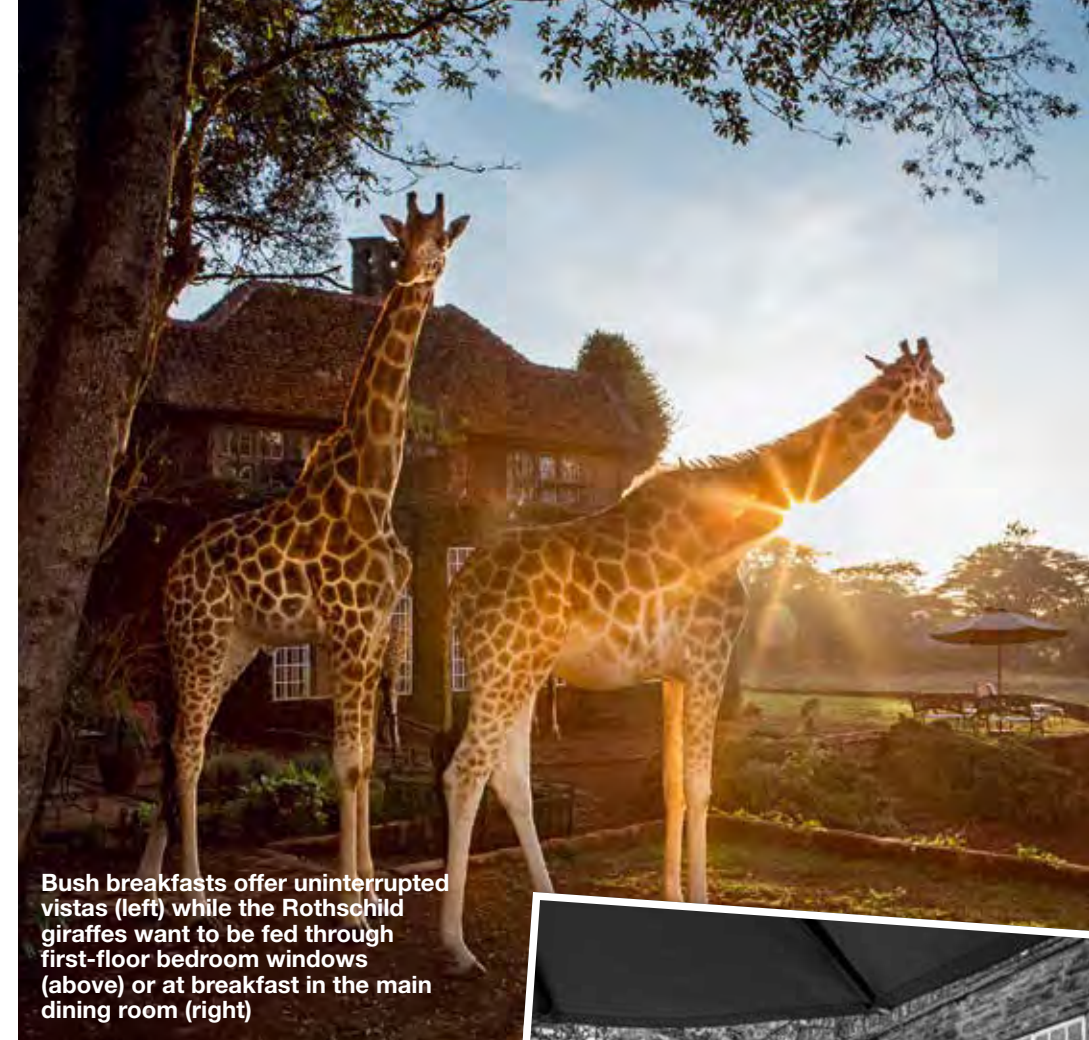


CAPTIVATING KENYA

THE CALL OF THE WILD BECKONS AS KENYA ENTRANCES WITH LUXURIOUS LODGES, LUSH LANDSCAPES AND SOME CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE HERD KIND



Bush breakfasts offer uninterrupted vistas (left) while the Rothschild giraffes want to be fed through first-floor bedroom windows (above) or at breakfast in the main dining room (right)



Tom between basking in ultra-luxe surroundings, and embarking on a life-changing adventure? Luckily there's a new crop of must-visit locations that ensure you don't have to swap your creature comforts in order to heed the call of the animal kingdom.

