

TANZANIA East Africa

A DREAM COME TRUE





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Photos: Sanjay F Gupta

The powerful headlights of my safari vehicle barely penetrated the early morning fog as it proceeded towards the entrance of the Ngorongoro Crater. I wanted to be the first to enter the park with the hope of photographing undisturbed animal behaviour before the other tourist vehicles would roll in.

I was in Tanzania, the largest East African country described as a place for 'wildlife viewing without parallel' in Africa. That much sought after, endlessly elusive phenomenon 'The Real Africa' exists in the mind or more appropriately in the heart of all Africa lovers and many other travellers. More than anywhere else this Zen lies in East Africa. My travelogue accounts for my exploration of this vast country and some of its best lodges. Serengeti National Park, Ngorongoro Crater and the Zanzibar constitute the most popular Tanzania destinations and this article will cover them.

Ngorongoro

Dodoma and Dar es Salaam are the main business cities of Tanzania but all safari-oriented tourists must negotiate a tiny airport lined with

tiny aircraft in the dusty town of Arusha. Just the day earlier, a 40-minute flight from the tiny, dusty Arusha airstrip followed by a one-hour scenic drive took me to &Beyond's Ngorongoro Crater Lodge with the most amazing rooms and grandest views of the crater. Ali, my ranger for the next few days, was born in a village not too far and was in love with the area: "Here and there in this vast expanse of grassland, bush and mighty volcanic mountains live fascinating tribes, pastoralists and cultivators along with hunter-gatherers, half as old as time. Here lions are still occasionally speared to death by warriors without wars, the dangerous buffalo is still brought down by little men with immensely powerful bows, their arrows tipped with a deadly poison and the scrawny hump-backed cow is worshipped with an almost Hindu reverence."

Now as my safari vehicle in the bitter cold with the heater on full blast entered the crater I soon realized why this place is so popular with tourists – the density of the wildlife inhabiting this area including presence of globally threatened species makes wildlife viewing a



Serengeti means 'endless plains' and here a herd of elephants cross a dead tree to find food. They communicate by producing a sub-sonic rumble that travels faster on ground than through air (**above**)

Tanzania's grass turns green with just a few inches of rain and then dries out within days. August is not the rainy season but the plains can get thundershowers anytime of the year creating drama in the sky and on land (**left**)

pleasure all year round. Saltpans, grassless plains, savanna, woodlands and forests are all there to be explored within short distances of each other. After just few minutes of driving we noticed a cackle of seven very focused hyenas trotting across the road in a rush and disappear behind a small hillock. Hyenas have a keen sense of smell and Ali immediately took the clue, backed up, and made a sharp turn on a road towards where the scavengers were headed. On the other side of the hill we saw a pride of 13 lions in open grassland noisily feeding on a zebra. The hyenas we had seen appeared behind the lions and, to my surprise, aggressively started approaching the kill without much





nearly the equivalent of the sea, there seems to be no end of it.”

The Serengeti Plains, through which the Olduvai George (named after the wild sisal which grows there) cuts its famous gash, is strewn with volcanic ash which gives the short grasses there a nutritious sweetness to more than two million animals from over one hundred miles, from the far corners of the Serengeti and beyond the Kenyan border.

To explore this ecosystem I choose two of &Beyond’s very different camps: Grumeti River Lodge right on the bank of the river and Kliens Camp up on the mountains overlooking the vast African bush right into Kenya. Deep in the heart of Serengeti both these camps instil Africa into the visitor’s mind with abundant wildlife in the daytime and at night the grunting of hippos, and roars of lions.

After spending few days in the company of hippos, crocodiles and such at Grumeti River where

the awesome butler Aron introduced me to a sumptuous African cocktail ‘Dawa’ made from vodka, lemon and honey I flew to Kliens Camp with the mission of watching Tanzania’s trump card: the spectacle of wildebeest river crossing. The Mara river is around 90 minutes away from the camp and they organised a day trip for me where I would leave early with packed food, reach the river via a lovely game drive and spend the entire afternoon at the river only to return well after sun down. The only catch – there was no guarantee that the wildebeest would decide to cross the river that day.

With high anticipation in my heart and Canon 1Dx with 200-400mm lens in my hand, I left the camp in darkness for the river through a well-wooded patch of Serengeti. If Ngorongoro is about concentration, Northern Serengeti is about abundance and vastness. By daybreak I had already covered half the distance and we stopped

the vehicle on the top of a mountain for coffee. I had a three 360 degree panoramic view of the sunrise and had never imagined the amount of wildebeest that could be moving with such discipline in one direction. As far as the eyes could see in any direction, there was the exodus of millions and millions of wildebeest undispersed with large zebra herds moving northwards.

With so many wildebeest eager to go over to the other side where there was promise of greener grass, I was so surprised that till around 3 pm, not a single wildebeest attempted to cross the river. Not a single member ate or drank but just stood at the bank grunting and staring into the river. Their apprehension is well justified, as the number of deaths caused by the stampede of the crossing and crocodiles in the water is substantial. This was evident by the amount of carcasses lying all over the bank, on the boulders in the middle of the river with vultures everywhere. But soon,

Travel Tips

- For the lodges mentioned: www.andbeyond.com. They are my favourite as they provide 7-star services and actively participate in wildlife/land conservation and tribal welfare.
- Visa: Embassy is in Delhi and one should plan on 7 working days for processing.
- Certificates: Yellow fever certificate is mandatory and is not easily available outside of big cities in India.
- Flight: All tourists who want to visit Serengeti/ Zanzibar must plan on reaching Arusha.
- Connectivity: Tanzania is a huge country and road transfers are impractical. But it is very well networked by small planes.



