

The Price of Reconnection
**A GLOBAL STUDY OF
NATIONAL PARK FEES**

What national park fees across 155 parks and 48 countries reveal
about the cost, value and protection of the world's wild places.



Mahlatini

LIFE'S GREAT JOURNEYS

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In Kenya, entering the Maasai Mara during peak season, one of the defining landscapes of African safari and the stage for the Great Migration, costs an international visitor \$200 a day. In New Zealand, entering Fiordland National Park, a UNESCO-listed wilderness of fjords, rainforest and mountains, costs nothing.

The contrast is striking, but it is not a ranking of value. Both places are globally significant. What it reveals is how differently national parks are funded, managed and priced: in some countries, access is treated primarily as a public good; in others, visitor fees play a more direct role in funding conservation, demand management and supporting community-linked tourism.

To explore these differences with data, Mahlatini Luxury Travel compiled an index of park access fees covering 155 national parks and equivalent protected areas across 48 countries and six continents. The study was designed as a representative global sample rather than an exhaustive list. The index measures mandatory park entry costs only, excluding accommodation, transport, guiding and optional activity permits unless they are a compulsory condition of access. In other words, this is a measure of park entry, not the total cost of a safari or holiday.

The findings show that park pricing is rarely arbitrary, and the result is a complex global picture of how access to nature is priced and protected.

Key findings:

- **Yala National Park in Sri Lanka offers the strongest resident price protection in the study**, with locals paying just 1.42% of the international visitor fee.
- **Volcanoes National Park in Rwanda shows the widest affordability gap between residents and US travellers**, with entry costing locals around 35.27 times more relative to income.
- **Akagera National Park in Rwanda is the least affordable park for local residents**, with a \$10.89 entry fee equal to 42.86% of Rwanda's median monthly income.
- **For US travellers, the Maasai Mara National Reserve in Kenya ranks as the most expensive park by relative entry cost**, with peak-season access costing \$200 per day, or 4.46% of median US monthly income.

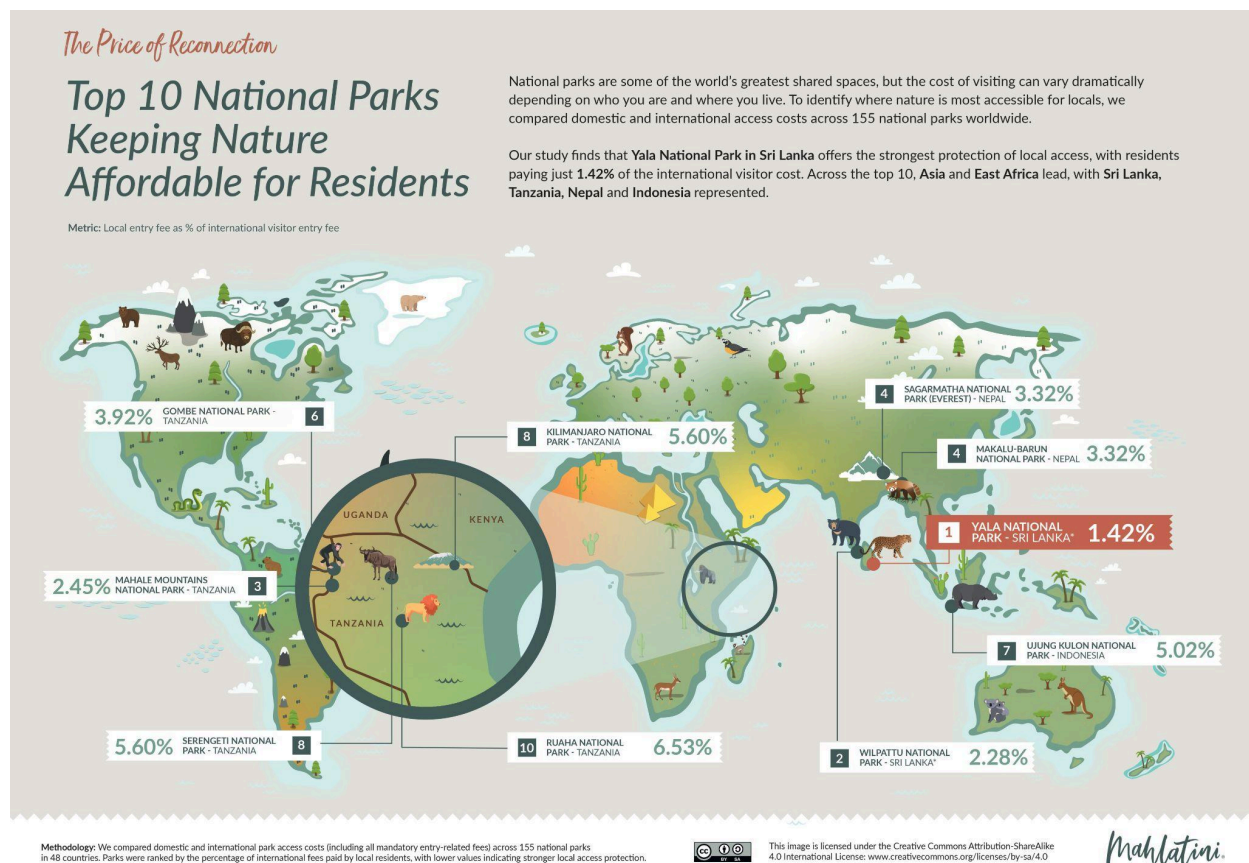
- **The study also found that 31 parks charge no general entry fee at all**, including major national parks in New Zealand, Japan, Iceland, Bhutan and the United States. Africa is the only continent in the study with no free-entry parks.

***Disclosure:** Mahlatini Luxury Travel is a Certified B Corp travel operator that sends clients to many of the destinations included in this study. That interest is declared openly. The index is based on independently sourced data, wherever possible from official park authority publications. Mahlatini's destination expertise and nearly 24 years of first-hand experience inform the methodology and editorial interpretation.*

Where National Parks Protect Local Access Most

The parks where residents pay the smallest share of the international visitor fee.

