

The real landscapes that inspired the Lion King – and 10 amazing ways to see them



Arguably the most magnificent animal on Earth CREDIT: ISTOCK

Telegraph Travel's safari expert Brian Jackman on the Kenyan plains which inspired Disney's writers, his own fascinating lion encounters, and ten of the best lodges in Africa to have yours

Why should lions have held the world in thrall since the dawn of history? As long ago as the seventh century BC, the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal had his royal palace at Nineveh decorated with magnificent bas-reliefs of lion-hunting scenes.

In Ancient Rome, the walls of the Colosseum resonated to the roars of lions as gladiators fought to the death with the king of beasts. Closer to our own time, Sir Edwin Landseer's four bronze lions were set to guard the statue of Nelson, the nation's hero in Trafalgar Square, and even in my lifetime I have watched spear-carrying Maasai warriors loping over the savannah to prove their manhood on a ceremonial lion hunt.

Celebrated in literature by the likes of Ernest Hemingway and Karen Blixen, lions have maintained their enduring hold on the national psyche, appearing on the shirts of the England football team and even entering our living rooms thanks to the popularity of TV wildlife documentaries such as *The Big Cat Diary* and Sir David Attenborough's *Dynasties* series.

But not since *Born Free*, Joy Adamson's true-life saga of Elsa – the lioness she raised and returned to the wild – has anything gripped the public imagination like *The Lion King*.

From its very beginning in 1994, the original Disney production took the world by storm, becoming the ninth-highest-grossing animated film of all time. Now, following his successful remake of *The Jungle Book*, director Jon Favreau has created a similarly photorealistic state-of-the-art version for Disney that looks set to break all records when it is released in the UK on July 19.



The story remains essentially faithful to the 1994 animated movie, revolving around a mischievous young cub called Simba, his father Mufasa and Scar, his wicked uncle. When Scar plots to usurp Mufasa's place by luring father and son into a wildebeest stampede, his plans go astray. Only Mufasa is killed and Simba eventually returns as an adult to take back his land with the help of his friends.

Giving voice to the pride and their allies is a stellar cast featuring Donald Glover as Simba and Chiwetel Ejiofor as Scar. Beyonce stars as Nala, a lioness that was Simba's playmate as a cub, and James Earl Jones returns to reprise the part of Mufasa.

In their search for authenticity, Disney's writers visited [Kenya](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/destinations/africa/kenya/hotels/) (https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/destinations/africa/kenya/hotels/)'s lion country, discovering locations such as Borana Ranch on the Laikipia Plateau, whose sweeping views and spectacular granite outcrops provided the inspiration for Pride Rock and the Pride Lands.

Having seen the film you, too, may wish to follow in their footsteps to find the real Lion King, in which case Kenya is hard to beat. This is where I saw my first wild lion 40 years ago in the Masai Mara National Reserve, and the memory is as fresh as if it happened only yesterday.



The Laikipia Plateau provided Disney's writers the inspiration for the Pride Lands CREDIT: GETTY

I'd flown down by light aircraft from Nairobi at the end of the rains and the land was still green as we bounced from thermal to thermal over endless plains on which herds of buffaloes stampeded away beneath our wings. Even before we touched down on the rough dirt airstrip I knew it would be love at first sight.

The kiangazi was just beginning, the dry season that would tempt the migrating wildebeest to pour in from [the Serengeti](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/destinations/africa/articles/Serengetis-great-migration-Trip-of-a-Lifetime/) (https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/destinations/africa/articles/Serengetis-great-migration-Trip-of-a-Lifetime/), and the ripening grasses had not yet been eaten down. Instead they stood tall, rippling in the wind like the waves of the sea towards a horizon so far away that it seemed like the edge of the world, heralding a time of plenty for the Mara lions.



Kenya is hard to beat for a Lion King adventure CREDIT: GETTY

We had driven out at first light to find the cats before they went flat and hadn't gone far when I spotted an adult pride male perched on a termite mound. He was still quite a long way off, so I watched him through my binoculars, a magnificent sight with his mane backlit by the rising sun.

Then he began to roar through half-closed jaws, and with every cavernous groan his breath condensed in the sharp morning air like smoke from a dragon's nostrils. All other sound ceased, as if the whole world was listening, the hairs on the back of my neck stood on end and I thought: Who could fail to be hooked on lions after a moment like that?

Lions | Fast facts

A lion's roar can be heard five miles (8km) away

Life for a lion is nasty, brutish and short. Twelve years is a good age for a pride male.

A lion can run at 50mph (80kph) over short distances. In other words, much faster than you, giving rise to the old hunter's saying: "If you run, you're done."

A lion's life is one of feast and famine. It may go hungry for a week, then put away up to 100lbs of meat at once.

Lions live in a matriarchal society of family groups known as prides in which most of the females are related and male offspring are forced to leave as two-year olds.

Lions can mate up to 100 times a day, but the act itself only takes a few seconds.

Every lion can be recognised by the unique pattern of whisker spots on each side of its face.

