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On safari in Tanzania: a 'unique, amazing place'

BY MARY ANN ANDERSON, MCCLATCHY-TRIBUNE NEWS SERVICE

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A trio of zebra marches across the great plains of the Serengeti at Singita Grumeti Reserve. Photograph by: Mary Ann Anderson, McClatchy-Tribune News Service

SELOUS NATIONAL PARK, Tanzania - The hot African sun was unrelenting, the sky broken only by an occasional wisp of cloud. My guide, Mtambo, and I were alone in the Land Rover for an early morning game drive.

As he drove through Selous National Park, gazing at the verdant treetops for an elusive leopard, I glanced at him. Mtambo, of the Ndengereko tribe, was of an indeterminate age. He could have been 40 or 70, but this much is known: He can identify every African critter or bird that crosses his path.

He pointed out an ebony tree, all gray and gnarled and not black as I thought it would be.

"It is black inside," he said in a pure and simple declarative statement before driving on.

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A few minutes later we stopped in a clearing framed by acacias and baobabs. Mtambo shut the engine, and for long minutes we just listened to the sounds of Africa: the softest of winds whirling around as rhythmic as iambic pentameter, the high pitch of a bazillion insects, and birds. A bazillion of those, too.

All around us was an avian orchestra of calls, songs, whistles, and tweets. Above the crazy din, a hornbill trumpeted "wah-wah-ned!" I thought it was a baby's cry.

But no leopard, at least not on that day.

Leopards don't come out on cue, and neither does any other African wildlife. But on safari, there are always surprises and elements of danger, plenty enough to satisfy a sense of adventure and curiosity and develop a healthy respect for the natural world.

Tanzania, in East Africa and surrounded by geographical treasures of the Serengeti, Ngorongoro Crater, the Indian Ocean, Mount Kilimanjaro, Lake Victoria, Lake Tanganyika and Lake Malawi, is a melding together of Tanganyika and Zanzibar and is preparing to celebrate its 50th anniversary of independence from the British on Dec. 9.

Anniversaries, whether of a nation or your own, are perfect times for safari, and Tanzania, a peaceful, visually stunning nation, beckons like a beautiful siren.

A safari in Tanzania should always begin in the Serengeti. Our journey took us to Singita Grumeti Reserve in the heart of the Serengeti, a Maasai word meaning "open plain."

Only three camps are located in the reserve, which means you practically have 340,000 acres to yourself. OK, you have to share it with the Big Five of lions, leopards, elephant, rhinos and buffalo, as well as cheetah, kudu, ostriches and untold numbers of zebras and wildebeest.

Our ranger's name was Arnold Swai, of the Chagga tribe from the Kilimanjaro region. On the first day there, near Singita Sabora Tented Camp, Arnold superior tracking skills found the most beautiful pride of lionesses I've ever seen. They moved through the grass gracefully and fluidly, their golden coats catching the late afternoon sun.

Just moments after driving away from the pride, the Land Rover hit a thorny acacia. Pop! Ssizzzz! went a tire. As Arnold quickly changed it, I watched closely for the lions as to not become their entree for the evening.

Sabora Camp borders a windswept plain where you can see forever. Evening brings all sorts of animals close to camp, and all night buffalo snorted, lions roared, and hyenas barked just steps away. These are merely the sounds of Africa and I am unafraid.

On our drive to Faru Faru, the next camp in the Singita reserve, the hunt was on again for leopard but they remained hidden that day, too. "It's not easy to find them," Arnold said. "Never is."

We hunted for cheetah instead, finding a pair of young males resting in the shade of an acacia, their colours blending in easily with the warm notes of Tanzanian earth. I snapped nearly 100 photos in a few moments' time.

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We were greeted at Faru Faru with big glasses of sweet iced tea and a lunch of fried fish. Who knew you could get touches of Georgia in the heart of the Serengeti?

Kate Murray, who manages Faru Faru, a bright, sunny lodge overlooking a watering hole, explained that tourism is a critical part of Singita and that tourism dollars go toward anti-poaching, maintaining roads, developing schools and sustaining agricultural projects. It is an impressive endeavor indeed.

Just a few minutes into our next game drive, Arnold's radio crackled to life from a call from another ranger. All I picked out was "chui," Swahili for leopard. Finally! The holy grail of all African wildlife. Arnold punched the gas, driving quickly for about a half-hour. Then there Miss Chui was, slumbering in the top of a tree, nearly completely occluded by gnarled limbs and thick leaves.

"We are lucky," whispered Arnold. "It is very rare because they are so elusive."

Finding chui was such a thrill, and we sat quietly, watching her stretch and yawn as she awoke. Arnold was as excited as I was, saying, "Every day is different. I never get tired of it."

Sasakwa, the last of the three Singita lodges we visited, crowns a hilltop overlooking the vastness of the Serengeti. It is stunning.

"Being up here with these views puts the entire Serengeti into perspective and just how far it goes," said assistant lodge manager Christopher Ford. I pondered getting a job there washing dishes, making beds, mowing the lawn - anything to see that view every day.

At breakfast on the morning I would leave Singita and the Serengeti, I looked out over the plains, my heart racing. The great herds of buffalo, impala and zebra hadn't yet awoken, but I know chui is already on the prowl. With a contented sigh, I took one more look at the Serengeti, climbed into the Land Rover with Arnold, and we drove away.

The Serengeti is a tremendous introduction to Tanzania, but when you return or even extend your first trip, there's always the "second safari" to lesser-known areas.