National parks are among the world's great shared spaces, but the cost of entering them can vary dramatically depending on who is visiting. To identify where residents receive the strongest price protection, we compared domestic and international access costs, including mandatory entry-related fees, across the full study sample. Parks were ranked by the percentage of the international visitor fee paid by local residents, with lower percentages indicating stronger resident price protection.



Sri Lanka (#1, #2) note: Domestic entry fees for Yala and Wilpattu have remained fixed at LKR 60 since 2022. Rupee depreciation means USD conversions may understate the real cost burden for local residents.

You can view the map in full-size [here](#).

By this measure, Yala National Park in Sri Lanka ranks first. Local residents pay just 1.42% of the international visitor cost, the lowest share in the study. Wilpattu National Park, also

in Sri Lanka, ranks second, placing the country at the top of the global ranking. Across the top 10, Asia and East Africa are especially prominent, with parks in Sri Lanka, Tanzania, Nepal and Indonesia standing out for the scale of their resident discounts.

Sri Lanka's position is notable because Yala and Wilpattu are not minor local reserves. Yala is the country's best-known safari destination, famous for leopards, elephants, sloth bears, crocodiles, dry forest, lagoons and coastal landscapes. It has strong international appeal, particularly among travellers combining wildlife, beaches and cultural sites. Wilpattu, Sri Lanka's largest national park, offers a quieter and wilder-feeling alternative, known for leopards, sloth bears and its distinctive villus – natural rain-fed lakes that shape the park's landscape and wildlife viewing.



A Sri Lankan leopard in Yala National Park, the country's best-known wildlife destination and one of its most visited protected areas, renowned for leopard sightings.

However, it is important not to conflate low entry fees with the “undervaluation” of national parks. [Researchers have observed](#) that both local and international tourists in Sri Lanka were willing to pay considerably more than current entrance fees, and that carefully managed fee increases could generate additional conservation revenue while helping ease pressure in heavily visited areas such as Yala. But keeping resident fees low is also a policy

choice with a clear social rationale. In a country like Sri Lanka, raising local entry prices can have considerable implications for equitable access, and could be interpreted as “Sri Lanka evolving its national parks from national public goods to club goods that only the better off could afford.” It is a trade-off that lower-income countries with internationally popular parks are increasingly being asked to navigate.

This pattern appears elsewhere in the top 10. Several Tanzanian and Nepali parks offer very low resident fees relative to international prices, even though the destinations themselves may be heavily shaped by international tourism. In these cases, differentiated pricing appears to serve two purposes at once: keeping formal entry costs low for residents while allowing international visitor fees to contribute more significantly to conservation funding, park management and tourism infrastructure.



Lions rest in an acacia tree in Tanzania's Serengeti National Park, one of several East African parks where international tourism helps support conservation and protected-area management.

The philosophical justification is simple: people who live alongside these landscapes should not be priced out of their own natural heritage by fee structures designed for wealthier international visitors. As **Mahlatini Director and Co-Founder Greg Fox** puts it, “It is insane that someone who lives alongside the Kruger has never seen an elephant.”



A Mahlatini Luxury Travel guest watches an elephant in the Greater Kruger region of South Africa. Conservation areas across Africa often use differentiated pricing structures to balance local access with tourism-funded conservation. Credit: Mahlatini Luxury Travel

That point matters because differential pricing can protect access at the gate, but it cannot solve every barrier around access. Overall, this ranking should be read as a measure of resident price protection, not total accessibility. Strong resident price protection does not necessarily mean a park is visited mainly by residents, nor does it prove that a full visit is affordable once transport, safari vehicles, guiding and accommodation are included. A low resident fee can help keep national parks within reach at the point of entry, but real-world access also depends on travel distance, transport costs, accommodation, permits, guides and the wider domestic tourism market.

When Park Access Is a Public Good

The resident price-protection ranking shows where local visitors pay the smallest share of the international visitor fee. But in several countries, the pricing model goes further: access to nature is treated less as a visitor product and more as part of the public realm.

Across the 155 parks in our study, 31 charge no general entrance fee for either domestic or international visitors. They include some of the world's most celebrated landscapes: New Zealand's Fiordland, Tongariro and Aoraki/Mount Cook; Iceland's Þingvellir and Vatnajökull; Japan's Daisetsuzan, Nikko and Fuji-Hakone-Izu; Norway's Jostedalsglaci; Slovenia's Triglav, the country's only national park, protecting the Julian Alps along its border with Austria and Italy; and the Great Smoky Mountains in the United States.



Milford Sound / Piopiotahi in Fiordland National Park, one of New Zealand's most celebrated protected landscapes. Visitors pay no general entrance fee, reflecting the country's wider public-access approach to national parks.

In some countries this reflects a wider public-access philosophy. New Zealand is one of the clearest examples: all three of its UNESCO-listed national parks in the study follow this approach. Japan's national park network does the same, spanning landscapes from the volcanic scenery of Daisetsuzan and the alpine terrain of Chubusangaku to the cultural landscapes of Nikko and the remote subtropical ecosystems of Ogasawara. Norway adds another layer through *Allemannsretten*, often translated as the "right to roam" or "everyman's right," which gives people broad access to uncultivated land, including forests, mountains and coastlines. Jostedalsglaci, home to mainland Europe's largest glacier, sits within that wider tradition. Great Smoky Mountains, one of the most visited national parks in the world, has remained outside the standard entrance-fee model due to

agreements made at the park's founding, a legal and historical context rather than a policy statement about value.



*Jostedalsbreen National Park, Norway. Home to mainland Europe's largest glacier, the park sits within a wider tradition of free public access to nature under Norway's *Allemannsretten* ("right to roam").*

Bhutan's three parks in the study, Jigme Dorji, Jigme Singye Wangchuck and Wangchuck Centennial, also charge no general entrance fee, though Bhutan operates a distinctive national tourism model that makes it a more complex case, explored separately later in this report.

