



Kenya-Tanzania Migration Safari

A Kiswahili primer



Swahili is one of the easiest African languages to learn for a native English speaker. You simply pronounce the words as they are written. Cue the relief.

Although the official languages are Kiswahili and English, Kenya and Tanzania are multilingual countries. Over 62 languages spoken throughout, which mainly consist of tribal African languages and a minority of Middle Eastern and Asian languages spoken by descendants of foreign settlers (i.e., Arabic, Hindi, etc.). The African languages come from three different language families – Bantu languages (spoken in the center and southeast), Nilotic languages (in the west), and Cushitic languages (in the northeast).

Kiswahili originated from Bantu languages' contact with Arabian traders over many centuries. Under Arab influence, Swahili originated as a lingua franca for the entire East African region. It's a mixture of indigenous African languages and also has roots in Arabic, English, Portuguese, and German.

Fun fact: There are many Kiswahili dialects, but standard Swahili has been taken after the dialect in Zanzibar's Stone Town.



Kenya-Tanzania Migration Safari

Swahili Greetings



- **Jambo** – Hello
- **Habari** – Hello, but generally used when speaking to older people
- **Mambo?** – How goes? Answer: **Poa** – Chill
- **Habari Gani?** – How are you?
- **Nzuri** – Fine/ Nice / Good
- **Kwa heri** – Goodbye
- **Tutaonana** – See you later

Politesse Swahili

- **Asante** – Thank you
- **Asante sana** – Thank you VERY much.
- **Tafadhali** – Please
- **Samahani** – Excuse me
- **Pole** – Sorry. Applies to really bad events and even minor issues
- **Ndiyo / Hapana** – Yes / No
- **Sawa** – Ok
- **Rafiki** – Friend

Food

- **Chakula** – Food
- **Kahawa** – Coffee
- **Chai** – Tea
- **Bia** – Beer



Kenya-Tanzania Migration Safari

- **Maji** – Water
- **Maji ya kunywa** – Drinking water

Places

- **Benki** – Bank
- **Soko** – Market
- **Choo** – Toilet

Just in case

- **Unaongea kiingereza** – Do you speak English?
- **Sielewi** – I don't understand
- **Hatari** – Danger
- **Sifahamu** or **Sielewi** – I don't understand
- **Sema Pole Pole** – Speak slower
- **Siongei Kiswahili** – I don't speak Swahili (alternatively: **Sifahama Kiswahili** – I don't know Swahili)
- **Unasemaje Na Kiswahili** – How do you say that in Swahili?
- **Rudia Tena** – Can you repeat that?
- **Unaweza Kuongea Kiingereza?** – Can you speak English?

Safari Vocab

When you're on safari, the driver may urgently point out a sighting in Kiswahili, his first language, followed by English. Here's what you may hear so you can grab your camera.

- **Simba** – Lion (here comes the Lion King!)
- **Tembo** – Elephant
- **Chui** – Leopard
- **Swala** – Antelope
- **Nyati** – Buffalo
- **Kiboko** – Hippo
- **Duma** – Cheetah
- **Kifaru** – Rhino
- **Twiga** – Giraffe
- **Wanyama** – Animal
- **N'gombe** – Cow
- **Mbuzi** – Goat
- **Fisi** – Hyena
- **Ngiri** – Warthog
- **Nyumbu** – Wildebeest
- **Punda Milia** – Zebra



Kenya-Tanzania Migration Safari

The driver may tell you to be quiet, or to look in a certain direction.

- **Utulivu** – Quiet
- **Tulia** – Be Quiet
- **Pole Pole** (or **taratibu**) – Slowly
- **Haraka** – Quickly
- **Ngoja** (or **subiri**) – Wait
- **Simama** – Stop
- **Moja Kwa Moja** – One by one or straight ahead

No matter where you go in East Africa, or how little you know, local people will always appreciate your effort to learn basic phrases and words in Kiswahili. Your most shy "Jambo Rafiki..." will be met with smiles and delight.

Bet you can you learn Kiswahili! Saturate yourself in the language by listening to [BBC radio in Swahili](#). If you're staying for a long time in Tanzania, you may wish to attend a language course or engage a local to teach you. Learn Kiswahili by:

1. Chatting with the locals (don't be shy!)
2. Learn the phrase "how do you say this..." -- **Siongei Kiswahili** -- then you can keep adding to your vocabulary.
3. When you learn a new word repeat it several times and use it right away
4. Listen to music or watch a TV show.

There's always [Duolingo](#) for a daily 5-minute Kiswahili practice!

