

FINANCIAL TIMES

# How to speed it

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A WORD



A large herd of wildebeest crossing a river in Kenya. The image is a close-up, high-angle shot of the animals' heads and horns, creating a dense, textured pattern of dark, curved shapes. The water is dark and turbulent, with white foam visible from the animals' movement. The overall tone is dramatic and intense.

# THE INCREDIBLE

Main picture: hundreds of wildebeest crossing the River Mara in Kenya. Inset above right: one of Nomad Tanzania's mobile tents in the Serengeti.



**Pioneering conservationists may have preserved the world's greatest wildlife migration, but seeing it in all its glory was never guaranteed – until now, says Lucia van der Post.**



# THE JOURNEY

If, like me, you have this incurable nostalgia for the Africa that used to be, the Africa that one reads about in the journals of the great explorers, then there is scarcely anywhere better to be than on Tanzania's great Serengeti plains. It is home to what is often called the greatest wildlife show on earth – the year-long circular migration of some millions of animals involved in a ceaseless search for the short, sweet grass that sprouts after the rains. It's a journey without end, a journey of some 1,400 miles that begins on the day the migratory animals – some 1.5m wildebeest, 200,000 zebra and 400,000 Thomson's gazelle being the main players – are born and one they're compelled to follow until the moment they breathe their last. For those who haven't seen it, it is almost impossible to convey just how awesome a spectacle it is. Here are plains so vast that you understand why it is called Serengeti (from the Masai word *Siringit* meaning "the place that runs on forever") and here, if you catch the migration in the right place at the right time, are Africa's iconic animals in the sort of abundance that elsewhere has gone forever. It's a moving testament to the power of millions of years of encoded memory that impels the huge herds to keep constantly on the move, braving crocodile-filled rivers and the bands of predators – lion, leopard, hyena, cheetah – that lie in wait, as they react to distant storm clouds, searching for the short grass they need to survive. It's also a living witness to the glories of a totally intact ecosystem, as well as a devastating reminder of what we have lost everywhere else.

The great migrations that were essential for the survival of herds all over the world have almost entirely disappeared. Wildlife today is mostly found in restricted protected areas, all the great ecosystems broken up by political boundaries and human expansion. Once millions of bison moved some 375 miles or more across the plains of America. The giant reindeer herds of the Far North are pale remnants of what used to be. In the South Africa of my childhood, people still spoke with awe of the great springbok migrations that used to trek regularly through the arid Karoo area – the last one took place in 1896 but it was so memorable that people still talked of the two weeks that it took for a migration to pass a given spot, and how the dust kicked up by the pounding herds took some six weeks to settle. A few smaller migrations remain – moose and mule deer within the US's Yellowstone Park and the Uganda cob that migrates in its thousands from the swamps of southern Sudan into Uganda. All the rest are now gone, mere footnotes in the history books, but in Serengeti, as well as in Kenya's Masai Mara (part of this same ecosystem), thanks to the vision of pioneering conservationists (Myles Turner, Serengeti's





warden from 1956 to 1972, the Grzimeks, father and son, whose *Serengeti Shall Not Die* is a wonderful and moving read, and the two governments, to name just a few), you can still catch this most dramatic of wildlife spectacles.

But how to catch it? There's the rub. The first time I thought I was going to see the migration I arrived in a state of high excitement only to find a few straggly lines of mad, capering wildebeest, with a few attendant zebra and Thomson's gazelle and the occasional sighting of a lion or a cheetah. And though it's always a treat just to breathe the Serengeti air, this wasn't what I thought I'd come for.

The problem is the animals are always on the move but not always in the same spectacular numbers and not always at the same time of year – everything is dependent upon the rains and when and where they fall. If you want to see the migration in all its glory, timing is all. You need to be flexible and ready to move as the animals move. This year, for instance, Nicky Fitzgerald, CC Africa's marketing director, tells me that the animals have been behaving rather badly: "They zinged through the Serengeti at breakneck speed and [as I write, in mid-August] they're pouring over the Tanzanian border and across the Mara river into the Masai Mara, where they will settle and graze until endish October. Then they will slowly and steadily head back south to the short grass plains in the southern Serengeti, arriving at the end of December." You will also need to be prepared for rain, for it is rain that nourishes the short, sweet grass that is the imperative behind this ceaseless movement.

Fortunately – nature's gift to tourists – there are two main seasons and three specific places where you are most likely to catch it at its most spectacular. Down in the southern Serengeti, in the Ndutu area, between January and March, the wildebeest gather on the short grass plains to give birth. Almost all calve within the same three-week period and to see these glorious plains, as I did last February, like one vast maternity ward, filled from one horizon to the other with wildebeest mothers and their calves, umbilical cords often still dangling down their fronts, cavorting in what seemed like a vast, green Eden, was an awesome sight. A baby wildebeest starts struggling to its feet within minutes of its birth, runs within five or 10 minutes and after just a day can keep up with the herd.

