

Life & Leisure

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TRAVEL TANZANIA

Passage to Africa

In these remote safari camps, the wildlife has right of way, writes **Roger Balch**.

"I've just had the most amazing elephant experience ever!" exclaims safari-goer Karen de Willimoff after a herd of five elephants strolls through our camp in south-west Tanzania.

She's just discovered in the most startling way that, in the remote camps where we're staying, the wildlife still has right of way.

Less than an hour before breakfast, the family of elephants including a couple of youngsters had been gently swishing through the bushes and rustling the trees between the guests' tents, tugging branches down with their trunks and folding the greenery into their mouths. And then they strolled down the dusty path towards Karen and her husband's tent, pausing just the other side of its zip-up flap for an excellent photo opportunity.

Close encounters like this are a frequent occurrence at Chada Katavi, a luxury tented camp on the edge of a large floodplain in Katavi National Park, one of the biggest and richest wildlife areas in East Africa and far away from the mass tourism of destinations such as the Serengeti.

The dry season (from June to the end of October) is the best time to visit Katavi, when water becomes scarce and the animals are drawn to the remaining pools. There's therefore plenty of game to see at this time of year, although you never quite know what and when.

Shortly after arriving at Katavi's landing strip on a small Cessna, while driving into camp my guide, Onesmo Mollel, suddenly stopped to point out a leopard under a bush just two metres away. It was so close that I couldn't see it at first because I was looking much further afield – up trees, behind bushes, far away in the distance. Eventually Onesmo's frantic gesturing and whispering



The lamp-lit bar at Greystoke Mahale.

This haunting savannah symphony presages a sighting the next day of a seven-strong pride of lions.

made me look down and there it was, right next to the wheel arch. Not a bad introduction to Katavi, given that leopards are one of the hardest animals to spot.

Then it was on to comfortably furnished Chada Katavi camp, where the manager is the animated and entertaining Julien Polet from the French-speaking part of Belgium, who enjoys naming the animals he sees around the camp. There's George the spitting black cobra, Roger the bushbuck, Joseph and Josephine the elephants and Julien's sweetheart, Celestine the civet, who frequents his tent at night.

After a sumptuous dinner in the mess tent, guests are escorted by askaris (watchmen) to their tents, to be awoken at dawn by a gentle "good morning" and deliveries of monkey-proof wooden chests containing coffee and biscuits.

Our slumbers on our last of three nights at Chada Katavi, however, are disturbed by lions roaring in the distance, the howling of hyenas and the trumpeting of an elephant.

This haunting savannah symphony presages a sighting the next day of a seven-strong pride of lions: two full-grown males, three lionesses and two cubs, one of which is practising his own nascent roar – cute with a hint of future menace.

East of Katavi lies the largest national park in Africa, Ruaha. More "jungly" than Katavi, its landscape is studied by otherworldly baobab trees, laced by rivers and riverbeds, and subtly perfumed by intriguing scents that vary with the time of day. It is also the scene of another unexpected wildlife encounter.

We weren't expecting to see a lion while out on an early morning walking safari on the last of our three days in Ruaha.

Our guide, Joel Mfinanga, had told us we'd only be seeing smaller animals up close and crocodiles and hippos from afar. We'd learn about plants and trees, he said. I was especially glad to hear that, because two nights before, as we sipped sundowners around the campfire, Ken John, the manager at Kigelia Ruaha safari camp in Ruaha National Park, had explained how lions develop a taste for human flesh by hunting down injured poachers.

"Poachers don't always get their own way," Ken said, "sometimes the elephant will gore a poacher and he will stagger away, wounded. And the lion, seeing a

weakened animal – even one on two legs – will do what is natural and pursue him."

And now here we are, three safari-goers standing a distance away from the security of our vehicle listening to an armed scout whispering the word every African traveller wants to hear: "simbu", the Swahili word for lion. The one he's spotted – disconcertingly right beside the bush where the men in our group have just relieved themselves – is one of a local croc-killing pride of four lionesses, on their way to the river for a spot of hunting. We don't move for a while.

Following a week of excitement and safaris it is time to ease off the pace a little. The next and last stop is four days at Greystoke Mahale, a camp on the eastern shore of Lake Tanganyika, a magical place accessible only by dhow.

But Greystoke Mahale is much more than a lakeside paradise. For more than five decades the chimpanzees of the Mahale Mountains National Park have been the subjects of a long-running anthropological research study, and the area has been a national park since 1985.

As we step down from the dhow we are welcomed on the lakeside beach by the beaming camp managers, Kate Malone and Cameron Raffan. And a few hours later over sundowners, Kate introduces us to life Mahale-style.

"There's no normal here," she says as a stunning sunset over the mountains of the Democratic Republic of Congo sets Lake Tanganyika aglow, "it's all to do with what the chimps are doing."

The following morning there's been no sighting of chimps by the trackers. So instead we enjoy a lake cruise on the dhow, pulling large fish out of the water one after the other on a simple landline (We eat the fish that evening as sashimi, a Greystoke tradition introduced by Japanese chimpanzee researchers).

There's still no chimp news on our return, so we head out on a walk to learn more about the jungle and maybe spot the elusive red colobus monkey. And, what do we see on the path ahead of us instead but a chimp and her four-month old baby.

The sighting proves to be a wonderful omen for the next day's chimping, when a group of chimps come right down to the camp itself, allowing us plenty of time to watch them up close.

Africa is an addictive destination. Visitors are initially attracted by the chance to see animals in the wild – a thrill that never fades – but find also an elemental and visceral connection to the continent's wide

Safari tips

- Be kind to the small planes that shuttle you between camps and travel light (most camps have a same-day laundry service, which helps).
- Leave your brightly coloured clothes at home. Greens, browns and of course khaki are best, but do pack layers and a beanie as it can be nippy first in the early morning.
- And don't forget a pair of binoculars and plenty of camera memory.
- Help big game survive by supporting an anti-poaching charity such as PAMS Foundation Tanzania (pamsfoundation.org).



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horizons, big skies and sheer abundance of nature at her most inspiring and revelatory. This connection is especially strong in more remote, less-touristed parts of the continent, and these far-flung camps in the most remote parts of Tanzania, for all their much-appreciated creature comforts, are a wonderful way to deepen and strengthen this special bond. **ESB**

The writer travelled with the assistance of Nomad Tanzania (which owns and operates the Chada Katawi, Kigelia Ruaha and Greystoke Mahale camps) and The Classic Safari Company.



Clockwise from left: cruising Lake Tanganyika; hippos crowd at a watering hole at Chada Katawi; Chada Katawi lodgings; glimpses of a chimpanzee and her baby at Greystoke Mahale.



Need to know

Staying there
Nomad Tanzania's Chada Katawi, Kigelia Ruaha and Greystoke Mahale camps can be booked through The Classic Safari Company in Sydney: classicssafaricompany.com.au or 1300 130 218.

Getting there
Emirates, Etihad and Qatar Airways fly from Australia to Dar es Salaam in Tanzania via their Middle-Eastern hubs. South African Airways flies to Dar es Salaam from Perth via Johannesburg.



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