



UNITED STATES

Safari so good in Kenya and Florida

* At Disney's Animal Kingdom Lodge, an ersatz wildlife encounter is just off the balcony

By Kathryn Brockman
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Exotic creatures such as rhinos and zebras, roaming free in their native habitat ... it's a rare experience, we knew, after going on safari in Kenya.

But can it be replicated anywhere else?

Walt Disney World is giving it a try in Florida with the 1,293-room Animal Kingdom Lodge, which opened in April.

The lodge, one of Disney's deluxe resorts, continues the African theme established by its 3-year-old Animal Kingdom park, which is home to about 1,000 animals on 500 acres.

Many of the same species roam the grounds of the lodge, allowing guests to imagine they've been plunked down in an African wildlife reserve. With a design based on a composite of 20 African lodges, the resort captures the feel of Kenya's famous tree hotels -- but without the inconvenience, expense or risk involved in a genuine safari.

At the resort, guests are surrounded by a visual feast of African art, culture, foods, wines and, of course, wildlife from throughout the continent, presented within one evocative African-thatch kraal, or corral, inspired by the traditional Zulu circular village design.

The lodge reflects only the appealing aspects of African tradition, contemporary lifestyle and global goodwill. It's Disney World, after all -- right down to the high costs.

With prices at the Animal Kingdom Lodge ranging from \$199-\$580 per night, dining tabs hitting \$60-\$100 a day per person, glasses of wine at \$5.50-\$15.50, kid-care programs at \$8 per hour, plus shopping, safari, and travel costs, perhaps some perspective is in order before getting too wild about the Lodge immersion.

Animal lotto

Let's start with the wildlife.

On an African safari, there are no guarantees you'll see specific animals. On our Kenya safari last year, we were lucky. We saw the big five: elephant, rhino, water buffalo, leopard and lion. Two mating lions and two big cats feasting on their fresh kills kept us riveted to the spectacle of life, death and survival of the fittest. Thousands of other exotic animals and birds drew us into an unfolding canvas of dramatic plains, deserts and jungles framed by spectacular hills and mountain ranges.

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In our protective, pop-top minivans with their 360-degree views, we were surrounded by the wildlife. We were a part of the big picture.

At Disney's Animal Kingdom Lodge, I looked up and suddenly, there was a giraffe outside my balcony, staring back at me. A rare kudu, a spiral-horned antelope, ambled in behind it; in the distance was a zebra. They were gone before I could get a photo.

Yet they couldn't go too far. About 36 species of mammals and 26 species of birds populate the resort's 33-acre savannah. Myriad corridors, walkways, overhangs and rock outcroppings provide plenty of viewing opportunities.

In an artificial way, you're surrounded by wildlife.

No bloody feasts

The animals at the Disney lodge are as pampered as the resort's guests. Because most have come from the Disney animal park or zoos, they have never known real hunger or hunters.

In turn, they provide convenient, easy, safe, comfortable wildlife viewing without the dust, potholes and sometimes long and occasionally futile searches that characterize traditional safaris. You can still dress up in your safari gear and never get dirty.

The animals' habitat simulates African landscapes, forests, river systems, grasslands and bush with added vegetation from Florida, Mexico, California and Arizona. The animals can roam only so far: Electric sensors in a perimeter-defining stone trail, about 15 feet from the Lodge building, encourage both the animals and the guests to keep their distance.

Rough it or fluff it?

In Kenya, we careened over a multitude of dry, dusty roads in diverse landscapes. Twice on our safari, we had to wait, trapped inside our vehicle, until a stubborn elephant and an indifferent lioness decided to move off the road.

At Animal Kingdom Lodge, you get all the landscapes in one location.

The mere sliding open of the balcony door provides an uncrowded vista of an African savannah, while maintaining the air-conditioned comfort of home. Rooms feature Zimbabwean hand-carved wood furniture, intricate woven baskets, framed art and colorful African textile patterns, most either bolted to the walls or too heavy to cart off as souvenirs. Plus, you can get a good night's sleep (assuming the kids next door aren't misbehaving).

