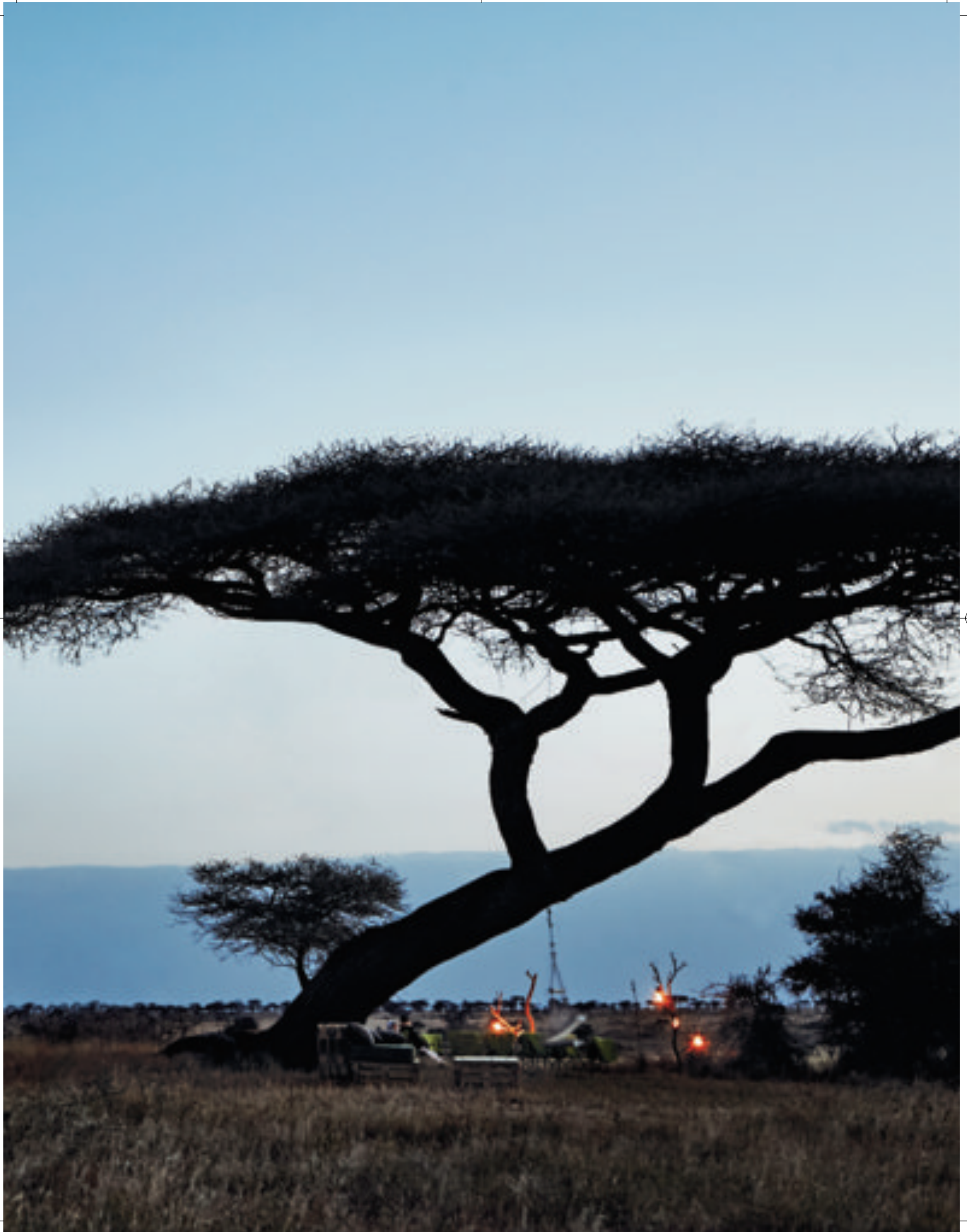


SHADOW LANDS

A SECRET SECTION OF TANZANIA'S SERENGETI NATIONAL PARK HAS JUST OPENED UP TO VISITORS FOR THE FIRST TIME IN 20 YEARS. ANTHONY SATTIN GOES ON THE PROWL FOR THE BIG CATS THAT HAVE FLOURISHED IN THIS WILDERNESS, BEFORE KICKING BACK ON ONE OF THE MOST BEAUTIFUL LAKES IN AFRICA. PHOTOGRAPHS BY OLIVER PILCHER





We want blood on safari. In the old days, a certain amount was guaranteed. Now we are onlookers, we want to be there when a lion or cheetah catches its breakfast or dinner

THE OTHER WEEK I SAT

around. I sat, and watched, and waited. And I heard a lion roar. It sounded as though it was just outside my tent. I held my breath, hoping for clarity, and for a moment even the cicadas stopped twitching their tymbals and the bush fell silent. Then Lewis laughed. 'What better way to announce dinner?'

