



**Larry Olmsted, Senior Contributor**

Larry Olmsted is a bestselling author who covers travel, food & sports

## Holiday Gift Guide 2024: Best Safaris, The Trip of a Lifetime

The best gift you could possibly give a loved one this holiday season is a safari vacation.

### How to Do a Safari Right

There's no better gift than the gift of travel, and while the term "Bucket List" is overused in the travel media, there is no trip that is more "Bucket List" or "Once In a Lifetime" than a safari. It is the ultimate dream trip, but also one of the trickiest to plan without using experts, because there are a lot of moving parts, from small bush planes and flights you cannot book online to vast seasonal changes in weather and animal migrations. The best safari lodges often have as few as three accommodations and can book a year out. Knowing when and where to go within each destination is critically important, as is choosing the right camps, transfers, guides and extensions. Safety and reliability are also key in all parts of these trips.

Simply put, these are trips you do not want to wing, and more than almost any other kind of travel, it is worth paying a premium to go with the best camps, tour operators or cruise lines that have hyper-specialized safari knowledge. These are the kinds of "Best Safari" trips you will find below, and if someone on your list has been very, very good this year, give them the best gift of all, a luxury safari vacation. Also, go with them and see for yourself. The memories will last a lifetime. These are some great options.

### The Classic, Luxury East Africa

Africa is top of mind when it comes to wildlife viewing safaris, and there is no other place where you can see so many amazing animals in one ecosystem. Going back to the days of Hemingway, the classic first-timer destination has been East Africa, Kenya and Tanzania, home to the famous annual wildebeest migration, the Masai Mara, Serengeti, Ngorongoro Crater, Mt. Kilimanjaro, and many other top sites.



When you are the top of the food chain, others notice. Maybe that's why so many people in the travel industry keep naming Micato "Best Safari Outfitter."

**There are a lot of good African safari specialists, but none better than Micato Safaris, the gold standard and only company in any field to ever win *Travel+Leisure's* #1 Best Safari Outfitter award ten times, along with just about every other award and accolade in the industry.** They have been doing Africa and India, and nothing else, for so long and so well that they—and by extension their customers—are the top priority for every great safari camp, city restaurant, luxury hotel and airline in the region. Beyond the best connections, they have their own vehicles, two offices in Africa, and full-time expert safari directors, and with a rolodex of VIP experts from paleontologists to artists, they open doors no one else can.

I have traveled with Micato more than half a dozen times, and I tell all my friends planning safaris the same thing: "If you can afford to use them, you cannot afford not to use them." And while they are far from cheap, everything on each trip is

included, all tips to guides and lodges, all meals (first rate), wine, beer, safari cocktails, transfers, flights, even laundry along the way so you can travel light. They do a lot of private and custom safaris (Oprah Winfrey, Hilary Clinton, etc) but also have a collection of scheduled small group luxury “Classic Safaris,” the most affordable way to experience their excellence. They are also one of the rare tour operators in any type of travel that features “guaranteed departures,” meaning if you book a trip, it will go even if you are the only guests (many companies cancel small groups because they lose money).

For Kenya and Tanzania, the one to book is “East African Splendor,” a 12-day journey that begins in Nairobi, Kenya and visits the Masai Mara, home to the world’s greatest assemblage of free-roaming animals, before heading to Tanzania and the

that even “The King of the Jungle” would be jealous of.

The best place on earth to see the biggest tigers is India’s Ranthambore National Park, a former royal hunting estate full of crumbling ancient buildings being swallowed up by jungle, all of which looks like an Indiana Jones set, and to see these majestic animals perched on an old stone column or such adds to the mystique. But the big surprise about going to India on a tiger safari is that it is far from a one hit wonder, and Ranthambore is also an awesome place to see leopard—my favorite of the African cats—as well as sloth bears, crocodiles, jackals, caracal (a cat very rare in Africa), wild boar, jungle cat, gazelle and samabar (another kind of deer), hyena, civet, mongoose, blue bull, monkeys, and peacock. The tigers are the main attraction, and many National Geographic specials on them

have been filmed here, but it is a legitimate all-around safari spot. Ranthambore has amazing luxury lodging at the Oberoi Vanyavilas, which has been rated the best hotel in all of India by *Travel+Leisure* and is more of a full-service resort than a safari camp.

A tiger safari is best as a 3-day or so part of a bigger trip to India, on which you will also see elephants and possibly other wildlife, along with world-class attractions like the Taj Mahal and lake palaces. **There is only one destination outside Africa handled by the world’s top luxury safari specialist, Micato, and it is India**, where the company’s founders originally hail from. Like Africa, India is a place with a lot of logistical issues where it is very beneficial to be treated like a VIP and have otherwise closed doors open for you, and that’s the experience I had when I went on a high-profile tiger safari magazine assignment and used Micato. Their 16-day fully-escorted “Soul of India” trip utilizes some of the world’s best luxury hotels, including the famed Amarvilas, the Oberoi Vanyavilas, the Rambagh Palace, Taj Ganges Veranasi, and the Oberoi Mumbai. You will visit the Taj Mahal, Old Delhi, Mumbai, the Hindu Holy city of Varanasi, the gem capital of Jaipur, and

of course, Ranthambore and its tigers (\$21,050 all-inclusive, including all tips, alcohol and domestic business class flights).

## Active Safari: Hiking Rwanda

Gorillas, along with chimpanzees, are the extra special African animals that you have to make a special effort to see. Gorillas do not co-exist with the “traditional” African game you will see at almost every game reserve and National Park in in East and South Africa—elephants, giraffe, rhino, lions, cheetah, leopards, African buffalo, hippos, antelopes, etc. To see gorillas, you have to go to either Rwanda or Uganda, and you have to go to them on foot. Of these, Rwanda is the more upscale destination with the best gorilla safari lodges, and since it’s a more physical trip, it’s a perfect choice for combining two great kinds of vacations, safari and active travel. **Gorilla trekking can be done with Micato as a 4-day add-on to one of their East Africa safaris.**



A tiger safari is far from a one-hit wonder. Take one with Micato, the world’s top luxury safari specialist.

Serengeti and Ngorongoro Crater. Everything along the way is topnotch, with Hemingway’s Hotel Nairobi, Sir Richard Branson’s luxe Mahali Mzuri camp with just 12 luxury units, the only safari property from global luxury chain Four Seasons, and the 10-cottage Manor at Ngorongoro, set on a 1,500-acre coffee plantation (from \$27,400 all-inclusive).

## Tigers, The Biggest of the Big Cats

There are very few shortcomings when it comes to African safaris, but the complete absence of tigers from the continent is one of them. I have seen all of the African big cats in person, and the majestic Bengal Tiger, which can grow nearly twice the size of a male African lion, outclasses them all. It combines the perfectly manicured, scar free gorgeous coat of the leopard with eyes so famously striking that classic poems are written about them and gemstones named after them. It is the ultimate super-predator, completely dominant in its eco-system in a way