

Kenya

Getting Started



NAME:	Republic of Kenya
CAPITAL:	Nairobi
LANGUAGE:	Swahili & English
RELIGION:	Christian & indigenous
CURRENCY:	Kenya Shilling

When to Visit

[Kenya's](#) temperatures and weather vary by region, geography, and time of year. In the east, along the Indian Ocean, temperatures can be very high (up to 105° F (40° C)) and the air can be extraordinarily humid as storms arise and leave quickly. In the central part of the country and west, to the Great Rift Valley the land is elevated so temperatures remain more consistent throughout the year. Temperatures year round are about 50° F (10° C) at night and about 75° (24° C) during the days. The final region is western Kenya, where temperatures can reach over 100° F (37° C) and can sink to as low as 55° F (14° C) in the evening.

The one general constant across [Kenya](#) is the rainy and dry seasons. Rainy seasons go from March to early June then again from October to late November. These are the worst times to visit Kenya if you have an interest in the wildlife. The dry season forces the animals to find water at streams, rivers, and lakes as the grasslands dry up, making wildlife spotting easier for you and your guide. Unfortunately, since the dry seasons are the peak tourist seasons, hotel and safari prices tend to soar.

Travel plans can be disrupted on the coasts if you're there during Ramadan (ninth month of the Islamic calendar, which rotates every year compared to the Gregorian calendar). This Islamic holiday can close shops, restaurants, and coffee shops along the country's coast.

Weather

Although weather can be generalized based upon years past, for more up to date weather patterns and predicted future weather patterns, visit weather websites like weather.com; many local news sources also have information for international weather forecasts.

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Tours & Cruises

If you're looking for a pre-arranged trip, that involves little effort on your part, then you should consider going on an organized tour or cruise. Organized tours and cruises vary from all expenses included to only daily tours and perhaps hotels included in the price, but all the options below will help you arrange all the details so you don't have to worry about finding the best deal or right hotel.

[Affordable Tours](#): A balance to get the highest quality for the lowest prices; a great value travel agency.

[Gap Adventures](#): Known best among young adults, Gap Adventures provides local transportation, housing, and food, which cuts costs and introduces the local culture, but can also be challenging for those seeking luxury.

[Intrepid Travel](#): Boasts more "off the beaten track" destinations; do your research though since some tours are very adventurous and involves camping and local hotels.

[Kensington Tours](#): Only offers personal tours for you and your family/friends, which allows greater flexibility, but also means slightly higher prices.

[Kenya Association of Tour Operators](#): Association recognized by Kenya's Ministry of Tourism, which includes many tour operators that work in Kenya, both local and international companies.

[Micato Safaris](#): Boasts an impressive list of "best tour operator" awards from a number of high end travel magazines; high end, luxurious, and expensive.

[Road Scholar](#): For older adults, Road Scholar offers tours with an educational emphasis; formerly known as Elder Hostel.

Guidebooks

If you are just traveling on business and have little free time or are already familiar with [Kenya](#), you may not need anything more than this guide! However, if you need more detailed and up to date information, there are a number of great country-wide, region-wide, and city-wide guidebooks available for travel in Kenya.

[Eyewitness Guides](#): Incredible pictures and detailed maps of popular tourist sites including museums. Those living abroad can't put these books down.

[Fodor's](#): Good maps and information for the major tourist locations, but has little information for anyone heading off the beaten track. Great for those on organized tours.

[Frommer's](#): Incredible number of lists, which divide travel into various categories based upon your interests. Travelers looking to spend most of their time in a single location or on organized tours enjoy these books.

[Lonely Planet](#): Great maps and updated often with comprehensive housing information, restaurants, & transportation options. Backpackers and adventurers love these guidebooks.

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Culture

Personality, Culture, & Identity

[Kenya](#) is like wondering children out for an adventure in the forest. There are no rules, no real direction, not even a well thought out plan. As each adventurer encounters the next, each decides if they will unite or divide, war or make peace, determine if the other is encroaching on his land or simply passing by to trade, but at the end of the day, when mom calls them home, they all listen.

[Kenya](#) is diverse (consisting of over 40 ethnic groups) and to most individual Kenyans, their ethnic loyalties stand well above some political unit, under whose umbrella they live. Kenya, as a political entity, is just a governing body that dictates laws and at times faces great resistance from ethnic groups who consider the nation's laws a breach of their freedom. Despite this conflict, each group respects and listens to the laws of the state, perhaps to acquire further economic development or perhaps just out of fear of the government's wrath and power.

