



Luxury Vacations in Kenya & Ethiopia

An Interview with Tamara Britten

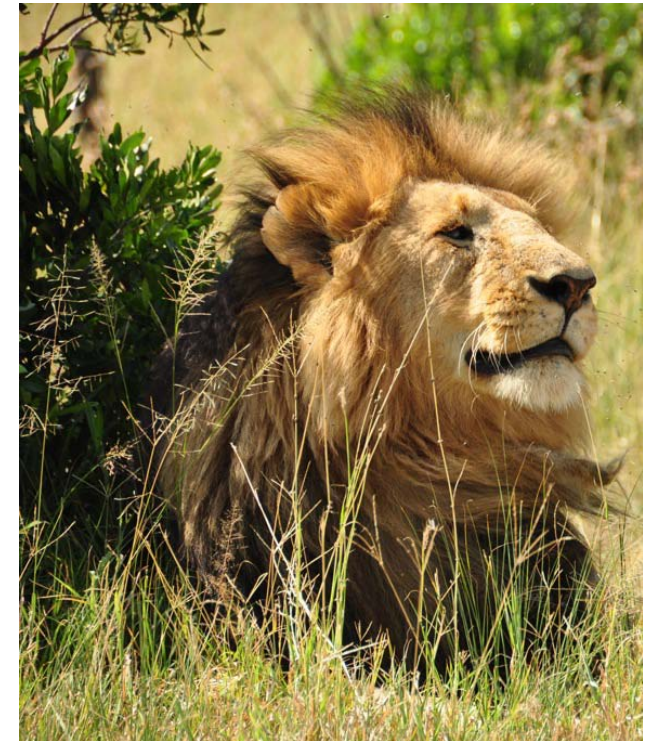
In recent years Kenya has emerged as an exciting new destination for luxury travellers, but this development is no surprise to Tamara Britten. Having travelled extensively around the world – climbing mountains, island hopping, crossing deserts and meeting different cultures – Tamara arrived in Kenya in 2004 (from Thailand) with the goal of combining her passion for travel with her MA in Creative Writing at UEA. Following her studies, Tamara decided to stay in Kenya, managing a luxury safari camp in the Maasai Mara between 2007 and 2009. By now it had become clear where her heart lay.

By 2010, Tamara already had a wealth of knowledge of the intricacies and experiences on offer in Kenya which she decided to share with the world through the release of *Karibu Kenya* – an in-depth guide book that has since been endorsed by the Kenya Tourist Board, Kenya Tourism Federation and the Kenya Professional Safari Guide Association. Following its resounding success, Tamara transformed the content of *Karibu Kenya* into a bespoke holiday bookings website (www.karibukenya.co.uk), in partnership with the award-winning Gamewatchers Safaris. Always ahead of the curve, Tamara has since set off around Ethiopia with Mulugeta Ababu, an Ethiopian specialist, and together they established Exclusive Ethiopia (www.exclusiveethiopia.com) – a holiday bookings website offering personalised and authentic holidays in Ethiopia. The LTG team recently spoke with Tamara to discover what it is exactly that makes these two countries so utterly unique.

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What was it about Kenya that enticed you?

I suppose – like many people – it was the safari that attracted me to Kenya in the first place. Visions of wildebeest coursing across savannah plains, lions running down a gazelle, and flocks of vivid colourful birds are what newcomers to Kenya are first wowed by. The extraordinary wealth of wildlife and birdlife has been attracting visitors for over a century and the country continues to lead the way in safari today. But there's so much more than just flora and fauna to this incredibly diverse country. Think of its stark deserts, glittering lakes, tropical coastline and forested highlands; or of the three craggy peaks of Mt Kenya, Africa's second highest mountain; or of the many national heritage sites and pre-history excavations that have given the country the nickname: Cradle of Mankind. I'll never tire of safari and can still stop dead in my tracks at the sight of a leopard or a lilac breasted roller, but there are many more attractions to the country that you discover over the course of a longer stay.

How is the luxury travel market comprised in Kenya?

Kenya does luxury in a way few countries do. There are some exceedingly lavish safari camps in the country. These are stunning, with huge tents that are more like cottages with multiple rooms and handcrafted furniture, swathes of white netting draped over four-poster beds. There are also some breathtakingly lovely coastal resorts: whitewashed Arabic architecture, Swahili furniture, coastal fabrics. And all of these serve haute cuisine in their mess tent or restaurant, by the sea or in the bush.

