

How to find incredible safari experiences without leaving the US

REGAN STEPHENS *Lonely Planet Writer* 4 DAYS AGO



These safaris can get Americans up-close and personal to America's coolest wildlife © Agnieszka Bacal / Shutterstock

Watching elephants roaming the grasslands of Kenya's Maasai Mara nature reserve, spotting lions in South Africa's Kruger National Park, stargazing from a remote lodge in Namibia is a once-in-a-lifetime, bucket-list adventure. This year, the COVID-19 pandemic has forced most US-based travelers to put a hold on plans for trips abroad, and while that dream African safari is delayed for a bit, some safari tour operators have turned to destinations closer to home.



A bear in Yellowstone National Park ©Mark Read/Lonely Planet

Mango Tours

Boutique travel company Mango Tours has specialized in African Safaris for over 20 years. But while the borders were closed this summer and fall, co-founders Teresa Sullivan and Casey Hermansen refocused on two domestic locales, announcing the news in the company's blog: "Since we can't enjoy the wilds of Africa right now, we are thrilled to be offering our first-ever collection of stateside safaris that celebrate the incredible wildlife of North America."

The team organized two itineraries – one in Yellowstone to see the region's grizzly bears, and one to New Mexico's Vermejo Reserve for elk bugling season. The home base in Yellowstone was a custom-built tented camp, right outside of the park, in a grizzly bear hotspot. The guide, a local wildlife biologist, noted the campsite was the best grizzly bear watching he had ever experienced in the lower 48 states.

Mango Tours' domestic itineraries were motivated by another factor, too. Besides offering travelers a safe, high-end option for experiencing America's beauty and wildlife, the company organized the trips to help fundraise for its Covid Africa Relief Fund. Africa's \$39 billion tourism industry has been greatly affected by the pandemic, and so far, Mango has raised over \$15,500 in donations for organizations that combat food insecurity, and promote vaccinations and anti-poaching initiatives.

While the team hopes that international travel is back to normal by next summer, they're fielding private excursion requisitions, and are open to the possibility of operating more domestic adventures.