

The Great Wildebeest Migration - One of New Seven Wonders of the World

In this report, we take a closer look at the **Great Wildebeest Migration**, which declared one of the "New Seven Wonders of the World" by a jury of experts polled by ABC Television.



Millions of Wildebeests Crossing the Crocodile Infested Mara River

Brought To You By Gerald Njuguna

You Are Encouraged To Forward This Report To Your Family & Friends

Copyright © Africa Point

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

No part of this report may be reproduced in any form whatsoever, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying and recording, without express written permission from the author.

DISCLAIMER AND/OR LEGAL NOTICES:

Africa Point has done its utmost to ensure that the information on this report is as accurate and current as possible. The information is provided 'as is' and Africa Point will not accept responsibility for any loss, injury or inconvenience sustained by anyone resulting from the information on this website. Please verify crucial information like visas, health and safety, customs and transportation with the relevant authorities before you travel.

Table of Content

1. <u>The Great Wildebeest Migration – One of the Seven Wonders of the World</u>	4
2. <u>Destination Facts: - Kenya</u>	12
3. <u>Travel Basics: - Kenya</u>	13
o Health Information	
o Visas	
o Peoples & Culture	
o Communication	
o Accommodation	
o Money	
o Climate	
o International Travel	
o Local Travel	
o Travel Insurance	
o What To Wear	
4. <u>Forward This Report</u>	17
5. <u>Recommended Resources</u>	18

1. The Great Wildebeest Migration – One of the Seven Wonders of the World

Between Kenya and Tanzania, you have Africa's most diverse and abundant wildlife. Animals within protected areas of game reserves and national parks have largely remained on a free ranging basis in their natural habitat. It is principally for this reason, that East Africa is the world's most outstanding safari destination.

Fittingly, it is here that one of the most **spectacular** phenomenon of the natural world takes place- the Great Annual Wildebeest Migration. This cross border event, is one of the last great migrations, and is increasingly celebrated as a unique world heritage. In November 2006, a jury of experts polled by ABC Television - a leading American broadcaster, affirmed the annual migration as one of the "*New Seven Wonders of the World*".

The migration event, the Maasai Mara Game Reserve (Kenya) and the Serengeti National Park (Tanzania) – where the phenomena occurs, were collectively selected to share in the honors.



The Great Wildebeest Migration is a yearly mass movement of millions of ungulates (hoofed animals) allured first to the north, and then back to the south by the promise of rains.

Tirelessly following almost the same pattern each year, and at around the same time of the calendar, the animals take an amazing yearlong 2,900 km clockwise trek.

The great migration involves an estimated 1.3 million wildebeest, 200,000 zebra, and a multitude of gazelles, among a few other hoofed species.

The Mara-Serengeti ecosystem supports the most varied collection of terrestrial wildlife in the world. The principal groups are carnivores, primates, reptiles and ungulates. The carnivores have among them the usual suspects: leopard, lion, cheetah, hyena and jackal, and others such as genet, mongoose, serval and wild dog. Primates are less common but include baboon, bush baby and monkey.

But the hoofed ones -without whose presence, the carnivores cannot thrive -are in plenty. The ungulates include: rhino, giraffe, zebra, buffalo, warthog, hippo, and antelopes such as reedbuck, impala, gazelle, duiker, bushbuck, dik-dik, eland, hartebeest, klipspringer, kudu, oribi, roan antelope, topi, waterbuck, and of course the wildebeest.

The Maasai Mara Game Reserve is by common consent, Africa's greatest wildlife destination. The Mara -as it is popularly known, covers 1,510 sq km and is located along the Great Rift Valley, approximately 300 km southwest of Nairobi. "Mara" in the language of the Maasai people, who are native to the region, means mottled- an allusion to the patchy landscape. Rolling hills, open savannah grass plains and woodlands define the area.

The Maasai are a pastoral tribes-people who live in southern Kenya and north-central Tanzania, along the Great Rift Valley plains. They are a fearless, proud, and freedom loving people, who live in the open wild, sharing their habitat with wildlife.



The tall, dark and slender Maasai have for long remained contemptuous of modern lifestyles. They have always infatuated romantic westerners, since the appearance of explorer Joseph Thomson's book "Through Maasailand" in 1885.

