

Tanzania's Southern Game Parks

My husband had a yen to climb Kilimanjaro as part of our three week vacation in Tanzania – but how would I entertain myself in his absence? We had already decided to 'do' the Northern circuit encompassing the Serengeti, Oldupai Gorge and Ngorongoro Crater together, so I needed an alternative destination and my own adventure. After spending some time scanning websites, I was despairing of a plan that would satisfy my longing to see part of Africa that was less travelled but was suitable for a solo trip with opportunity for companionship and only a frisson of danger....

I was lucky to come across Gane and Marshall, an International Travel Company that specialises in East African safaris and adventure holidays. Jeremy Gane did an amazing job of winking out of me what I was hoping for (when I barely knew myself) and planning an itinerary that would give me a different view of Tanzania than the Northern Circuit – a visit to two of the National Parks/Game Reserves in Southern Tanzania that fewer than 1% of tourists to the country visit and that provide a more laid-back safari resembling those of yesteryear. Thus my trip to Ruaha and Selous took shape.

Ruaha National Park, with a current size of 22,600 sq kilometres (after its fusion with the Usangu Game Reserve) is one of the largest in Tanzania and indeed in Africa. It mainly consists of semi-arid bush country with impressive numbers of the giant Baobab trees among the diverse Acacia species. Much of the park is relatively inaccessible and provides a safe zone for an amazing range of African wildlife including birds of many a feather (over 500 species), a massive elephant population, many antelope including the Greater and Lesser Kudu, Sable, many Impala and the adorable Dik Dik. Of course, predators are also in abundance especially lion, the more elusive leopard and at least for me the invisible cheetah. The most notable characteristic of Ruaha in my opinion, however, was the beauty of the landscape - the Great Ruaha River meandering its way through the park even in the dry season and the undulating terrain and distant hills so unlike the endless flat plains of the Serengeti; all glowing a staggering golden colour during the daytime in the dry season. Hard to imagine this as the "Darkest Africa" of Henry Morton Stanley's writings..... Even without the wildlife this is a beautiful place to visit and with their addition, it turns into a true Garden of Eden where giraffes, impala, elephants graze together in scenes of great tranquility until disturbed by the hungry carnivores.



I stayed at the Ruaha River Lodge, I believe the only accommodation in the park where one sleeps in something more substantial than a tent. It is managed by a highly respected Danish woman Mitte, who has worked there for something like 18 years together with her Assistant Manager, Karen, a lively Australian who is very entertaining and great fun. The Lodge has a fabulous setting in the crook of a bend in the Great Ruaha River. Even without leaving the comfort of the Lodge one can see baboons, impala, giraffes, waterbuck, elephants coming down to drink as well as hippo wandering by, making their loud unmistakable grunts. I even saw a crocodile in the water right in front of my banda one day, hoping for an unwary animal to come too close.



Karen and Mitte

During my first night a strange rustling noise right outside my banda turned out to be a HUGE elephant stopping for a snack of Palm fronds on his way to drink – apparently he was a frequent visitor! Another night five young male lions came through the grounds making their deep throated growls, establishing their supremacy and our need not to wander at night. In the dark, several Maasai guards would escort us to and from our bandas armed with spears for protection – not I must say my weapon of choice for encountering hungry lions but apparently the large cats and also elephants have a deep-rooted respect for the Maasai and give them a wide berth..... Another evening as we sat in the dark by the firepit in front of the dining area, the baboons on the other side of the river starting making an incredible noise as they scrambled for the trees while a leopard came along making that unmistakable leopard grunt every 20 feet or so - looking for an evening snack. I was ready to sprint for the relative safety of the dining room (it has no walls but seemed a less vulnerable position than on a sandy patch right beside the river with only shallow water between us and the grunts) but was assured that he wasn't interested in us..... I did ask for the odd frisson of fear, didn't I?

My four days in Ruaha were exactly what I had hoped for – wonderful relaxed game drives with Josephat, our kindly guide and driver who spotted so many animals and birds we would never otherwise have seen. The 'tracks' we drove along in our open safari vehicles were incredibly bumpy but the relative lack of dust (compared to the Serengeti where an open vehicle would be impossible) made Game viewing totally absorbing and satisfying. It is not just seeing a family of elephants right in front of you that enchants but watching a very young one emerge from under his Mum's legs and do a mock charge with ears flapping wildly. Definitely a young male I decided! Another elephant rose up on his hind legs and danced about trying to reach a particularly fine morsel from the tree above – unbelievable! Yet another got himself astride an old ant hill and writhed to and fro apparently trying to remove ticks from his underbelly. And then there were the mating lions, the ever-curious giraffes, elegant Kudu, skittish impala and zebra – to name but a few. I only saw one distant leopard but others were much luckier and at least one group saw a cheetah close to their vehicle. Of course there were also birds although there are many more in the wet season apparently. My favourite – the purple throated roller, a very colourful small bird with a happy chirp.

