

African Rhapsody

A luxe safari into Tanzania's seemingly never-ending expanse of bush and beast reveals why the pull of this stunning wild place remains long after the game drive is over.

—STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY KIMBERLEY LOVATO—

THE TOY-SIZED SINGLE-PROPELLER plane aborted its landing on the scraped dirt band in Serengeti National Park, a vast 5,700-square-mile sprawl of wildlife-roaming grassy plains in northern Tanzania and southwestern Kenya.

"We'll have to go around again; there are giraffes on the runway," our 20-something South African pilot, Zander, lilted over his shoulder.

I crumpled my neck and peered out the oval window. Indeed, there were giraffes, a half dozen of them. With slack lips, the leggy creatures plucked leaves off the canopies of Acacia trees that bordered the airstrip while a lone gold-and-brown beauty loped across the rust-colored earth, kicking up dust as its limbs curled and unfurled in slow-motion majesty.

The plane circled again and eventually touched down, stuttering to a halt near an unpainted cinder block structure—aka the airport. Zander opened the back door, which transformed into stairs that landed with a bang, welcoming us to Africa, a place I'd dreamed of seeing for more than a decade.

Africa, I'd heard from travelers and transplants, is not just a place, but also a feeling that burrows deep inside us and settles into those spaces between heartbeat and bone. It's a concentrated amalgam of love and longing, an affliction and an affection that doesn't go away, I'd learned. In 1999, while living in Florida, I met a young girl from Kenya who had come to live with an uncle and was working as an au pair for a local family. Her name escapes me

now, but I can still picture her: 19 or 20 years old with dark, honest eyes and skin that dewed in the humidity and looked as smooth as mink. After several meet-ups at the neighborhood playground where I regularly took my daughter Chloe, she began to tell me about her home.

"The rains are like nowhere else. I miss the rains. The sky is so big there. Oh, how I love the sky. And the people are warm like the sun."

Her honeyed accent and the precision of her words painted a portrait of a place I yearned to experience. She once concluded her paean to home by saying, "Africa never leaves you. I miss my continent."

I'd never been to Africa and was intrigued by this girl's emotive outpouring for her homeland. I assumed someday I would understand.

Someday arrived 15 years later when I, along with Chloe and my husband John, landed on the dehydrated dirt in Serengeti National Park.

Our nine-day odyssey began in the city of Arusha, about an hour's drive from Kilimanjaro International Airport in Tanzania, and would string together three locations: the Serengeti National Park, the Ngorongoro Crater and Conservation Area, and Lake Manyara National Park, each requiring arrival by a similar bush plane thrill ride.

After much research, we had opted to go with safari outfitter &Beyond, not only because of its stellar reputation and choice of properties around Africa (and in particular Tanzania, where we wanted to focus our trip), but also because of its work empowering communities via a partnership with the Johannesburg-based Africa Foundation, an organization that funds local development projects in rural villages around the continent.

Melau Lalatalia, our guide while in the Serengeti—a protected area since 1940 and a national park since 1951—welcomed us in khaki shorts and matching shirt, and a wide smile that carved a gleaming arc through his round cheeks. He offered us coffee and cookies set up on a camping table, then loaded our duffle bags into an open-air, forest-green Land Cruiser.

Our first game drive would begin immediately,

Melau told us as we rumbled over pitted roads en route to our camp. Game drives are the cornerstone of any African safari vacation and would anchor our daily routine: morning drive followed by a picnic lunch, then a return to camp for a respite from the midday mercury, followed by an early evening drive, then a three-course dinner back at camp, usually comprised of some sort of barbecued meat and roasted vegetables served with wine or a local Kilimanjaro lager called "Kili."

The word "camp" is misleading. The accommodations at &Beyond, as with most safari outfitters, are often luxurious set-ups, including the "Serengeti Under Canvas" tented camp we stayed in for three nights, which put me in a dreamy *Out of Africa* trance. The semi-permanent tents move around at different times of year to get guests as close as possible to the Great Migration, a wildlife pageant of massive proportions. Though dates are hard to predict, twice a year—once between July and October then again around November and December—roughly 1.4 million wildebeests and 300,000 zebras and gazelles, guided by food sources and rain, trek 1,800 miles between Tanzania's Serengeti and Kenya's Maasai Mara National Reserve in what is one of the world's greatest land migrations.