The Maasai are not hunters, an aspect that greatly contributes to their harmonious co-existence with wildlife. The only conflict arises when wild game attacks their beloved livestock.

Wildlife in the Mara is plentiful and the big five – elephant, lion, buffalo, leopard and rhino- are easy to spot. The predator population here is abundant and witnessing a lion or cheetah on the hunt is not just an idle dream. The reserve is also an excellent birding destination, being host to over 450 species of birdlife, including the vulture, marabou stork, secretary bird, hornbill, crowned crane, ostrich, long-crested eagle, and pygmy falcon.

The Mara being a game reserve, the Maasai peoples are allowed to co-exist with the wildlife, unlike in national parks, where no human residents are allowed. The Mara is a northern extension of Tanzania's Serengeti National Park.

The Mara's savannah provides a magnificent backdrop for wildlife photography and movies. It is in fact the location of numerous wildlife documentaries and movies, among the most celebrated being the popular BBC documentary series "Big Cat Diary" and Sydney Pollack's Academy Award winning movie "Out of Africa".

Visitors are drawn to the Mara by its plentiful resident wildlife, and by the prospects of witnessing the annual wildebeest migration. Those coming between July and October are likely to witness part of the action. Besides its pomp and glamour, the Mara has some outstanding research facilities; among them Africa's leading spotted hyena research centre.

The Serengeti National Park, which was established in 1951, is found to the north of Tanzania. It is the country's oldest and most famous wildlife sanctuary, and has been selected as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Serengeti occupies a massive 14,763 sq km, and lies 335 km from Arusha. Extending southwards from the Kenyan border at the Mara, it is made up of grassy plains, open savannah, acacia woodlands and scattered riverine forests.



Serengeti is derived from a Maasai word for "endless plains". To the south of the park, the endless savannah is punctuated by a series of granite Kopjes -rocky outcrops, some of which feature ancient African rock paintings.

The Seronera region in central Serengeti is the most accessible, and predictably the most popular. The Grumeti River to the west is

one of the migration river crossings, and is an excellent location to witness the wildebeest hordes in motion. Lobo near the Kenyan border has plenty of wildlife during the dry season.

With great effort, Serengeti has been well preserved, and human interruption kept at bay. In a move that stirred great controversy, the Maasai were relocated to the nearby Ngorongoro highlands. Relative to Serengeti, and taking into account size difference the Mara is more developed and has far more by way of accommodation and other facilities.

The Great Migration principally involves the wildebeest, a larger member of the antelope family, also known as the gnu. The wildebeest is Dutch for "wild beast",

and was so named by South African Dutch settlers, who were inspired by the beasts bewildering appearance and behavior. The gnu comes fitted with the crest like a buffalo's, skinny antelope-like legs, a horse-like tail, and a hind slant posture like a hyena's.

Though humorless by nature, wildebeests have managed to earn themselves the name "Clowns of the Savannah". But when it comes to survival, nobody laughs at the wildebeests, for they thrive in huge numbers and are a very successful species.



The average gnu will stand at 1.27 m at shoulder height, and weigh about 250 kg. Its diet is primarily grass, and prefers to live in the open grasslands and savannah woodlands of East, Central and Southern Africa. Like many bovines, the bulls are larger than cows in build.

The cows experience a gestation period of 8 to 8 ½ months and parenting is solely their responsibility.

The gnu are free spirited, and form no social structures. Though of necessity they travel together, they are a collection of loners; with no hierarchy, no team leaders, and only mother-calf relationships are substantial.

The animals spend most of the year grazing in the expansive Serengeti plains. The migration year begins on a quiet note, with the migration squad spread over Tanzania's Ngorongoro area and parts of southern Serengeti around Lake Ndutu. The animals usually move to this region in December after the short rains subside.

At that time, the grass throughout the plains has had months to regenerate. Most of the cows are then noticeably expectant. The wildebeest happily settle here, until the onset of the long rains around March.



January slips by almost unnoticed, but February brings

forth a new burst of life. The Serengeti becomes an extensive maternity unit for 3 weeks or so, with over 400,000 calves being born every year at this time. With the cows' continued good diet and state of rest, the calves usually arrive strong and lively. Within a short 3 hours of birth, they are up and running, wasting no time to practice for the long and hard journeys ahead.

