

Atlas

November 2017

From Abu Dhabi to the world

Ski hotel

Is the Four Seasons Megève this winter's coolest opening?

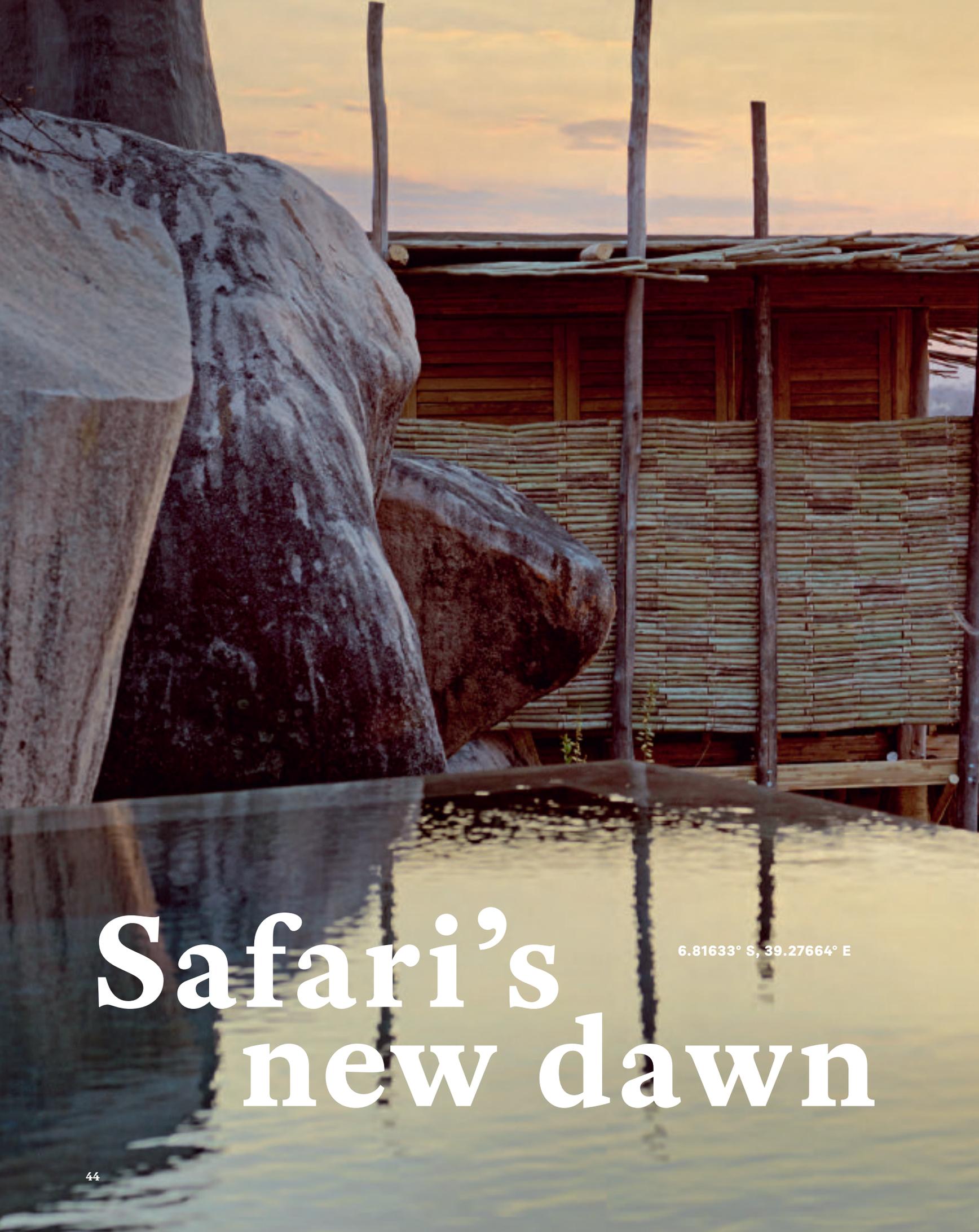
Sky high

Meet the people bringing high-rise luxury to Bangkok

6.81633° S, 39.27664° E

Wildest dreams

Mixing lions with luxury, Tanzania is safari's new alpha destination



Safari's new dawn

6.81633° S, 39.27664° E



Move over Kenya. Tanzania is fast establishing itself as the destination of choice for a modern wildlife adventure. The reason, says *Sarah Gilbert*, is a combination of eco-luxe lodges and astonishing landscapes

Photography by Vincent Fournier



The radio crackled...