Other countries beyond our sample follow broadly similar models. National parks in England, Scotland and Wales charge no general entrance fee, though visitors may still pay for parking, campsites or specific attractions. Sweden and Finland operate along comparable lines, alongside everyman's rights traditions similar to Norway's.

Free access, however, should not be read as a universal ideal or a simple measure of generosity. It is one funding model among several, and it depends heavily on national context. In countries such as New Zealand, Japan and Iceland, park access sits within broader systems of public funding, infrastructure provision and cultural expectations

around outdoor recreation. These parks are not free because they lack value; they are free because their conservation and management costs are supported through other mechanisms.

That distinction matters. In much of Africa, park fees play a far more direct role in funding the essential work of conservation: ranger operations, wildlife protection, community-linked programmes, infrastructure and anti-poaching work. This is a different and often more urgent model.

Africa: the continent with no free-entry parks in the study

Among the 47 African parks included in the study, every one charges an entrance fee for both residents and international visitors.

This stands in striking contrast to the rest of the index. Europe has six free-entry parks in our sample. Asia has fifteen. Oceania, North America and South America all include parks with no general entrance fee. Africa, the continent most strongly associated internationally with wildlife and wilderness, has none in this dataset.

To understand why, you need to understand the context in which African parks operate. The wildlife that draws travellers to Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda, Uganda and Namibia exists under pressures very different from those faced by protected areas in Iceland, Japan or New Zealand. Poaching risk, land-use pressure, human-wildlife conflict and the competing needs of communities living alongside protected areas are daily management realities.

In this context, entrance fees are not just a charge for access. They are part of the conservation finance model, helping fund ranger salaries, wildlife protection, park infrastructure, community revenue-sharing and the long-term costs of keeping ecosystems intact. In many African parks, visitor revenue plays a direct role in protecting wildlife populations whose survival depends on sustained, well-funded conservation work.

As **Vanessa Dean, Mahlatini's Head of Product and Experience**, explains, those links are visible across multiple countries and species:

"Across Africa and the Indian Subcontinent, tourism revenue has played a meaningful role in conservation outcomes, even where the link is less visibly tied to a single permit or levy. India's tiger population has increased under a protected-area system supported in part by tourism. One-horned rhino numbers in Nepal's Chitwan National Park have recovered significantly. In Namibia and Kenya, black rhino populations have stabilised and expanded under conservation models that depend on tourism income. In southern Kenya, the Kimana Corridor, a critical

elephant route connecting Amboseli with Tsavo and the Chyulu Hills, has also been supported through tourism-backed conservation funding, helping protect habitat used by large elephant populations, including some of Africa's last remaining Super Tuskers."



A black rhino calf in Kenya. Tourism income helps fund the conservation work that has supported the stabilisation and recovery of black rhino populations in parts of East Africa. Credit: Save the Rhino International

The absence of free-entry parks in Africa should therefore not be read as a lesser commitment to public access. It reflects the direct role tourism revenue often plays in keeping these protected areas functioning. The pricing model is different because the conservation context is different.

Bhutan: free parks, premium country access

Bhutan offers one of the most distinctive models in the study. Its national parks, Jigme Dorji, Jigme Singye Wangchuck, and Wangchuck Centennial, charge no general entrance fee. But Bhutan does not operate a low-cost tourism model.

Known as the Land of the Thunder Dragon, Bhutan is also the country that gave the world the concept of [Gross National Happiness](#) (GNH). In the 1970s, its fourth king declared

that “Gross National Happiness is more important than Gross Domestic Product” — a philosophy that has since shaped development thinking well beyond Bhutan's borders, and that inspired the United Nations to establish an International Day of Happiness. For years, Bhutan's tourism slogan was simply “Happiness is a Place.”

For **Vanessa**, Bhutan's philosophy was deeply felt during her journey through Punakha, the Gangtey Valley and Tiger's Nest this year.

“What really resonated with me is that culture is lived there. Spirituality is lived. Nothing feels performative or created for tourism. Whether you're visiting a local monastery or simply watching people go about their day-to-day lives, you're experiencing a culture that remains deeply rooted in its heritage.”

The philosophy is not merely rhetorical. Ecological health is one of the nine domains the GNH Index formally measures, and the results are tangible: Bhutan's constitution requires at least 60% forest cover in perpetuity, the country currently stands at 71%, and it is measurably carbon negative.



Forested Himalayan slopes surround Tiger's Nest Monastery in Bhutan, where environmental protection is embedded in national policy.

That philosophy also shapes how Bhutan manages access. International visitors pay a Sustainable Development Fee of \$100 per night to enter the country, whether they are trekking through a national park or staying in Thimphu. Apart from limited regional exemptions, visitors are also required to travel with a licensed local guide and driver. In effect, Bhutan shifts the cost of access away from individual park gates and into the wider structure of national tourism policy.