Just five hours on a direct flight from Dubai, Kenya has become the go-to destination for discerning travellers looking for adventure, but not willing to forgo luxury in the process. The Safari Collection has four destinations, each offering a truly distinct up-close-and-personal once-in-a-lifetime wildlife experience.

GIRAFFE MANOR

Your fellow residents at this English colonial country-manor-style retreat, set in 140 acres of lush Langate forest, will be joining you for an early six o'clock breakfast, and again at five for high tea. This might seem unremarkable, yet given that a herd of 15-foot Rothschild giraffes, scampering warthogs, delicate antelopes and impala call this tranquil Karen Blixen-esque 10-bedroom oasis home, means Giraffe Manor constantly surprises. The sight of Jock or Stacey craning their necks into the large restaurant windows, looking to be fed by guests is truly an astonishing, bucket-list thrill.

Giraffe Manor – once home to the renowned conservationists who also founded the African Fund for Endangered Wildlife, Scot Jock Leslie-Melville and his American-wife Betty – is perhaps the best known of The Safari Collection's properties thanks to its Insta-friendly fame. The sight of a giraffe in a dining room or being kissed by delighted visitors is a photographic moment everyone wants to shout about. For once the hype is totally justified. This verdant spot

'The sight of Jock or Stacey craning their necks into the restaurant windows to be fed by guests is a bucket-list thrill'

plunges you into the thick of the wildlife action, although it is just a 30-minute drive from Nairobi airport, an oasis at the edge of the bustling metropolis.

Other sights to make sure you take in during this stop? For one, there's The David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust's Elephant Sanctuary, where you can foster one of the orphaned babies for a year, getting regular updates on their progress throughout the 12 months. This essential programme ensures these magnificent creatures – one of which is killed by poachers every 15 minutes for its ivory tusks – get a chance of survival as they are returned to the wild once they are nurtured back to health. ▶



The main lodge at Solio is beautifully fitted out and an ideal spot to meet fellow guests during meal times



All of life's creature comforts are to hand at this five-star retreat



Visitors are spoilt by a multitude of rhino sightings

SOLIO LODGE

From Giraffe Manor, a short 45-minute plane ride (or a four-hour drive for those not fond of tiny aircraft) takes you to the famed 13,500-acre private reserve, Solio Lodge. It's perched on the Laikipia plateau, between the famed Mount Kenya and the Aberdare mountain range, full of acacia-lined ravines, wooded swamps and grassy savannahs. It is also home to over 300 black and white two-tonne rhinos. The fact that you are taken into a thrilling game drive by your expert driver and spotter in a specially kitted-out top-of-the-line Land Cruiser straight from the tarmac sets the immediately immersive

tone – baboons, buffalo, agile impalas, eland oryx and Thomson's gazelles, not to mention dozens of zebra and perfectly plumed birds surround you at every turn from the get-go.

As this is a private game reserve, exciting night drives, leisurely walks and horse-back excursions through the adjacent cattle ranch, and breakfasts out in the open bush are all par for the course. For those on longer visits, a trip to the nearby 767sqkm Aberdare National Park that offers up a very different kind of safari experience, is a must.

High-end Solio Lodge doesn't just have rooms; it offers six, completely private, self-contained, suite-style cottages with floor-to-ceiling windows that afford unparalleled views onto the endless reserve in front that you can call home. Each has every mod con you can think of and some added old-school extras, like a hot water bottle tucked into your bed at night and a roaring fire lit by the stand-alone egg-shaped Palazzo baths that you wouldn't dare expect. This spot oozes contemporary chic, but with a distinctly African accent.