By around mid March, hordes of gazelles begin to stream into the area. The grass begins to dwindle, putting pressure on lactating mothers to seek better and more nutritious grass elsewhere.

They slowly begin to herd together and move northwest in columns towards the Serengeti plains, past the Naabi Hills. They trek steadily at a slow pace; by now only a few hundred thousands are on the move.



The little ones are a few weeks old, and some even only a few days into the world. But they are strong enough; they tag along their mothers into the new, mineral-rich territory.

The animals munch on the wholesome grass as they move along towards the west. They head on past Moru and Simba Kopjes, Seronera, Ndoha and Dutwa plains. By May, when the long rains are waning, the now surging herds check into the Ndabaka and Ruana plains, to join the western migratory corridor along the Grumeti River. They unite with other smaller herds that reside along the route taken, and continue the trot in columns.

As the numbers rise, the march raises a majestic din of thundering hooves and low grunts. The swelling hordes attract all sorts of predators- big cats, hyenas, jackals, and the vultures too. Christmas has indeed come early for the predators of the Serengeti, and the fattening ungulates are a welcome gift.

This is also happens to be the migrants' mating season. The air is filled with noisy grunts, and a cloud of excitement envelopes the plains.

The Grumeti River is infested with huge Nile crocodiles that have patiently waited for the time the troops must cross the river. This is the migration's first crocodile challenge; crossing the river is a do-or-die survival game. After the crossing, the

pace goes a notch higher as the trekkers take on the western corridor through the Musabi Plains.

The 50 km corridor leads them north towards Lake Victoria, and to the northeast. It is now June and the dry season sets in. Water in the plains is not plentiful, and most of the green is dried up. Many animals die during this time, some out of sheer exhaustion. The lake region, with its unique rainfall pattern, brings a little relief. The animals soon head for the eastern banks of the Mara River, towards the Kenya-Tanzania border.

Around July-August, the troopers arrive at the Kenyan border, ready to cross the steep banks of the broad and fast Mara River. This crossing is truly the greatest episode of the entire migration.

The banks of the Mara River provide one of the best vantage points to witness the drama, and great crowds of visitors are drawn here.

The crossing is a magnificent and unbelievable spectacle; in September 2006, an estimated 500,000 animals are reported to have crossed the Mara River in a single session over a period of 7 hours!



About 1.5 million animals attempt to cheat death at various points along the Mara River. At first, the animals halt at the banks and wait for the first few brave machos to make the initial leap.

The wildebeest betrays a lack of intelligence and judgment, for the animals leap into the river with little calculation or method. Observers who had judged the



beast stupid by appearance are bound to feel justified.

In these waters float some very cunning and ruthless crocodiles, on the ready to nab any crosser that may stumble.

Having waited a whole year for this day, they show little

compassion and make no exceptions- even ignoring a mother's kicks to save her calf.

The animals are however single minded about the crossing, and the heaving procession leaps into the river, stampeding over one another. In this primal zero sum game- crocodiles make a hefty meal of many, while other equally agile predators such as lion, hyena and jackals, await their turn along the river's banks.



About 1/8 of the horde do not survive the crossing; some are carried away by the hard river torrents, others simply drown, and others are victim to predators.

The young ones suffer the most; not more than one third of calves born in the Serengeti survive the challenge of their maiden migration.

Those that make it safely to the other side have now set hoof into Kenya's Maasai Mara Game Reserve, where the grass is truly greener.

While in the Mara Triangle, they are joined by a new group of migrants from the Loita Hills, slightly to the northeast of the reserve. Between August and October, the Mara is full of life with ungulates and predators traversing the horizons. They spread throughout the park, concentrating in the western, more watered parts of reserve. There is enough food for all, and the wildebeest will reside here for a while. Others wander slightly beyond the Mara.

In October, after munching most of the grass in the Mara, the mass columns begin to form again. This time they head south where the promise of the short rains in November and renewed grass draws them back to the Serengeti plains. They move eastward towards Keekorok area, and then head southwards, crossing the Sand River on their way out.