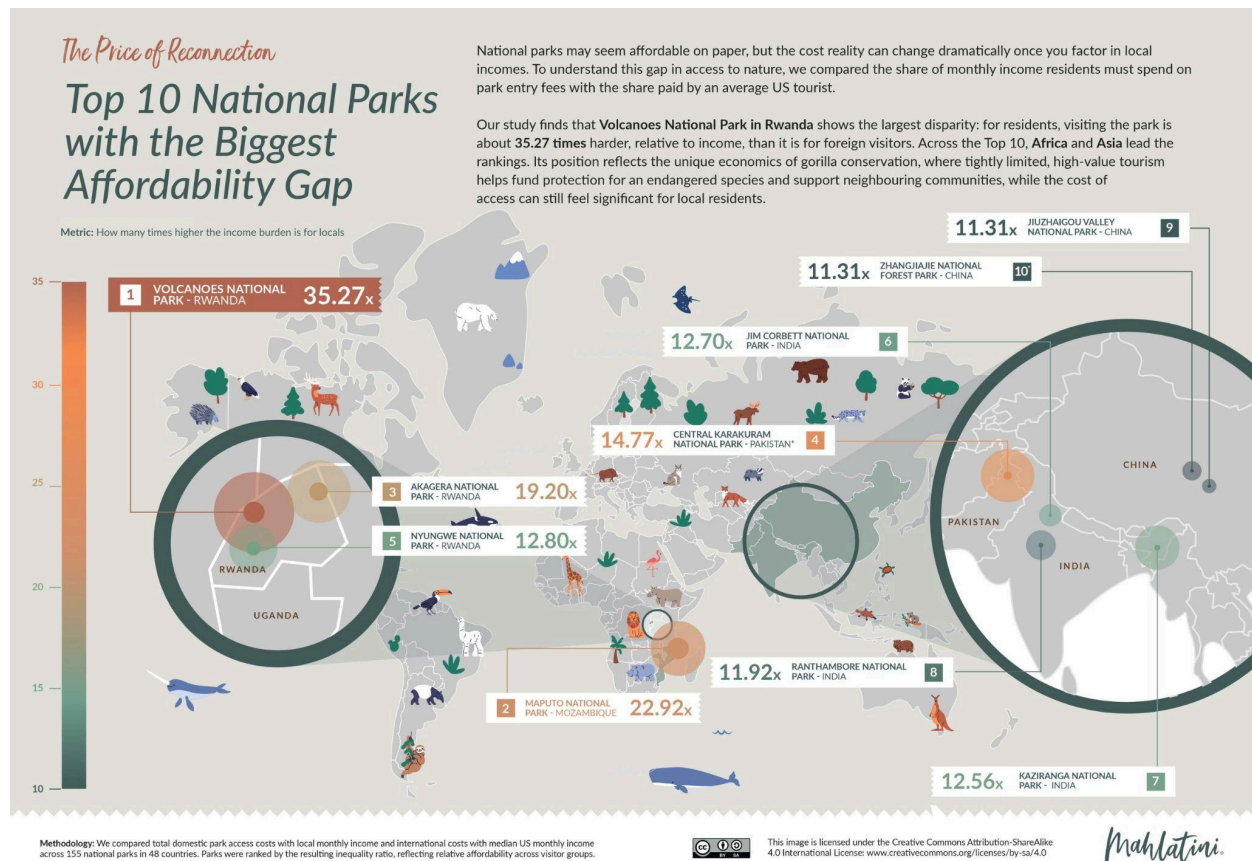
This reflects Bhutan's long-standing "high value, low volume" approach: using tourism pricing to manage demand, generate revenue and protect cultural and environmental assets simultaneously. The park entrance fee disappears not because access is unconsidered, but because the pricing has been relocated, and elevated, elsewhere.

Bhutan therefore complicates any simple reading of "free access." Its parks may be free to enter, but access to the country is deliberately premium for international visitors. The \$100 nightly fee is part of the mechanism by which a small Himalayan kingdom has chosen to protect its environment, preserve its culture, and exist in the modern world on its own terms.

Where Access to Nature Is Most Unequal

These parks show where residents spend far more of their income on entry than US travellers would.

National park fees can look very different depending on whose income they are measured against. To understand where access costs fall most unevenly, we compared domestic park access costs as a share of local monthly income with international access costs as a share of median US monthly income across 155 national parks in 48 countries. Parks were ranked by the resulting inequality ratio, showing where residents face the greatest relative affordability gap compared with US travellers.



Pakistan (#4) note: Salary data predates recent inflation, so current real wages may be lower than reflected in the index.

China (#9, #10) note: Jiuzhaigou Valley National Park and Zhangjiajie National Forest Park recorded identical scores. They are shown separately for infographic clarity, but should be read as tied.

You can view the map in full-size [here](#).

By this measure, Volcanoes National Park in Rwanda shows the largest disparity in the study. Entry costs residents around 35 times more, relative to income, than it costs a US traveller. Rwanda also accounts for three of the top five parks in the ranking, reflecting the country's distinctive conservation economy: globally significant wildlife, tightly managed tourism, and local income levels that make even moderate entry fees feel substantial.

This does not mean Rwanda's park fees are unusually high in global terms. Akagera National Park, for example, charges local residents \$10.89. But when set against a median monthly salary of \$25.41, that single entry fee represents nearly half a month's income. At Volcanoes, the income burden is even higher. It is a clear reminder that affordability cannot be read from the ticket price alone.

The Gorilla Premium

Rwanda's position at the top of this ranking needs one further layer of context. Volcanoes National Park charges \$50 for general park entry, the figure captured in this index. But for most international visitors, that is not the primary cost of the experience. Rwanda's gorilla trekking permit costs \$1,500, while Uganda's Bwindi Impenetrable National Park charges \$800. These permits are excluded from the ranking because the study measures park access, not the cost of headline activities within the park.

That distinction matters because the permit model is central to understanding why the affordability gap exists and what it funds. Rwanda's high-value approach has played a significant role in financing conservation, ranger operations, veterinary care and community support programmes. The mountain gorilla population has grown meaningfully through sustained investment of this kind, making the permit system one of the most closely watched examples of high-value wildlife tourism delivering conservation results.

The affordability tension is still real, but it sits alongside something important: Volcanoes is a remarkable park beyond the gorillas. Golden monkey tracking, the volcanic landscape of Mount Bisoke, Dian Fossey's research site and the park's Afromontane forest all offer ways to experience the landscape that do not require the premium permit. For residents, these may represent a more realistic, and still genuinely significant, route into one of Rwanda's most important protected areas.



A mountain gorilla in Rwanda's Volcanoes National Park. While general park entry is relatively modest, gorilla trekking permits create a separate premium access model for one of Africa's most sought-after wildlife experiences.

India: Popularity Does Not Always Mean Affordability

India adds a different kind of insight to this ranking. Kaziranga, Jim Corbett and Ranthambore are internationally recognised wildlife parks, known respectively for the world's largest population of greater one-horned rhinoceroses, Bengal tigers in the Himalayan foothills and tigers moving through the dramatic backdrop of Ranthambore Fort, but all three are predominantly visited by domestic tourists rather than international ones.

Their presence in this ranking is a reminder that a large domestic visitor base does not automatically mean broad affordability. Parks can be popular with residents, well-loved and heavily used, while the entry fee still represents a meaningful cost burden for lower-income households. In a country with as large and diverse an internal tourism market as India, that distinction matters: visitation patterns and income-adjusted affordability are not the same thing.



