

Review of Ultimate Africa Safari, posted on Overseas Adventure Travel website – November, 2016

Anticipating that you are reading this because you are thinking of signing up for the trip, I wholeheartedly recommend it. I added both the Thornybush pre-trip and the Cape Town post-trip, and am glad I did. My primary interest was in the animals, and I was not disappointed. However, if you want to see the Big Five, be sure to include Thornybush. If I hadn't, I wouldn't have seen leopards or either the black or white rhinos. I will not repeat what the other reviewers have said, other than saying that the camps (for me, it was Baobab, Banoka, Kafue and Kashawe) were all just fine - not particularly fancy, but very comfortable, with extraordinary staffs that knew our names immediately, provided Americanized food that was quite tasty and plentiful (we seemed to eat every two hours or so), and were quite clean. There were lots of game drives; I counted 23, including two double drives, and the guides were generally excellent, good at locating game and answering everyone's questions. All the camps had electricity and charging stations for cameras and other devices. I only needed a South African adapter for my chargers. I had purchased all the various adapters referenced on page 16 of the Handbook (which wasn't easy), but didn't need them. If you are staying in other camps, they might be necessary, but not for the four camps I was in. There was no wifi availability, which was fine since I wasn't trying to work. You should be aware that if you are used to accessing wifi for personal or business reasons, it just isn't possible. Once in the camps, you are there for the duration, and there is no wandering off to an internet cafe. We did have a 30 minute opportunity at the airport between two camps, but that was it for the 16 days of the trip in the camps.

I know that prior to my trip I was most interested in what people suggested was necessary for packing. Obviously, it depends on the season. My trip was from September 24 through October 19, so it was hot - 106 in the tents one day in Kashawe. However, the game drives are early in the morning (leaving at 5:30 to 6:30 depending on the camp) and in the late afternoon, so in the heat of the day you are in the camps and generally napping. The camps will launder your clothes (except underwear) for free, and return them the same day, which is quite a treat. I suggest two pairs of pants that are full length but can roll up to the knee or so when it gets hot. A couple of light t-shirts or tank tops, and two long sleeve overshirts for layering and keeping the sun off your arms. A pair of shorts for the downtime during the day. One pair of lightweight closed toe shoes, like tennis shoes, a sturdy sandal like Tevas, and flip flops for around the tent. You will be wearing the sandals most of the time, and your feet will get very dirty. A lightweight jacket in case of rain. It really is best if your clothes are earth tones colors. You blend in better, and it seems more polite to the animals. Also, if it is going to be hot, bring clothes that are loose - you will be much more comfortable. You do need to be physically able to climb in and out of the trucks - I am glad I had my knees done before the trip, and the rides, particularly in Okavanga with all the Kalahari sand, can be quite bumpy, but no one on our trip had a real problem with that, and I think I was one of the younger ones, at 64. The trucks in Thornybush are open with no roof, so too much sun can be a problem; the trucks for the other camps all have a canvas cover over the seating area, so you are generally in the shade during the game drives. That helps a lot when it's hot. By the way, our group of 14 was quite good - everyone was pleasant and on time, quick to find humor in things, and paid attention to the need to rotate seats on the trucks so that everyone had a good view during the game drives.

As a photographer, I brought several cameras and a monopod, but found that I didn't use my SLR or the monopod after the first day. While the visibility in the trucks is good, the animals are in lots of different directions and I was moving around in my seat a lot to get the shot I wanted, so the monopod wasn't practical. Also, my SLR with its interchangeable lenses was just too cumbersome. In anticipation of the trip, I had purchased a "superzoom" camera, a Panasonic Lumix FZ300, with a 2.8 lens that went from 28 to 600, and it worked really well. You can see my photos at the website I just put together,

www.mmacleanphotos.com. Bring extra batteries, though. With all the zooming in and out, I found that I often went through three batteries in a day. Some people on the trip used simple point and shoot cameras or even their phones, and were happy with that. I am glad that I had the capability to get really close with the 600 zoom and a real viewfinder. I also recommend that you bring the manual for your camera, whatever kind you bring. You will be doing different things that you have done before, and this is not the time to be frustrated with your camera.

Other things to bring include reading material (I downloaded a bunch of books from the library onto my kindle); there is a lot of down time in the middle of the day and after dinner. Bring a notebook or something to write on, to keep track of all the various animals you see. Several of us thought it would have been good to bring a field guide to mammals (and/or birds) of South Africa. The guides will tell you what everything is, but it's easy to get the different animals, particularly all the types of antelope, confused. Other helpful things: chapstick, suntan lotion, flashlight, a backpack with a side holder for the water bottle they give you. Since you are on game drives for several hours at a time, keeping all your stuff in a backpack that can easily sit next to your feet in the truck is helpful. And, as others have mentioned, OAT will send you a duffel that they require you use. It is quite large, and has no ties inside or anything that can keep what you pack in place. I purchased from Amazon two "TravelWise Packing Cubes" for \$9.95 for a set of three (different sizes), and was very glad I did. It allowed me to keep everything organized, and made unpacking and packing again much easier. The other thing I brought that came in handy was a small speaker to attach to my phone, so I could listen to music during the afternoon down time (you want to listen to the animals at night). OAT recommends that you bring about \$800 in cash - several of us questioned that during the trip. There is nothing to spend money on while in the camps, unless you are a big drinker or are going to buy the hand made goods some camps have for sale. You do need the cash for visas, and for incidentals, but I brought most of that money back with me. Finally, it was the practice in our group that everyone was escorted back to their tents when dinner was over - around 8:00 or 8:30. Once you are escorted to your tent you can't leave again until the next morning when they come to wake you up for the morning game drive. If you are traveling as a single, that's a lot of alone time. Not bad, but be prepared, or talk to your fellow travelers about perhaps staying in the lodge area after dinner for a while for socializing.

It was a great trip. I wasn't particularly enamored of our Trip Leader, and the village and school visits were not something I was particularly interested in, so OAT may not be the best kind of trip for me, but I am glad I did the Ultimate Africa trip and recommend it to anyone really interested in spending time and seeing all those magnificent animals.

Most memorable moment

There were so many - the giraffe that refused to get out of the road, the 1,000 cape buffalo in Chobe, the hyenas circling the lions and their cubs, the happy hippos that would go under water when I tried to take their photo, and then would come back up when I was out of range, laughing at me, the water hole in Hwange National Park, with 45 elephants and a passel of hippos, just hanging out, the hippo that spent 45 minutes outside my tent in the middle of the night, then marking his territory on a nearby tree for me to see in the morning. It was all good.

Traveled On

September 24, 2016

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