Another important factor of the luxury Kenyan tourism market is the calibre of the safari guides. The Kenya Professional Safari Guide Association has a strict and stringent accreditation system. Guides can only progress through the system after a certain number of years working in the industry at each level, and by passing rigorous exams. The luxury safari camps insist on guides who are at least silver level, and preferably gold; this gives their guests a greater chance of seeing the rarer species, and a greater insight into the lives of the animals and birds that they see.

Which are the key destinations and why?

The most famous destination in Kenya is probably the Maasai Mara. The Mara-Serengeti ecosystem stretches across parts of Kenya and Tanzania, and is where the annual Great Migration takes place; the wildebeest are in the Kenyan section of that ecosystem – the Maasai Mara – from late June to October. However, all the national parks and reserves have their own character and attractions: all were gazetted for a particular reason or to protect a specific species. Samburu is known for red rocks, dry vistas and the 'northern big five'; the Aberdares are renowned for their lush forested slopes and the rare bongo that lives on them; Tsavo is known for desert-like sands and herds of elephants that gleam red with dust; Nakuru is famed for the flocks of flamingos that turn its lake pink and extraordinary numbers of rhino.

Likewise, while Diani is the most famous beach in the country and has won multiple awards, the whole coastline of Kenya is filled with bays and beaches that are heart-stoppingly beautiful.

Watamu has rocky coves and turquoise sea; Takaungu has craggy cliffs and white-topped waves; Shimoní has canopied forest that fringes the beach. And the sites beneath the water are similarly stunning: the five marine national parks contain coral gardens that are filled with numerous species of fish, dolphins, whales, turtles and flamboyant sea creatures.

Are there any hidden or undiscovered gems you can share with us?

I'm not sure there are completely undiscovered gems, but there are certainly lots of less visited places in the country where you can get away from it all. Lake Turkana, a stunning slash of green through the desert, offers boat trips and camping and is home to nomadic tribes who move across the sands with their camels. Iten, high in the hills, is where Kenya's famous marathon runners train; it's also atop a dramatic cliff that plunges into the Kerio Valley, and from which paragliders love to throw themselves. The islands of Lake Victoria are notable for their enticing beauty and the stark differences between them: one is covered in nesting birds while another is home to multiple monitor lizards. Laikipia has the highest numbers of rare and endangered species in the country despite having no national parks or reserves, only conservancies.

What do you look for in a hotel, resort or luxury camp? Do you have specific criteria?

I like places that are eco-friendly; hotels that implement eco-polices such as reuse of water, sustainable power, composting, growing fruits and vegetables or buying locally. And I like places that work with local communities, providing employment, giving training, and acting with locals to provide visitors with activities that are pertinent to the area.

I particularly take note of places that are flexible in their schedules, and let visitors choose the activities they want to do at the times of day they wish. Organising activities to fit the wishes of the visitor is a sign of a superior camp or resort: walking safaris, or a private dinner the bush, or a sundowner at a viewpoint, or yoga on the beach – whatever it is that the visitor wants, whenever they want it. The qualifications of the safari guides and other staff is important: I would always choose to do a game drive with a gold or silver level guide, to go scuba diving with an advanced instructor, or to check into a hotel whose receptionist has completed a hospitality or tourism diploma. Safety is vital, especially for places offering adventure sports or water sports – logging of equipment, maintaining machinery and first aid. And I have to admit I relish flavoursome food; a hotel can win my heart with a delectable dish or an original cocktail!

But there's a feeling about a really superlative camp or resort that transcends everything else. It's in the set up and spacing of the tents so they all have good views; it's in the faces of the staff who greet the guests; it's in the flavours of the food and the way the wine is poured; it's in the ability of the team to surprise visitors with a sundowner when they're least expecting it. A well-designed and well-managed camp combines these and makes the whole experience special.

Do you have a personal favourite experience, hotel or location?

I love festivals and Kenya has some of the most entertaining and unexpected festivals in the world. There's the Shela Hat Contest – otherwise known as the Mad Hatters Contest – that showcases the artistic flair of the folks at the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Lamu Island; the Maralal Camel Derby in the desert of northern Kenya brings camels to the forefront with camel races, mini-marathons, local dancing and colourful festivities; Rusinga Island Festival on Lake Victoria puts the spotlight on the Suba people's



island ways and culture; the Marsabit–Lake Turkana Cultural Festival features the arts, culture, dances and music of the 14 tribes in the northernmost part of the country; Rhino Charge aims to save the rhino and its environment through an extreme and unique off-road rally; the Lewa Marathon pits Kenya's famed marathon runners against all who want to run and support conservation while they're at it; and my personal favourite, the Lamu Yoga Festival, brings yogis from around the world to the island of Lamu with yoga classes in styles as far afield as yin, SUP, acro and kundilini, as well as dune walks, dhow meditations and a grand finale beach party.