Vulture like in looks and eating habits, Ground Hornbills are commonly found in sub-Saharan Africa. They produce just one chick every nine long years. Although generally in a flock I found this male hornbill on his own, in the late evening, very focused at finding food in the grasslands near Kliens Camp. Traditional African cultures believe hornbills are harbingers of rain (**above**)

Buffalo at Ngorongoro Crater. Weighing up to 900 kilograms, they have a strong family bond and come to each other’s rescue; they are not easy prey to lions. A solo lion seldom manages to bring down a full-grown buffalo and many times even a pride fails. There have been several recorded incidents where the entire herd has fought lions to save the attacked member (**top**)

Found mostly in pairs, saddle-billed storks eat not only fish but birds, tiny mammals, reptiles and have been seen scavenging. Males and females participate equally in raising the chicks (**right**)

fear of the pride. Some of the bigger lions in the pride turned around and gave the hyenas a growl and did a mock charge pushing the hyenas back. But soon the lions would have to leave the zebra to the intruders, as hyenas are very persistent, can inflict injuries to the lions and keep coming to the kill from all directions.

That Ngorongoro Crater has the highest concentration of lions was demonstrated easily when just that day I saw three different large prides. In addition to the sightings of the predators, large herds of zebra, buffalo, the highly endangered and elusive black rhino, hundreds of birds of various sizes the safari seemed very special because of the ever changing and fascinating landscapes.

Back at the &Beyond Crater Lodge, which can be compared to a set of a grand movie, Masai dancers with sundowners completed an extraordinary day.

Serengeti Plains

Where the land meets the sky and large prides of lions roam freely, Serengeti Plains was referred to by the great British conservationist Laurens van der Post as “I do not know of any country which is, in terms of earth, of solid matter, so



Mnemba Island is truly what wallpapers are made of. Hidden within the trees seen here, surrounded by white sands, are ten luxury suites close enough to ocean to hear the waves right through the night. This was the only part of Tanzania I dived and it was fantastic with clear waters, pristine corals and pods of dolphins. Based on this experience, I will certainly add scuba diving to my safari whenever I visit Tanzania again.





Masai in the touristy areas of Tanzania and Kenya welcome photographers in their homes and I find that if one wants, one can have conversation on varied subjects with them. The one on the right is draped in the traditional blanket called 'shuka'. **(top left)**

The glorious &Beyond Ngorongoro Crater Lodge, rated as one of the world's best hotels by various reviewers has opulent décor and fantastic views of the world's largest, intact caldera. I saw these zebras right under my suite and walked around to take this photo. These zebras are totally wild but like to be around the lodge to be safe from predators **(top right)**

&Beyond works diligently towards the welfare of the Masai. Tourists on the lawns of Crater lodge watch a Masai tribal dance with a spectacular view of the crater in the background. The dance continued well into the night lit just by the torches and lanterns **(bottom)**

right before it was time for me to head back, one wildebeest jumped into the water starting a frenzy of crossing I had never seen before. The river flew fast and the animals struggled for over seven minutes and thousands of them crossed over. Soon the bush was quiet again as if nothing had happened.

Zanzibar

Dust, early mornings and searching for animals in relentless sun not your thing? Let me recommend to you Zanzibar. Azure waters, thriving underwater life, isolated beaches, great seafood and African dishes attract many to this part of Tanzania. Many combine the coast with their safari to get variety in their holiday and I certainly recommend it.

The old quarter of Zanzibar town is known as 'Stone Town' to distinguish it from traditional Swahili mud and wattle settlements. Basically Arabic in character and Islamic in spirit, it is also an enthralling blend of Persian, Indian and even European influences.

My choice of hotel, mainly because I wanted the experience of living in a totally private island, was the Mnemba Island Lodge. From the moment I was picked up by a speedboat from the 'common tourist' side, I felt I lived within a





The **Black Rhino** is easily distinguished from the white rhino by its pointed upper lip. This is an old big member who has fought many battles and blunted its horn. Both males and females have horns (**right**)

The **Grumeti Camp** is right on the banks of Grumeti River where you can watch hippos right from the dining area. They feed mostly at night when they travel long distances to graze. Extremely social, they can be seen interacting with each other all day long. Their reputation of being aggressive is true but overtly hyped and misrepresented (**far right**)

The **lions** killed the kudu sometime during the night. It was a large pride and when I reached here, most had already eaten and were asleep in the grass close by (**below**). Although very little of the kudu remained, this lion dragged it away into the thicket as the vultures started closing in.



computer's wallpaper. Sand colour whiter than salt and ocean bluer than cobalt, ocean life worth Nimo's abode, the island is perfect for photographers and all ocean lovers.

I had reached early enough to quickly fit into my dive gear and board the dive boat on the footsteps of my hut (a large suite with an equally large bathroom totally open from all sides) to reach a dive site just 7 minutes away. I have dived all over the world and recognise a special dive site within minutes of being in the water. A visibility of over 30 metres, and turtles, large shoals of fish and several curious dolphins greeting a diver is very special, indeed. What I remember most is the staff of the hotel waving me goodbye well until the speedboat was far away and they just tiny specks on the horizon.

I highly recommend all passionate photographers to visit Tanzania, as their desire to create good photographs is made simpler by the stunning landscape, abundant wildlife and the beauty of the people of Tanzania, all of which is a photographer's dream. ■

Email me at sanjayfgupta@yahoo.com with any questions about the area, equipment or time to visit.