Safari Glossary and Swahili Cheat Sheet

The safari terms and Swahili words I use on every trip.

Safari terms

Term	What it means
Safari	The whole trip: the bush flights, lodges, meals, experiences, hospitality and game drives. (It's also the Swahili word for journey.)
Game drive	A drive in a vehicle with a guide, looking for animals
Game, or general game	Animals. A game drive is literally a drive to look for them
Guide	The person who drives you and explains what you're seeing
Tracker	Spots the signs of animals: prints in the dirt, smashed trees, poop
Sighting	An animal you've found
ALT	Animal looking thing: a twig, branch or rock that looks like an animal
AFT	Africa flexible time: nothing is on time, so hurry up and wait
Big 5	Lion, leopard, elephant, rhino and Cape buffalo
Little 5	Ant lion, leopard tortoise, buffalo weaver, rhinoceros beetle and elephant shrew
Ugly 5	Warthog, wildebeest, spotted hyena, vulture and marabou stork
Pre-dawn drive	A game drive that starts before sunrise
Night drive	A game drive after dark, when animals are most active. Not every lodge offers them
Sundowner	A drink at sunset, usually in the bush
Bush flight	A small plane between lodges or airstrips
Open vehicle	A game vehicle with open sides: chillier, with better views
Kopje	A small rocky hill that rises out of the plains
Private game reserve	A protected area run privately outside the national parks. Rules like night drives can differ from national parks

Swahili loves saying things twice. Notice how many of these are doubled: polepole, sawa sawa, katikati, takataka, barabara.

Swahili cheat sheet

Stress falls on the second-to-last syllable, so say each word with a little push there.

On safari

Swahili	Say it	Means
Polepole	poh-leh-POH-leh	Slowly. It's basically the speed of a game drive.
Katikati	kah-tee-KAH-tee	In the middle
Takataka	tah-kah-TAH-kah	Trash
Barabara	bah-rah-BAH-rah	Road
Sawa sawa	SAH-wah SAH-wah	Okay, or alright. Use it to agree in a conversation.
Simama	see-MAH-mah	Stop, or stand. It sounds like "sí, mamá."
Twende	TWEN-deh	Let's go
Twende haraka	TWEN-deh hah-RAH-kah	Let's go fast, like when you see a leopard

The Big Five and friends

Swahili	Say it	Means
Simba	SEEM-bah	Lion (yes, like The Lion King)
Tembo	TEM-boh	Elephant
Chui	CHOO-ee	Leopard
Nyati	NYAH-tee	Buffalo
Kifaru	kee-FAH-roo	Rhino
Twiga	TWEE-gah	Giraffe
Kiboko	kee-BOH-koh	Hippo
Pundamilia	poon-dah-mee-LEE-ah	Zebra
Nyumbu	NYOOM-boo	Wildebeest
Fisi	FEE-see	Hyena
Duma	DOO-mah	Cheetah
Mamba	MAHM-bah	Crocodile
Ndege	n-DEH-geh	Bird

Food

Swahili	Say it	Means
Kachumbari	kah-choom-BAH-ree	Fresh tomato and onion salad
Chapati	chah-PAH-tee	Flatbread
Mandazi	mahn-DAH-zee	Slightly sweet fried dough
Ugali	oo-GAH-lee	Stiff maize porridge, eaten with your hands
Maji	MAH-jee	Water
Chai	CHAH-ee	Tea

Family (and friendly strangers)

Swahili	Say it	Means
Baba	BAH-bah	Father
Mama	MAH-mah	Mother
Babu	BAH-boo	Grandfather
Bibi	BEE-bee	Grandmother
Kaka	KAH-kah	Brother
Dada	DAH-dah	Sister

People often use these for strangers as a friendly, respectful way to address someone.

Everyday

Swahili	Say it	Means
Jambo	JAHM-boh	Hello
Habari	hah-BAH-ree	How are you? (literally, news)
Mambo? Poa!	MAHM-boh? POH-ah	Casual hello, and "cool" in reply
Asante	ah-SAHN-teh	Thank you
Karibu	kah-REE-boo	Welcome
Pole	POH-leh	Sorry
Tafadhali	tah-fah-DAH-lee	Please
Hakuna matata	hah-KOO-nah mah-TAH-tah	No worries