Lions have a lazy life, spending up to 20 hours of the day at rest.



A lion's roar is exceptionally powerful

A few years later my growing passion for the big cats led to a friendship with George Adamson of Born Free fame and the lions he was returning to the wilds of northern Kenya. In 1982 I had flown to Nairobi to cover the story of Joy Adamson's murder.

Afterwards, having met George at the end of the funeral, he invited me to fly up to Kora, where he lived in what resembled an inside-outside zoo, with the people inside the wire and the lions outside. It was an extraordinary place, which he shared with Tony Fitzjohn, his young assistant, Hamisi his cook, and an odd assortment of wild creatures, including a pair of vultures known as Bourne and Hollingsworth.

It was clear that George couldn't wait to be reunited with his lions. For no sooner had we arrived than he threw some camel meat into the back of his Land Rover and we went to look for them. We stopped somewhere beside the Tana River and George got out. "I'd stay put if I were you, old boy," he said, and began to call for Arusha, his pride matriarch, the way you might yell for a lost dog.



There's nowhere else in the world quite like Africa's Serengeti CREDIT: ISTOCK

And suddenly, there she was, a full-grown lioness with blood on her muzzle from a fresh waterbuck kill, running straight at George. On reaching him I watched in disbelief as she rose on her hind legs and draped her huge forepaws over his shoulders. "Arusha old girl," he said, hugging her like a long-lost friend as she grunted with pleasure at seeing him again.

Since then I have lost count of the lions I have seen and heard, but from that day on they have continued to walk through my life and my dreams. Over the years they have become an obsession with me. Fellow fanatics will know the feeling. When you've been away from lions for a long time you long for a sight of them, and whenever I return to Africa I lie awake in my tent at night, unable to sleep until I have heard them grunting in the starlight.

Who can fail to be moved by their majestic profiles? Even in repose, lions exude an aura of imminent drama. They are the ultimate predator, their mere presence holding the constant possibility of unimaginable violence. Long since hard-wired by evolution for a life on the savannah, they are the apex predators of a parallel universe far older than ours, and for three years I was a privileged to enter their world, waking each morning to the sound of their thunderous voices and driving out into the red dawn to join them.

That was in the late 1970s when a young wildlife photographer called Jonathan Scott introduced me to a pride of lions whose territory lay around Musiara Marsh in the heart of the Mara. Together we produced a bestseller called *The Marsh Lions*, a true-life story revolving around Scar, Brando and Mkubwa, the coalition of pride males that ruled Musiara.

In the Mara they translate what the lion is saying into Swahili: Hii nchi ya nani. Hii nchi ya nani? Whose land is this? Whose land is this? Yango, yango, yango! Mine, mine, mine!



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And what a land it is. To look out across its rolling ridges from the top of the Oloololo escarpment is to stand at the gates of heaven. I didn't know it then; but what I had stumbled on was the greatest wildlife showcase in Africa. Until 1977, few people had even heard of the Masai Mara. Serengeti was where you went if you wanted to see lions. Then Kenya and Tanzania fell out. The border was closed and you could no longer drive down to the Serengeti from Nairobi, and that's when the Mara came into its own.

By the time *The Marsh Lions* was published, Scar and his pride had become as familiar to me as old friends. Sometimes, parked alongside him as he lay in the grass, I would try to imagine what he was feeling. That was what Jonathan and I had tried to capture – the essence of being a lion in the lion's world.

Surely the warmth of the sun on his tawny flanks must have been as pleasing to him as it was to me? I watched him raise his head to sniff the breeze and listen to the zebra stallions calling to their mares on the plains beyond. Sights and sounds, the ineluctable smells of the African bush, all these we shared; but what else that went on behind his implacable visage would forever remain a mystery.

In the years that followed I would meet many other lions. Among them, The Earl, as he was known, hunting by moonlight on Busanga Plain in Zambia's Kafue national park. I also remember the handsome Kalahari pride males with their luxuriant black manes; and the daughters of Ntchwaidumela – “He Who Plays with Fire” – padding like ghosts through Savuti's bone-dry grasslands on a Botswana winter morning – all possessing the same innate nobility.

Today, tragically, these glorious carnivores are in decline almost everywhere except in the Serengeti and the private conservancies adjoining the Mara, leaving them with only eight per cent of their former range. In the 25 years since Disney released the original version of *The Lion King*, Africa's lion population has halved, leaving no more than 20,000, of which perhaps only 3,000 are the big adult males everyone wants to photograph.

Top 10 | Where to see lions in the wild

1. Kenya Laikipia, Samburu and the Masai Mara

In celebration of Disney's Lion King remake, The Safari Collection (thesafaricollection.com) is offering a unique eight-day safari to the Kenyan locations that inspired the original film. Guided by Robert Carr-Hartley, who was closely involved in the creation of the first Lion King in 1994, the itinerary includes two nights at Borana Lodge on the Laikipia Plateau where he guided Disney's animators in their quest for a location to inspire Pride Rock. During their stay, guests can enjoy sundowners on this very rock, overlooking the "Pride Lands" below. From Borana, guests fly to Samburu for two nights to meet the Ewaso Lion Warriors and learn how to track and identify lions as part of a hugely successful conservation project. The following morning, guests will fly on to the game-rich Masai Mara for two nights of game drives in classic lion country at Sala's Camp, overlooking the Serengeti National Park.



