

THE ENSEMBLE HOW-TO

BE A SAFARI-SAVVY



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FAMILY!

Chris Robinson



Lion cubs with their mother

There is nothing – and I mean *nothing* – that can compare with the thrill of being on safari and seeing one of the Big Predators... through the eyes of your child. The moment lasts forever in both your minds. My son was three years old and we were in a safari jeep in Kruger National Park in South Africa. It was a few minutes after dawn and Wolfgang, our affable guide, had been tasked by Pip, the aforementioned three year old, to “Find lion, Wolfgang...pleeeeeeze!”. Suddenly, the lion found us. And the look in Pip’s eyes as the lioness and her three cubs padded right by our vehicle was worth all the time, money and planning it had taken to make this heart-stopping moment possible.

We had taken both our sons on safari in South Africa, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Tanzania and Kenya before they were ten. That has led to further wilderness trips to the Arctic to see polar bears and to Tasmania to see Tasmanian devils (yes, they really do exist!) and an enduring interest in - and respect for - the natural world on both their parts. But it wasn’t achieved without some serious planning and forethought. Here are my tips and thoughts about sharing the adventure of a lifetime with your children on safari.

First of all there is no minimum age for this kind of vacation. None. You need to judge your own kids –and that is more

about attitude than age. For some that will be three, for others ten. You will also need to research age limitations at the lodges you plan to visit. Just like Florida’s theme parks with their height restrictions on rides, some lodges impose minimum age requirements for participating on the game drives. It should also probably not be your first long haul trip with the children. Pip had been on an around-the-world trip before venturing onto the African savanna. It helps to accustom them to the experience of intercontinental flying because New York to South Africa, for instance, is more than 15 hours non-stop.

Next – pick your country according to your particular requirements. You may want to choose destinations that are malaria free - for instance much of South Africa and Namibia - to avoid tablets. And the fewer vaccinations the better... so consult with your doctor or a Travel Clinic before you decide.

The right safari vacation company makes all the difference. Some feature special departures for families. Others have itineraries designed around family friendly lodges with some child care options – but don’t expect kids’ clubs in safari lodges. Child care will mean that the adults have the option to take some more adventurous



On the lookout for lions!

A zebra on the savannah



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activities while the kids are happy and looked after. And as you will otherwise be “on duty” with the kids 24/7 on a safari holiday this may be a welcome break. Another real plus when you select a game lodge is a pool for the kids to play in during the middle part of the day when even the animals seek the shade. Last but not least – think about a twin centre vacation that combines safari with a stay at the beach. For instance a Kenya safari with a stay on the Indian Ocean near Mombasa or even the idyllic Seychelles Islands.

Involve the children in the early stages of planning so that they know what to expect and become excited about their big trip. Films such as “Born Free” can capture young imaginations as can wildlife programs and many great books. For younger kids your child’s teacher may well be excited for them to do a special “show and tell”. Older kids might enjoy setting up a scrapbook or Pinterest site of what they are hoping to see on their Safari. Pick out or buy special clothing. Long sleeves and long pants are practical – plus a special

hat for your little adventurer. You don’t want your kid plugged into their iPod on safari – so make sure they have technology focused on photos or video that is exclusively theirs. Binoculars are fun too.

The kids are excited. You are excited. You are on your way! Plan tons of entertainment for the long flights and a couple of days R&R before you start your Safari in earnest. This is an opportunity to accustom your children

to what they are about to experience. For instance, if your vacation starts in Kenya you will be arriving in Nairobi. Spend time at the Sheldrick Elephant Orphanage where elephant calves orphaned by poaching are rehabilitated so they can be reintroduced to the wild. Also the Giraffe Centre in Langata just outside Nairobi operates a conservation and education program for the endangered Rothschild giraffe. Here you can stay at the Giraffe Manor and the children can hand



A baby elephant gets special treatment at an orphanage

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Ensemble Experts Suggest

There are no direct flights from Canada to the African safari destinations, so you have a choice of flying via the U.S. to Southern Africa or via Europe (London or Frankfurt) to Eastern Africa. There are a number of top-notch companies offering safaris for families: Kensington Tour's Kenya Family Discovery (8 Days from **\$3,384** per person); Big Five Tours and Expedition's 9 day Kenya Safari suitable for families from **\$9,400**; Tauck Bridges' Tanzania: A Grand Family Safari (11 days from **\$6368**); or G Adventures' 10 day Tanzania Family Adventure from **\$3,599**.

Ask your Ensemble Expert for details.

feed giraffes. Also just outside Nairobi is the pocket-sized Nairobi National Park. There are no big predators here, so this is a safe and gentle way of introducing the children to spotting wildlife in its natural environment.

When it comes to the real thing you may want to consider a private group for maximum flexibility and enjoyment for all concerned. You don't want to have to worry about your kid's loud excitement disturbing

the enjoyment of fellow passengers. Importantly it also allows you the flexibility to tailor your game viewing activity to your children's tolerance and interests and you have the control to call it a day. Nevertheless you will have plan for pre-dawn or twilight outings as this is when the game animals are active and most easily viewed. So early to bed and early to rise – and if you are complaining, then so will they...so make an adventure of it! Provide your kids with a bird and animal checklist – most kids love to collect sightings. Don't be surprised if their sharp eyes are the first to spot the cheetah in the long grass or the leopard draped over a high up branch in an Acacia tree.

Lastly – one of the delights of your trip will be the warm welcome your children receive wherever they go. Everyone in Africa loves children – and everyone from the maids to the game wardens will befriend them and have endless patience. Wolfgang got as much of a thrill from finding Pip a lion as we did in watching those young eyes widen in amazement.



Giraffes at a conservation centre



Lifeguard hut on a gorgeous stretch of Gold Coast beach.