A Bengal tiger and cubs in Ranthambore National Park, Rajasthan.

This is one of the more important findings to emerge from comparing the rankings. Resident price protection, income-adjusted affordability and actual visitation tell three different stories about the same park. A park can score well on one measure and poorly on another, and understanding which lens is being applied matters for interpreting what the data actually shows.

Overall, this ranking should be read as a measure of relative affordability between visitor groups, not as a judgement on any particular pricing model. The same fee can carry very different weight depending on local wages, international demand, conservation costs and the wider tourism economy around the park.

Where Nature Comes at the Highest Local Cost

These national parks require the biggest share of monthly income from local residents.

For many international travellers, a national park entry fee is a relatively small part of a wider holiday budget. For residents, however, even a modest local fee can represent a much larger share of monthly income. To identify where park access places the greatest financial burden on local visitors, we compared domestic entry costs with median monthly earnings across 155 national parks in 48 countries. Parks were ranked by the share of local monthly income required for a single entry.

This ranking is distinct from the affordability gap measure examined earlier in the study, which compared how much harder it is for locals to pay the entry fee relative to a US traveller. That ranking is about relative inequality between visitor types. This one looks only at the resident side: not how the local fee compares to the international one, but whether the local fee itself is affordable in local economic terms.



Uganda note: Travel conditions may be affected by health-risk advisories, including Ebola-related warnings.

You can view the infographic in full-size [here](#).

By this measure, Akagera National Park in Rwanda is the least affordable park for residents in the study, with entry costing 42.86% of median monthly income. Rwanda accounts for the top three entries, with Akagera, Volcanoes and Nyungwe all appearing among the parks where local entry fees take the largest share of resident earnings.

The issue is not that Rwanda's resident fees are unusually high by international standards. Akagera charges \$10.89 and Nyungwe charges \$7.26 for local entry. The issue is that local earnings are low enough for even modest fees to become significant. Against a median monthly salary of \$25.41, a single visit to Akagera costs nearly half a month's income.



Akagera National Park, Rwanda. Although local entry fees are modest in absolute terms, they can represent a significant share of resident income, making affordability look very different when measured against earnings.

This does not make the ranking a simple criticism of Rwanda's park pricing. These parks protect globally important ecosystems and wildlife, and visitor fees contribute to park management, ranger work, habitat protection and community-linked conservation. The data points instead to a structural tension that runs through this entire ranking: in

lower-income contexts, conservation funding needs and local affordability can be genuinely difficult to reconcile.

India's parks appear here for the same structural reason they appeared in the previous ranking, not because their fees are high in absolute terms, but because the relationship between entry cost and local earnings creates a meaningful barrier for many residents. That tension is especially striking given that Kaziranga, Jim Corbett and Ranthambore are all predominantly visited by domestic tourists. Parks can be popular with residents, well-loved and heavily used, while still placing a disproportionate cost burden on lower-income households within the same country.



Asian elephants in Kaziranga National Park. Like many of India's best-known wildlife parks, Kaziranga draws strong domestic visitation even as entry costs can represent a meaningful burden relative to local incomes.

Kenya's presence adds another dimension. Maasai Mara, Amboseli and Lake Nakuru are central to the country's wildlife tourism identity, and their appearance here — alongside their presence in the most expensive ranking for US travellers — captures the central challenge of high-value conservation destinations: the same pricing that funds wildlife protection and supports surrounding communities can simultaneously place access out of reach for many of the people who live closest to these landscapes.

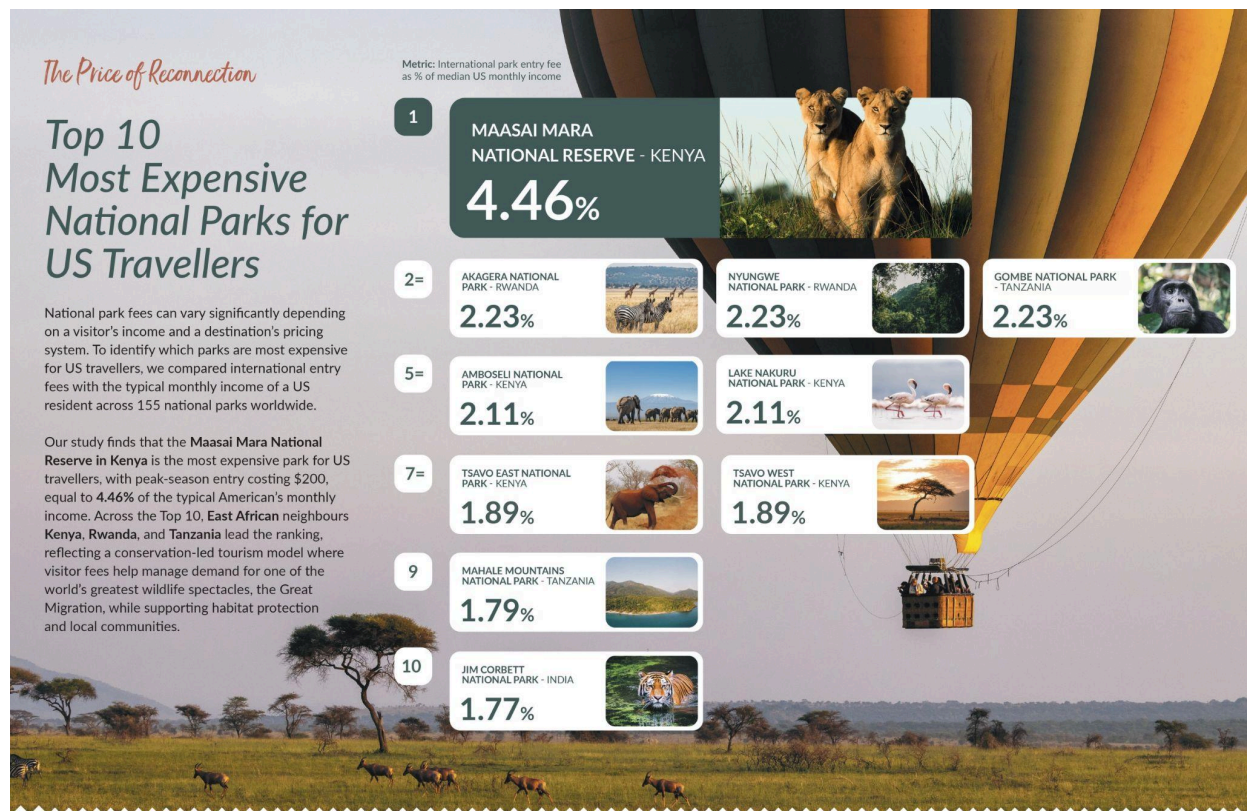
Jiuzhaigou Valley in China shows that this challenge is not confined to safari destinations or to any particular income bracket. Known for its striking lakes, waterfalls and mountain forests, it is a protected area where strong international demand and domestic income levels still combine to produce a meaningful affordability gap for local residents.