No better way to start a safari. The previous evening I had dined on... I'm not sure what, on a plane from London. Twenty-four hours and several short bush flights later, I was in the Serengeti, Tanzania's blue-chip National Park. It felt about as remote as it is possible to get. Thompson's gazelle grazed on the dirt track that

passes for an airstrip just minutes after the small Cessna had landed.

The Serengeti is savannah, mostly sloping flatlands, green in the rainy season and burned in the summer. The part I had come to, in the park's remote east corner, long famous for its kopjes – beautiful rock outcrops that break the horizon – is now also known for its big cats. (Namiri Plains, the new six-tent camp where I was staying, echoes this: *namiri* means 'big cats' in Swahili.)

For the past 20 years or so, this part of the Serengeti has been closed to everyone other than researchers to preserve its pristine condition as a truly wild place, allowing the wildlife and fragile short-grass plains to proliferate in a protected environment. It's certainly an arrangement that seems to have suited the big cats because there are more of them there than elsewhere in the park. A baker's dozen of lion, presided over by a large male with a magnificent shaggy mane and a taut, muscular frame, were lying around a water hole immediately below Namiri Plains when we arrived at camp.

The lion were silent as dinner was served – beef, fresh salads and South African wine – but there was a breeze, and the large mess tent was open to the

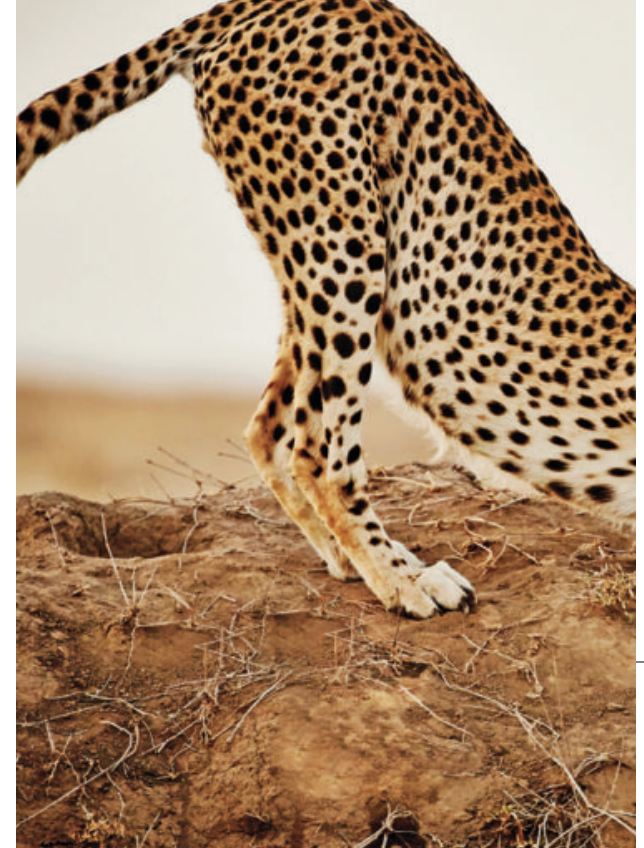
view, so I knew they could smell our presence. Later, lying in darkness, having noted that there was no fence, no ditch, in fact nothing between myself and the lions but a thin membrane of canvas, I listened to the night noises and smiled at my luck at having got so far from the familiar so quickly.

If you have been on safari, you will know that national parks and reserves in Africa insist that you keep to the roads and do not drive across open country. You may also know the sinking feeling of being part of a posse of Jeeps tracking a cheetah or lion while it, in turn, tracks its prey. There is none of that around Namiri Plains, and for two good reasons. This camp is the first allowed into this 200sq km zone and, because the wide-open plains provide few natural campsites, it could be the only one here for the foreseeable future. So there is little chance of running into other vehicles and very few roads, so most driving has to be cross-country. And that is good news, because along with a sense of being remote, the other thing we long for on safari is exclusivity. We also want to see a kill.