...there was an excited stream of Swahili and we set off in a swirl of dust. I'd only caught one word – pangolin. This normally nocturnal scaly mammal is the world's most hunted creature and notoriously difficult to spot. It tops every safari guide's bucket list, and there it was, rootling around in search of termites. Almost immediately, the crackle of foliage under our feet alerted it to our presence and the creature curled up into an armoured ball, but for the briefest of moments, we'd enjoyed the privilege of observing this rare creature in its natural environment, entirely oblivious to its audience.

It's fair to say that there's nothing quite like an African safari. But while Kenya is almost certainly the continent's most celebrated destination for such an expedition, this trip was fast revealing to me that its southern neighbour, Tanzania, could actually be even better. Part of the reason is that it's so diverse. "The fact that you can be surrounded by thousands of wildebeest on the Serengeti plains one day, be boating down the Rufiji River at sunset in Selous the next, then go on to track our chimpanzee cousins in Mahale is incredibly special," says Mark Houldsworth of Nomad Tanzania, a safari company that raises funds for a variety of partner projects around the country. Add to that the chance to scale snow-tipped Mount Kilimanjaro, explore exotic Zanzibar's atmospheric Stone Town, or just lounge on sugar-white sand beaches lapped by the Indian Ocean, and you have some serious all-round appeal.

When it comes to animal spotting, however, Ruaha National Park is hard to beat. Covering 20,226km² of central Tanzania, it's a wild and beautiful landscape of dramatic sand rivers, granite *kopjes* (outcrops) and broad open plains. Here you'll find a large elephant population, enormous herds of >



Here A guided tour
of Ruaha National Park
Left It's a three-hour
flight to Ruaha from
Dar Es Salaam



6.81633° S, 39.27664° E
TANZANIA SAFARI

Ruaha National Park
is home to a sizeable
elephant population

“You can be surrounded by wildebeest on the Serengeti one day, boat down the Rufiji River the next, then track chimpanzees in Mahale. Tanzania’s incredibly special”







The lion sleeps safely tonight

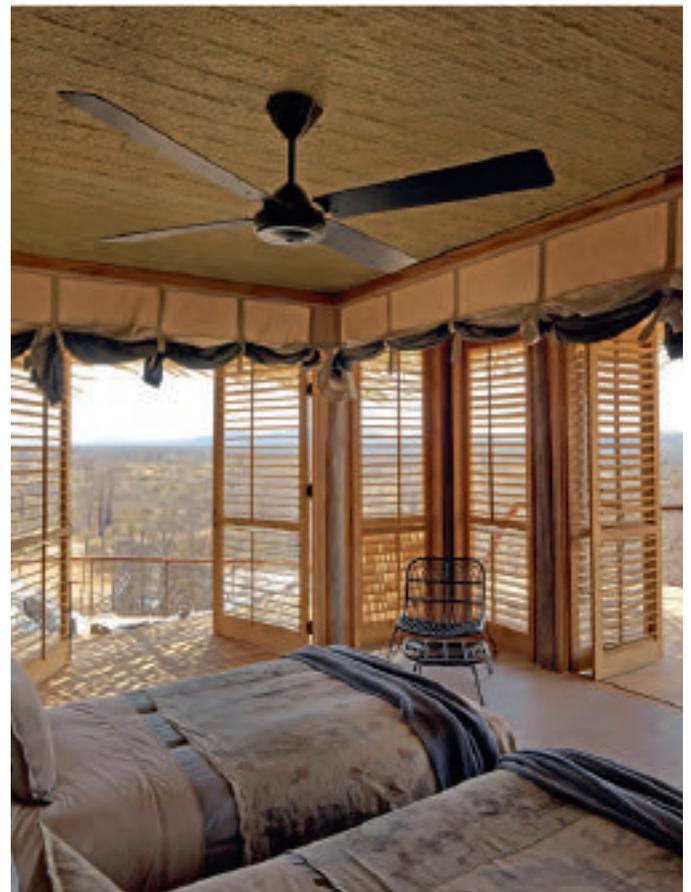
How conservation efforts are protecting Ruaha's No 1 predator

