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Inside Great Historic Days Out Guide

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The Stones at 50

By Tony Blair, Brian Wilson

Safari for all budgets

Where to get more buffalo for your bucks

Tanzania's Selous reserve is the biggest in Africa.

Lisa Grainger reviews camps to suit all budgets

“Dig” is a word frequently

experience; most visitors land at one of the reserve's many stony bush airstrips and stay at least a week. There's much to fill their time: walking with armed rangers trying to spot elephant, buffalo, giraffe and rhino (the last few of which, sadly, are rarely seen); reclining by swimming pools watching hippo-infested rivers flow by; boating on lakes in which creatures drink and bathe; and driving into miombo woodlands, grasslands, hills and lake shores to spot game.

The benefits of this being a game reserve, rather than a national park, are numerous. Here, it's not essential to stick



Sand Rivers Selous.
Below left: the camp

Bsafari guest wants to tick off the Big Five, to get up close to the biggest land mammal (the elephant), to hear the biggest African cat (the lion), to spot the biggest bird (the ostrich). The big thing that very few visitors get to see, though, is Selous: the biggest game reserve on the continent.

In spite of it being 5,000 sq miles larger than Switzerland (21,081 sq miles, with a large chunk set aside for photographic tourism), the Selous Game Reserve in southern Tanzania has only nine camps and very few visitors. Looking out from a twin-prop Cessna over this vast wilderness, established as a game reserve in 1922 and named after the British hunter Frederick Courteney Selous, there's no trace of mankind: no roads, houses or fences nor electricity poles. It's mile upon mile of trees, occasionally broken by patches of golden grass and rust-coloured soil, and two enormous rivers that slice up the territory: the Rufiji and the Ruaha.

It is this remoteness that makes it such a favourite with safari-goers who have ticked off the Big Five and want a proper bush

can veer off-road and track it, by car or foot. Some camp rangers have permission to take guests fly-camping overnight, with only a fire and kerosene lamps for light. And it's extremely sparsely populated; around the lakes, where game congregates, you might see another vehicle, but in the southwest, near Sand Rivers, you might only see your own guide.

Best of all in straightened economic times, not all camps in the Selous are expensive; the three I visited cost from \$335pp per night, all-inclusive. While not cheap, it is good value by safari standards, and when you're in Africa surrounded by game, with chilled sauvignon blanc on tap, savouring delicious meals and sleeping in white linen sheets, it seems incredible that it's available at all. But there is a huge range of prices and a diversity in what the different camps offer. For instance, the most expensive

camp I visited was almost double the nightly rate of the budget option. So what's the difference in terms of service and, more importantly, game?

Luxury Sand Rivers Selous

The oldest camp in the reserve, Sand Rivers was built by the renowned former hunter

Richard Bonham in 1984, as a base for his famous portered walks. Now it's the most sophisticated of the Selous camps, with five big rooms, two suites and a remote honeymoon house, all set along a wide section of the Rufiji in which hippo grunt noisily at night. There is a stone and makuti-thatched living space, two pools and cushioned loungers set beneath mahogany trees. Not that guests want to leave their enormous river-view rooms, with their squishy sofas, wide verandas, mosquito-net-covered king-sized beds, bathrooms with rain showers — and, in suites, plunge pools and private living spaces.

The camp has the advantage of both bush and river to spot game from, as well as the dramatic Stiegler's Gorge to explore. But because it's the closest camp to the hunting concessions in the south, game is more skittish than at the other camps. Still, the landscape is wonderfully varied to explore by vehicle or on foot, or to fly-camp overnight in spacious net tents, with bush showers and pit toilets, and three-course dinners served under the stars. Hospitality is gracious; the food varied, fresh and delicious (with such dishes as sweet pea fritters, prawn and coconut curries, and tomato, basil and feta salad), although camp dinner tables are communal. For groups who wish to safari in privacy, the luxurious Kiba Point house is just one mile down the river.

Details nomad-tanzania.com, from \$620pp, all-inclusive, excluding park fees.

Mid-range Selous Impala Camp

Set on raised decks and built entirely of wood and thatch, this relaxed 16-bed camp is Italian owned. It isn't as swanky as Sand Rivers — but neither is it as expensive. It is set amid trees between two lakes, Mzimba and Siwandu, the shores of which are teeming with game, from herds of blue wildebeest, zebra and Masai giraffe, as well as the occasional lion, leopard and elephant (the latter jittery thanks to a marked increase in poaching). The bird life around the lakes is particularly dazzling, from glossy-feathered green wood hoopoes to tiny malachite kingfishers, easily spotted from boats at dawn or dusk (in September we saw hundreds of bee-eaters nesting in riverbanks: an extraordinary sight, with their red and green feathers flickering in the light).

Big canvas tents, erected a comfortable distance apart on wooden platforms beside a tributary, are extremely comfortable, with netted double beds, wooden furnishings and brass lamps, and a proper bathroom at the back.

What really marks Impala out is the keen and friendly staff, led by their manager Barbara Ripamonti, who immerse

“It's not essential to stick to the roads here, so if an animal is spotted the ranger can veer off-road to track it”

Need to know

Lisa Grainger was a guest of Expert Africa (020-8232 9777, expertafrica.com), which can offer three nights at Lake Manze, two nights at Impala and five nights on Zanzibar at Pongwe Beach Resort from £2,808pp, including international BA flights, internal road and air transfers, full board and activities at Manze and Impala, half-board at Pongwe, and park fees. Or stay five nights at Sand Rivers and five at Sultan Palace Hotel for £4,249pp, including flights, transfers, all meals and safari activities, plus most drinks at Sand Rivers.

guests in bush life; there's a telescope and a resident stargazer to teach about the skies; rooms come with a basic guide to Swahili and wildlife, a map and safari notebook; so you learn while you relax in the raised living area, beside the pool or at private dining tables under the stars.

The Italian-trained chef produces simple but delicious food, from homemade muesli and croissants, fresh passion fruit juice and hot espresso for breakfast, to fresh fish, exotic salads and reasonably priced wine (\$25 a bottle).

Details adventurecampstz.com/selousimpalacamp.htm, from \$370pp, excluding drinks and park fees.

Budget Lake Manze

This camp, set in a pretty forest of doum palms on the lake, doesn't exude glamour; each of the 12 rooms is a medium-sized Meru-style tent, with outdoor shower and toilet (for the star-lover, rather than the nervous or bug-averse). But the big surprise is that although it is half the price of the luxury camp, the game is better and prolific. Elephant swim near by, hippo crash about, and lion occasionally prowl around (hence the ban on children under six, and restrictions on under-12s).

The camp, lit at night by kerosene lamps, is romantic, if basic; in the tents, solar panels power the eco-lamps and fans, and heat water in the dribbling showers; there are no such comforts as shampoo or plugs. The food, eaten at large, shared tables within the sand-floored, palm-thatched living area (where electronics can be charged), is homely rather than tasty, featuring dishes such as stews, quiches and basic salads, and drinks have to be paid for.

But the activities are as varied as anywhere else: boat trips and fishing excursions on the lakes, walking and drives in game-rich areas, all with keen, if not highly experienced, guides in shared vehicles (or private ones, for an extra \$80pp a day). It is a great camp for those on a budget.

Details adventurecampstz.com/lakemanze.htm. From \$335pp per night, excluding drinks and park fees.