At Kenya's Treetops, by contrast, children under 5 are not allowed and only one overnight is permitted so that as many adventurers as possible get to experience the wildlife. Daytime heat shimmered off the ground and sweat poured from our bodies. Our safari rooms, set in a mountain jungle 24 miles south of the equator, rose straight from the ground on stilts, 50 rooms total, three stories high. Our small, twin-bedded room, ventilated only by the open window, felt as cozy as a shipboard cabin; communal showers and toilets were down the hall.

Whenever an animal appeared during the night, a room buzzer erupted, which made sleep difficult as people emerged from their rooms, swarming to the rooftop platform. Almost everyone stayed awake for the 24 hours.

African feasts

Safari excitement in Africa stimulated my appetite, or maybe it was the freshness, varieties and flavors of African meals. I ate almost everything in sight. At Carnivore restaurant in Nairobi, we feasted on rotisserie game meats (but no man-eating carnivores), freshly sliced, with great presentation off a sword skewer.

Disney World's Animal Kingdom Lodge simulates African cuisine. Though game meats are definitely not part of Disney family dining, the skilled, creative use of freshly ground and blended African spices and a melding of Africa's international

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cuisines distinguish Jiko the Cooking Place and the exhibit-kitchen marketplace restaurant -- Boma, Flavors of Africa -- for their dining experiences reminiscent of Kenya.

The resort goes to great lengths to give visitors the feel of Africa. In the grand, six-story lobby, Zulu war-shield chandeliers hang from the domed ceiling. On display is a rare, Nigerian Igbo Ijele ceremonial mask, the only one known to exist outside Africa, where it is worn only once every 10 to 25 years.

The aromas from the restaurants, the rhythmic, African-influenced music, the handcrafted furniture and the museum-quality art combine to fill the senses.

In the Zawadi Marketplace below, where you can buy souvenirs and crafts, African artisans demonstrate their skills.

No haggling here

On our real safari, real traders besieged us, encouraging us to buy their wares. In the ramshackle shops on long stretches of remote dirt roads, we learned that to touch or even glance at an item was an invitation to bargain. We soon kept to the minivan at stops, windows closed despite the heat.

At the Animal Kingdom Lodge, however, quality crafts come at a fixed price, with bargaining not an option.

Of course, the main attraction at the lodge remains no more than a room with a safari view. If you haven't gone on an African safari, Animal Kingdom Lodge is the next best thing and you don't need a passport.

An unexpected plus: Many of the Lodges' "cast members," are native African residents from various tribes and nations, happy to help visitors better understand Africa's diverse and developing cultures.

"We're not still picking bush berries for dinner, you know," explained one cast member.

If you go

- * **Kenya Safari:** Four wildlife sites -- Masai Mara, Samburu, Lake Naivasha and Treetops -- plus round-trip airfare from San Francisco, transportation from Nairobi, safari minivan with driver, resort accommodations, three meals daily, bottled water. Cost \$5,070 for two people for 11 days during peak season; \$4,230 off-season.
- * **Voyagers International**, www.voyagers.com, 800-633-0299.
- * **Somak Safaris**, www.somaksafaris.com or 714-985-3456.
- * **Online resources:** www.kenyatourism.org, www.kenyaembassy.com
- * **Walt Disney World's Animal Kingdom Lodge:** Savannah-view accommodations for one or two adults, with children under 17 free in same room, \$1,770 a week (\$295/night). Round-trip air fare from San Francisco to Orlando \$254 a person on American (special fare through September). Daily meals excluding beverages about \$360 a person. Tax (11 percent) \$274. Total: \$3,272 for seven days, two people.
- * **Animal Kingdom Lodge**, 407-934-7639 (WDISNEY) or www.disneyworld.com

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