

NAMIRI Tanzania

Once upon a time in Africa





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Photos: Sanjay F Gupta

Howling midday wind scraped sand from the barren landscape creating a low-level storm. The sun beat down relentlessly and every living being searched for cover to prevent the sun from draining them of all energy. Warthogs buried themselves in their burrows; hyenas lay down in slush, lions cuddled up at kopjes. All except for one young cheetah mother who braved the elements and prowled urgently to find food for her hungry cub. Her eyes, half shut to prevent the sand from entering them, scanned the horizon for a possible prey. Just two days prior she had lost her other cub to lions and wanted to ensure the safety of her surviving cub. She moved rapidly climbing every anthill scanning the horizon until she suddenly crouched. The cub followed her mother's movement and disappeared in the short grass. Almost 700 metres away in a small patch of grass next to a pond, few Thomson's gazelles were slowly approaching for a drink.

The hunter's body shot like a bullet towards the gazelle and within seconds the chase began. The mother gave the chase her best; the cub had not eaten for over two days and she could not fail. With dust flying everywhere, the gazelles ran in different directions with the cheetah sprinting after it in long leaps. Perhaps it was the heat or



White backed vultures at a kill. They feed only during day and with nightfall they are fly back to their chosen trees for the night.



the young mother misjudging the distance, but the gazelles vanished into the horizon leaving the cat panting and walking back to where she had left the cub. She would have to restart the game of life and death all over again; such are the ways of the bush.

I was at Namiri Plains, a very special unexplored part of pristine eastern Serengeti where one can truly be one with nature. Where else can you be without any other tourist vehicles spoiling the landscape, build your own roads as you go along? Shut down to visitors for the last 20 years to bring the area back to how nature created it millions of years ago, the only camp in the area is set up by the eco friendly, conservation oriented luxury safari company Asillia. (www.chaloafrica.com or www.asilliafrica.com) With just six tents and no other campsite around, this

I tracked these mating lions for over two days. They follow a very specific and precise pattern to their mating. Every 20 minutes, to the minute, the lioness would approach the lion and circle him till he mounted her. They did not eat for at least three days while the courtship continued. The other lioness in the photograph presented herself to the male but he rejected her.



As the sun starts sinking, the lions get playful. If hungry they will start their hunt shortly after sundown. If not, they will sleep through the night. Namiri Plains is superlative for allowing one to be in close proximity with the cats.



Tree climbing lions are a rarity outside of Tanzania. This young male scampered up this tree, checked the view and went off to sleep on the branch for rest of the morning. (above)



Lions are attentive and loving towards their pride members except for when they are feeding. Here they lick the rain of each other's back. (left)

is the visitor's own private 489 sq. km. of unexplored Africa. Since the animals have not seen vehicles, the safari never feels like roaming in a zoo, which unfortunately is the case in many parts of Africa.

The cheetah lay down under an acacia to regain energy before moving ahead while the cub lovingly played with her ear as if telling her it was ok that she could get the food later. I waited in the car for sundown for further photography; my well-informed guide (earlier a hunter) told me that it was not easy for them to select the exact spot for building the camp. They sacrificed building it next to a shaded spot surrounded by yellow fever trees because that would dislodge large herds of buffalo and elephants that visited that area for shade and food. Instead they choose another equally beautiful spot overlooking the riverbed.

Many, including myself, advocate eco-friendly tourism to facilitate conservation and the decision of shutting the area down to the public seemed questionable. On close examination certain distinct advantages surfaced. A researcher from

the area says - "Tourism doesn't necessarily affect the number of cubs born, but it can impact cub survival. Harassment by tourists can negatively affect mothers with cubs, especially when cubs are small. On rare occasions cubs get separated from their mother because of cars." The validity of this statement became evident soon as cheetah sightings of the area were frequent. Namiri camp being the only camp in the area really helps in sightings and welfare of the wildlife.

By sundown the cheetahs disappeared in the grass and as we started to head back to the camp, we heard a very deep-throated lion roar in the distance from our right. A 15-minute drive on the grass and I was, what it seemed like, within touching distance of a large pride of playing lions. A little manoeuvring of the vehicle and they were perfectly framed against the setting sun which cast an almost surreal red cast to the sky. Click.

To most, the ideal Africa safari would mean being in close proximity of the magnificent cats and witnessing the spectacle of river crossing. Having experienced the

The frenzy of river crossing. Wildebeest may take forever to decide to cross, but once they start the stampede, nothing can stop them. Between July and October every year about 1.5 million wildebeest attempt to cross the river. Many die in the process. Here once can see wildebeest trying their best to climb the riverbank after crossing the river. Frequently, they have barely any energy left when they finish crossing the river.





Cheetah brothers rest after a heavy meal. It is estimated that less than 11,000 cheetahs remain in the wild, down from 100,000 in 1990. Chances of viewing them at Nameri are much higher than other places (above); the cheetah mother (right) not only has to hunt almost everyday but has to constantly protect the cubs from lions and hyenas. Fortunately, the lack of bush and tall grass here prevents sudden ambush from other predators.



Asillia's mobile camp shifts base twice a year to follow the migration. In the north, it sets camp right near the river crossing and in the south, where calving mothers surround the camp.

Namiri Plains tents are right in the bush without even a pathway between the tent and bush. I have visited various lodges and camps but none feel so part of nature. My favourite.

cats at Namiri Plains I head off to Asillia's Kimondo camp. The migration time was almost finishing and I hoped that I would witness at least one crossing.

On reaching the camp I was informed that thousands of wildebeest were crossing Mara River from North to South in huge numbers when the migration pattern dictates that they do the opposite. The river had lots of wildebeest carcass all over clearly indicating the dangers of crossing the river and it was baffling to see the herds endangering their lives four times within the same season. They would slowly start congregating at the river's edge from mid morning until the herd would start numbering into hundreds. They would not feed and

walk at the bank totally focused by the river trying to find a spot from where to cross. Then suddenly as soon as the first one starts to cross, the entire herd would blindly follow and a frenzy of jostling, jumping and swimming starts and it is an incredible sight.

I saw four river crossings that day and each amazed me equally. By evening the river now flowed calm with just some vultures feeding on the carcasses and hippos grunting in the distance. The giraffes and the herd of zebra against the setting sun made for a classic African landscape and I could have stayed forever. ■

For any information on photography tips, please write to sanjayfgupta@yahoo.com