

Camping Safari for Families – True Adventure in Tanzania

For families with a sense of adventure, a camping safari in the Serengeti delivers in spades.

Our holiday of a lifetime arrived in the post in a hessian folder from Gane and Marshall. Inside was the complete itinerary for what turned out to be the best holiday we have ever had. No question.

‘We’ are two families of four adults and five teenagers who have been friends forever and have camped together in Cornwall for years. It was time for something big, and after a lot of research we handed our Tanzania wish-list to Jeremy Gane to make it all possible.



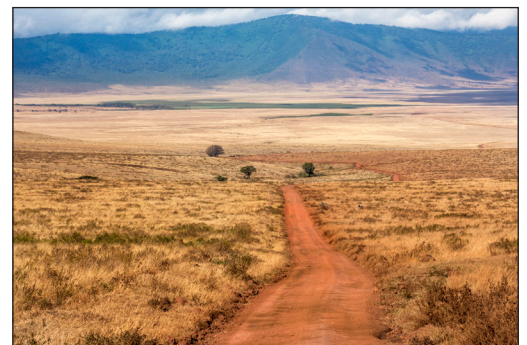
The first part of our trip was climbing Mount Meru (that’s another tale), so when we started our Light Mobile Camping Safari we were more than ready to let the fun begin.

Sam Diah of the Tanzanian Travel Company met us at Ilboru Lodge in Arusha to brief us about the camping safari before the two vehicles and crew arrived to whisk us away to the land of our dreams. Our superb crew was led by Hassani whose knowledge and enthusiasm was inspiring, aided by Anthony, Goodluck the cook and William, a Maasai Warrior whose job it was to keep us safe.

After heading west through the Ardai Plains and by Lake Manyara, we stayed overnight at Plantation Lodge at Karatu and rested in its superlative luxury. Refreshed and clean, we set off towards the Ngorogoro Conservation Area, stopping at a small supermarket to stock up on a few drinks for the evenings, and charcoal. Goodluck, the cook, needs plenty of charcoal for cooking and ‘making bread’ in the Serengeti. “Bread?” In the Serengeti? How cool is that?

Day 1 – Ngorogoro Crater

No wildlife documentary can prepare you for seeing this breathtaking natural wonder; the world’s largest unbroken caldera, it is about 20 km across, 600m deep and home to about 25,000 animals. The views as we descend into the crater are spectacular. As soon as we break through the trees on the rim, we meet zebra, close enough to touch. Our cameras click madly and the excitement builds.



We are driven in our two open-roofed jeeps giving unhindered views over the amber earth roads that meander through the lion-coloured grassland. Lions! Right there in front of you; we are all transfixed at the rawness of it. The teenagers scramble over each other to get a closer view and photograph them. It is profound and quite unlike any other experience.



We see all we could hope for: lions, zebra, buffalo, wildebeest, gazelles, warthogs, ostriches and elephants. The boys' jeep insist they also saw a black rhino, but we only saw a black dot. It is still a talking point even after the holiday.

These animals are majestic and free and protected. How incredibly lucky we are to see them.

Leaving the crater we head towards the Serengeti, stopping briefly at Oldupai Gorge. "Oldupai" is the name of the wild sisal plant that grows in the gorge; 'Olduvai' is actually a misspelling. This is the 'Cradle of Mankind' where fossil remains provide the most continuous known record of human evolution and is a fascinating look back to our ancestors who walked the plains long before us.

After a few hours of 'African Massage' along the bone-shaking ridged earth roads of the region, we arrive at our 'private campsite' near Seronera as the sun starts to set. We help erect the four dome tents whilst Goodluck prepares dinner.

Our tents stand between two beautiful umbrella acacias that hold what look like small bundles of hay, but which turn out to be weaver bird nests. The setting is stunning and we eat our three course dinner as the sounds close in with the darkness. On our foam mattresses with sheets and blankets, we can only imagine which animals make which sounds. The distant deep "eeyuh!" of lions, however, is unmistakable, and sends shivers of excitement and happiness down the spine.

Day 2 Central Serengeti

A 6:30am start ("You can sleep when you're dead!") was my mantra to the seemingly sleep-deprived teenagers) ensured we saw the golden sunrise. Watching it through the iconic shape of the umbrella acacia tree gave us a quintessentially African start to the day. Sausages, eggs and toast with tea, coffee and juice fortified our bodies for a day's game viewing.