We do want blood on safari; in the old days, when we shot wildlife with rifles, a certain amount of it was

Opposite: elephants, at Namiri Plains in the Serengeti. They have also been introduced to Rubondo Island, over the past 30 years. *Previous pages:* one of six tents at Namiri Plains camp, set beneath giant acacias in a seldom-seen eastern corner of the Serengeti





I could see an adult male cheetah, as relaxed as a dog in front of a fire. Cheetahs are the fastest

guaranteed. Now we are onlookers, shooting with cameras, we want to be there when a lion or cheetah catches its breakfast or dinner. To do that requires a guide who understands the ways of the wild, and also a good dose of luck.

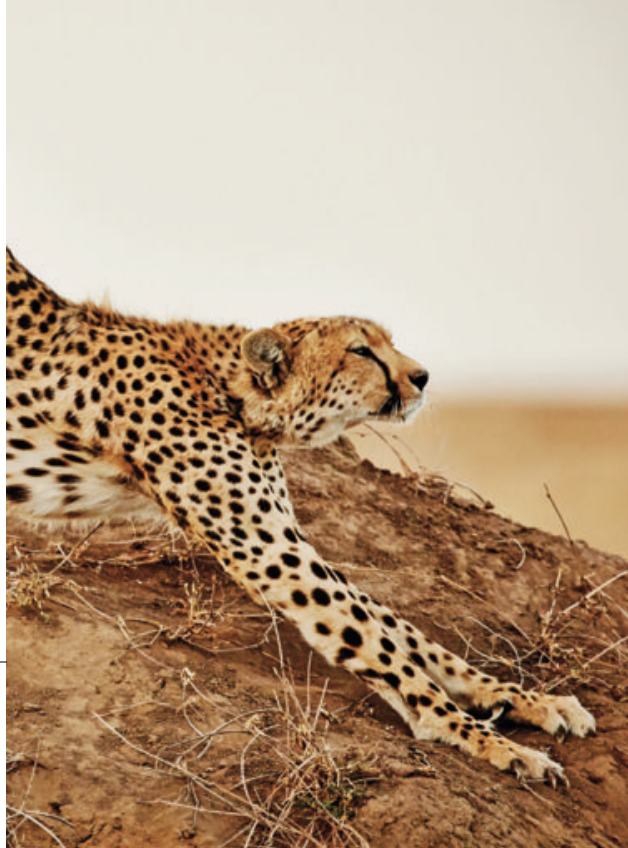
I had the former in Lewis Mangaba, a Shona man from Zimbabwe who can read all the signs, knows about natural healing and can smell animals on the wind. And there was no shortage of game: as day broke, we spotted a lioness with three cubs between the camp and the watering hole. I assumed they were part of the pride I had seen the night before. The mother paid us no attention and, as she slouched through the grass towards a hartebeest, Lewis began to

offload some knowledge. ‘Lactating females need to feed every day... You see the hartebeest? The lioness needs to be very close, maybe 10 metres, if she is going to catch it... she can only run 500 metres... she has small lungs and heart, and will overheat...’ While he continued – explaining why she was sitting where she was, with good sightlines, and downwind so that prey couldn’t smell her – the lioness trotted away from the cubs and I stopped listening, distracted by her concentration, power and beauty.

By the time we stopped for a picnic breakfast, we had spotted reedbuck, Grant’s gazelle, impala (‘good cheetah fodder’), steenbok, Maasai giraffe and

‘mud boys’ (bull buffalos). By midday we had added an ark-ful of other creatures: an impressive elderly elephant shadowed by a younger student bull, busy learning the ways, a thundering herd of buffalo, an enormous martial eagle, an improbable secretary bird with head-feathers like something concocted for Ascot and then, with the sun high and hard overhead, seven more lionesses in the shade of an acacia. ‘You see how the youngest is grooming the elder in the hope she will be groomed in return? ...Such brilliant killing machines...’ But there were to be no kills, no blood, and we returned to camp to do as the game was doing, to doze through the heat of the day.

Above, a cheetah at Namiri Plains, which was shut off for two decades to help preserve the untouched wilderness; it now has the highest density of big cats in the Serengeti, with between 20 and 40 cheetahs. Lions are best seen in December and January during the wildebeest and zebra migration



creatures on earth, but this one did more than look lazily back at us, scratch, yawn and settle

It was good, for someone who spends too long looking at screens and book pages, to stretch my eyes on vast landscapes, to peer into that epic light in the hope of seeing... 'You see warthog running on the horizon?' Lewis asked that afternoon as we bouncing over the scrub. I was delighted that I could. 'Look to the left... the termite mound.' We were still some way off, but I could see what he was pointing at: an adult male cheetah, as relaxed as a dog in front of a fire. He was full-bellied, ears pricked, back legs crossed, black eyes sharp, the stripe down his cheek like the dark tracks of tears. Cheetahs are the fastest creatures on earth, but this one did no more than look lazily back at us, scratch, yawn and settle. A pair of lapwing screeched nearby.