Londolozi is in a league of its own

Prices start at £8,309 per person based on two sharing, including full board accommodation, game drives, conservation fees, private guiding by Robert Carr-Hartley, all local flights and road transfers in Kenya and one night at Giraffe Manor in Nairobi.

2. Kenya Mara North Private Conservancy

Adjoining the Masai Mara's border, Mara North and its neighbouring conservancies are one of the few areas where lion numbers are healthy and even increasing.

Safari Consultants (01787 888590; safari-consultants.com) offers six nights at Kicheche Mara Camp from £3,995 per person.

3. Tanzania Serengeti National Park

First comes Namiri Plains, where it's possible to see up to 60 lions in a day. Then move on to Lamai Camp, where the big cats keep watch from granite kopjes when the wildebeest herds pass by.

An eight-night itinerary with one night in Arusha, three nights at Namiri Plains and four nights at Lamai cost from £6,295 (excluding international flights). Natural High Safaris (01747 830950; naturalhighsafaris.com).

4. Tanzania Ruaha National Park

Home to 10 per cent of Africa's remaining lion population, Ruaha is second only to the Serengeti when it comes to actual numbers and Mwangusi has always been its foremost hotspot.

Six nights at Mwangusi and one night's B&B at Arumeru Lodge near Arusha cost from £4,705 with Steppes Travel (01258 601758; steppestravel.com).

5. Zambia South Luangwa National Park

The luxuriously refurbished Puku Ridge (opening in September) overlooks the floodplains where Ginger and Garlic, Zambia's most famous lions, compete for territory with the local prides.

Seven nights on safari with four nights at Puku Ridge and three nights at Chiawa on the Lower Zambezi costs from £6,161. The Luxury Safari Company (0166 880 111; theluxurysafaricompany.com).

6. Zambia Kafue National Park

For great lion viewing, head for Busanga Plain, a Zambian Serengeti known for its tree-climbing lions.

Four nights at Ntemwa Bush Camp and three nights at Musekese Camp cost from £5,890 with Expert Africa (020 8232 9777; expertafrica.com).

7. Zimbabwe Hwange National Park

In a wilderness the size of Yorkshire, Somalisa is the place to choose, in the territory held by Cecil, the lion whose death at the hands of a trophy hunter outraged the world. His offspring are still there.

The Explorations Company (01367 850566; explorationscompany.com) offer seven nights at Somalisa, including road transfer from Victoria Falls, from £5,800.

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8. South Africa Sabi Sands Reserve

Londolozi has an unrivalled reputation for leopard sightings, but lions come a close second thanks to impressive coalitions of males, notably the five “Birmingham Boys”.

Bailey Robinson (014888 689700; baileyrobinson.com) can arrange a fully inclusive

9. Botswana Okavango Delta

Mombo, known as the predator capital of Europe, is Wilderness Safaris’ flagship camp in the Moremi Game Reserve.

A nine-night safari including three nights at Mombo and four nights among the semi-aquatic Duba Plains lions costs from £10,980 per person. Audley Travel (01993 838 500; audleytravel.com).

10. Botswana Chobe National Park

In the wild heart of Chobe is Savuti Marsh, where filmmaker Dereck Joubert followed Ntchwaidumela and Maome’s Pride as they competed with the local hyena clans.

Five nights at Savuti Camp in the Linyanti Wildlife Concession and two night at Machaba in the Okavango costs from £4,370 (excluding international flights) with Cazenove & Loyd (0207 384 2332; cazloyd.com).

All prices are per person based on two sharing, including local flights and international flights from London Heathrow unless otherwise

That is why this latest version of The Lion King could not have come at a better time. Disney has already donated US\$1.5 million (£1.2 million) to lion conservation and now hopes to raise a further US\$1.5 million through its Protect the Pride campaign, whose aim is to double the lion population by 2050.

Not all conservation groups are happy, arguing that USD \$1.5 million is a mere fraction of the Lion King’s billion-dollar franchise profits. But there is no doubt that their contribution is desperately needed.

Climate change, trophy hunting and conflict with the pastoralists who live alongside lions – all have conspired to loosen their grip on the land they once held; but above all it is loss of habitat to the inexorable advance of the modern world that is putting their lives at risk.

Yet, miraculously, lions continue to grace our world, and the magic they exert upon the human psyche remains as strong as ever. “Who will speak up for the lion when my own voice is carried away on the wind?” asked George Adamson.

Conservation organisations including [The Tusk Trust](https://www.tusk.org/) play a vital role, as does ecotourism, whose dollars underpin the very survival of the wild places where lions can still be seen. And this year The Lion King will add his own clarion call, appealing to the future generations on whose shoulders the very survival of the species will rest.