Kenyans identify in various ways. Some groups, like the Masaai see their fellow Masaai warriors in neighboring [Tanzania](#) as a closer ally than any group within Kenya itself and "Kenyans" most often identify as such only in the cities, which are little more than giant mosh pits of everyone who can't find work or who seek a new life away from their rural tribal life and traditions.

History

The Great Rift Valley (which passes through modern-day Kenya) has been the "cradle of civilization" since the first man (or woman) began to walk on two feet, and since then [Kenya](#) has found itself as the destination for migrating cultures and peoples from throughout Africa. Today, its population primarily consisted of small tribal groups

controlling each's own plot of land or following the herds across the plains for food.

[European](#) influence began in the late 1400s with the arrival of the Portuguese, but in the 1700s the [Omani](#) Sultans took power over the coast and stationed their capital in the island of Zanzibar ([Tanzania](#)). This island became the center of the Indian Ocean's trade including Indian spices, African slaves, and European clothing and guns.

In 1886 the [British](#) and [Germans](#) drew boundaries of their newly claimed [African](#) lands and what is the modern border between [Kenya](#) and [Tanzania](#) was one of these boundaries, with the British taking control of what is today Kenya.

Due to the multiple ethnic groups and relatively little foreign influence on the region's interior during this period, there was no united liberation movement until the 1950s. The initial freedom movement was a wild and violent uprising, which did little to gain freedom and claimed the lives of many more locals than [British](#) (who controlled [Kenya](#) at the time). Soon after these events, the British decided to grant the country this freedom and, soon after organized free elections and transferred power to the people in 1963.

Since independence, [Kenya](#) has been fairly stable, although the country's presidents have tended to rule with an iron fist. The country's economic and income levels have been fairly consistent with minor growth over time. The economy took a couple major blows after the bombings in 1998 and 2002 (see below), which discouraged tourists from entering the country. Additionally, there has been a slow standard of living decline in the past few years and the country is amassing major debts.

Dress & Behavior

There are few dress or behavioral warning to be aware of in [Kenya](#) other than along the coast, where Islam dominates. The only warning everyone must be aware of in all parts of the country is that many local

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cultures believe having their picture taken is unlucky or that by having their picture taken, a part of their soul is stolen from them. For this reason never take pictures of the local people unless you first ask.

In Muslim areas it is considered inappropriate for women to leave their hair uncovered, however this is loosely enforced, especially among foreigners. Women covering their heads will show great respect to their culture, however most [Kenyans](#) understand if you don't cover your hair.

Again in these Muslim areas, both women and men are expected to cover their legs and shoulders; showing your knees can be very offensive. 3/4 length pants, like Capris and short sleeve shirts are only looked down upon by strict Muslims, however wearing full length pants and long sleeves at all times in predominantly Muslim areas is the best course of action. Some seaside resorts often times allow these rules to be ignored, but follow the example of locals in these places.

Islamic law forbids pork products and alcohol. While the interior has no dietary restriction, along the coast try to avoid drinking alcohol and eating pork. In these areas though, pork products are difficult to find so avoiding pork is easy due to its inaccessibility. To learn more about dining etiquette in [Kenya](#), continue reading below.

Food

Dining Etiquette

To fit in at a dining table in [Kenya](#), you must be observant, because table etiquette here varies drastically from one house to the next. Differing socio-economic classes, location, and local ethnicity contribute far more in determining behavior than does anything else, and in a country with 42 ethnicities, that's a lot to learn. Your best course of action is just to arrive open-minded and follow the lead of your hosts, although there are a few general rules to follow and in business settings, the following rules are a good beginning standard.

If invited to a local's house show up on time, leave your shoes at the door and bring a small gift like a dessert or flowers. Your host will probably show you to your seat, but don't sit down until you wash your hands and the other diners have arrived and are at their seats. In predominantly Muslim areas you may only dine with people of your same sex. In more conservative homes the men will eat first, then the table will be cleaned and the women will eat. Muslims also don't eat pork, so if at a restaurant avoid ordering an pork products when you're with Muslims.