Here I spent two magical days with CC Africa's Serengeti Under Canvas seasonal camp near Ndutu. I had an enchanting tent – gorgeous bed and all mod cons, but set deep in the bush which is mostly how I like to be. Each day I would set out with Frank, my



guide, and we would wander round in the 4x4 taking in the extraordinary scenes, going where we fancied, never very far from our base. We didn't have to get up at crack of dawn (the animals were temporarily fairly static, milling around, calving or feasting on the sweet grass) but what a treat to be able to have a leisurely breakfast and then set out, picnic in tow, knowing that a lie-in didn't mean missing all the action. We tracked lion and found a pack so replete, so bloated that they scarcely had the energy to move a paw. We followed the trails of vultures hovering in the sky, watched them coming in to land more skilfully than any pilot and generally had a ball.

The next big spectacular is the rut, which takes place at the end of the long rains of March and April. Though this season isn't popular with tourists (they fear the mud and the rains), real aficionados of the Serengeti think it is one of the loveliest seasons – it's fresh and green and other tourists are thin on the ground. CC Africa's Serengeti Under Canvas has three mobile camps carefully placed near the action, which you can book into just the way you'd book into a lodge. This is the time when the wildebeest move off the plains into the woodland zone in central Serengeti and gather in large compressed numbers to be ready for the rut. In the space of about three weeks half a million calves are conceived amidst indescribable noise and confusion as the bulls compete for cows, clash horns, bleat and cavort. All the while, all along the route thousands of other animals, huge herds of zebra and buffalo, as well as topi, other antelope and the odd rhino, join the journey; and lying in wait are the predators. Being territorial and needing to guard their domains, few of them follow the migration – they merely wait for what must seem like the biggest feast on earth regularly comes trundling into



view. The old, the weak, the newly born and the unlucky never make it but thousands of others do.

From central Serengeti, the herds move up into the Western Corridor. On their way, some time between April and June (with June being the best bet) they have to cross the Grumeti river where some of Africa's oldest, wildest and largest Nile crocodiles are to be found. To see the bleating herds massing together, sensing their fear at the crossing combined with their compulsion to do so, is to see nature at its most extraordinary. They move nervously, they hover on the brink, the crocodiles circle below. They lose courage and pull back. Then they mass up on the bank again and eventually they go – first one, then another, then a headlong stream. The crocodiles always get a few. It is not a pretty sight. The thrashing of the hooves, the bleating, the blood and the sense of lives

**Top: pre-dinner drinks at CC Africa's Serengeti Under Canvas. Above: zebra herding in Serengeti. Above right: a typical game drive with CC Africa.**



snuffed out. It is a reminder that nature is tough. It isn't interested in individual fates. It has its eye on posterity and on the survival of the masses. Many are trampled and drowned, and later the vultures and marabou storks come circling, attracted by the smell of death. Those that emerge on the other side have another gauntlet to run – this time of predators, lion and hyena who have merely to give mild chase and latch on to the nearest unlucky beast. CC Africa's Grumeti River Camp is brilliantly placed for all these viewings, if you can get the timings right.

On and round through the Western Corridor go the herds. Once this lay outside the protective embrace of the Serengeti Game Reserve, so that the animals had to pass through unregulated land where they faced illegal poaching for the bush-meat trade as well as authorised hunting. These days this corner has been made safe thanks to the efforts of US commodity trader Paul Tudor Jones. Working with the Grumeti Fund on over 140,000 hectares of land, he has put anti-poaching patrols in place, is restoring the land, reintroducing wildlife and, on top of that, has built one of the most spectacular and luxurious of all the lodges from which the migration may be viewed – Singita Grumeti Reserves. As you stand on the vast lawn outside the most lushly luxurious of them all, Sasakwa Lodge (English gentleman's manor meets colonial Africa), peering out at what seems like most of Africa spread before you, it does more than take your



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breath away, it makes you understand why Tudor Jones, an über successful hedge-fund manager who presumably could buy almost any of the gewgaws the world has to offer, has chosen to put his money here. When I was there in February the wildebeest were still calving down near Ndutu, and the plains were stunning to look at, but the big beasts were thin on the ground. To look out over those plains when covered with the migration passing through on its way to the Masai Mara must be one of the world's great sights.

It doesn't come cheap. All three lodges are small, with just 52 beds in all (74 from next January). Faru Faru, all cream leather and gleaming chrome but seductively comfortable with it, is the most modern. Sabora Camp is, for my money, the most glamorous – Ralph Lauren-style tents with four-posters, libraries, Persian carpets and oil lamps, and the view from the outside dining room is right across the plains, a typical Serengeti landscape with the flat-topped acacia trees, the short grass and low mountains in the background. But timing here is key for the lodges do not move, they can merely sit and wait, though given that the migration is described as being "two weeks long and 20 miles wide", quite often there are not long journeys to be made to find it. Most years the migration passes through this area some time between mid-May and August, but making your booking for the right weeks will always be a matter of luck.