The untouched wilderness of the Selous Game Reserve is one of those places. North Americans have yet to discover the Selous (pronounced "sa-loo"), a UNESCO World Heritage Site and the world's largest game reserve.

Only a handful of camps dot the Selous, including the Selous Safari Camp where we stayed. Like the Serengeti, it is home to the Big Five, untold numbers of impala, a lake filled with crocs and hippos, and those bazillions of birds.

Everywhere sunbirds, bee-eaters, weavers, rollers, and herons flit from tree to tree in the primary and pastel colours of yellow, green, blue, red, lilac, and pink.

Mtambo also showed me "hippo highways" crisscrossing the Selous where those big boys come out of the lake at night, making tracks savanna grasses for a midnight snack. Riki Tiki Tavi made an appearance, with Mtambo showing us a banded mongoose and explaining, "They kill the big snake."

During one drive, we came upon the spectacular sight of lions mating, their low growls metamorphosing into insane earth-shaking guttural roars as they, um, well, you know. As we watched, Mtambo said that a few years ago, 26 people from one village were killed by lions. I hoped the frisky felines in front of us weren't man-eaters.

Our next stop was Jongomero Camp in Ruaha National Park, another perfect spot for a second safari.

The very uncrowded Ruaha is characterized by its diversity of open plains mixed in with riverine forests, savannas and acacia woodlands. Parts of it are so lush and thick that you can practically be standing next to an elephant and not see it. So many giraffe are here that a Dutch couple jokingly called it Giraffic Park.

Jongomero, with only eight tents, is quite special.

"It's the most remote and unique camp in all of East Africa, like a diamond in the rough," said Noelle Herzog, who manages the camp with Andrew "Moli" Molinaro. "It's for people who are on their second or third safari, the ones who've already been to the Serengeti and want something different."

The camp is not fenced and Maasai warriors - the askari - accompany you everywhere, lest samba (Swahili for lion) might be lurking in the tall grasses.

Later that morning I joined three American women named Lois, Joan and Abby for a game drive with Modest, a ranger from the Hehe tribe. Modest finds for us elephant and giraffe and giraffe and more giraffe.

"When you see this on the National Geographic channel, it goes in one ear and out of the other," said Lois, who's from New Jersey. "When you're in the midst of it, it sticks with you."

That evening a spectacular thunderstorm swept across the Ruaha. A family of mongoose tried to find refuge from the downpour in my tent, but when they spotted me they panicked and ran into the deep vegetation. Poor little guys. I wouldn't have minded sharing.

On leaving Jongomero, Modest had to drive around and around the dirt airstrip to run off a herd of impalas so the plane could land. I laughed, as that's what makes Africa so special.

Then there's Ngorongoro, which takes safari to an entirely new level. Ngorongoro, once an active volcano a few million years ago, is the world's largest intact caldera. Nearly 600 metres deep, it is a virtual Garden of Eden, sheltering one of the most dramatic wildlife havens on Earth.

More than 30,000 critters graze its pastures at any given time, not including the birdlife and flocks of pink flamingoes that flood the lakes in an explosion of colour. For the predators like lion, leopard, cheetah, and hyenas, Ngorongoro is like a big open buffet for tamer creatures like buffalo and zebra. There are few hiding places in these high open plains, leaving a natural collision course waiting to happen.

Ngorongoro, which means "deep deep" in Swahili, is home to Maasai pastoralists who predominately inhabit the conservation area, tending to their cattle and goats in a peaceful coexistence with the wildlife.

Only five hotels rim the crater, and Extraordinary Journeys, which set up almost our entire itinerary into Tanzania, selected for our group Ngorongoro Crater Lodge. The luxurious lodge, at about 2,400 metres in elevation, stands sentry over the crater and its terraced slopes. The view is simply unreal.

"Contrary to the belief that the animals are 'trapped' inside the crater, they move frequently in and out, especially the wildebeest and zebra during the Great Migration," said lodge manager Innes Pruissen. "It's a unique, amazing place."

Yes, I think, as is all of Tanzania.

IF YOU GO:

To get to Dar es Salaam, the capital and gateway to safari, take the northern route through Europe or the southern route through South Africa. I chose South African Airways (SAA), connecting through Johannesburg, because SAA flies all the way into Dar with no change of airline. Visas are required, so take good advice and get one ahead of time. Otherwise, you might find long lines in the un-air conditioned, hot, humid airport.

Because of grueling international airline schedules, plan your first and last night in Dar. Extraordinary Journeys selected for us the gorgeous Kilimanjaro Hyatt. Many North Americans, I discovered, choose this hotel for pre- and post-safari. It is inadvisable to rent a car, so Extraordinary Journeys also arranged all ground transportation through Ranger Safaris.

Tiny "bush planes" take you to outer airstrips from Dar and Arusha. Coastal Aviation is the logical choice with the best schedules and reliability. Most camps are in constant radio communication with Coastal's pilots, so you always know exactly how early or late your plane will be.

Contact the Tanzania Tourist Board at www.TanzaniaTouristBoard.com. Contact Singita Game Reserves at www.Singita.com. For comprehensive bookings, including Coastal Air, Ranger Safaris, Kilimanjaro Hyatt, Selous Safari Camp, Jongomero, and Ngorongoro Crater Lodge, contact Extraordinary Journeys at www.ExtraordinaryJourneys.net or call (212) 246-7650. South African Airways flies in partnership with JetBlue. Contact South African Airways at www.FlySAA.com and JetBlue at www.JetBlue.com.

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