By November, they are crossing into the Serengeti, headed for the Lobo Hills, negotiating many rivers on their way farther south as far as Ndotu and Ngorongoro. It is here that they will rest for a while; the pregnant ones will calve and prepare to begin the same migration journey over again.

Archaeological findings at Olduvai Gorge have revealed that the migration may have been going on for millions of years. It is difficult to speculate how much greater the migration may have been before the onset of the 20th century that brought an ill-fated sweep of *rinderpest*. The disease wiped out massive herds of plains animals, leaving less than 1/10 of today's wildebeest population.

It was not until the 1950's that the first official count was run, revealing a 99,500 wildebeest population in the Serengeti. This was the great contribution of Bernhard Grzimek and his son Michael; makers of the film "Serengeti Shall Not Die". Their 1959 Oscar Award winner was the first of its kind, and it put Serengeti squarely on the international map.

Until very recently, scientists had not been able to fully track this frantic journey. Veterinarian Patrick Garcia has now led a group of scientists sponsored by Animal Planet that included Sophie Grange, Anja Brinch Jensen, and Sébastien Lafont. They employed modern equipment and technology, including a VHF radio system, minuscule Global Positioning System (GPS) monitors, and satellite transmitters. They tracked 10 migration participants- 7 wildebeest and 3 zebra.

The scientists were able to track the animals 24 hours a day, revealing their exact position via satellite. After months on the edge, they showcased their findings in a 3 part televised program –"The Great Savannah Race", which was aired on Animal Planet in July 2006. The documentary takes viewers through the everyday lives of the ten co-stars, with glimpses of their chums and foes alike. This reality show treats you to drama, paradox, intrigue, suspense, tragedy, and light moments.

The Mara and Serengeti are well serviced with a wide range of accommodation- ranging from luxury bush lodges and tented camps, to camping grounds for the thrifty and adventurous. Out there in the bush, you will be pleasantly surprised that there is a variety of Kenya and Tanzania safari lodges having all the trimmings of 5-star luxury.

Mara Serena Lodge - >



You can view game while walking, horse riding and even aloft a hot air balloon. Taking a safari is best done on an

escorted Kenya and Tanzania safari that includes- transport, guides, park fees and accommodation.

The guides are usually well versed about the animals, where to find them and how to get there, and have other such useful local knowledge. But if you have a lot of time and need more freedom as you get around, then taking a rental car in Nairobi or Arusha (Tanzania) is a viable option.

On safari, wear light cottons and linen. Warmer clothing is needed for the evenings and for your early morning game drive. Some rainwear is advisable between March and June, and October and December. You should bring along a decent pair of sunglasses. The glare you experience in bright tropical light is a new and uncomfortable experience for most. It is also a good idea to carry a pair of binoculars. They are very useful for spotting animals and will earn you the envy of your less informed fellow travellers.

[Back To Top](#)

2. Destination Facts: Kenya

Full Country Name: Republic of Kenya

Area: 583,000 sq km

Population: More than 30 million

Capital City: Nairobi

Other Major Towns: Mombasa, Kisumu, Nakuru, Eldoret

Peoples: Kikuyu (21%), Luhya (14%), Luo (13%), Kamba (11%), Kalenjin (11%), Gusii (6%), Meru (5%) plus Asian, Arab and European minorities

Language: English, Swahili & indigenous languages

Religion: Christian (54%), Muslim (6%) and traditional religions

Government: Republic

Time: GMT + 3 hours

Currency: Kenya Shilling (Ksh)

Electricity: 220/240 V, 50 Hz

Weights and Measures: Metric

Economy: Textiles, tea, horticultural produce, agricultural processing, oil refining, cement, tourism

[Back To Top](#)

3. Travel Basics: Kenya

Health

Visitors over 1 year of age entering Kenya from yellow fever infected areas require yellow fever international certificate of vaccination. Exemptions are made for visitors arriving from non-endemic areas such as Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand. Cholera is a health risk in the country and precautions are essential. Malaria is a serious risk in most of the country. The risk level is however lower in the highlands above 2500m, of the Central, Rift Valley, Eastern and Western Provinces. Visitors are strongly advised to take anti-malaria medication commencing two weeks before travel.

