

While it does safaris like nowhere else, Kenya is also a great, and affordable, beach holiday destination, as an extremely chilled out **Sean Sheehan** discovered

KENYA can seem just too epic when you are seeking the exotic but also in dire need of a lazy holiday in the sun. Vast open savannahs filled with equally huge herds of wildlife are fine on a big screen but may not hit the mark when you want to kick back on a beach and find the relaxation your body demands. Exit safaris and crate loads of camera gear; enter the east coast of Kenya where wide stretches of bone-white sand extend to the north and south of the fabled Swahili port of Mombasa. And if seeing some wildlife on the side seems a good idea there is Tsavo East National Park just hours away by road. To the south of Mombasa sandy beaches run close to the coastal road that heads down to Tanzania. Take your pick between the package-holiday resort of Diani Beach or, 16 miles further south, the almost empty Mwabungu Beach where two hotels have the place to themselves. One of them, Saruni Ocean, has 10 rooms, scattered across 12 landscaped acres. The design of the place is clearly Mediterranean-inspired – even if the lampshades are made from local coconut shells – and so too is the food (lobster Catalan, fresh octopus with olives), making it easy to imagine you're somewhere on the Amalfi coast instead of the Kenyan one. The reality that Europe is very far away hits home when you realise that the small vessel out at sea is a dhow floating in the calm waters of the Indian Ocean. Then you notice that the tree by the pool is an ancient baobab and that those providing shade as you sip a drink at a beachside table are casuarinas. It's hard work slipping away to the spa but if you think yoga is easy, take some of the sessions provided at Saruni Ocean and discover how wooden your body has become. The coast north of Mombasa makes for an even more languid holiday destination but with snorkelling-friendly beaches it's fun

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Kenya in Comfort

for families as well. The town of Malindi has plenty of resort hotels and Italians love the place – local kids greet you with calls of 'Ciao!' – but for somewhere more discreet head south to the small town of Kilifi and its beach houses or, better still, to Watamu where the attractive Lonno Lodge and its spa are to be found. From the superb beach on its doorstep – literally walk down a few at the rear and you're on the sand – it's a short walk to a fishing village with shops, bars and restaurants. Kayaking in mangrove swamp and kite surfing are some of the activities and local attractions include Arabuo Sokoke Forest Reserve where the day and night walks from its visitor centre should lead

to an encounter with the gloriously named golden-rumped elephant shrew. There is also the ruined city of Gede that was inexplicably abandoned at the height of its influence in the 16th century. It's within cycling distance on one of Lonno Lodge's free bicycles, passing hair-braiding salons and boutiques with clothes in jazzy colours at a fraction of prices back home. The city of Mombasa is well worth a day's visit and a tour is the easiest way to pack in the main attractions, especially one that includes a visit to the Hindu temple and the Akamba wood carvers' cooperative close to the city centre. The co-operative operates in a large open-air workshop under awnings and there are scores of craftsmen working away at every stage of their highly skilled work. Using teak, soapstone, neem, mahogany and ebony, they shape intricate pieces and will work on your own design if you leave it with them for a few days. Keep a piece of luggage empty for stocking up at the shop on the premises because this is the single most useful place for gifts and memorable items for the home. When it comes to staying in Mombasa

there is no accommodation worth singling out but the Voyager Beach Resort [www.heritage-eastafrica.com/beach-holiday/voyager-beach-resort-mombasa] is only 10km outside the city. The resort's rates



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■ Saruni Ocean hotel

cover all meals and drinks and there is a grand beach metres away for water sports, boat rides and camels to be photographed on while taking a ride and looking absolutely daft.



■ On the Kenyan coast, south of Mombasa

Factfile

■ **Getting there:** Kenya Airways flies daily from Heathrow to Nairobi with connections on to Mombasa; prices from £645 including taxes for an economy return ticket to Mombasa (kenya-airways.com).

■ **Accommodation:** Saruni Ocean (saruniocean.com), Lonno Lodge (lonnolodge.com), Ocean Voyager (heritage-eastafrika.com), Galdessa (galdessa.com), Voi Safari Lodge (safari-hotels.com).

■ **Tours:** Mombasa city tours with AfricanMecca Safaris (africanmeccasafaris.com). Places: Akamba Woodcarvers Cooperative (akambahandicraftcoop.com)

■ **Car hire with driver:** Nguta Mwauchi (ngutamwauchi@yahoo.com). Information: Kenya Tourism Board (magicalkenya.com); Lonely Planet's guide to Kenya (lonelyplanet.com) has the rundown on where to stay and eat and how to get around East Kenya.

WILDLIFE AT YOUR OWN PACE

TSAVO East National Park is less than a hundred miles from the coast and it's the place to see some of the country's stupendous wildlife without the razzmatazz of Kenya's more famous parks.

Poaching is still a problem – in the 1980s 5,000 elephants were being killed annually – and some areas are closed to visitors for this reason.

There is also Tsavo West but the eastern park is best for wildlife because the foliage is not dense in the extensive stretches of savannah.

The elephants are red due to the colour of the muddy soil they roll around in; lions are not uncommon and the chances of seeing cheetahs are reasonable; leopards and packs of hunting dogs less so; zebras, hippos, antelope and warthogs will almost definitely be spotted; the birdlife, with some 500 species, is extraordinary.

Voi Safari Lodge, just inside Voi Gate, one of the main entrances to the Park, has a motel-like appearance but is situated atop high ground so you can watch herds roaming on the plain below or visiting nearby water holes. A hide is provided for close-up photography.

Galdessa is more expensive, a luxury tented camp situated well inside the park by the side of the Galana, Kenya's second-longest river at 250 miles.

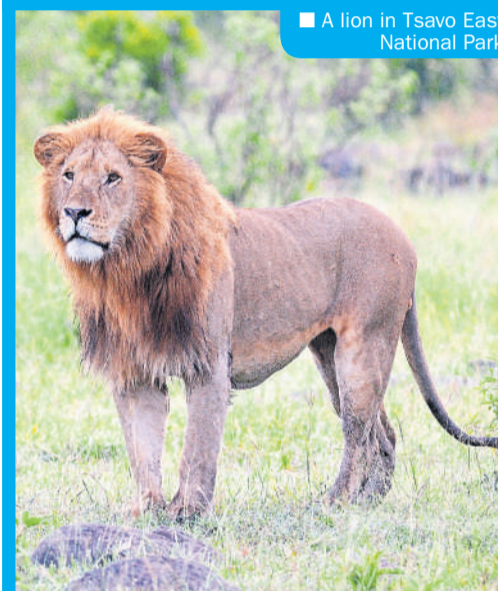
Conspicuous doum palms give a magical feel to the camp's landscape and their fruit attracts elephants which sometimes wander along the river bank close to the tents but with an escarpment that keeps it safe to watch them at close quarters.

Galdessa also have Masai staff to watch over you and with less than a dozen tents, the place never feels crowded.

As well as game drives there are guided walks, bush breakfasts and sundowners on a rockface overlooking the river.



■ Galdessa is a luxury tented camp in Tsavo East park situated by the side of the Galana, Kenya's second-longest river



■ A lion in Tsavo East National Park



■ Galdessa



■ Lonno Lodge



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