

SAFETY ON SAFARI

by Mark Homann, certified safari guide

There is no doubt that going on an [African safari game-drive](#) is the best way to see a ton of animals while in Africa. The vehicle allows you to cover a lot of ground in your search for Africa's big game and acts as a mobile hide, allowing you to see animals in relative comfort. Game-drives are a great thing to do and makeup the bulk of a person's safari experience.

More adventurous [African safari tours](#), such as canoeing and walking in the dangerous game areas of Africa, are thrilling experiences. The world around you comes alive in a way that it cannot while you're in a safari vehicle. The further you move away from the roads and into the bush or down a river, the further you move away from the modern world. This is a liberating experience as we have moved so far away from the world that we all came from. And the thrill of being out with nothing but your own senses transports you back to the world of our ancestors.



Walking safari safety

Often, you will not see any big game at all on a walking safari but you know they are there as you see signs, such as a fresh leopard track, a worn elephant trail, the warning bark of a secretive bushbuck, or the unmistakable scent of a recently past elephant herd.

Today, the massive growth in the safari industry makes it quite easy to book a safari that can get you into a lot of trouble. In the late eighties and early nineties very few countries and camps offered adventure activities like canoeing and walking. When I first started working as a guide in 1992, Zimbabwe had so few walking guides you could count them on one hand. Today, nearly every country and every camp or lodge offers walking and canoeing tours, and some even offer horse riding and mountain biking. This is great as there is a lot more to an African safari experience than sitting in a vehicle.



African family safari

But it is VERY important to be with people who know what they're doing. We hear more and more about accidents happening when people are out of the safari vehicle. Even the most experienced guide can get into trouble, which is why it's important to ensure that you are with a guide who has the experience and training to handle the unpredictable situations that develop so quickly. A guide with experience can read a situation and avoid it before it even happens. Simple rules such as "never approach a female herd of elephants" can save a lot of trouble. A good guide needs to be stronger than his guests and not let them push him into going closer to get "that photo."

There are many great guides in the field today in every safari country in Africa. Each country has its own licensing or grading system, so some are better than others. In Zimbabwe, it takes a minimum of 3 years of intensive training and exams before a guide is allowed to walk with guests. A good guide develops a feel and instinct for the world around him or her, as they spend thousands of hours in the field.



African safari tours

Adventure activities are without a doubt the best way to experience an African safari tour and something everyone should try and do if they can. But, it's very important that you go out with a qualified guide, and the best way to do this is to bypass Internet sites and to book through experienced [African safari travel agents](#) who work with experienced operators.

Safari safety under scrutiny

African safari specialists have urged travellers not to be scared off after a British nurse was killed in Malawi - the latest in a long line of elephant-related deaths - raising fresh questions about the safety risks

By Charles Starmer-Smith 12:01AM BST 10 May 2003

[Comment](#)

African safari specialists have urged travellers not to be scared off after a British nurse was killed in Malawi - the latest in a long line of elephant-related deaths - raising fresh questions about the safety risks.

Pauline Stratton, who had been working in the country, was on a walking safari in Liwende National Park with a group of rangers when they encountered a herd of elephants. A large bull broke off from the others and charged. Despite the efforts of the rangers to draw it away from their clients, the elephant bore down on Mrs Stratton and trampled her. She later died from her injuries.

Walking safaris are seen as the most authentic way of experiencing the bushveld. But even with an experienced guide, the exposed position, lack

of medical facilities and unpredictability of the animals have raised doubts about whether tourists should get quite so close to nature.

Tim Best, of Tim Best travel, a safari adventure specialist, insisted the risks were minimal. "If you go to Africa, there are of course dangers with elephants, hippo, lions and buffalo around, but nowadays guides are extremely well qualified and accidents are rare," he said. "You are more likely to get knocked down by a car on Kensington High Street than by an elephant in the bush."

Although Mrs Stratton's death last week is believed to be the first of its kind in Malawi, elephant-related deaths have occurred on safaris all across Africa (see right).

Calvin Cottar, a fourth-generation Kenyan and one of Africa's most experienced guides, argued that the real dangers of walking safaris come with inexperienced and unarmed guides.

"If you look at the number of deaths, they are miniscule. But in some parks guides are not armed and that is a mistake. Much of the value of big firearms is to scare off a large elephant or lion with a big bang over the animal's head. Guides should have guns and know how to use them."

In Zambia and parts of Botswana, guides on walking safaris are not allowed to carry guns and have to rely on rangers for protection. Walking safaris are prohibited in some of East Africa's popular parks such as the Serengeti in Tanzania.

In Zambia and Zimbabwe guides must pass stringent exams and practical tests over a two-year period before they are licensed by the tourist boards, which also stipulate that no more than seven are allowed in each walking party. Guides in Kenya are also tested. But elsewhere safaris are less well regulated.

Elephants, which weigh up to seven tons and are capable of speeds of up to 25 mph, are among the biggest dangers to safari walking tours. Cottar said that in the event of a charge, inexperienced guides may be more preoccupied with self-preservation than anything else.

He added that proper training in the field teaches you to know when a female elephant is pregnant or with calves and when a male bull is in musth (state of arousal) - the situations when elephants are at their most volatile.

Six years ago Cottar was on a tour with the American photographer Peter Beard, who himself boasts 25 years' experience in the bush, when they were charged by an angry pregnant female. The elephant crushed Mr Beard's pelvis and drove its tusk through his thigh.

The remoteness of most safari areas leaves people more vulnerable if they do get injured. In the case of Mrs Stratton, it was several hours before she reached a hospital.

"The questions you must ask of any safari operator before you set out is have they got the right equipment, vehicles and facilities for medical evacuation . . . and have you got insurance," said Mr Cottar.

Mr Best recommends that all his clients take out local emergency insurance with either the Flying Doctor Service in East Africa or the Medical Air Rescue Service in Southern Africa.

Elephant charge

January 2003 A South African man was trampled to death by an elephant after he and a game ranger tried to chase a herd on to a road for tourists to see at the Gazebo Game Ranch in Komatipoort, South Africa.

April 2001 In Il Ngwesi safari lodge, Kenya, a British woman was attacked while on a morning jog. She survived despite suffering a shattered pelvis, dislocated collarbone and tusk wounds.

January 2001 In Ruaha National Park, Tanzania, an American Peace Corps volunteer was killed by an elephant during a game-drive, when it charged her after she had left the vehicle to take photographs.

September 2000 In Damaraland, Namibia, an American tourist was killed and his companion injured when an elephant charged their group in the Huab Valley area, after they had left their vehicle to photograph a herd of elephants.

August 2000 In the Masai Mara game park, Kenya, a British visitor was killed when he left the camp to take photographs of an elephant nearby.

July 2000 At South Luangwa National Park, Zambia, a British safari guide was killed by a female elephant while accompanying a tourist on a bush walk.

October 1999 A British tourist was trampled by a female elephant while on a walking tour in the Selinda Game reserve, Botswana.

September 1999 A German tourist died from her injuries when she was charged by an elephant in the Bundala National Park in Sri Lanka. She had left her jeep to get a closer look at the animal.