It is recommended, especially for longer staying visitors, to take vaccinations against hepatitis A, polio and typhoid. HIV-AIDS is prevalent in the country and prudent measures are called for. Some fresh water lakes and rivers carry the risk of Bilharzia and you are advised not to swim or paddle in such areas. There are good hospitals in Nairobi, Mombasa and Kisumu. Chemists can be found in all the major towns.

Visas

Passports valid for 3 months from date of entry are required of all visitors. All visitors require a visa except for citizens of some commonwealth countries. There are also exceptions with varying conditions for citizens of Ethiopia, Turkey, Malaysia, and Uruguay and a few other countries. Airport visas are available although this may result in delays upon arrival. It is advisable to obtain visa's in advance from Kenyan Embassies and High Commissions as some airlines may require it before allowing you to board. Visa requirements vary from time to time and you are advised to check on prevailing status well ahead of travel.

Peoples & Culture

Kenya is made up of more than 70 or so tribal groups. There are also small but influential minorities of Asian, Arab and European origin. More than 90% of the African population falls within the broad categories of Bantu and Nilotic speakers. The main Bantu speakers are Kikuyu, Luhya, Kamba, Gusii, Mijikenda, Embu and Meru. Nilotic speakers are Maasai, Samburu, Pokot, Turkana, Luo and Kalenjin. At the coast, the interaction of Arabs, Persians and Bantu Africans has resulted in the Swahili people. The Swahili language is now widely spoken in Kenya and throughout Eastern and Central Africa. It is quite useful to have a working knowledge of Swahili if you intend to travel outside the main urban and tourist routes. English is widely understood in urban centers.

The de facto national dish is Nyama Choma, barbecued goat meat. But the guy in the street survives on that stodgy filler called Ugali, prepared using maize meal accompanied with some greens. At the coast however the traditional food

of the Swahili is a good experience. This is usually based on seafood and rice dishes. Beer lovers will have a good time in Kenya. There are several international standard lagers produced locally. The most popular is named after the elephant, thus Tusker. While on safari, remember to celebrate the African elephant by taking a little Tusker.

In the last few years there has been some kind of revival in local music. This revival is led by younger urban artists who sing in Swahili and Sheng, a kind of Creole mix of Swahili and English. The music is a local blend of hip-hop and rap.

Communications

Telephone, fax, telegram, post and Internet services are available in urban centers and locations popular with tourists. International direct dialing to many countries is available in most urban centres. In rural areas international calling is through the operator. The country code for Kenya is 254.

Mobile phones are based on GSM 900 network. Coverage extends to the principal urban centres, major highways and parts of popular game reserves such as the Mara. You are however advised to check beforehand whether your GSM phone is usable if you are traveling outside the main urban centres. You can obtain a GSM card that will allow you to make international calls to any country. Currently the country is served by two network operators: Celltel and Safaricom (www.safaricom.co.ke). There are Internet cafes in urban centres and hotels around the country. More than 90% of the internet cafes charge 1 Kenya shilling/min (\$ 0.01/min) to browse the internet

Accommodation

You will find good quality accommodation within the main routes popular with tourists and business travelers. This includes Nairobi, Mombasa, Lamu, Malindi, Lake Naivasha, Kisumu and the popular game reserves and national parks such as Maasai Mara, Amboseli, Lake Nakuru, Tsavo, Aberdares, Samburu and the Mount Kenya area. In the parks, accommodation varies from 5 star lodges and tented camps at the upper end, to basic camping at the lower end. Outside the main urban centres and tourist routes, it is difficult to get rated accommodation. See [Kenya Hotels, Lodges & Resorts](#) information to view info and book accommodation for your stay in Kenya.

Money

The local currency is the Kenya Shilling (Ksh). There are no restrictions on the import and export of local or foreign currency. But for amounts exceeding US dollars 5,000 or equivalent you will need to declare the source and purpose of the funds. Major currencies such as US dollars and now the Euro and travelers cheques can be converted at major hotels, banks and forex bureaus in the main towns and tourist areas. You will get best exchange rates for cash or travelers

cheques if you are dealing in US dollars or Pound Sterling. For this your best deal will be at forex bureaus. Avoid changing money in the streets however favourable the exchange rate may appear.

Visa and Mastercard have wide acceptance. But American Express, Diners and other cards have more limited acceptance. Your Visa card can access your bank or credit card account through any Standard Chartered Bank dispenser, 24 hours a day.

