

THE STARTING POINT

What sort of safari is for you? We look at the questions you should think about before you book

As every regular traveller knows, the key to a successful safari is in the planning. And it helps to have a plan for that planning. Before you consider consulting a safari expert, or Google, you need to ask yourself a few questions in order to gain a clearer idea of what you would like to get from your trip. Understanding your hopes will help immensely with your planning. And while choosing the destination may seem like the most pressing issue to anyone planning a safari, “Where should I go?” is invariably the last thing you should ask.

There’s no magic formula – each of you will have your own interests – but here are a few pointers to get you started.

Q IS THERE A CERTAIN SPECIES OR EVENT YOU WANT TO SEE?

“This is the first thing we ask,” says Bill Given of The Wild Source. Armed with an answer to this question, the framework for your planning can immediately take shape. For example, if you are an experienced safari-goer, you may want to focus on observing certain animal behaviours while, as a first-timer, you may be more eager to see as many iconic species as you can.

Debbie Addison of Wild Frontiers agrees. The starting point for us, she says, is: “What do you want to see? Once we have this, we can guide you to the right area at the correct time of year.”

Knowing the types of animal you want to see is paramount, says Brad Mitchell of Rhino Africa. “It allows your travel expert to narrow down destinations that can make these sightings most likely.”

Dan Free of Wildlife Worldwide suggests digging a little deeper. “Are you hoping to see or photograph a specific species or wildlife event, or are you simply looking to spend time in a particular environment and see what you encounter?” he asks.

Letting your travel planner know the extent of your interests – such as photography or birding – is another key

element. “Are you a serious photographer, an amateur or a happy snapper with a phone?” asks Addison. “Or, if birding is your thing, are you just interested, a twitcher or a very serious birder? The latter may require a specialist local guide to find certain birds, for example.”

Q WHEN DO YOU WANT TO GO?

Wildlife populations migrate, congregate and mate according to the seasons. Parks can burst with animals at certain times of the year and be eerily quiet at others. Some reserves may be inaccessible during the rains. There is always great wildlife somewhere; you just need to match the right region to your travel dates.

Think about what is more important, “the date of travel or seeing a specific species”, says Addison.

Linked with timings and your wildlife ambitions is the destination. Again, you need to be clear on which is most critical. If it’s the place, you shouldn’t think “I’d like to go on safari in Kenya this March.” Rather, you’d be better off asking: “I’d like to go on safari this March; where is wildlife best at that time?”

Q HOW LONG DO YOU WANT TO GO FOR?

The duration of your safari will either limit or extend the range of activities available to you. For instance, a short trip will mean you’ll have to focus on a destination that has a high density of attractions. With more time, you’ll be able to consider a combination of locations or enjoy the opportunity to move at a slower pace.

“Think about how fast-paced/adventurous you would like your itinerary to be,” says Free. “Do you want to spend longer in one location or to experience as much as possible in the time you have in the country?”

Q HOW MUCH DO YOU WANT TO SPEND?