A tiny selection of what I saw:



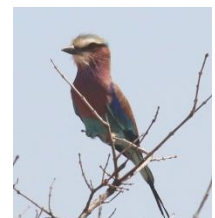
View of Site



My Banda



View from Banda



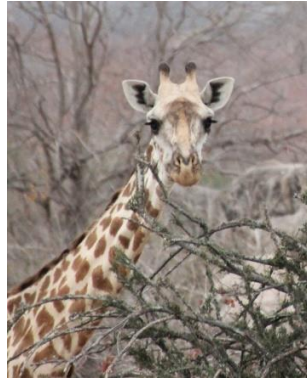
Elephants across the river



Greater Kudu



Greater Kudu – the ladies



After four wonderful days, I flew from one dusty airstrip near Ruaha Game Reserve headquarters to another, seemingly in the middle of nowhere, in Selous. Even the journey in a tiny plane with only the pilot (a young man with a broad Glasgow accent!) and me on board was an adventure. We flew low so I was able to see the countryside below all the way. Several rivers with meandering paths, dry river beds, and straight dusty roads cutting through the bush country. The odd town came into view and more frequently, unmistakable round structures marking Maasai enclosures surrounded by prickly acacia to keep predators out.

On landing I was relieved to see that there was a safari vehicle there to meet me as otherwise I would be alone in the African wilderness....No airport here...or even a Game Reserve Headquarters, just a small round covered area with a bench for people waiting for flights. Off we went, to Lake Manze Camp where I would be staying in a tent (albeit a substantial one with a real bed inside and ensuite shower, toilet and washroom). Glamping, I believe its called.....

Selous Game Reserve at around 50,000 km² in size, is one of the largest Reserves in Africa (twice the size of the Serengeti for example and three times larger than Kruger National Park in South Africa). In 1982 it was awarded the status of World Heritage Site in recognition of its incredibly varied terrain and wildlife. It has 'miombo' (a type of tree) woodlands, open grasslands, strips of forests that hug the rivers, lakes and swamps that all together provide habitat for an incredibly large diversity of species including 16,000 elephants (sadly reduced from 70,000 a few years ago by poaching...), 40,000 hippo, 4000 lion and 120,000 buffalo by some accounts. Only 10-20% of the Selous is accessible for tourists although some hunting is allowed in other parts of the Reserve to raise money to conserve the rest....

I was met at Lake Manze Camp by Manuele and Malcolm, Assistant Managers who were overseeing the camp while Rebecca and Steve were on leave. They made everyone extremely welcome and ensured that we were all aware of the intrinsic joys and dangers of an open camp in the African wilderness. Again, Maasai would escort us to and from our tents at night and indeed were around all day to monitor the presence of animals – particularly elephants and hippos around the camp.



I had a wonderful time at Lake Manze Camp. The communal dining table made it easy to meet fellow travellers and the evening sundowners were very convivial. I had a Guide (Harvam) and Driver/Guide (Zahoro) who were great company, knew the names of every bird, mammal and tree and taught me an amazing amount of information about the habits and lifestyles of the wildlife in Selous. Again the game



drives were wonderful relaxing outings – quite different from the high powered chasing of ‘the big five’ in the Serengeti I was to be part of the following week. Not that we didn’t see a great assortment of animals: lions hunting or sleeping under acacia trees, a lioness protecting her kill from vultures (altho later giving way to a pack of hyenas), many Cape buffalo and wildebeest and of course the impala, zebra and giraffes. One morning I went on a boat trip on Lake Manze and was treated to amazing views of hippos and crocodiles, more birds (Goliath, Great White and Grey herons, African spoonbills, kingfishers and many others), than I had seen up to that time as well as many animals coming down to the lake to drink.

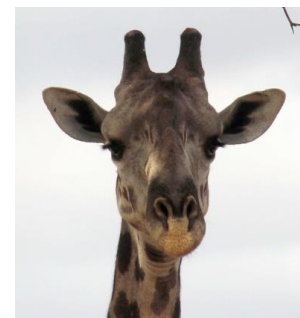
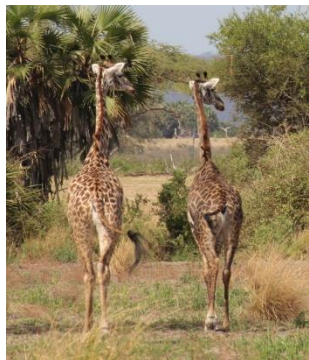


African-style zebra crossing

The greatest excitement at Lake Manze came one lunchtime when a group of about 10 elephants visited us in camp and peered in under the palm roof of the communal dining area at the strange humans eating strange food. They preferred the palm fronds from the tall Doum palms (that provide shade for the tents) before taking off leisurely after about half an hour.



Game Drives





All in all, this was the holiday of a lifetime. A thousand images still circle round and round in my head and editing my 1500 photos is allowing me to relive the incredible moments....

Thank you Jeremy for making this holiday happen – I felt looked after from the moment I was picked up at my hotel in Arusha until I returned 8 days later to connect with my husband who had successfully summited Kilimanjaro and was also exhilarated by his week's activities.