What this ranking ultimately shows is not that these parks are overpriced, but that price is not experienced the same way everywhere. A fee that barely registers for an international visitor can represent a genuine sacrifice for a local resident.

The Most Expensive National Parks for US Travellers

A look at the national parks where entry costs represent the largest share of average US monthly income.

National park fees can vary significantly depending on a visitor's income, residency status and the pricing model used by each destination. To identify which parks are most expensive for US travellers, we compared international adult entry fees with median US monthly income across 155 national parks in 48 countries. US national parks were included using the domestic rate, since American visitors do not pay international surcharges at their own parks.



Zimbabwe note: Salary data may be affected by exchange-rate and inflation changes since the source year.

You can view the infographic in full-size [here](#).

By this measure, Maasai Mara National Reserve in Kenya is the most expensive park for US travellers in the study. During peak season, entry costs \$200 per day, equal to 4.46% of median US monthly income. Seasonality matters: outside peak season, the rate drops to

\$100. The differential is not only a pricing convenience; peak-season fees also serve as a demand management tool, helping to distribute visitor pressure across the year and limit congestion during the migration window when the Mara faces its most intense international interest. But for many travellers, even the peak-season fee is unlikely to raise the question of whether the Mara is worth the price. The Mara is one of the world's defining wildlife landscapes, and the Great Migration remains one of nature's great spectacles; for many, a once-in-a-lifetime experience.



The Great Migration brings hundreds of thousands of wildebeest through the Maasai Mara each year, helping make the reserve one of Africa's most sought-after wildlife destinations.

Across the top 10, the highest relative costs for US travellers are concentrated in East Africa, particularly Kenya, Rwanda and Tanzania. These are not ordinary visitor attractions. They include some of the world's most recognisable wildlife destinations, from the Maasai Mara and Amboseli to Akagera, Nyungwe, Gombe and Mahale Mountains. The pattern reflects the particular economics of East African conservation tourism, where high-value wildlife experiences, limited carrying capacity and long-term protection costs all shape how access is priced.

Kenya: Premium Safari, Sustainable Growth

Kenya's wider presence in the ranking is especially notable because it is not limited to the Maasai Mara. Amboseli, Lake Nakuru, Tsavo East and Tsavo West all appear in the top 10, showing the breadth of Kenya's safari offering. Amboseli is best known for its large elephant herds and Mount Kilimanjaro backdrop; Lake Nakuru for rhinos, Rift Valley scenery and its famous flamingo gatherings; and Tsavo East and Tsavo West for vast wilderness, red-dust elephants, lava flows, springs and some of Kenya's most expansive safari landscapes.



Elephants roam Amboseli National Park with Mount Kilimanjaro rising in the background. The park is renowned for its large elephant herds and some of Africa's most iconic safari scenery.

That pricing also sits within a wider national tourism economy. According to the World Travel & Tourism Council's [2026 Economic Impact Research](#), produced in partnership with Oxford Economics, Travel & Tourism contributed \$12.7 billion to Kenya's economy in 2025, representing 9.3% of national GDP, and supported 1.8 million jobs. International visitor spending reached \$5 billion, slightly above domestic visitor spending of \$4.5 billion, underlining the role overseas demand plays in Kenya's tourism model. WTTC also identifies Kenya as an emerging leader in sustainable tourism, with the sector sourcing

19.9% of its energy from low-carbon sources, above both the global and African averages. In that context, premium park fees sit within a broader system in which international tourism contributes not only to conservation infrastructure, but also to employment, foreign-exchange earnings and the long-term sustainability of the destination.

Gombe: The Price of Scientific Significance

Premium pricing is not limited to the big-name safari icons; it also applies to smaller, more specialised protected areas where the experience is shaped by rarity, remoteness and scientific significance. Gombe National Park in Tanzania is a clear example. Charging \$100 per day for international visitors, Gombe is one of the highest entry fees in the TANAPA national park network. Its location on Tanzania's remote Western Circuit, with access primarily by boat along Lake Tanganyika, means it is not a mainstream safari destination, but it remains one of Tanzania's most internationally recognised protected areas.

Gombe's significance comes from the chimpanzee research begun there by Jane Goodall in 1960. Her observations helped transform scientific understanding of primate behaviour, showing that chimpanzees make and use tools, hunt and eat meat, form complex social and family bonds, display emotion, and engage in conflict between groups. These findings challenged long-held assumptions about the boundary between humans and other animals, and helped shape the fields of primatology, animal behaviour, human evolution and conservation science.

Dr. Deus Mjungu, Director of the Jane Goodall Institute's [Gombe Stream Research Center](#), describes what makes the park so singular:

"Gombe National Park is a fragile ecosystem. It is Tanzania's second-smallest national park, covering just about 35 square Kms of land (52 square Kms including Lake Tanganyika surface-area) along the shores of Lake Tanganyika. To ensure the long-term survival of its wildlife, the Tanzania National Parks Authority (TANAPA) uses strict entry protocols to limit daily visitor numbers while maximising tourism experience. Notably, Gombe is home to the longest-running continuous wild chimpanzee study in history, pioneered by Dr. Jane Goodall in 1960 and still continuing today. Because of this landmark research, visitors can observe the famous Kasekela chimpanzee community, where generations of individual primates boast a deeply documented lineage and unique life history."