At our camp, the khaki canvas structure was kitted with burlap floors, zip-up doors and

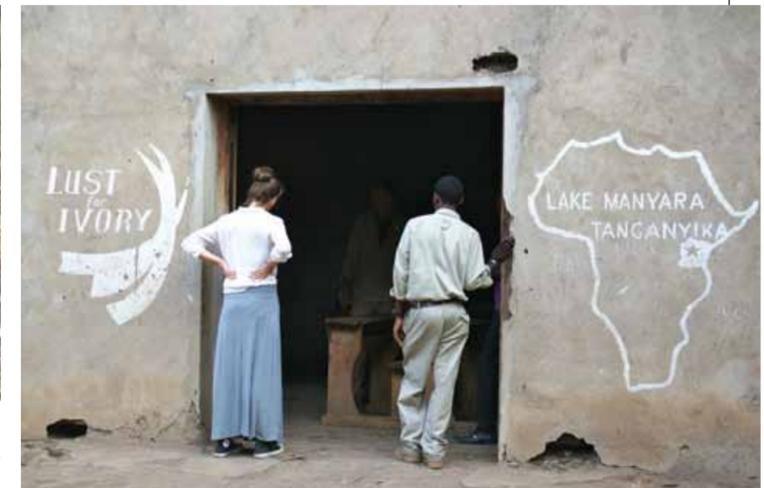
Previous page: Giraffes in Serengeti National Park. This page, above left: Maasai woman; right: treehouse room at Lake Manyara Treehouse Lodge.

screened window openings, a large bed under a chandelier and a flushing toilet. There was no TV, Internet or radio, and at night all we could hear was the chatter of fellow travelers along with the occasional whisper of the surrounding tall grass in the breeze. Despite the high comfort level, we were not immune to the biting insects that snacked on our ankles as we took bucket showers outside. The heated water was carried to us each night in rubber bladders by a skinny boy named Simon who always arrived with a smile and a friendly "Jambo" (hello), and an apology for not speaking better English.

"It's perfect," I told him. "Much better than my Swahili."

"Asante," he said. Thank you.

Melau, like all our &Beyond guides, was well educated about animals and their behaviors, and our daily outings were both informative and entertaining. He mimicked the hippos' grumpy, get-off-my-lawn grunts as they wallowed in rivers outside our windows, and pointed out the flapping and prancing mating ritual of the ostrich couple we passed each morning. Every now and then, he'd stop the vehicle, turn the engine off, and listen. Like a tuning fork to the



Clockwise from top left: Baboons near Lake Manyara; Maasai men; a lioness yawns in Serengeti National Park; John and Chloe at Serengeti Under Canvas camp.

Clockwise from top left: Sun streaks over the Ngorongoro Crater; elephant in Lake Manyara National Park; school building in Mayoka; lion in the grass in Serengeti National Park.

wild, Melau would grab binoculars and scan 180 degrees along the hazy heat line where the grass seeped into the sky, looking for the flick of a tail, the twitch of an ear or an interlocking color in the drape of green and gold that was the Serengeti palette. During one drive, Melau stopped the truck, slammed the gearshift into reverse, and slowly backed up while sniffing the air.

“Smell that?” he asked as we rolled to a stop. “What?”

He inhaled the warm and dusty wind into his flared nostrils.

“That. It’s the smell of broken Acacia tree. There are elephants near.”

A whiff of a musky African incense drifted up my nose. Melau was right, there was an elephant nearby. We watched it break branches for 10 minutes before it tired of us and disappeared deeper into the African thicket.

One afternoon, we inched to within five feet of a sleeping lion, and as Melau reminded us not to make sudden noises or movements, the lion popped up its head and trained its golden eyes on us. Melau moved us back. The lion became more relaxed, but it never stopped watching.

We would be reminded just how feral the African wilderness can be when later, at the tail end of our trip, we stopped for two nights at &Beyond’s lodge at the Ngorongoro Crater, a large volcanic caldera 110 miles west of Arusha where, during one game drive, we watched a

leopard drag the limp-limbed carcass of some antlered animal up into a tree and hang it over a branch, gnawing and ripping at the flesh.

When John, Chloe and I left the Serengeti and landed in Lake Manyara about 125 miles away, we were greeted at another airstrip by Stephen, a lanky man with an omnipresent smile, dressed in &Beyond’s signature khaki. From the entrance gate in the town of Mto-wa-Mbu, a name that translates to Mosquito Creek, we rambled though Lake Manyara National Park along a dirt road skimming the base of the 1,900-foot-high Rift Valley escarpment. Unlike the vastness and heat of the Serengeti, the park was dense with verdant jungle and grassy flood plains. Baboon troops clamored up trees and sat cross-armed on branches like protective old men. On occasion, an elephant blocked the road, or a lone giraffe wandered across a dried-up riverbed.

