

# National Parks: Get Adventurous in East Africa

More than two dozen national parks fall within Kenya's borders, making it the most popular safari destination in all of Africa. The Director of National Parks and Wildlife, the famed paleontologist Dr. Richard Leaky, has done much to ensure that the parks are kept pristine and the poachers are kept out. Consequently, though Kenya's parks are the continent's most visited, they are also among the richest in natural beauty and wildlife.



## **Maasai Mara Game Reserve**

Maasai Mara is the Kenyan portion of the great Serengeti Plains, which means that it is quite simply one of the most astounding game parks in the world. Wildlife of all sorts is abundant here, but the particular attraction of the Serengeti has always been the migration of its enormous herds of wildebeest (1.3 million) and zebra (400,000). In search of water, the herds move north from the Serengeti in Tanzania in May or June, arriving in Maasai Mara around mid-July. The return to the South usually begins in the middle of October. Accompanying the herds, of course, are their natural predators, so that the migration also brings to Maasai Mara large prides of lion.

While the migration period is undoubtedly the best time to visit Maasai Mara, the reserve easily outpaces almost any other park even when the wildebeest are in the South. Many different species of antelope, elephant, leopard, cheetah, rhino, giraffe, and buffalo – virtually all of Africa's big game animals in fact – can be found in abundance in Maasai Mara.

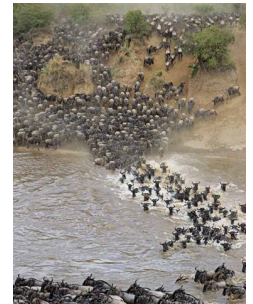
## **Amboseli National Park**

The most distinguishing feature of Amboseli is its dramatic setting. Mt. Kilimanjaro, Africa's highest mountain, rises a majestic 19,340 feet (5,895 meters) just across the Tanzanian border, in full view of the park. Most of the game can be found clinging to the swamps and grasslands in the center of the park, an oasis for buffalo, lions, cheetah, and over 420 species of birds. Amboseli is also one of the best parks in Kenya to see elephant, which travel in large herds near Ekongo Narok Swamp.

## **Lake Nakuru National Park**

Lake Nakuru is a shallow, alkaline lake, just the sort of place that flamingoes go crazy for. Estimates of the flamingo population of Lake Nakuru vary by the millions – what is certain is that any visitor to Lake

Nakuru is likely to encounter flocks large enough to induce absolute awe. Over four hundred species of birds have been sighted at the park, but it also serves as a sanctuary for the endangered black rhino as well as being home to various other large game species, including leopard.



### **Mount Kenya National Park**

Africa's second highest mountain is one of the continent's most popular destinations for mountaineers and trekkers. Its two highest peaks, Batian (17,058 ft./5,199 m.) and Nelion (17,023 ft./5,188 m.), require considerable technical climbing skills. However, the third highest peak, Point Lenana (16,355 ft./4,985 m.), can be reached by hikers who are in reasonably good condition. The climb can be made in three days, the descent in one or two, and the views from the top are as spectacular as you would expect. The most scenic trek, the Chogoria route, takes 5 – 7 days.

While such accessibility presents rare opportunities, it has also resulted in a good deal of misjudgment by casual visitors. The most common error is overly rapid ascent, which can cause headaches, nausea, and even death. Improper preparation for bad weather conditions is another common problem. The best times to make the ascent are from January to March, and September to October, when the weather tends to be warmer and dryer.

### **Lake Turkana**

Surrounded by an arid, extraterrestrial landscape that is often devoid of life, the long body of Lake Turkana droops down from the Ethiopian border, extending nearly 200 miles from north to south and 30 miles at its widest point. It is Africa's fourth largest lake, fondly called the Jade Sea because of its breathtaking color.

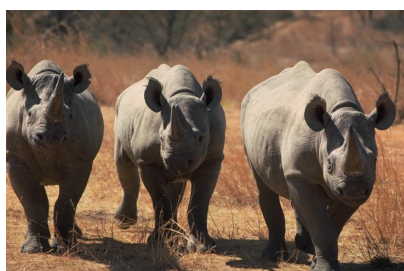
Turkana is home to a burgeoning population of crocodiles, who are unmolested by poachers because the lake's waters are heavily alkaline: a trait that makes their skin worthless. Consequently, some of them grow to monstrous sizes, and swimming in the lake is risky. Fishing, however, is of course safe and very good here. The world's largest fresh water fish, the Nile perch, lives in the lake, and it can get up to 400 pounds.

There are two national parks in the Lake Turkana region, both of them islands. Three volcanic cones are a major attraction of Central Island, which could just as easily be called Crocodile Island: it has the largest crocodile breeding ground in the world. South Island, the other park, is also volcanic and full of

the giant reptiles. One of the most thrilling ways to see the crocs is by night; when a flashlight is shined over the water, their retinas reflect a deep, luminous red over great distances.

### **Malindi–Watamu Marine Reserve**

Malindi–Watamu, located on the central coast, is one of Kenya's best marine parks. The town of Malindi, in fact, is home to the International Bill Fishing Competition, which takes place every January. The reserve itself begins 100 feet offshore and extends three miles out to sea, its main attraction being its spectacular reef, which starts about a kilometer offshore. A particularly charming way to dive Kenya is from the deck of a dhow, which can be chartered in the ports.



### **Lamu**

There is only one automobile on the island–city of Lamu, and it belongs to the District Commissioner. That the next fastest available vehicle here is donkey–drawn cart is testimony to Lamu's biggest charm – its timelessness. The island has changed little over the centuries. Like Zanzibar, it was once a Muslim stronghold, and Islam is still widely practiced on the island. Through its mysterious and narrow streets walk white and black–robed men and women. Though there are plenty of mosques to see, only a few will allow visitors.

The resilient beaches of Lamu are some of the best in Kenya, with the finest being at Shela. Off–shore scuba diving can be also arranged, and for those interested in taking a dhow voyage, Lamu is an ideal place to charter a boat. It is virtually impossible to look out to sea without seeing one of the elegant and fluttery boats passing by.

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