



KENYA

Gamewatchers Safaris
 (877) 710-3014, porini.com
 From \$3,170 for a seven-day trip, including lodging and meals.

Walking and Talking in Kenya

In a 4x4 vehicle driven by our guide, Harry Maina, a group of five other travelers and I rumble toward a riverbed in the 15,000-acre Selenkay Conservancy in southeastern Kenya. Rain had just begun to splatter on the Land Rover's rooftop a few minutes ago, as we spotted a herd of giraffes, some so tall they reached the highest branches of the flat-topped acacia trees. Now we pass four Masai men wearing red and purple plaid *shúkà* (fabric draped over one shoulder and wrapped around their waists) and beaded arm cuffs and earrings. They carry long wooden staffs. It has started to pour, but we've convinced Harry that we still want to walk with the Masai to their village, as planned. We climb out of the vehicles, huddle beneath green umbrellas, and hop over puddles along the muddy brown road.

One of the Masai, Jonah Karasinka Maai, works for Gamewatchers Safaris, the outfitter I've joined for this seven-day trip to some of Kenya's most spectacular natural areas, including Amboseli National Park and the Masai Mara

Game Reserve. Jonah is wearing sandals made out of strips of tire—"Four-by-fours!" he jokes. Jonah talks about how he grew up an hour from here, moved to Nairobi, and then returned home to become a Gamewatchers guide. "I like learning about people from around the world, and teaching guests about the Masai, too," Jonah says. As we talk, I recognize that this simple idea of cultural exchange is part of a much larger shift in the way a new generation of safari companies is doing business.

African safaris have a long history of outsiders enjoying the continent's wildlife at the expense of the local people and environment. Gamewatchers offers comfortable lodging at its four Porini Camps and views of the Big Five (lions, leopards, buffalo, rhinos, and elephants), but it does so in partnership with the Masai people. The company, which won the 2010 Most Responsible Tour Operator award from Ecotourism Kenya, leases conservancy land from Masai communities, paying them monthly and per guest. More than 90 percent of the

company's staff comes from the area. Later I speak to another Masai Gamewatchers guide, Wilson ole Kasaine, who says, "You have to incorporate the local communities, so we feel the benefit of tourism rather than being exploited. Here, we are benefiting."

By the time we enter the village, I'm streaked with mud from slipping on the walk—now I understand Jonah's tire-tread shoes. The Masai men chant harmoniously as we approach the circle of mud huts surrounded by a fence made of brush. Once inside the enclosure, they join a group of women wearing beaded necklaces and clothing printed with tropical flowers. Together they sing a high, echoing tune that sounds haunting and joyful at once. When it's over, we shake hands with each member of the choir. They teach us the greeting "*Sopa!*" and response "*Ipa!*" in the Masai language, Maa. Jonah tells us that the villagers say we are blessed because we've brought the rain—it's the first downpour of the season. They were singing a welcome song. We are their guests. **A**

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Other Safaris Worth Taking



BOTSWANA AND ZAMBIA

Wilderness Safaris
27/(0) 11-807-1800,
wilderness-safaris.com

Beginning at an Edwardian-style lodge near Victoria Falls in Zambia, explore a few of the many concessions of land that Wilderness Safaris leases from communities throughout southern Africa. After spotting hippos in the Zambezi River, meet residents of Simonga village, home to a school supported by Wilderness Safaris. Then fly to Savuti Camp, along the Savute waterway in northern Botswana, where game-watching drives might reveal cheetahs, leopards, lions, and, in the winter, aardvarks. Continue on to Vumbura Plains, a tented camp on the Kwedi concession in the far north of Botswana's Okavango Delta, which is a refuge for reedbeek, red lechwe (a type of antelope), and Cape buffalo. End with a helicopter ride to Gunotsoga, one of Kwedi's five villages, where the *kgosi* (chief) will greet you. From \$7,840 for a seven-day trip, including lodging and meals.

NAMIBIA

Conservancy Safaris
264/(0) 64-40-6136,
kcs-namibia.com.na

In the Kuene region of northwestern Namibia, journey through basalt hills, riverbeds shaded with leadwood and camelthorn trees, and the rugged Etendeka Mountains. This seven-day wildlife-watching trip also connects you with the area's nomadic culture. The Conservancy Safaris company is 100 percent owned by people from the indigenous, pastoral Himba and Herero communities, who live on five conservancies in Kuene. As your hosts and guides, they will show you how they live in this starkly beautiful desert—a habitat for black rhinos, elephants, oryx, ostriches, and lions. You'll sleep four nights in mobile tents and two nights at Etambura Camp, a Himba-owned lodge. Here, five canvas-and-thatch units sit on a hilltop overlooking springbok-dotted plains. From \$3,400 for a seven-day trip, including lodging and meals.

ZAMBIA AND MALAWI

Robin Pope Safaris
265/(0) 177-0540,
robinpopesafaris.net

Spend four nights at safari camps in Zambia's South Luangwa National Park, where elephants, leopards, and more than 400 species of birds inhabit open grasslands, stands of ebony trees, and the expansive Luangwa River system. Robin Pope Safaris, named after the guide who founded the company in 1986, has developed a strong relationship with the area's Kunda people. The company has renovated schools in nearby communities, paid teachers' salaries, and funded a health care clinic. Learn about the locals' daily life during a visit to the village of Kawaza and, if you wish, dine in the home of a Kunda family. Then fly northeast to Robin Pope's new Mkulumadzi Lodge (opening July 15) in Malawi's Majete National Park. Surrounded by a 175,000-acre conservation area, eight contemporary chalets front a river filled with hippos. Finish with three nights at the Pumulani resort on the quiet, sandy shores of Lake Malawi. From \$5,972 for an 11-day trip, including lodging and meals.

SOUTH AFRICA

Thakadu River Camp
27/(0) 11-805-9995,
thakadurivercamp.com

Patience Bogatsu, who is from Molatedi village just outside northern South Africa's 185,000-acre Madikwe Game Reserve, is one of the few black, female game rangers in the country. She might be your guide at the Thakadu River Camp, a lodge run entirely by members of the Molatedi community. Bogatsu and other staff share their knowledge about the reserve's wildlife—cheetahs, black and white rhinos, wild dogs, lions, and leopards—as well as their tribe's culture. After game-watching drives around the reserve's savannah grasslands and volcanic outcroppings, travelers can visit Molatedi village or just relax in one of the 12 tented suites along the banks of the Marico River. From \$450 per person, per night, including lodging and meals. Village visits are an additional \$44 per person.