Ruaha National Park is stunningly beautiful, but as home to 10 per cent of the world's lion population, it's also red in tooth and claw. Yet even its apex predator has something to fear. Where bush meets grazing land, lions kill livestock and are then killed in retaliation by local tribesmen. As a result the Park has the highest documented levels of lion killing in East Africa. That's why Oxford academic Dr Amy Dickman set up the Ruaha Carnivore Project in 2009. Gaining the support of the Maasai and Barabaig communities was key to the project's success, as were measures such as predator-proof enclosures, guard dogs and turning hunters into Lion Defenders. Supported by private donors and international organisations, including Asilia and Tusk Trust, the RCP team have reduced livestock depredation by 60 per cent and lion killing by 80 per cent. ruahacarnivoreproject.com

buffalo and rare antelope. It's also where 10 per cent of the world's lion population live – something I'm reminded of in an electrifying encounter when we pull up what seems perilously close to several powerful females lounging in the shade with their playful cubs. A lioness fixes me with her amber eyes and in that moment my heart skips a beat. I suddenly remember I'm not in a zoo; there are no cages here. But I am clearly of no interest. She rolls on to her back, revealing fearsome fangs in a gaping yawn.

Until very recently, Ruaha remained under the tourist radar but visitors are arriving in growing numbers, thanks in no small part to camps such as safari firm Asilia's Jabali Ridge. Cocooned by giant boulders rendered smooth by the elements and overlooking a forest of venerable baobabs, Ruaha's newest property provides guests with a safari experience that manages to be both luxurious and respectful of the environment. Wooden structures take their cue from the surroundings, vast beds are clad in hand-dyed linens and the shuttered walls let the outside in. Crucially, the camp also takes an active role in conservation. It's a key part of Asilia's philosophy, as MD Jeroen Harderwijk explains: "Our new camps in Ruaha and Selous [a neighbouring game reserve where they opened Roho Ya Selous in August] will not only allow us to introduce guests to these magnificent wilderness areas but also help conserve these important ecosystems and improve the livelihoods of local people."

East Africa is where safaris – "journey" in Swahili – began in the 1830s, and it's on these plains that the legend of the great white hunters and African explorers took hold, creating a romantic if brutal image of the continent. Part of the appeal for these early visitors was the opportunity





Clockwise from above Inside Jabali Ridge's bar and lounge; a path leads to the rooms, which are designed to let the outside in; getting up close with the locals

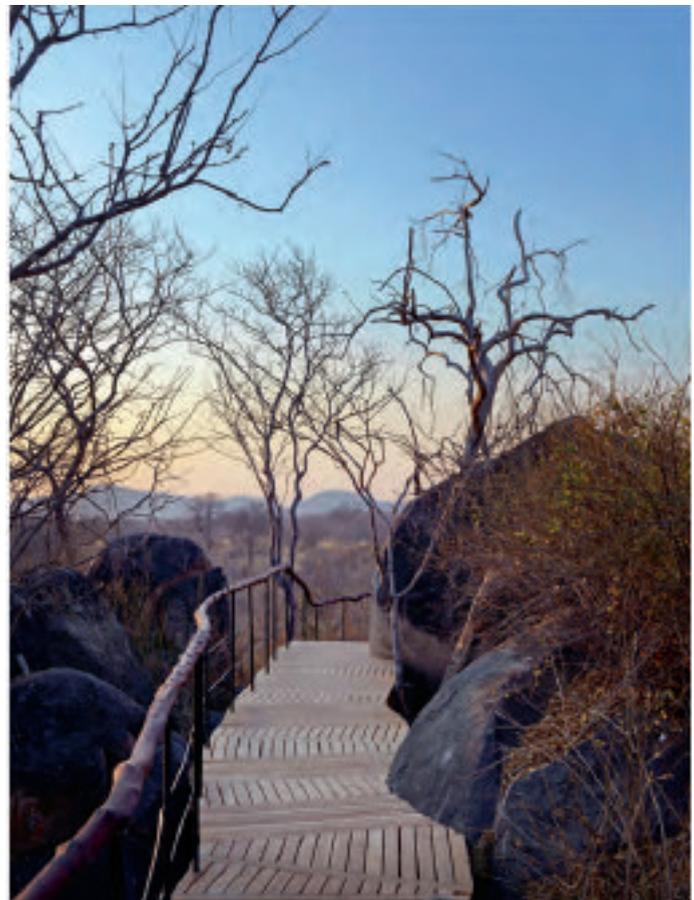
to be pampered by huge contingents of locals and to track and hunt game. Of course, safaris have evolved greatly since colonial times as the need to protect wildlife and respect local communities has been recognised. Companies such as Asilia are leading the way, helping to establish a new template – one with a focus on responsible tourism – that is placing Tanzania at the forefront of this growing market. Right now, the numbers are relatively small – Tanzania accounted for only around 2.5 per cent of the 40 million international visitors sub-Saharan Africa welcomed last year, but as the demand for ecotourism grows (it already accounts for a fifth of total international travel), there's no doubt that more will arrive to enjoy its unique natural assets.

