

travel

# Into **AFRICA**

WILD AND EXOTIC TANZANIA OFFERS SOME OF THE MOST DIVERSE SAFARI EXPERIENCES ANYWHERE ON THE PLANET

THE VIEW AS OUR plane descends into Dar es Salaam, after 14 hours and two flights from Hong Kong, is enough to rid us of any travel weariness and spring us back to life. White coral sands, the aquamarine water of the Indian Ocean and miles of palm trees open up below us as the pilot banks into land.

Dar es Salaam is our starting point for why most visitors come to Tanzania, to experience the National Park safaris. After the formalities of immigration - checking of yellow fever vaccination forms, which are compulsory for Tanzania - we're surprised not to be met by a scrum of taxi drivers and touts that so often greet visitors to more modern airports. Instead, we amble across to the domestic terminal for the next stage of our journey - the northern town of Arusha, situated at the base of Mts Kilimanjaro and Meru.

With regular, relatively cheap and easily pre-arranged domestic flights, we don't have to wait long and are soon to experience the breathtaking beauty of an African sunset on the one-hour flight. On arrival, the short transfer by jeep from the airstrip to lodge gives us an unforgettable introduction to the unique fresh-air, sounds and smells of Africa.

Arusha is a green and lush place - enjoying a cool temperate climate throughout the year - and is the starting point for most safaris on the northern safari circuit. These include the National Parks of Tarangire, Lake Manyara, Serengeti and the Ngorongoro Conservation Area.

We've already arranged an itinerary and route for our safari, which conveniently includes airport transfers, accommodation for the ten-night trip, four-wheel drive vehicle with guide/driver and park permits. When booking a safari, many tour operators give advice on choosing your route and you can select from a variety of lodges along the way. It's worth taking a day to recover from the long flight before setting off, and Kingongoni Lodge near Arusha is the perfect place to do just that.

Sitting on a hilltop with lush gardens, the lodge has 18 cottages tucked between the trees and has a rustic laidback charm. Sitting outside your bungalow as the sun sets, with spectacular views of Mt Kilimanjaro and Mt Meru, there can't be many better places in the world to enjoy an ice-cold beer and absorb your new surroundings.

The bungalows are built in traditional African style, each with unique detail and, as with many lodges on the northern safari circuit, the food compares favorably with top restaurants anywhere. Even in remote settings, you don't have to forego comforts whilst still being able to experience an authentic safari.

Vehicle safaris are the most common in Tanzania and in many of the northern parks are the only option unless you intend to get up-close-and-personal with the wildlife. You must be in a closed vehicle for most parks but vehicles have roofs that open, allowing you to stand and get a better view.

Most reputable operators provide trained English-

speaking guides as drivers for your safari and the journey becomes an education, not only about the wildlife and ecosystem, but also the culture, of which Tanzanians are fiercely and rightly proud.

Although one of the poorest countries in the world, and with around 120 different tribal groups, most people you'll meet are warm, humorous, laid back and dignified – as is our driver and guide, which is just as well, as we'll be spending the next ten days together.

Tempting though it is to stay by the pool at the lodge, our guide arrives early to tell us we have much to see.

## TARANGIRE

Distances to the National Parks are long but the journeys are as rewarding as arriving. Tourist infrastructure is good in Tanzania and your driver will have planned breaks along the journey - invariably at souvenir shops with toilet facilities.

The journey from Arusha to Tarangire National Park is just a few hours. What seems like an endless road leaves the green fields of Arusha and cuts directly through arid plains. Soon the horizon appears to be hundreds of miles away in every direction and, although the sun beats down as we bounce down the gravel road, there is a gentle breeze running through the Land Rover.

After passing numerous remote rural tribes, Muslim and Christian primary schools and army training camps – where you shouldn't take photographs – we arrive at the gates to the National Park. Abruptly, the terrain changes, this time to woodland, with vast numbers of baobab trees among the permanent waters of the Tarangire River.

Tarangire is part of an extended ecosystem where animals roam freely, and almost immediately after entering the park; our driver has stopped our vehicle just feet away from a pride of lions. Tarangire has one of the highest concentrations of wildlife of any of the country's parks, especially between August and November, and over the next few hours we'll encounter lions, elephants, zebras, wildebeests, giraffes, elands, gazelles and impalas, to name but a few.

Less than a mile after seeing the pride of lions we stop for lunch and are surprised to find we're having this outside the vehicle. Our guide reassuringly tells us that, for no particular reason, the lions won't come to where we are. And luckily he's right.

There's something very surreal about being in such a wondrous environment after what seems only hours since sitting in a bar in Central. And with so much to see, time passes quickly before we depart for the next stage of our journey, Lake Manyara.

## LAKE MANYARA

The road from Tarangire to Lake Manyara is tarmac and we cover ground quickly through arid plains dotted with acacia trees. Our guide regularly stops the vehicle to impart his impressive knowledge of the region's fauna – about which we don't yet realise he'll be testing us on the following day (430 species and subspecies apparently) - but it's been a long day and we're now looking forward to arriving at the next lodge. In yet another dramatic change in our surroundings, we approach the escarpment of the Rift Valley and Lake Manyara, with tall green trees set amongst savanna, marshes and acacia woodland.

Lake Manyara National Park is more than 1,000m above sea





level and the road climbs through a series of gentle curves to a high central plateau on the edge of the Great Rift Valley. Just a few miles from the main road is Kirurumu Tented Lodge, our base for the next couple of nights.

