

GoAfrica Safaris & Travel

By Russ Willcutt

Sometimes all you want from your vacation is to order room service and lounge beside the pool, but those craving real adventure can find it in Kenya.

No matter what part of the world you call home, when planning a travel itinerary you first want to make sure the inhabitants of the country you'll be visiting have a friendly disposition toward visitors. And if you'll be traveling in a wheelchair, you must ascertain in advance the level of accessibility you can expect on your arrival. Those who visit Kenya or Tanzania with GoAfrica Safaris & Travel can be assured of both, according to Yvonne Matiba, managing director of marketing & tours.

"The Kenyans welcome Americans and travelers from around the world, and they are so helpful," she says. "We rely on people from the local community a great deal, and they are our friends. Sometimes we have to tell them not to worry so much, that our guests are just fine."

Matiba and Esther Nthemba, who is director of operations & sales, became involved in accessibility some years ago, when they were working for large tour operators. They noticed that, no matter how exotic the locale or adventurous the setting, travelers with disabilities were often forced to forgo the full experience, staying at their hotel or lounging around the pool. "We thought it was a shame that they weren't going on safaris, or swimming in the ocean, or really getting out and enjoying the countryside," Matiba says. "So that's when we decided to launch a business dedicated to providing those types of adventures to our guests with physical disabilities."

While tour operators in the U.S. have the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) to help them formulate policy regarding accessibility, you don't have such well-defined guidelines when you're launching a similar business in Kenya. As a result Matiba and Nthemba decided to reach out to available sources such as the Society for Accessible Travel and Hospitality, or SATH, and other authorities on the subject—such as Gordon Ratray, author of the soon-to-be pub-

lished book *Access Africa: Safaris for People with Limited Mobility*—to create working guidelines of their own. They also began discussions with area hotels and lodgings, asking them to consider making their properties accessible. They were met with incredulity, at first. "They

all basically said 'you're crazy, this will never work in Africa,'" she says, "but we told them 'yes, it is going to work,' because that's our motto—We make it possible."

It wasn't long before many of these properties began to realize that travelers with disabilities actu-



An elephant forages in the Amboseli National Park, above; a GoAfrica vehicle offers guests an up-close view of a resting lioness, center; and a Samburu girl in native garb, bottom left. Opposite page: a guest makes contact at the giraffe feeding center, at top of opposite page; and another makes use of the accessible ramp before leaving on a "game drive," below.



Photos courtesy of GoAfrica Safaris & Travel

ally represent a large, growing, and attractive market to the lodging industry, and accessible rooms—and bathrooms, as well—soon became available. “It’s not always perfect,” Matiba says, “and I make clear to our guests what they can expect in advance because this is not a cheap holiday, and there don’t need to be any unfortunate surprises on their arrival. We even connect people who are thinking about booking a safari with past guests with disabilities to get a firsthand description of the experience.”

As area hotels work toward providing greater accessibility, GoAfrica makes sure it is equipped with everything guests will need to enjoy their adventure. The operator currently has an accessible four-wheel drive jeep, with another one on the way, that can carry up to five people in wheelchairs, power or manual, with tie-downs to keep everyone in place while crossing rough terrain. While on a “game drive,” as jaunts

into the countryside in search of animals in their natural environment are called, the crew carries portable ramps, toilets, grab bars, shower chairs, and even a hoist in case it’s required so they’ll be able to surmount any obstacle the day might present. At present safaris are available in Kenya, where GoAfrica is based, and in Tanzania, which the company has only begun to offer in the past year. Matiba says they generally host trips for around 100 guests with physical disabilities each year, along with their family members, friends, and caretakers, and they’re able to tailor the adventures to meet their customer’s needs and desires.

“We started the company to work with disabled guests, of course, which remains our primary focus, but we do get clients who find out about us online and want a ‘specialized’ trip,” she says. “We have some older guests, for instance, who are eager to go on a safari but would like the experience to be a little more private than what other tour operators might be able to provide.”

In addition to providing its guests with insights into the surrounding geography and culture, GoAfrica also supports local schools and organizations established to educate and serve Kenyans with disabilities. Travelers are often interested

be outside then. The dormitory will enable those students with mobility problems to attend school. One girl named Mary who has never attended school before recently received a wheelchair that will enable her to move around and also to attend church on Sundays, which has been her dream. So if our clients are interested, we take them for a visit, which gives them a real feeling for local rural life.”

The staff of GoAfrica works with a variety of safari lodges, tented camps, hotels, and beach resorts to make sure that accessible accommodations will be available. They even check properties and areas to be visited personally to make sure rooms, restaurants, common areas, and game-viewing platforms are wheelchair accessible. In short, every effort is made to be sure that travelers will have the opportunity to forget about making necessary arrangements and to simply absorb and enjoy this truly remarkable land. With so much work required, Matiba is asked why she and her colleagues go to the effort, from a personal standpoint.

“Sometimes we wonder that ourselves, because it’s very hard work, but we don’t want to do regular travel. There are a lot of challenges, but it’s fun. Every situation is new, and we get to know a lot of wonderful



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in learning more about these efforts, according to Matiba. “Most of our clients are very interested in visiting local projects at some point during their stay,” she says. “We are currently raising funds to build a dormitory at a nearby school for disabled children, and we hope to realize this by the end of 2009. The project is in the bush and there is hardly any infrastructure, so children have to walk via rivers and hills to reach school. And since there are elephants roaming around early in the morning and in the evening, it’s too dangerous for the students to

people,” she says. “I sometimes feel that our guests enjoy the experience twice as much as anyone else because they know what went into making it happen, and they really appreciate our efforts. Many of them never thought they’d be able to have such an adventure, and that’s what motivates us to continue.”

To learn more about GoAfrica Safaris & Travel call (landlines) +254-202353884/5 or (mobiles) +254-722599194 or 724710356. Send e-mail to info@go-africa-safaris.com, or go online to www.go-africa-safaris.com. ☞