

AFAR

Kenya Reopens to American Travelers. What Does That Actually Mean?

By Annie Fitzsimmons

Aug 10, 2020



(Photo courtesy of Angama Mara)

You might have the Mara—and migration—to yourself in Kenya now.

Kenya’s international borders are now open to (most) Americans, and travelers may have the great migration to themselves.

Kenya, the east African country that usually draws 2 million visitors each year, reopened its borders on August 1 to international tourists, including Americans, with an exemption from quarantine.

There is a catch: If you’re coming from California, Florida, or Texas, you’ll have to quarantine for 14 days, says the [U.S. Embassy](#) in Kenya.

Still, this opens up the classic safari destination at a time when much of the world’s borders remain closed—and you may see wildlife in Kenya as it was decades ago. “By twist of fate, as lockdown lifted, so did the migration season,” says Nicky Fitzgerald, owner of [Angama Mara](#). “We’ve got tens of thousands of animals heaving over the Mara. You’re going to have the migration to yourself.”

Of course, there are other health restrictions, [updated by the embassy](#) on August 3. All travelers prior to boarding must not have a body temperature above 37.5°C (99.5°F) or a persistent cough, difficulty breathing, or other flu-like symptoms, and they must have a negative PCR-based COVID-19 test conducted within 96 hours before travel, presented at the airport at check-in.

You also have to complete a health surveillance form prior to disembarking, and receive a QR code of the form to show the customs officials in Nairobi, according to Teresa Sullivan, co-owner of [Mango Safaris](#). “First reports are that the airport is almost empty and passengers are swept through in minutes,” Sullivan says.

There are limited international flights into Nairobi as of August 1. Phoebe Weinberg, president of [Greatways Travel](#) in Michigan and an award-winning travel advisor specializing in Africa, recommends flying from the United States through Europe on British Airways, Lufthansa, or KLM to Nairobi—Americans are allowed to transit through European airports, but should double-check with individual airlines on policies. Qatar is flying from Boston to Nairobi via Doha, and Emirates is operating from JFK to Nairobi via Dubai. The Kenya Airways direct flight from JFK-NBO is scheduled to resume in October.

Tourism directly employs around 2 million people in Kenya, representing 9.3 percent of total employment in the country, and livelihoods and jobs have been dealt a devastating blow. Lockdowns have cost Kenya an estimated \$752 million in lost tourist dollars so far. International travel restrictions lifting are part of a phased reopening; the country has recorded 22,597 cases out of a population of 51 million, with [382 COVID-related deaths](#).

Are travelers booking and actually traveling to Kenya now?

Angama Mara welcomed the first American travelers the day borders reopened, on August 1. “Our hope is that once these travelers return home, word will spread and confidence will start to rebuild,” says Fitzgerald. It has also been flooded with inquiries from Kenyans and has offered special rates to stay and experience their heritage.

Sullivan says some clients want to get to Kenya as soon as possible, and the first ones will travel in mid-September. “For those who travel now, the payoff will be a dream,” she says. “Travelers will have the Masai Mara and other wildlife hot spots practically to themselves.”

Echoes Fitzgerald, “Right now would normally be our peak season, largely due to the dramatic river crossings of the Great Migration. But this year, there is hardly a vehicle in sight. Our guides are reporting back that at times it’s just been them and the hundreds of thousands of wildebeest and zebra, and nearby prowling predators. I don’t imagine that there will be a migration season quite like this again in our lifetime. For photographers, it’s a dream come true.”

Aside from those heart-stopping safaris, she says, it’s also a beautiful time of year to enjoy picnics under a lone fig tree, surrounded by wide open spaces, or to enjoy an aerial view of the migration from a hot-air balloon ride over the Mara River.

[Mahali Mazuri](#), Sir Richard Branson’s camp in the Mara, is another great property to watch the migration unfold; in Tsavo West National Park, [Finch Hattons Luxury Tented Camp](#) is offering exclusive-use stays to guests.

Most visitors start in Nairobi before they head off on safari. Weinberg recommends [Hemingways Nairobi](#) as “hands-down the best hotel in Nairobi in the idyllic suburb of Karen,” formerly part of Karen Blixen’s coffee plantation.

But not every popular attraction is open yet. The popular [Sheldrick Wildlife Trust](#) elephant and rhino orphanage remains closed, but the [Karen Blixen Home & Museum](#), with original furnishings, is opening soon in accordance with government guidelines and protocols.

[Kenya has been awarded](#) the World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC) Safe Travel Stamp, and all properties and attractions are expected to adhere to precautionary guidelines.