Climate

Kenya has such diverse geography, that, temperatures, rainfall and humidity vary widely. The country can be divided into four main regions: the arid north, the savanna lands in the south, the central highlands and the lowlands along the coast and the Lake Victoria region. The coastal areas are hot and humid though tempered by some much welcome sea breezes. Average temperatures vary little year round and range from 22°C minimum to 33°C maximum.

The central highlands and rift valley enjoy a pleasant temperate climate. Average temperatures vary from a minimum of 10 to 14°C to a maximum of 22 to 26°C. The Lake Victoria lowlands are hot and dry and temperatures can reach 34°C. Rainfall is also heavy. The semi arid north experiences the most extreme variations in temperatures. This ranges from a maximum of 40°C in the day to 20°C at night. There are two rainy seasons: March to May ("long rains") and October to December ("short rains").

International Travel

Kenya is a regional travel hub and has connections by a large number of airlines from all over the world particularly those from Europe, Asia and other parts of Africa. The country has three international airports at Nairobi, Mombasa and Eldoret. The national airline is Kenya Airways, a major player in African air travel. British Airways and Kenya Airways fly to Nairobi direct from London. A few European airlines also have direct flights from their hubs in Europe. Gulf Air and Emirates fly to Nairobi using mid eastern connections.

In addition to flying, you can travel by bus between Kenya and Tanzania. The main connections are from Nairobi and Mombasa to Dar es Salaam and from Nairobi to Moshi and Arusha. Occasional ferries leave Mombasa for Zanzibar and Dar es Salaam. Uganda can be reached from Kenya by air, rail and bus. There is a border crossing at Moyale on the Kenya-Ethiopia border and which trucks mainly use. Overland travel to Sudan and Somalia is exceedingly difficult at present.

Local Travel

There are scheduled flights to a number of local destinations from Nairobi to Mombasa, Nanyuki, Kisumu, Malindi, Lamu, Lokichogio and the national parks and game reserves of Maasai Mara, Amboseli and Samburu. View info and booking of [local flights in Kenya](#). You can also travel to a few urban centers in the country by train though this has not been reliable in recent years. Regular bus service links the main urban centers.

Around urban areas and shorter links between towns, the popular way to get around is by means of matatu (shared taxi). Rental cars are reliably available from Mombasa, Kisumu and Nairobi. Review [rental cars in Kenya](#). Remember that driving is on the left. Generally, between urban centers the road links are good. The quality deteriorates when you get off the main routes and into more remote locations.

Travel Insurance

Health and the usual travel insurance are recommended. Ensure your travel insurance includes emergency evacuation.

What to Wear

Light clothing is generally recommended in Kenya. The highlands are however temperate and you need a sweater and jacket year round. This is necessary for the evenings and early mornings. If you plan to climb Mount Kenya be ready with special clothing not only for the climb, but to protect yourself from sub zero temperatures.

On safari, bright colored clothing may get you in trouble with the wild animals. Colours of the earth are generally favoured, thus brown, beige and khaki clothing. Short sleeve shirts, shorts and trousers for men are sufficient. For ladies, short sleeve blouses and skirts are ideal in the national parks and touristy places. This is except at the predominantly Muslim coastal areas, where more conservative dressing is called for. But even at the coast, swimwear is perfectly acceptable at beaches and hotel premises. It is advisable to travel light and some safari and air charters have a baggage limit of 10-15 kilograms.

[Back To Top](#)

5. Forward This Report

I hope you've found this report to be informative and educative. Please [click here](#) to forward it to your family and friends. I'm sure they will like it as much as you did!

6. Recommended Resources

- [Kenya Wildlife Services](#) – Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) is charged with the protection and conservation of Kenya's biodiversity as presented by its fauna and flora. View information on all national parks and game reserves in Kenya
- [Tanzania Tourism Board](#) - Official website for Tanzania, with everything you need to know about the beautiful country in one easy location.
- [Magical Kenya](#) - The official travel and tourism guide by the **Kenya** Tourist Board describes attractions and provides databases of safari operators and accommodation.
- [YouTube](#) – On this website you can search for interesting videos showing the wildebeest migration

Gerald Njuguna