The understated camp consists of 22 tented bungalows, hidden away in the vegetation, and has a bar and dining room with beautiful views across the Rift Valley and Lake Manyara. It's also conveniently situated just a few miles away from the National Park entrance so we won't have to travel far for the next day's game drives.

The National Park has much to offer and we observe more elephants – a herd of thirty or so strolling straight past our jeep – hippos, zebras and giraffes at close range alongside tens of thousands of flamingos on the lake.

## SERENGETI

Another 6am start and we set off on a five-hour journey that will take us to Nduku Safari Lodge, just outside the southeastern Serengeti. It is here that we get our first real sense of isolation - the lodge is situated well away from the busy tourist circuit but wildlife photographers and biologists have been coming to Nduku for decades.

The lodge is set under a canopy of giant acacia trees and is a great place from which to explore a range of habitats in the area. We arrive just before lunch and settle into our comfortable stone cottage. There are 34 in all, each with its own private veranda to relax and watch wildlife passing through the area.

To give the place an added edge, there are no fences around the lodge and wild animals wander through camp at all hours of the day and night. Guests are therefore advised not to leave their

# travel

cottage after returning from dinner. During the evening, armed watchmen are on duty and on hand to escort guests back to their rooms from the bar and restaurant (the only one within at least a 30 mile radius). Electricity is turned off at 11.30pm and it's then that we experience the complete darkness of night in Africa and stay awake listening to the savage and feral sound of lions, howling hyenas and barking zebra.

From here we travel the short distance to the southern gateway of the Serengeti National Park. In Maasai language, Serengeti means 'land of endless space'. The 14,763 sq km treeless plain is best known for the annual migration of wildebeests but is also well known for its predators – lions, cheetahs, leopards and hyenas. It's around 50 miles from our lodge to Seronera, the main area for observing wildlife on the Serengeti, and our driver puts his foot to the floor to cover the endless space in just over an hour, not bad going on a pot-holed dirt track. We're lucky enough to encounter lions, leopards and cheetahs - all of which have just made kills – and, for the first time on our visit, crocodiles.

## NGORONGORO CRATER

Making our way back to Arusha we still have time to visit one of Africa's best-known wildlife areas, the Ngorongoro Conservation Area. The area is a Unesco World Heritage Site and to the east of the area are a number of volcanoes and collapsed volcano craters (calderas).

The Ngorongoro crater is around 12 miles wide and Maasai tribe people, lions, elephants, buffaloes, black rhino, hippos, gazelles, wildebeests, warthogs, ostriches and zebras, share the crater floor. Because of the crater's popularity (almost half a million visitors each year), restrictions have been put on how many vehicles can

crowd around each animal and the number of vehicles entering the crater. Vehicles are now only permitted to stay for six hours. We leave at first light and are amongst the first vehicles to slowly creep down the steep muddy winding track into the depths of the crater. Arriving early is advisable as there are relatively few vehicles before 9am. The Ngorongoro crater is a spectacular setting and watching the sunrise over the towering crater walls provides one of our most enduring memories of Africa.

The crater and surrounding highlands could quite easily warrant another trip on their own merit - trekking tours can be arranged in the highlands and can last for more than two weeks – but with such an expanse to cover in our short time we must head

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back to Arusha.

The five-hour journey back is comfortable; the circuit from Arusha to Ngorongoro is a well-trodden path and tourist infrastructure efficient. The cool mountain air of Arusha and another night at the lodge are a welcome relief after so many days on the road.

We arrive at the small airstrip in Arusha and say goodbye to our companion and friend over the past ten days. Guidelines suggest tipping your guide at the end of the safari and his wide beaming smile, on receipt of this, sums up an incredible experience that will leave us with an indelible impression of a fantastic place and people.

## WHEN TO GO

Tanzania's climate displays distinct regional variations but mostly has a tropical climate. The warmest months are December to March and the coolest June to October.

The coastal areas are hot and humid and although Mount Kilimanjaro, the highest point in Tanzania, is always covered in snow, the rest of the central plateau is dry and arid.

Most of Tanzania has two rainy seasons. The long rainy season lasts from April to May when tropical rainstorms can be expected nearly every day. The shorter rainy season in November is less intensive and the rest of the year is hot and dry.

The north-western highland area is generally cooler with rains from February to May and again from November to December. The coastal areas are less humid between June and September.

## HOW TO GET THERE

Both Emirates (via Dubai) and Qatar Airways (via Doha) operate schedules to Dar es Salaam. Approximate combined flying time 14 hours.

## SAFARIS

There are many tour operators that can organise your whole itinerary before departure (usually excluding international flights). See [www.baobabtravel.com](http://www.baobabtravel.com) or [www.africaboundsafaris.com](http://www.africaboundsafaris.com)

Alternatively, you can book your vehicle safari directly through local operators in Arusha – but be sure to check their credentials first. See [www.shidolya-safaris.com](http://www.shidolya-safaris.com) or [www.leopard-tours.com](http://www.leopard-tours.com)

## HEALTH

Recommended Immunisations: Hepatitis A, Polio, Tetanus, Typhoid, Meningococcal meningitis (especially for long stays)

Yellow Fever: All travellers require a Yellow Fever Certificate to enter into Tanzania

Malaria: Malaria is endemic all year round throughout Tanzania and is chloroquine resistant, hence adequate prophylaxis is important.

## VISAS

Your passport needs to be valid for at least 6 months at the time of travel and have 2 blank pages. Visas for UK citizens can be obtained from the Tanzanian Consulate. Tel: (852) 2311 8828

# TANZANIA