From here the migration crosses into Kenya, tackling the Mara river – more dramatic scenes, more life-and-death struggles, as it does so. Here we once sat all day long in the care of Calvin Cottar when we were staying at his 1920s safari camp just outside the Mara. We sat alone, our little group, in our Land Rover protected by some overhanging trees, utterly caught up in the drama of the river crossing. And we were lucky, for none of the many minivans that so scar the face of

the Mara came near us. Dramatic though the viewings can be in Kenya, for me the Serengeti side usually wins out – there are fewer people, smaller lodges and you have much more of a sense of the real treasures that Africa has to offer – space, silence and physical beauty on a spectacular scale. From August to October the herds feast on the green grasslands of the Mara, but around November they head back south for the short, light rains and the cycle begins all over again.

As you can see, to experience the migration in its full glory you need to be flexible and ready to move as the animals move, to be with guides who know where the animals are and how to get you there. Many of the original, static camps (places such as Ndutu Lodge, the lodge at Seronera) are perfectly fine if your visit happens to coincide with the migration passing through but very disappointing if it doesn't. The long drives needed to track it down are often impractical and disappointing. This is where the new breed of mobile, seasonal camps set up by CC Africa, Nomad Tanzania and one or two other enterprising operators have utterly transformed the scene. When I first had my disappointing experience it was because we were booked into a lodge which could do nothing about the fact that the migration didn't pitch up when it was supposed to. (There's a wonderfully useful way of tracking the action – log onto [www.wildwatch.com/great\\_migration](http://www.wildwatch.com/great_migration).)

CC Africa's Serengeti Under Canvas pre-books camping sites (which are private, romantic and in the bush, far from lodges and other operators) at places and times carefully calculated to coincide with the known migratory patterns.

Its three camps are based in the south when the cows are calving and then move together to the north, staying in place for up to three months as the migratory herds hang around for long periods. When the herds are on the move, the camps move every two to four weeks so that they are never more than a

couple of hours from the main herds (though the company is careful to point out that rainfall patterns and animals are unpredictable and nothing can be guaranteed).

Nomad Tanzania has fully mobile tents and guides (Squack Evans is their star guide) and can up-sticks and take you to exactly where the migration is at any given time. If you were planning the safari of a lifetime and the migration was high on your agenda, then probably the best way to do it would be to combine a fixed lodge or two with a private mobile camp. To spend, say, three days at Serengeti Grumeti Reserves (for the glorious views and the inordinate comfort alone it's worth it), three nights at one of CC Africa's Serengeti Under Canvas camps close to where the migration is and, finally, a few days with Nomad Tanzania finding out exactly where the migration is, no matter how eccentrically contrary the rain or the animals have turned out to be, would seem to me a dream scenario.

If you're set on seeing it from the Kenyan side, there is a wonderfully spoiling option offered by Oldonyo Laro, a vast private estate owned by the Bonde Nielsen family near the Tanzanian border which you can hire it in its entirety – villas, wildlife, staff, planes and helicopters. Each day your pilot finds out where the herds are and off you set in your private plane or helicopter.

If you've never been to Africa and you plan to go just once then it would be hard to imagine a spectacle more dramatic than the migration on the move. I'm reminded of Sir Osbert Sitwell's reply to Alan Moorehead when he remarked that he was considering a journey to the temples of Angkor-Wat but was having trouble making up his mind: "Anyone who can go to Angkor-Wat and does not is mad," he said. That's what I feel about Serengeti and the migration. ♦

### AFRICA ON THE HOOF

Lucia van der Post was a guest of **Kenya Airways** and Africa specialist **Journeys by Design** (01273-623 790; [www.journeysbydesign.com](http://www.journeysbydesign.com)), which offers a 10-night Tanzanian safari of three nights with CC Africa Under Canvas, four nights with Nomad Tanzania's mobile tented camp and three nights in Faru Faru camp at Singita Serengeti, from £6,320 including ground arrangement service, all meals, drinks and private internal transfers, but excluding international flights. A one-week safari using Oldonyo Laro in Kenya as base, including exclusive use of the ranch, private mobile camp, guides, all food and drink, and private aircraft and helicopter transfers throughout, costs from £20,000 per day for up to 14 adults and four children.

**CC Africa Serengeti Under Canvas**, +2711-809 4314; [www.ccafrica.com](http://www.ccafrica.com). **Singita Grumeti Reserves**, 0131-476 6822; [www.singita.com](http://www.singita.com). **Kenya Airways** (020-8283 1818; [www.kenya-airways.com](http://www.kenya-airways.com)) flies daily from London Heathrow to Nairobi, from £520 economy, £1,810 in Premier World (with flat bed); and from London Heathrow to Dar es Salaam (via Nairobi), from £608 economy, £1,858 Premier World.

**Barefoot over the Serengeti** by David Read (Mawenzi Books, £12.95) is another wonderful read for anyone thinking of visiting.

**Top: a Nile crocodile lunges for a wildebeest crossing the Grumeti. Above left: the Ralph Lauren-style Sabora Camp at Singita. Above right: campfire stories with Nomad Tanzania.**