As you sit down you may notice that there are no glasses on the table, eating and drinking at the same time is considered rude by most Kenyans so you won't get anything to drink until the meal is finished. Guests are typically served first; take a small amount of everything, turning down food is rude and second servings are common. Only after everyone is served and the oldest male begins eating should you begin and when you do, be sure to follow the locals' leads; if eating with your hands, most Kenyans use only their right hand.

Once your plate is cleaned (and you should finish all the food on your plate), feel free to let out a belch, which symbolizes satisfaction, but don't overdo it, a small one will do. At this time drinks will probably be served and the host typically gives a toast, which the honored guest

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is expected to reciprocate. If this is you, thank and compliment the host and the cook.

As everyone began together, leave together as well; don't leave the table until everyone does and before leaving, wash your hands once more. If you're dining out, the person who initiated the meeting is expected to pay for everyone.

History & Influences

Kenyan food is almost entirely based on what is locally available, which means their diet primarily consists of grains and meats. The second influential aspect is determined by the ethnic group, as each has various style, spices, or ingredients they use more or less often.

Kenyan food has very few outside influences. Some ingredients have been introduced and, since they grew well in Kenya, have become popular, like corn. The [Indians](#) have made an impact, but more through the introduction of Indian restaurants rather than any true alteration to Kenyan food, although some spices have been added to traditional dishes. Likewise, the Muslims, from both [Oman](#) and northern Africa, have changed the diet, but again with little significance. The final outside group to influence the region was the [British](#), who gave [Kenya](#) many of their table manners and increased the popularity of tea.

Staple Foods

Ugali: cornmeal cooked until it is a dough- or sticky rice-like texture

Regional Varieties & Specialties

Indian Ocean Coast: More Muslims so no pork & more Indians so less meat in general

Drinks

Tea and coffee are both popular in [Kenya](#). The water is best drank from a bottle, since the ground water is polluted in most areas.

Many Kenyans don't drink alcohol, especially along the coast, but those who do tend to prefer beer over other liquors.

Practical Information

Visas

Many foreign nationals need a visa to enter [Kenya](#), however the requirements for citizens of different nationalities varies. To learn more about who need visas, what type of visa is needed, what requirements are needed to obtain a visa, and visa costs, please visit [Kenya's Ministry of Foreign Affairs Official Website](#).

Health & Insurance

Every part of the world has different health concerns and diseases, including [Kenya](#). Before traveling, consult with a physician to learn more about your destination and what steps you can take to prevent illness. At the time of writing, many countries required proof of having received a Yellow Fever vaccination if you are arriving from Kenya. This proof is not required to enter Kenya, however to return to your home country or travel onwards, most countries require that you show proof of having been vaccinated. Additionally, a number of other immunizations are strongly recommended, so visiting your physician prior to travel to Kenya is essential.

Many health insurance providers don't cover health care that is provided outside your home country. Before going abroad check with your health insurance to see if they cover international care. If not, consider purchasing an international medical insurance option, preferably from a company that specializes in international medical insurance.

Transportation

Unless you're on an organized tour or working with a travel agent, you will have to arrange some transportation. The below links can greatly help you start your planning, first by finding a flight to [Kenya](#), then

with domestic airlines and car rental agencies. If you don't know where to begin, try the "Flight & Rental Car Search Sites" to learn competitor's prices during your trip.

Largest International Airlines: [Air France](#), [American Airlines](#); [British Airways](#); [Cathay Pacific](#); [China Southern Airlines](#); [Delta](#); [Emirates](#); [KLM](#); [LAN](#); [Lufthansa](#); [Qantas](#); [Singapore Airlines](#); [United Airlines](#).

Largest Kenyan Airline: [Kenya Airways](#)

Largest Rental Car Agencies in Kenya: [Avis](#) & [Europcar](#).

Flight & Rental Car Search Sites: [Expedia.com](#); [Farecast.com](#); [Kayak.com](#); [Orbitz.com](#); & [Travelocity.com](#).

Housing

Housing options are numerous in most tourist destinations, but every individual seeks out something different when it comes to housing. The below links should help you get started, with low- to high-end hotels, hostels, and camping options.

Popular International Hotel Conglomerates: [Accor Group](#) (various price ranges); [Choice Hotels](#) (low- to mid-price range); [Hilton](#) (various price ranges); [Hyatt](#) (high-end to resorts); [InterContinental Group](#) (mid- to high-price range); [Marriott Family](#) (various price ranges); [Starwood Hotels](#) (high-end); [Wyndham Hotels](#) (low- to mid-price range).