The Serengeti's endless sun-scorched savannah is arguably home to the highest density of big game anywhere on the planet, where the annual cycle of the Great Migration sees wildebeest flocking to cross the Mara River in search of fresh grasslands, with predators in hot pursuit. While just to the south, the Ngorongoro Crater, the world's largest unbroken

caldera, teems with wildlife. The Big Five – lion, leopard, Cape buffalo, elephant and black rhino – and countless other creatures roam across its 300km², attracting equally large numbers of visitors.

In 2016, Asilia opened The Highlands, set over 2,500m above sea level on the edge of a forest that envelops the slopes of the Olmoti Volcano in the Ngorongoro Conservation Area. Guests there stay in futuristic-looking geodesic domes, which are partially transparent so you can take in the views – including the star-studded night sky – from the comfort of your bed.

It's not the only way that staying here puts you right in the lap of Mother Nature. Early one morning I drove across the boundless plains, dotted with cows, sheep, goats and Maasai people, adorned in intricate beaded jewellery, their red robes vivid against the straw-coloured grass, to the Empakaai crater, ringed with steep, forested walls that concealed a turquoise lake fringed with brilliant-pink flamingos. As I hiked down the narrow path, past tangles of bushes and ancient trees festooned with vines and creepers, the only sounds were birdsong and the tinkle of cowbells. Suddenly, my guide pointed out a fresh footprint of a leopard that had been prowling along the same path that very morning. Later, I watched ostrich sprinting in strict formation across the plain and a hundred-strong troop of baboons darting past, >



Three more ethical safaris

Duba Plains Camp, Botswana

To support its projects in habitats throughout Kenya and Botswana, Great Plains Conservation runs low-impact tourism trips in beautifully designed lodges. Duba Plains Camp, which opened this year in the watery wilderness of Botswana's Okavango Delta, is the latest and includes the prospect of seeing swimming lions.

Endangered Species Flying Safari, Kenya

Fly across Kenya on a Scenic Air Safaris plane, stopping off at iconic lodges and discovering the country's efforts to preserve endangered species. Key conservationists will be on hand, including Saba Douglas-Hamilton of Save the Elephants. And it's no ordinary plane, with fully rotating seats and panoramic windows.

Bisate Lodge, Rwanda

Wilderness Safaris offers access to 50 luxury camps across eight countries in Africa, and all are respectful of the local environment. Opened in 2017 tucked in to a volcanic crater, Rwanda's Bisate Lodge makes a perfect base for tracking endangered mountain gorillas, as well as being a pioneering conservation project.

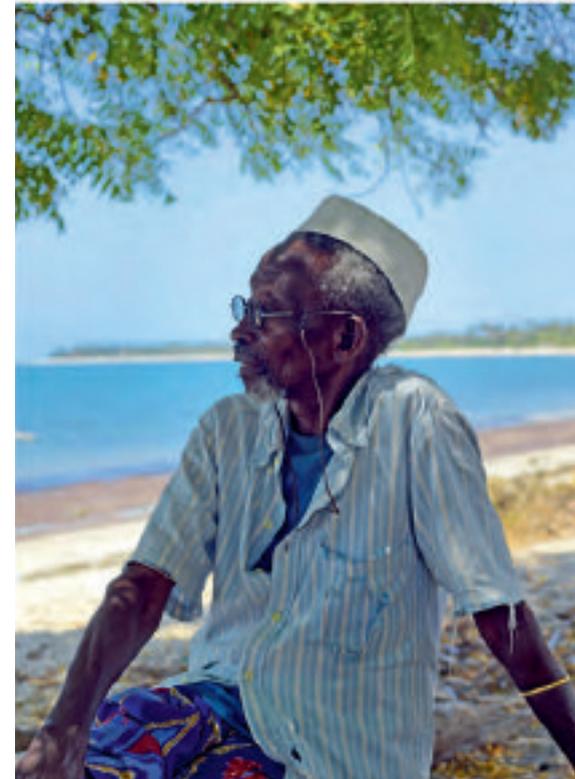


their sentries stopping to check us out, while giraffes interrupt their leaf chewing for a moment to stare at us curiously.

