

# AFRICAN ADVENTURE

Calling all thrill-seekers (who also crave fine wines, gourmet dining, spa treatments and more).

By William Kissel



sit in awe as the open-air vehicle makes its way over an expansive field of oat grass in the northern Serengeti. Suddenly, we're nose-to-nose with a herd of 400-pound wildebeests all with the same features: a buffalo's face, a camel's hump and a horse's back-

side. Tens of millions of migrating animals, including the homely, docile wildebeest, call this northernmost region of Tanzania home. If you're lucky enough to visit East Africa



during the off-season (mid-December through March), when the animals are calving and before the great migration gets underway in late July, you'll find yourself viewing this magical scene almost entirely alone.

The endless stream of Land Cruisers that jockey for the best viewing positions during Africa's peak months in the fall are nowhere to be found on this warm January day: it's a peaceful moment in nature everyone yearns to experience but few actually do.

We drive slowly through a herd of feasting elephants, one of which is nursing a day old calf. We watch three hyenas unsuccessfully stalk a rare black rhino and her newborn offspring, a trio of cheetahs

snake through the tall grasslands, and a lone lion nap under a thorny acacia bush. This is the Africa of your imagination. The panorama of wildlife has drawn visitors since long before the days when Hemingway came to hunt. But now, with the help of two of Africa's most celebrated tour companies — Nomad Tanzania and Asilia, working in collaboration with Canadian custom tour operator Trufflepig — it's time to revisit Africa's original safari destination.

East Africa's safari outfitters have responded to competition for tourism dollars by building plush, deluxe camps and upgrading amenities to appeal to adventure-seekers who also want access to fine wines, spa treatments, pool time and other pamperings.

Naturally, getting to these remote camps is a big

**Below: The author's tastefully appointed tent at the Serengeti Safari Camp**



part of the adventure. A commercial flight via South African Airways to Johannesburg is just the first leg in a 36-hour journey. From there we board a second flight to Tanzania, where one of Tanganyika Flying Company's 12-seat planes awaits to ferry us to Arusha, the gateway town to Serengeti safari. Here we board another small plane for a flyover of Tanzania's famed Ngorongoro Crater (the largest intact volcano caldera in the world) to Ndotu, a rock-filled airstrip, where the first of many Land Cruisers awaits our arrival. We cross the snake-like Mara river past a pool of hippos and a few crocodiles, and continue on to Ubuntu, one of three mobile camps designed to follow the migrating animals. Rested and well fed, we travel another three hours to our first camp at Olakira.

These mobile setups are actually lavish tent cities that require two full days and three trucks to relocate,

which is operated by Asilia and listed as one of the top five new luxury lodgings in Africa. It's located in a remote valley five miles from the border of Kenya, home to the Kuria tribe. A mobile camp that found its permanent home just



four years ago, Sayari is something of an anomaly among African camps. Its 15 tented structures are shaped like the large tabletop mountain called Turner's Hill (after Miles Turner, the first warden of the Serengeti), visible in the distance. The tents are outfitted Asian-style with teak floors, *shoji* screen walls and massive marble tubs to wash away the residue from the raw, dusty plains. It's a bit disconcert-

ing to be in one of these tubs when a leopard passes by, but the small creature comforts far outweigh the predatory creature *discomforts*. (Sayari, like most camps, provides each guest with his own private *askari*, or night watchman, to guard against wild animal attacks.)

Unlike Sayari's Zen Buddhist vibe, few sites scream Africa more than Lamai Serengeti, a one-year-old permanent camp developed by Nomad Tanzania on the rocky Kogakuria Kopje peaks, just a few miles from where the great migration across the Mara river begins. Honored with the 2013 Best New Property in Africa award, it boasts 12 sumptuously appointed thatched roof structures, each with its own wraparound deck. Resident game lingers just outside at sun up, and during the day the playful vervet monkeys can be spotted feasting on the sour plums that dangle from the native Ole Lamai trees, from which the camp gets its name.

In case you haven't guessed, a safari is not the time to catch up on your sleep. Instead, you'll wake before sunrise for the first of two game drives of the day. Those initial hours on safari are the most adrenaline-filled, especially as you catch your first glimpse of the big five — lion, rhino, leopard, buffalo and elephant — everyone comes to see. Once you've spotted them, usually within hours, your mind will open to Africa's other amazing flora and fauna.

Lavish lunches and dinners after each drive offer the perfect opportunity to reflect in solitude or share stories with fellow travelers. And at day's end, a surprise sundowner cocktail — a nightly African tradition — always awaits where and when you least expect it.

Left: Women of the Kuria tribe in full ceremonial regalia

Above right: One of the spectacular bathtubs at Sayari camp



and each canvas structure is enormous by anyone's standards. At both Olakira and Serengeti Safari Camp, tents are self-contained suites with oversized beds, sitting areas with lovely writing desks, and private bathrooms with a chemical toilet and stall shower in lieu of actual plumbing. Even in the remotest part of the world, these private sanctuaries are filled with little amenities to make outdoor living a four-star experience: gas- or battery-powered lighting, daily laundry service, and hot showers provided by stewards who boil water and fill your cistern on demand.

Among Tanzania's few permanent camps is Sayari,