Hotel Search Sites: [Expedia.com](#); [Kayak.com](#); [Orbitz.com](#); & [Travelocity.com](#).

Hostels: Although there are many hostel websites, some of the most popular and reputable include [hostels.com](#), [hostelworld.com](#), & [hostelbookers.com](#).

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Camping: Camping is not recommended in Kenya unless you're on an organized trek, since only the local guides will know which locations are safe to camp at.

Opening Hours, Expenses, & Tipping

[Kenya](#)'s business world is theoretically on the same time schedule as much of [Europe](#), but local shop and restaurant hours vary dramatically. Shops tend to open at about 9:00-10:00 am and close at about 5:00 pm, but inconsistencies are everywhere. Many factory workers put in much more than 40 hours a week, banana farmers never have a regular schedule, and shops may open late, close early, or shut down mid-afternoon based upon whose working that day and what their personal schedules look like. Having said that, most major tourist attractions are natural, and safari and tour companies are excellent at catering to the client and know the best times for wildlife viewings in various locations. Weekends in Kenya are Saturdays and Sundays.

One thing to be aware of if you plan to spend time on the coast is that during the Islamic holiday of Ramadan (ninth month of the Islamic calendar, which rotates every year compared to the Gregorian calendar), fasting is required from sunrise to sunset. Due to this Islamic requirement, most shops in predominantly Muslim areas close down and it can be difficult to find an open restaurant anywhere outside major hotels catering to tourists.

The cost of tourism in [Kenya](#) varies greatly by what amenities you are willing to forgo and what kind of wildlife guides you hire. Living in small cramped quarters with shared toilets, taking public transportation, eating at local markets, and hiring the wildlife guide you find on the street corner whose friend has a car (which is probably a scam) will cost pennies, while staying in nice safari lodges, hiring reputable guide companies, eating at ethnic restaurants, and taking a hot air balloon ride over the Serengeti can cost hundreds of dollars a day.

The first expense you'll encounter on the way to [Kenya](#) is transportation to the country, which can be quite high from most locations (70,000 shillings (\$800) from [Europe](#), typically double that from [North America](#)). However, once on the ground, local and city transportation is very inexpensive, although safari tours (which come with transportation) are often times about 8,000 shillings (\$100) a day, but include transportation, guides, and sometimes food. Food costs also vary from about \$1 for a meal to well over 4,000 shillings (\$50). Likewise, housing costs can vary from about 500 shillings (\$6) to well over 16,000 shillings (\$200) for a nice safari lodge.

Tipping is not common among [Kenyans](#) and if you're eating in local restaurants and visiting local sights you don't have to worry about tipping. In most restaurants catered to the tourist however a gratuity is often included; if it's not about 10% is standard. The real expense in tipping adds up in safari tours. You are expected to tip your guide, driver, cooks, and porters. Depending on the length of your tour and the service offered, anywhere from \$1 a day for porters to \$5-10 a day to a guide is appropriate.

Crime & Safety

[Kenya](#) can be intimidating to a minority traveler and wearing western clothes can immediately attract followers (although many locals wear western clothes from donation centers). There is little active violence or aggression towards foreigners in Kenya, however violence from Islamic extremists in the north can seep into the country, best seen with the bombing of the American embassy in [Nairobi](#) (1998).

Most local violence is concentrated in the north near Somalia and there are few reasons to visit this part of the country considering most tourist attractions are in the south. However, [Kenya](#) can be a volatile country and travel warnings should be considered prior to travel to any part of the country.

Crime in [Kenya](#) is commonplace; keeping an eye on your belongings and using common sense will be two of the most successful tactics at

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countering this. Most of these crimes are pick pocketing and bag snatching and running (especially in large crowds), however at night in the cities the chances of armed robbery increase as well, so cities are best avoided at night. To avoid the hassle of losing something valuable, simply leave everything of value at home, from your nice watch to your laptop computer.

Beggars are also a common encounter in the cities and in some rural areas. These people (often times children) are typically harmless, however be careful of group ploys and never give anyone money, since you don't know where it'll end up. If you want to help these people wait until after your trip and make a donation to a reputable organization like Red Cross or the United Nations.

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