At Solio, a two-storey central lodge provides the hub at which guests exchange stories of sightings, share expertly prepared gourmet meals and engage with the warm, hospitable staff under the guidance of South African Manager Ava Paton. Lunches are generally lighter, with a plethora of freshly prepared salads, soups and cold meats, while dinners are impressive three-course feasts with all dietary requirements (and just plain finicky likes and dislikes) always painstakingly taken into account.



Endangered white and black rhinos are the focus of Solio's conservation efforts

SALA'S CAMP

Tearing oneself away from Solio is a challenge; but luckily heading to the majestic open grasslands of the Maasai Mara takes the sting out of leaving. This 3,911 sq-km natural reserve entrances; it's no wonder it's often lauded as the world's top safari destination.

Even if you don't schedule your visit between July and October – traditionally the best time to see the incredible million-strong wildebeest migration – the drier months still enthrall as they offer better sightings of the big cats and a plethora of babies to gush over. From elephants to giraffes, hyenas to packs of lions, the Mara never disappoints as each game drive gives you a glimpse into another world.

Sala's Camp is uniquely situated in the southern tip of the Mara, just where it meets the Tanzanian Serengeti. This prime sighting site, on the banks of the Sand and

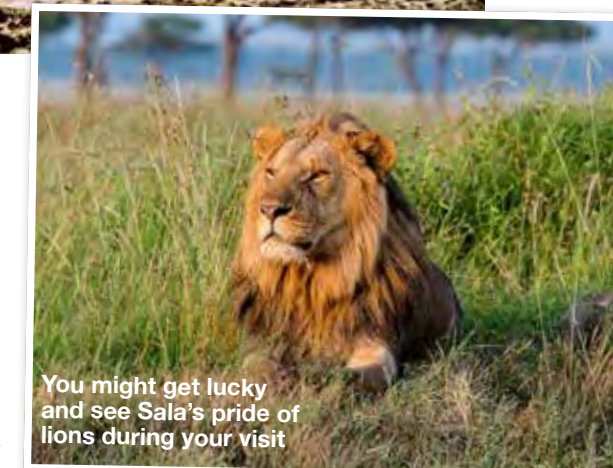


Sala's Camp offers up an abundance of wildlife encounters, including the famous annual migration



The Mara's hippo population may look cute but can be ferocious

'The seemingly endless 3,911 square-kilometre Maasai Mara is often lauded as the world's top safari destination'



You might get lucky and see Sala's pride of lions during your visit

Keekorok rivers, has its own pride of lions that roams the area, and leopard-spotting sites in nearby swamps, while a herd of elephants greets visitors from across the water on a regular basis. Best of all, it is far from the rest of the lodges and hotels that have sprung up around this popular reserve, ensuring your wildlife encounters are not hampered by a multitude of other jeeps jostling for photo-friendly positioning.

This time you'll get the stand-alone luxury tent experience alongside the river, with ensuite showers and baths and fabulous feasting that you can avail of in solitary splendour or amongst your fellow safari-goers in the main tent. Make sure, yet again, that you opt for the bush breakfast at least once – sizzling maple-syrup pancakes, freshly cooked eggs, cereals and toast, all washed down by strong Kenyan coffee with Mara vistas is truly a gastronomic treat.

Despite the exclusive nature of these

resorts, the warmth of the staff and their knowledge of the area is what stands out. This emphasis on conservation is in the very DNA of these spaces; the founders ensured it is in The Safari Collection's ethos. The indigenous communities are celebrated – make sure you sign-up and set time aside to visit the local villages – a trip to see the Maasai warriors leap and dance in their traditional colourful attire, adorned with jewellery, is a treat to behold!

For those looking for a trip of a lifetime, this is one to truly tick off the bucket list.

For a bespoke safari experience email info@thesafaricollection.com, thesafaricollection.com; Emirates flies to Nairobi twice daily from Dhs1,705 return; emirates.ae