There were kills, plenty of them – one near the camp, if the bellowing of

lion that night was anything to go by – but still I didn't see anything. (The screams from an American woman in the next tent – at least 20 metres away – were to do with a spider or some crawling creature.) But by the next day I understood that one of the greatest thrills of safari is not blood, but an appreciation of the complex interaction of animals. With Lewis it was easy and I was soon learning to read the belly profiles of predators to see how recently they had fed, to note the ear-messages of elephants and to work out the age of the big cats from the pigment shading of their noses.

There was fascination, too, in the smallest detail of that interaction. Breakfast that second morning was taken beneath an acacia where a leopard had feasted: secretary bird and guinea

fowl feathers were scattered across the dried earth. But also here were dried spoor, animal footprints, remains of other kills, a hide, the intricate work of a poisonous tunnel-web spider, a single pink flower, a mongoose skull... And then there was the earth. Not the red I had expected, but grey dust from the nearby OI Doinyo Lengai volcano, which erupted six years ago and which had mixed with rainwater to form a cement-like floor.

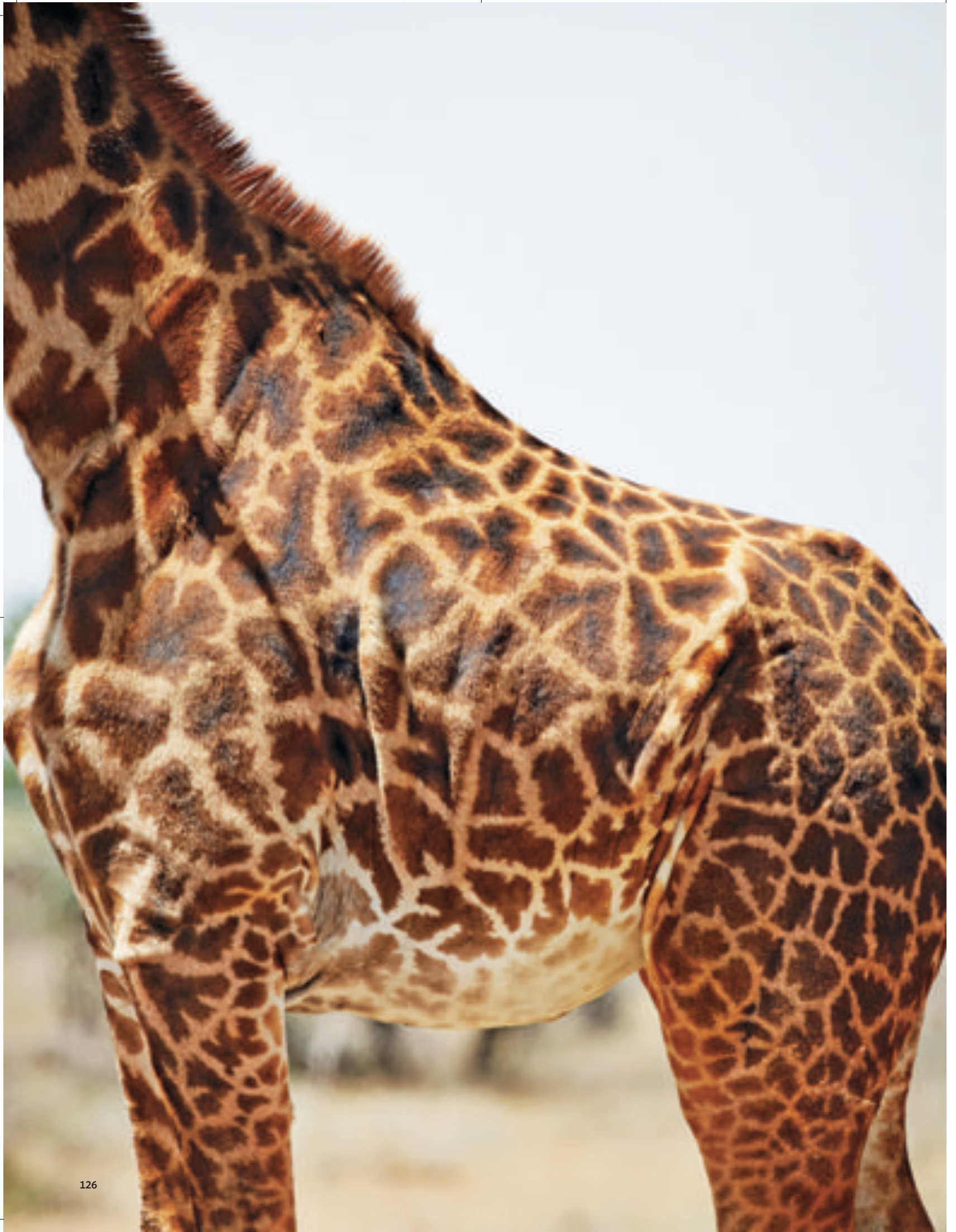
ZANZIBAR IS THE MOST OBVIOUS PLACE to go after a Serengeti safari, but three and half hours and several short flights in the other direction was somewhere I had always wanted to go. Lake Victoria is the largest tropical lake in the world. At 210 miles from end to end, it is an inland sea set in the