Dr. Jane Goodall and field staff observe [Goblin](#) at Gombe National Park, Tanzania. Credit: The Jane Goodall Institute (JGI)

It is an experience shaped as much by scientific history as by the forest itself: chimpanzee trekking here is connected not only to wildlife viewing, but to one of the most influential field-research stories in modern conservation.

What Maasai Mara and Gombe have in common is not the nature of their fame; one is a globally recognised icon on the mainstream safari circuit, the other celebrated within conservation and scientific circles for research that has shaped our understanding of what it means to be human. What they share is that the price of access reflects the cost of protecting ecosystems that are genuinely difficult to sustain, and the scarcity of experiences that cannot be replicated elsewhere. It is also worth noting that even the highest-ranked parks in this study represent a relatively modest share of median US monthly income, expensive by the standards of a park entry fee, but not disproportionate given what is being protected and offered. The ranking is less a list of overpriced parks than a map of where the world's most significant nature is, and what it takes to keep it that way.

America's New Visitor Premium

As mentioned earlier, US national parks were included using the domestic rate for this ranking specifically as it measures affordability for US travellers. Americans visiting their own national parks pay the resident price. However, the introduction of higher non-resident fees at selected US national parks creates an important side finding: in an absolute ranking of international entry fees, several US parks now sit near the very top of the global list.

From 1 January 2026, non-US residents aged 16 and over face a [\\$100 surcharge](#) at 11 of the country's best-known national parks: Acadia, Bryce Canyon, Everglades, Glacier, Grand Canyon, Grand Teton, Rocky Mountain, Sequoia & Kings Canyon, Yellowstone, Yosemite and Zion. Combined with the standard entry fee, this puts these parks above almost every East African park in the dataset on a per-person daily basis, trailing only the Maasai Mara's peak-season rate. Among the parks affected is Yellowstone, [established in 1872](#) as the world's first federally protected national park, and the model that inspired national park systems around the globe.



Thomas Moran's [The Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone](#) helped shape early public support for protecting Yellowstone, established

in 1872 as the world's first national park. Today, Yellowstone is also among the US parks where international visitors face a new \$100 surcharge.

The effect is clearest for families. A British family of two adults and two teenagers visiting Yellowstone would pay one \$35 vehicle permit plus four \$100 surcharges: a total of \$435, compared with \$35 for an American family making the same trip. That is a twelvefold difference for the international group.



Half Dome rises above Yosemite Valley in Yosemite National Park, one of the 11 US parks affected by the new international visitor surcharge.

This makes the US approach noteworthy in a global context. Residency-based differential pricing is well established in many lower- and middle-income tourism economies, where international visitor fees help balance conservation funding with local affordability; a model [widely documented](#) in the academic literature on park pricing and one that has shown clear conservation benefits in contexts ranging from East Africa to South Asia. South Africa is a clear example: SANParks operates an explicit three-tier system in which South African residents, SADC nationals (visitors from neighbouring southern African countries) and international visitors pay different conservation fees, with the local rate subsidised to ensure residents are not priced out of their own national heritage. In many

of these contexts, conservation finance is understood in direct ecological and operational terms: ranger deployment, anti-poaching work, wildlife monitoring, habitat protection and community revenue-sharing.

In many higher-income countries, the pattern has traditionally been different: free-entry or flat-fee access regardless of nationality. The official White House [fact sheet](#) states that “charging higher entrance fees to foreign tourists is a common policy at national parks throughout the world that supports both conservation and affordable access for residents,” which is broadly true in lower- and middle-income conservation economies. The US case, however, sits within a high-income, tax-funded context, and applies the surcharge not to lower the domestic baseline but simply to add a steep premium for international visitors. The result is less a debate about price than a debate about what conservation funding is actually meant to cover, and who decides.

The [administration](#) framed the policy as a fairness measure (“putting Americans first”), and as a contribution toward the park system’s \$22.9 billion maintenance backlog. That framing has since drawn scrutiny. A [May 2026 New York Times investigation](#) found at least \$67 million in recreation-fee revenue directed toward Washington D.C. beautification projects. This allocation is technically lawful under [federal rules](#) governing how recreation fee revenue can be spent, which allow a portion of centrally pooled funds to support sites that do not charge their own entrance fees. A group of senators subsequently cited a higher figure of \$95 million in a [June 2026 letter](#), and noted that the maintenance backlog had in fact grown to over \$24 billion since the policy was introduced. The controversy underscores a wider theme running through this study: park fees may be described in the language of conservation or stewardship, but what that means in practice can vary significantly by country, institution and political context.

The Canadian contrast is instructive. Canada’s national park pricing has historically been nationality-blind, with domestic and international visitors paying the same standard admission (already a different philosophy from the new US approach). This summer, that model goes further still: under the [Canada Strong Pass](#), all visitors, Canadian and international alike, receive free admission to every Parks Canada national park, historic site and marine conservation area from June 19 to September 7, 2026. The two approaches, announced within months of each other, point in opposite directions.



Spirit Island on Maligne Lake in Jasper National Park, in the Canadian Rockies. Under the Canada Strong Pass, admission to Parks Canada national parks is free for both domestic and international visitors during summer 2026.

For **Liane Goldring, Founding Brand Partner at Mahlatini**, that contrast was not only theoretical.

“Travelling through the Canadian Rockies last summer, I was amazed to discover that access to some of the world’s most spectacular natural landscapes was completely free. The parks were impeccably managed, the visitor experience was exceptional, and it challenged my assumptions about the relationship between access, funding and conservation. That experience was one of the inspirations behind this research and the questions it explores about how we value and protect nature.”

