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KENYA

With the soul-stirring landscapes and vast migrating herds of Kenya's Maasai Mara National Park (and Tanzania's Serengeti National Park just over the border), East Africa is considered the most "iconic" safari destination—the land of *Out of Africa* and vintage Hemingway, and a must for first-time safari-goers. It doesn't take long to see why: Before we even made it to the year-old Elewana Sand River Maasai Mara (elewanacollection.com), we spotted nursing baby elephants, mama lions protecting cubs and herds of grazing giraffe and zebra just steps from the jeep.

To help preserve this secluded slice of the Mara game reserve, the 16-tent Sand River uses solar power to heat water and filter the pools, and has built an ingenious charcoal wine "cellar," which is cooled by fresh water. They also have a policy of not allowing drivers to radio other jeeps if they come across something interesting on a game drive—which means guests are able to enjoy the experience and take their time watching the wildlife, without being swarmed by other cars.

Though the topography around the 12-tent Olare Mara Kempinski (kempinski.com) is rockier and more rugged, the wildlife riches continue here, with sightings of wildebeest, hippos, leopards, buffalo and more. Originally built as a private family retreat along the Ntiakitiak River, Olare opened to the public in 2013, and now features several river-view dining areas, a bonfire nook, an organic garden and a grove where guests can help plant trees to repopulate areas munched on by hungry elephants. Therapeutic massages, performed in-tent and using nourishing, herb- and flower-scented African oils, help soothe muscles after bumpy game drives.

As with many camps in the region, Olare's staff includes some Maasai tribesmen, and guests are welcome to visit a nearby Maasai village during their stay. Though within walking distance to a small town with shops, schools and services, the residents here still live traditionally; visitors will tour the low-slung mud-and-dung huts, learn about rituals and daily chores, and shop an open-air market for beaded belts and bowls, carved wooden tableware and colorful jewelry made by the tribespeople.

Gorilla Sighting: Rwanda & Uganda

My massage in the hut overlooking the ancient volcano and the mist-enshrouded lake at Rwanda's Volcanoes Virunga Lodge was well-earned. I let the therapist's gentle pressure and the perfume from the locally made, lavender-infused oil seep into my senses, but while I was relaxed, I couldn't keep silent: I wanted to tell her about my day hiking the steep, muddy, bamboo-fringed trails of nearby Volcanoes National Park—and about the heart-stopping moment my guide and I encountered a family of gorillas, including a colossal Silverback patriarch amid the trees. Only 80 visitors a day, split into small groups, can have access to the park, so the ranger-led forays ensure the protection of these fascinating, endangered apes.

The solar-powered Virunga Lodge, composed of locally styled bandas (huts), facilitates gorilla tracking and other sightseeing in northwestern Rwanda (with all the outdoor activities, a stay here also includes one complimentary massage per day). The camp is overseen by eco-tourism pioneers Volcanoes Safaris (volcanoessafaris.com), which also runs three other camps in gorilla- and chimpanzee-rich parts of Rwanda and Uganda. Not that the experience is just about primates: At the culturally rich Volcanoes Gahinga Lodge in Uganda's Mgahinga Gorilla National Park, the mountain setting allows for a village immersion program with the region's Pygmies—a one-time forest dwelling population known for their knowledge of local herbs and plants. —Becca Hensley



Watch families of elephants en route to Kenya's Elewana Sand River Maasai Mara