The park is said to be home to nearly 400 species of birds, as well as the famous tree leopard, which unfortunately I never saw. We stayed at &Beyond’s Lake Manyara Tree Lodge. Located nearly two hours by car from the park’s entrance and the only permanent luxury accommodation in the park, the site is hemmed in by a lush mahogany tree forest less than a mile from the lakeshore. Perched on stilted tree houses, rooms were well-appointed with porches and outdoor showers, plus regular howls from blue monkeys in the surrounding jungle.

Having met Melau, who is a member of the Maasai tribe, a Nilotic group (mainly from the Nile Valley and Central and East Africa) of semi-nomadic people inhabiting southern Kenya and northern Tanzania, we were curious, and so we asked Stephen to take us to a boma—a typical Maasai village comprising a circular enclosure surrounded by thorny branches to keep the lions from attacking the cattle, the tribe’s lifeblood. The boma receives visitors for the price of about \$20 per person, money, we were told, that is used to buy medicine, rice, and beads to make jewelry that is then sold at local markets. The vibrant drapes of blue and red fabric the villagers fashioned into clothing popped against the boma’s muted tones of dust and dirt. We were greeted with chanting song and invited to hold hands and dance along to words we didn’t understand. Though Chloe and I tried to ripple our bodies in the fluid way of the Maasai women, whose Frisbee-sized beaded necklaces moved up and down on their shoulders, we were too stiff, or too inhibited.

Since we’d read about the charitable work that &Beyond and Africa Foundation do with local communities, we opted to forego an afternoon game drive one day and instead asked Stephen to take us to the village of Mayoka, just a few miles from the lodge, where the two organizations built and outfitted new school buildings in 2001 and refurbished a medical clinic between 2006

and 2008. There, we met 20-year-old student Salu, who walked us around the village. The dirt road was lined with cornfields and doorless residences. Barefoot children with brilliant teeth and ill-fitting clothing ran to us and waved, yelling “Jambo! Jambo!” Women hung laundry on ropes strung between trees, two men played Bao (a traditional board game) in the village center, and one boy stood straight as a spear in a faded green Boston Celtics t-shirt as we passed and said, “Good afternoon. How are you?” in perfect English.

Later, we sat on the shores of Lake Manyara, once extolled by Ernest Hemingway as the loveliest he’d seen in Africa and home to more than a million flamingoes that, from a distance, looked like a ribbon of rose petals scattered atop a glassy bath. Salu and Stephen joined an impromptu soccer game with a group of children. According to Stephen, the &Beyond staff regularly organize soccer tournaments with villagers and, a few times a year, bring them to Lake Manyara National Park, just a few kilometers away. Despite being so close, many of the children have never seen the animals that I had just flown 5,000 miles to view.

Before I left for Tanzania, a friend told me that Africa had made her feel like a tiny speck, which I felt, too. But there were times when the breadth of recognition of just how insignificant

I was eclipsed any sense of awe. At sunset, when the fiery, engorged sun sank into the horizon, silhouetting the flat-topped Acacia trees and smearing the land and sky with anarchic streaks of red and orange, I couldn’t conjure up an image more exquisite than the masterpiece nature created over Africa each night. And when the four corners of the sky sparked with limitless stars that appeared close enough to flick with my finger, I reached for them. It reminded me of those silky parachutes with pie wedges of color that we’d shake and billow as kids, then duck under, pulling the edges in and letting the vibrant wonder engulf us on all sides.

It rained several days during our trip. I could smell it in the air before the drops pelted the ground and bounced like stones hitting cardboard. It raised the streams and filled the watering holes; it greened new grass and softened the earth where birds beaked for dinner. While in the Serengeti during one downpour, Melau suggested we stick our hands out the window to capture the drops on our fingers and then taste them.

“It’s not enough to just see Africa,” Melau had said, referring to his continent, not just to the Serengeti where we had parked on a hill overlooking miles of incalculable vastness.

“You must hear and smell and touch it, too.” I recognized his sentiments from years earlier on a playground in Florida.

One day, the Kenyan girl just didn’t turn up. After a few weeks, I saw the child she’d been caring for with a new au pair, and I asked her where the girl had gone.

“She went home.”

Turns out the weight of being away from Africa was too heavy, the pull of the skies and the rains too strong.

Some places have that power. I finally understand the girl’s longing for her continent, and sometimes I miss it, too. ❁

If You Go ...
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