Tanzania is, of course, vast. At nearly a million square kilometres, it is almost twice the size of neighbouring Kenya, which means a visit here requires a good deal of travelling once you've landed in Dar Es Salaam. The northern circuit, which is where you'll find Tanzania's two famed safari hotspots, the Serengeti and Ngorongoro, are some 800km away, a three-hour internal flight. For some safari-goers this might seem too far, but don't be put off. There are other options in Tanzania. To reach Selous takes an hour, with a further 30 minutes to Ruaha, and while these southern parks are far less visited, their reputations are growing quickly – not least because they are places where you can escape the 4X4 herds.

“There's always the desire to get off the beaten track, and I think in future, Tanzania will see more visitors who are keen to get away from the bigger parks and really get under the skin of the place,” says Nomad's Mark Houldsworth.

Katavi is one such national park, a pristine wilderness that brims with life. With only a handful of small, permanent camps spread over its 4,500km² and a few hundred visitors a year compared to the hundreds of thousands that flock to the Serengeti and Ngorongoro, it's retained its frontier feel. Nomad's Chada Katavi has just six classic safari tents, and while I didn't see another vehicle it wasn't hard to spot wildlife. A dazzle of zebras scattered as I touched down on the dirt runway, and beyond the mess tent's wooden deck, built around towering tamarind and sausage trees, there was a never-ending parade of animals. At night, I was immersed in the rustle and hum of the bush, thrilled to think that there was just a thin wall of canvas separating me from the hyenas that whooped >



From top Mawimbi Villa offers cracking views out to the Indian Ocean; the oldest man in the village



From left Maziwe Island Reserve; a bag seller on Ushongo beach

long into the night and the lions whose sonorous call echoed through the darkness, while vervet monkeys squabbled and screeched and scampered across my roof at dawn.

Tanzania offers far more than the Big Five. There are very few places in the world where you can still spot wild chimpanzees, but in the Mahale Mountains in the country's wild west, you can get up close to these fascinating primates in their natural habitat from Nomad's Greystoke Mahale. Within the densely forested slopes, a 60-strong chimp community has been semi-habituated to human visitors by more than 50 years of continuous study by Japanese researchers. Chimps and humans differ by just a few per cent of their DNA and their expressions and mannerisms appear extraordinarily familiar. Like the characters in a long-running soap opera, they have distinct personalities and their daily lives are equally engrossing. Machiavellian plots and power struggles are all part of their routine and you can get to watch it live, at least for an hour a day.

Such visits are not the only other distraction on a Tanzanian trip. The country boasts 800km of stunning coastline – which means a safari holiday can easily be combined with some beach time. Mawimbi Villa is located on Ushongo Beach, 16km south of Pangani just up the coast from Dar and it's the perfect example of the kind of high-end stays that are slowly arriving here. A pebble's throw from the dazzling blues of the Indian Ocean, on sand so powder-fine it squeaks, the six-bedroom exclusive-use villa is the epitome of barefoot luxury. After more than a week in the bush, it was

the perfect setting for a post-safari wind down, my final days spent in blissful idleness, flitting from day bed to lounge, pool to ocean. Just snorkelling off Maziwe Island – a pocket-sized island that comes and goes with the tide – I floated above an array of coral: flat-topped table, clusters of mushroom, forests of staghorn. Electric blue starfish lay on the seabed, while shoals of iridescent fish flitted around me.

The beaming Grayson and his team ensured I was ridiculously well looked after too – from greeting me with spine-tingling *a cappella* to arranging feet-in-the-sand BBQs and a sunset sailing trip on a wooden dhow. Not to mention introducing me to life in a nearby village. The philosophy of the team behind Mawimbi, much like that of the various safari camps I visited, is that local communities need to be respected and supported, not simply used for labour or ignored. It's an outlook that makes this place very special. Because a journey around Tanzania isn't just about wildlife, it's also about the people you encounter along the way. ■

The Ultimate Travel Company (theultimatetravelcompany.co.uk) offers three nights each at Asilia's Jabali Ridge and Roho ya Selous from £4,375 p/p; and three nights at Mawimbi Villa for six people from £6,153p/p. Both are full board and include internal flights

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