You also have tremendous experience of the luxury travel market in Ethiopia. Can you tell us more?

Ethiopia has a much younger tourism industry than Kenya, and the people in the industry have had less exposure to international hotels and tourism providers. Many of the hotels in Ethiopia have yet to offer that quality of luxury. However, the industry is developing fast and there are some places that break the mould. In Addis, there are several international hotel chains including Sheraton, Marriott, Hilton and Radisson Blu. In the south of the country, Bale Mountain Lodge sets the standard for safari lodges, with its cottage-style accommodation, stunning views of the mountains and extensive range of activities. In Tigrey region, Korkor Lodge and Gheralta Lodge offer charming cottages with views of the cliffs, wide range of activities and Italian cuisine. In the Simien Mountains, both Simien Lodge and Limalimo Lodge offer appealing lodge facilities, striking vistas and diverse activities. And two Ethiopian hotel chains are providing plush resorts in several locations around the country: Kuriftu Resorts and Haile Resorts, the latter owned by Haile Gebrselassie, arguably the best runner Ethiopia has ever produced.



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What does Ethiopia offer that is different to Kenya?

The two countries are so completely different it's almost impossible to believe they're neighbours. Ethiopia has a lengthy history that stretches back to the days when the first hominids stood upright. The early stories of Ethiopia go back to when history, myth and legend blended: the days of the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon of Jerusalem. Then came the dominance of the Axumite Empire, and later the centuries of carving churches from rocks – which gave Ethiopia some of its most famous sites: the rock-hewn churches of Lalibela and Tigrey challenge one's concept of what was possible so early in time.

The tribes in Ethiopia are also different. While there are around 82 tribes in the country, the peoples who are most diverse are those who live around the Omo Valley region in the south of Ethiopia. Many of these still live as they have done for eons, with their own individual customs and traditions; the Mursi women insert plates into their lips; the Hamar men prove their readiness for marriage by running over the backs of bulls; the Karo adorn themselves with body paint and feather piercings; the Konso mummify their chiefs in honey, butter and milk for nine years, nine months, nine days and nine hours.

Who would a trip to Ethiopia typically appeal to?

It really depends on the region you'd like to visit and the activities you'd like to participate in. Those who are interested in history, and the history of the church, would be fascinated by the northern route: Bahir Dar and the lakeside monasteries; Gondar and the evocative castles; Axum and the obelisks; Lalibela and the rock-hewn churches. All these are captivating, accessible and unlike anywhere else.

Other parts of the country are for the more adventurous – the Danakil Depression is the hottest place in the world in terms of year round temperatures; Erta Ale Volcano requires a climb in the dark of night; the Simien Mountains and Bale Mountain are at high altitude and have challenging treks; the Omo Valley is remote, hot and dusty; while to reach the churches in Tigrey one needs to scale rock faces. All these are absolutely beguiling, but require a certain level of fitness and a spirit of daring to appreciate their appeal.

What is the biggest piece of advice you would offer to our readers experiencing either country for the first time?

Both countries are so diverse and offer so many things to do that it's easy to get confused. Read about where you're going.



Discuss the options with your tour operator. Make sure you're getting the trip that you're dreaming of. In Kenya, it's not just a matter of deciding to go on safari; there are many national parks, reserves and conservancies and you need to decide which one offers what you want to do. Likewise – which beach do you go to, which mountain, which lake, which region, which festival? In Ethiopia the options are just as varied – which national park, which geographical anomaly, which selection of churches, which historic site? Take time to discuss this with your tour operator, tell them what you're hoping for, and what you and your travel companions like to do, and take the booking process slowly. Your tour operator is there to help you and to design the holiday that perfectly suits you.

Is there anything else you would like to share with our readers?

Kenya and Ethiopia offer experiences nowhere else does. Don't wait until tomorrow. If you'd like to go on safari, or immerse yourself in antiquity, do it while you really want to. Sleep at the top of a volcano, visit the hottest place in the world, celebrate tribal festivals, climb a cliff to a church, watch the migration sweeping across the plains. I truly believe the world is changing, we are changing, and now is the time to experience all it offers.



Simien Mountains