

# SERENITY IN THE SERENGETI

In the vast, untamed beauty of the Serengeti, a safari offers more than just wildlife encounters—it provides a rare chance to find peace and solace amid nature's raw, timeless rhythm.

Words: CHARUKESI RAMADURAI



It was raining lions in the Serengeti on that chilly day in late November. It is true that we were in the middle of the season known as the 'short rains'—when there are short spells of intermittent showers every day—but I was not expecting this deluge of big cats. It started right on the drive from the tiny airstrip at Seronera in central Serengeti towards our camp due north.

The hour-long bush flight from the bustling town of Arusha had been through stormy, cloudy skies, and a mild drizzle welcomed us to the African Savannah. Barely 15 minutes later, our driver-guide Felix suddenly stopped the jeep by the side of the empty mud road. I peered out to see a grumpy lioness under a tree; she was not enjoying the afternoon showers one bit. "What are you smiling about," she seemed to snarl when I let out a whoop of joy. My first big cat sighting in Tanzania! Lots more to come, Felix promised. And I am happy to report—he did deliver on this.

## THE LION SLEEPS TONIGHT

We checked into our luxury tent at the Serengeti Under Canvas, a mobile camp from Andbeyond, that follows the path of the annual wildebeest migration from the Serengeti in Tanzania to the Maasai Mara



Our guide



in Kenya. Considered one of nature's most awesome phenomena, the great migration also happens in reverse every year, when millions of wildebeest return to the Tanzanian Savannah just in time for the healing rains. And we were there to witness this spectacle.

Now, I know that 'mobile camp' suggests roughing it out in the wilderness, but nothing could be further from the truth. With only 10 tents, Under Canvas was the absolute epitome of glamping, complete with a double bed, a couch, easy chairs on the outside porch, and with a dedicated butler for each

tent. Ours was soft-spoken Edward, who took care of us through our time there: from waking us up with coffee and cookies at the crack of dawn (safari holidays are not for sleeping in!) to managing our dietary preferences and laundry, Edward was always ready with a smile.

Since the camp was set up in the middle of the Serengeti, with no fencing to keep animals away, we were also under strict instructions to not step out unaccompanied after sunset. And so, Edward would appear in front of our tent at dinnertime with a large torch to escort us to the plush dining

area for our elaborate three-course meals, or to the cosy bar and lounge for an evening cocktail. And when it was not raining, a roaring campfire would be set up at a central zone, where we would warm our hands and exchange notes with other guests about the day's experiences in the forest.

Why no fencing, you ask? That is because Andbeyond is an avid advocate of responsible wildlife tourism in Africa and believes that animals deserve free movement through the land that originally belongs to them. But there is every precaution to ensure that guests are safe throughout their stay. And I



can assure you that falling asleep to the sound of hyenas howling in the distance or even a male lion growling in a low pitch from somewhere deep within the Savannah—while you are ensconced in a warm bed—is an unmatched thrill.

#### ROAMING FREE

Eager to see what awaited us, we clambered on to our safari jeeps bright and early the

next morning. Our plan was to stay out the whole day, which meant that the kitchen team had woken up even earlier to pack our picnic breakfast and lunch. And off we went, with Felix pointing out the smaller animals that stayed hidden in the mist and identifying birds from their whispered songs.

The sun was just coming out after a night of rain, and the air was cool and heavy with the promise of exciting wildlife experiences.

Herds of elephants crossed our path a mere 500 metres from our camp, with the wise matriarchs leading the group and protecting the tiny ones from wandering away. Giraffes poked their heads through the tall shrubbery, while zebras contentedly munched on their breakfast of fresh grass.

The big cats' sighting started with a pair of male lions sleeping under a tree, waking up to stare at us with an intensity that sent

chills down our spines. Lions are nocturnal mammals, doing most of their hunting and eating during the night, Felix explained. "But that is not to say they are always sleeping through the day," he hastened to add.

Surely enough, we soon came upon a large pride of three lionesses with seven cubs between them, suckling, frolicking, climbing trees, and generally being frisky. The mama lions took turns watching them wearily as the

tiny cubs ventured farther and farther away from them, as if to see how far they could push the boundaries of independence. We spent a good half hour close to this pride, watching the family dynamics playing out in front of our fascinated eyes.

We finally managed to tear ourselves away from this scene for breakfast, which Felix set up at an open spot under the shade of a sprawling fig tree. As we waited, he set

up a picnic table (covered by a striking red tablecloth, no less) and uncovered jar upon jar of muesli, muffins, eggs, breads, and preserves. This was easily one of the most delightful locations I had ever had breakfast in, with miles of wide-open Savannah stretching out in all directions and hardly another human being in sight.

The morning went by quickly, with more incredible encounters—a pack of hyenas on



A cosy setup

Guides upon arrival



As curious as we are



Cooling off in the mid-day sun



Glamping by way of the Serengeti



Calmly grazing

the prowl, droves of Thompson's gazelles and impalas, troops of olive baboons, and most importantly, massive herds of wildebeest marching past in a single file, following some secret command issued by the leader. They seemed to be moving purposefully towards a predetermined destination, neighing and grunting in panic as they dashed across the mud path in front of the jeep.

Many years ago, I had spent a few days in the Maasai Mara in July, during peak migration season, watching these wildebeest brave the deadly crocodiles of the Mara River to cross over from Tanzania. This passage back to their homes in the southern Serengeti was equally stunning and dangerous—with lions and leopards waiting for them out of the water—and it boggled my mind to think they did this back and forth like clockwork every single year.

More lions made an appearance as we drove on: Simba himself standing on a rock overlooking his kingdom (thank you, The Lion King, for that indelible image), lionesses grooming themselves and each other in a timeless bonding ritual, adolescent cubs playing and mock fighting in a rebellious mood, and of course, dozing off in the mid-afternoon heat. The Serengeti was everything I had imagined it to be, and then some. We returned to the Under Canvas camp just as the sun was beginning to set, exhausted but also exhilarated from a day of being out in the open, seeing nature at her finest. [www.andbeyond.com](http://www.andbeyond.com)