When we arrived at Namiri Plains camp, a baker's dozen of lion were lying around a waterhole,



presided over by a large male with a magnificent shaggy mane and a taut, muscular frame





heart of Africa: from here, water flows thousands of miles north along the Nile towards the Mediterranean.

As we came in to land, a ring of green in the south-west corner of this vast expanse of water turned out to be Rubondo Island, one of the least-known Tanzanian national parks, an island some 17 miles long, covered in dense forest and uninhabited apart from parks staff and visitors. Chimpanzees were released here in the 1960s and since then elephant, giraffe and colobus

hissed – but they had already seen us, a pair of immense and improbable shapes out for an afternoon graze. They stared hard for a few minutes then continued to crop the grass, making their ponderous way towards the water before finally slipping in. Their passage took an hour, one of the most pleasing I have spent in a long time.

At the beginning of this safari I had felt frustrated at the lack of a kill, at the sleepy cheetah, lions licking blood from their paws, at the lack of

guide called Deos. As the Tomcat's engines cut a deep wake in the water and we headed for the fishing grounds, he told me tales about tilapia and Nile perch, which can grow longer and heavier than a man, but I had few expectations. I had already heard how poachers had depleted the stocks and how fishing here wasn't what it used to be. So I was surprised, delighted, an hour out, when my spool began to spin – click clack – and I reeled it in a perch. It flapped furiously on the deck,

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monkeys have also been introduced, to join native vervet monkeys, hippos, bushbucks and sitatunga, a marsh-loving antelope.

Rubondo looks and sounds like a tropical island, with birdsong by day, the chatter of unseen creatures at night and the glimmer of fireflies near the shore. Because the forest is so dense and the island so large, it can be hard to see chimps or elephants, although I did try, marching between a park ranger with a single, bolt-action rifle and Habibu, another excellent guide, who pointed out the spoor, the dried droppings, the insects, the thorn trees. We were heading for a treehouse on the island's swampy edge to look for some of the many birds that live around the island, or pass by on one their migrations. But once up in the hide, it wasn't just a bird that I spotted.

'Is that a hippo?'

'No,' said Habibu, 'it's a rock... But that,' pointing elsewhere, 'is a croc. And,' he continued after a few moments, 'it seems to be dead: it was in the same place yesterday.'

Dead croc. Can we take a look?


Down the steps, the ranger in front, over terrain more suited to water lilies than feet, we got close enough to the croc to see the pattern of its skin and the formidable jaws. Being on foot, down on the ground, changed everything: I immediately felt vulnerable, a feeling that seemed justified when the crocodile suddenly moved.

Not dead, then, just waiting for a kill.

We stood and watched as it progressed threateningly through the shallow water and disappeared. It was then Habibu spotted the hippos – 'Don't move!' he

action. Now that I was on the ground, I was happy just to watch, to feel alert and alive.

Rubondo National Park includes the waters around the island. One day I went out in a kayak to trace the line of the shore and watch monkeys watching the sunset from the treetops. Another day I went out with a fishing

then lay still, beaten. Deos measured it, quickly because it was a catch not a kill and, at two kilos, was too small to keep. As I tossed it back into the lake there was another of those magical interactions when a fish eagle leapt off its perch high up a lakeside tree and soared gloriously overhead, dropping out of the sky and plunging into the lake. 



A seven-night Tanzanian safari with Journeys by Design (+ 44 1273 623790; www.journeysbydesign.com), combining three nights at Namiri Plains camp and four nights on Rubondo Island, Lake Victoria, costs from £3,849 per person, including all ground arrangements, meals, drinks, park fees and all internal flights. International flights with Kenya Airways cost from £809 return to Kilimanjaro, Tanzania