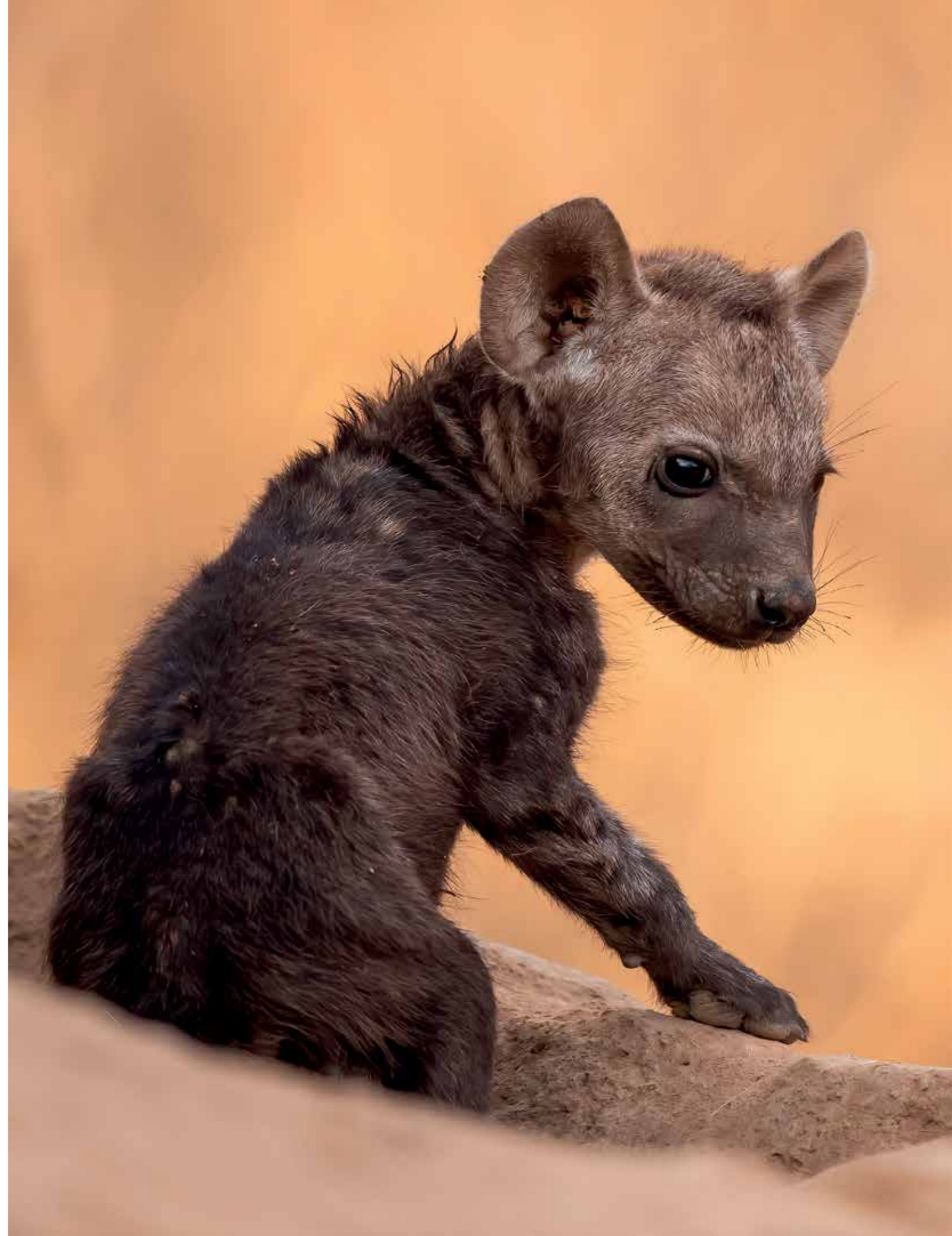
“This is often an awkward question,” says Addison “To get around this [rather than ask ‘What’s your budget?’], we ask ‘Where have you stayed previously or in what style of accommodation have you stayed?’”

The size of your budget doesn’t really prevent you from visiting most areas – it will simply change how you experience them. Your budget will determine the range of accommodation and transportation you are open to, and what combination of activities you can allow yourself.

But note, there are some costs you cannot avoid, such as park fees. In some countries, you may find this restricts your time in some parks. Be aware, though, that money buys you more than just a soft bed; it can also land you a →

Outward bound:

A baby hyena emerges from its den, Kruger National Park



PLANNING KEY QUESTIONS

top-notch guide and a comfy open-topped 4WD instead of a converted minibus.

“Focus on obtaining high-quality guiding,” advises Given. “Ultimately, the entire experience depends on the guiding. It is important during planning to ask about guiding, such as if it is possible to receive details on who your guides will be?”

He adds: “We find it interesting that many travellers focus on the decor of the camps or specific locations, but very few know who will guide them, even though that is by far the most critical factor for a wildlife-focused safari.”