Almost straight away we saw four male lions dozing in the sun (perhaps their nocturnal calling wasn't as distant as I thought). More and more amazing sightings followed; hippos, giraffes, elephants, gazelles, antelopes, more lions, a serval cat and even a pair of cheetahs that crossed in front of us. One of them even stopped and looked back at us; we nearly knocked each other out trying to capture that look on camera before it sauntered off. Magic.



Back to camp for a lunch of delicious homemade vegetable pizza (yes pizza, with bread baked by Goodluck in his camping oven which is actually a metal suitcase). We rest before the afternoon game-drive. The children sit and play cards whilst we chat, read and write journals. The Maasai call this area “Serengit” meaning “Endless Plains”. It’s not hard to see why. I see Thomson Gazelles from my camp chair amid the grassland that stretches off into the distance, dotted with acacia trees and distant silhouettes of giraffe. The temperature is warm with a light breeze; a perfect interlude.



A highlight of the day for me was having a shower. I cannot deny that Serengeti game-drives are dusty and so it was with relish that I stood in a canvas cubicle on wooden slats whilst washing off the grime. Emerging from the canvas, squeaky clean and dressed in only a towel and sandals in the middle of the Serengeti is a joy to be had.

Our evening game-drive was very special. We came upon a dead gazelle high up in a tree; closer viewing revealed a leopard sitting nearby. Not something you see every day.

Day 3 Through the Serengeti

A giraffe ambles around the perimeter of the camp as we talk about the night sounds over breakfast. Soon it is six giraffe that lollop among the acacias as we strike camp and head north on our morning game-drive. We see zebras, topi, gazelle and elephants. Lots of them. We are close enough to photograph their eyelashes and compare shots.



We have a picnic lunch near a hippo pool. Hippos create “low oxygen pools” by essentially emitting vast quantities of dung into the pool. The burbling, puffing and grunting are mesmerising for a while until your sense of smell declares that you’ve seen enough.



Back on the journey north we see increasing densities of zebra and wildebeest. The grass is greener and acacias flourishing. The rains have come early to the northern Serengeti which means the great migration has stalled and returned back from Kenya into Tanzania. It is an affect of global warming apparently.

We set up camp at a private site near Lobo. We see no other people except us. We sit around the camp-fire sipping cold beer that never tasted so good.

Day 4 – Northern Serengeti to Kenya

Our morning game-drive starts before the sun erupts from behind the hills. We wear fleeces over our safari clothes for warmth but the air is light and refreshing. We drive around a hill and into the low golden beams of first sunlight. They pull long shadows from the acacia trees and light up the zebras in the grass like spotlights.



The landscape is undulating with acacias everywhere. Granite outcrops (kopjes) punctuate the hills, their smooth giant boulders catch the light like beacons. Low humps of granite poke through the grasses, smooth and dark, like giant hippos ducked under the Earth.

Our second game-drive takes us around the hills that edge a massive plain. The landscape is just so big. The views are awe inspiring; we feel like we're in the middle of the best documentary programme on Earth.

Near the border we see hundreds of wildebeest crossing a small river. They run through the water and then trot and walk into the bush making 'gnu' noises. Being able to witness this little piece of the Great Migration feels such a privilege.

Sitting around the camp-fire that night, William our Maasai Warrior Guide talks to us about his family and the way of life of the Maasai people. We chat, exchange stories and absorb our surroundings.

The Serengeti feels like the birthplace of Mankind and being there set off a resonance deep within me that can only be described as being a bit like home-coming. I feel a need to return.

Leaving the Serengeti was difficult. Even though we were tired and rather dusty, I couldn't bear the idea of not seeing these animals and landscapes every day. We departed for a few days of relaxation on Zanzibar aboard a 14 seater plane, taking off from the gravel airstrip at Lobo; a mini-adventure in itself.

Returning is an inexorable fact. Would I camp again? Yes, without doubt. Camping makes it real; you are living on the earth of the Serengeti and can inhale its aroma and beauty. You become a part of it, if only for a short time.

Gane and Marshall provided us with an incredible holiday. If you are thinking about a family safari, just do it. Light mobile camping is better, cheaper and far more rewarding than day-trips from lodges.