By applying a large international surcharge to some of its most famous national parks, the US complicates the idea that residency-based pricing belongs mainly to lower- and middle-income conservation economies. It raises a wider question that this study can pose but not yet answer: is differential pricing now entering the policy toolkit of wealthy countries as a permanent feature, and if so, on whose terms, and toward what ends?

The Price of Access, the Value of Protection

We set out to map the price of access. What emerged was something larger than a fee comparison.

Across 155 parks and 48 countries, the entrance fee was rarely just an entrance fee. It reflected a wider set of choices: how conservation is funded, how visitor numbers are managed, how local access is protected, and how tourism is expected to contribute to the future of a protected landscape.

Different countries answer those questions in different ways. In Rwanda and Uganda, high-value gorilla tourism has helped fund one of conservation's most important recovery stories. In Bhutan, parks may be free at the gate, but access to the country is deliberately managed through a national tourism model designed to protect culture and environment. In New Zealand and Japan, many of the world's great landscapes remain free to enter, supported through different public-access and funding systems. In Africa, every park in our study charges an entrance fee; a striking finding, but one shaped by the direct role fees play in funding ranger work, wildlife protection, community-linked conservation and the infrastructure that makes responsible tourism possible. Kenya shows how this model can sit within a broader growth story: a tourism economy supporting millions of jobs, attracting significant international spending and increasingly linked to sustainable tourism leadership. And in the United States, the introduction of higher fees for international visitors at selected national parks marks a further shift: even in wealthy countries, access pricing is becoming a more active policy choice.

None of these models is simple. None is universally right. Each reflects a different balance between access, funding, conservation pressure and long-term stewardship.

For travellers, that matters. The price of entering a park is not only a cost; it is part of the relationship between tourism and the place being visited. In some destinations, visitor fees help protect fragile ecosystems, sustain local employment, support communities living alongside wildlife and keep extraordinary landscapes intact. In others, free entry reflects a public commitment to access and a different way of funding nature's protection.

The point is not that higher fees are always better, or that free access is always fairer. The point is that the economics of access deserve to be understood. Travel can be extractive, or it can be sustaining. At its best, it helps make conservation viable while giving travellers something far deeper than a holiday: time and a more meaningful perspective and connection to the natural world.

This is the kind of travel Mahlatini believes in: transformative journeys that pair refined luxury with deep responsibility. Beautifully planned, yes, but also thoughtfully considered – shaped around what a place needs, what a traveller’s presence can support, and how each journey can contribute to something lasting. Because travel, when crafted with care, can move people deeply while helping protect the places that move them.

Go thoughtfully. Go with purpose. And wherever possible, go to the places where tourism helps protect what makes them extraordinary.

That is what we mean by **Life’s Great Journeys**.

About Mahlatini Luxury Travel

[Mahlatini Luxury Travel](#) is a Certified B Corp luxury travel operator specialising in Africa and beyond. Founded in 2002, we have been sending clients to many of the parks, reserves and landscapes in this index for almost a quarter of a century. B Corp certification recognises companies that meet rigorous standards of social and environmental performance, accountability and transparency; standards we believe are central to meaningful, experiential travel. This study was compiled because we believe that understanding what parks charge, why they charge it, and whether the money works is part of the responsibility that comes with operating in these places. The parks in this study are not backdrops. They are ecosystems that depend on the economic relationships tourism creates. Our clients’ access to nature depends on those ecosystems remaining intact. That is why we compiled this data, and why we published it openly.

Methodology

This study covers 155 national parks and equivalent protected areas across 48 countries and six continents. It is a curated, representative sample, not an exhaustive global inventory. Not every country or ecologically important site is represented. The sample was designed to be proportionate across the globe rather than exhaustive within any single region. Where significant parks outside the study are relevant to the findings, for example, free-entry national parks in England, these are discussed in context within the editorial sections of this report. Sites were selected before data collection began, based on geographic spread, representation across major wildlife and landscape categories, and the availability of verifiable entry fee data. The selection includes national parks and their functional equivalents, national reserves and conservation areas, where a site represents a country’s primary paid-access nature destination for international visitors. Maasai Mara National Reserve and Ngorongoro Conservation Area are examples of non-park designations included on this basis.

For each site, we sought the official published tariff, domestic and international, from the relevant government authority or park management body. Where official sources were available in any language, we used them. Where they were not, we used the most reliable secondary source available. Where we could not independently verify a fee from a current accessible source, it is flagged accordingly and excluded from all headline claims in this study.

Each site was reduced to a single comparable figure: the fee an international adult must pay to lawfully enter, expressed as a standardised per-person daily equivalent in US dollars at peak-season 2025/2026 rates. Where parks charge a per-visit fee rather than a daily rate, we calculated a daily equivalent using the documented typical length of stay for that destination. Where parks charge per vehicle rather than per person, we divided the fee by two, the average occupancy established by the US National Park Service across its national park system, where approximately 218 million annual visitors arrive in 110 million vehicles ([FHWA, Traffic Monitoring in Recreational Areas, 2009](#)). All non-USD fees were converted using Q1 2025 spot rates from XE.com, representing the January to March 2025 average. Tanzania's national park fees are quoted inclusive of 18% VAT, as that is the actual amount a visitor pays at the gate. The study includes only mandatory, consumer-facing park access fees. Accommodation, transport, guiding and optional activity permits are excluded unless they are a compulsory condition of park entry. Gorilla trekking permits, crater descent charges and similar activity fees are excluded throughout; they represent the cost of a specific experience rather than park access.

For the affordability rankings, median monthly income figures were sourced from [ILOSTAT](#). All income figures are expressed in USD at the same Q1 2025 conversion rates used for the fee data.

Excluded Parks

Some parks were excluded from specific rankings where active travel advisories or unreliable salary data made fair comparison impossible. From the least affordable for locals ranking: Kahuzi-Biega and Salonga National Parks in the DRC, Canaima National Park in Venezuela, Bale and Simien Mountains National Parks in Ethiopia, and Parc national de Taï in Côte d'Ivoire. From the most expensive for US travellers ranking: Madidi National Park in Bolivia, due to an active FCDO advisory for the La Paz department through which the park is typically accessed.