Quality guides not only increase your chances of seeing a good range of wildlife, their knowledge enhances your enjoyment of the encounters, providing stimulating insights into species you had previously known little about. A world-class guide is one of the most important investments you will make, and we would suggest you compromise on other aspects of the trip if your budget is restrictive.

Q WHAT TYPE OF TRAVELLER ARE YOU?

Are you set on bushwalking? Dining on the very best campfire cuisine? Or soaking in a bath with an unforgettable view of the sunset?

We all have a slightly different idea of what makes a place special. To work out what’s right for you, start by consulting guidebooks and websites and talking to safari experts at specialist travel companies.

When we say talk, we mean it. An open conversation can be amazingly productive. As Chris McIntyre of Expert

“A safari is a once-in-a-lifetime experience, so don’t skimp. Your tour operator and travel expert are experienced in getting you the very best for your budget. After all, that is why you use them.”

BRAD MITCHELL, RHINO AFRICA

“Don’t rush! Take your time in your chosen location. It takes the pressure off, increases chance of success and makes for a more immersive and enjoyable experience.”

DAN FREE, WILDLIFE WORLDWIDE

“Book and travel with a reputable company – one that knows the destination first-hand and employs quality guides.”

DEBBIE ADDISON, WILD FRONTIERS

“‘Luxury’ or ‘exclusivity’ means different things to different people. Make sure your operator understands you and what you want.”

RUTH MAXWELL, SUBSCRIBER, UK

Africa says: “When someone asks for my advice, I’ll spend a good half-hour chatting about their past holidays and their ideas for this one. It takes a proper conversation to get a feel for what they’re likely to enjoy.”

Whether you’re intending to travel alone, under your own steam (including self-drive), as part of an expert-led small group, with your partner, your children, extended family or friends also has a part to play. Some regions offer great value accommodation for larger groups and families. Others have more romantic options for couples. If you’re travelling with someone who has mobility issues, you’ll need to consider the provision available at the facilities that will host you.

The personalities and fitness levels of your group can also help narrow down certain aspects of your trip. If the thought of sleeping in a tent inside a wildlife reserve would terrify one of you, you may want to opt for lodge accommodation instead. If your stairs at home leave you short of breath, trekking to see gorillas may be out of the question.

Another angle to consider is your preferred type of safari – sitting in a vehicle seeing as many species as you can, taking time to watch a specific animal or herd, or heading out on foot?

Travelling with children doesn’t limit your choice of destination as much as you might believe. Yes, some safari lodges won’t take kids, but there are oodles of others, and national parks, that welcome them with open arms – some even have special children’s programmes. There are some amazing wildlife areas that are malaria-free.

Conservation may also be a consideration. You need to determine “how important your impact on the environment is to you”, says Addison. “We can guide you to eco-friendly camps and lodges, and companies that are ethical and support conservation projects.”

Mitchell adds: “Most, if not all, lodges and wildlife reserves contribute funding towards conservation projects and anti-poaching units. Ultimately, your trip is an investment in the future of the environment, the wildlife and the communities surrounding the area in which you travel.” 🌿

WHAT ABOUT COVID?

With the restrictions placed on us by Covid-19 remaining fluid, always check the latest regulations governing entry and exit of the destinations you intend to travel to and that of your home country. One way to reduce risk, and logistical complications, is to minimise the number of parks you visit and to remain within one country rather than travelling across borders.

“We have been seeing a trend of staying in fewer places for a longer time,” says Sandy Wood of Pulse Africa. “By doing this, you reduce your risk of transmission because you aren’t moving around as much, but it will also reduce your carbon footprint. Take the opportunity to immerse yourself in the surroundings. You won’t feel guilty for skipping an early morning game drive if you know you’re there for more than a couple of nights.”

Stretch it out:
A Grant’s zebra foal puts its young legs to the test, Kenya

KLEIN & HUBERT, NATUREPL.COM

