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# TOP OF THEIR **GAME**

ON A SAFARI CIRCUIT FOR CONNOISSEURS, PETER BROWNE VISITS THREE PIONEERING TANZANIAN GAME RESERVES THAT OFFER FIVE-STAR COMFORT, EXHILARATING ENCOUNTERS WITH WILDLIFE AND A REAL SENSE OF REMOTENESS. PHOTOGRAPHS BY LLOYD ZIFF

Lionesses rest in the heat of the day in Katavi National Park, Tanzania's third largest reserve but one of its least visited.







October in Katavi: hippos crowd into one of the last mud baths for miles around. Opposite, a breeding herd of elephant visits Chada Katavi camp



**T**HERE COULD BE NO mistaking where we were about to land. On the left-hand side of the twin-prop, soaring high above the clouds against the blank blue canvas of the East African sky, was the iconic colossus of Mount Kilimanjaro. Then the aircraft began its descent and the celestial vision vanished in a bank of earthbound cloud and rain.

Kilimanjaro International Airport is near the town of Arusha, the gateway to Tanzania's celebrated safari circuits: Ngorongoro Crater, with its soda lake and flamingos and the eerie Olduvai gorge; Lake Manyara National Park, home to tree-climbing lions; the vast Serengeti plains. Half a million tourists are catapulted into the wilds of Africa each year from Arusha, crouched in the rain-shadow of Mount Meru, its drizzly slopes skirted with coffee plantations and banana groves. Entrepreneurs abound here, and not just the usual curio sellers and cut-price safari operators. A sizeable European expat community (Arusha is the headquarters of the Rwandan war crimes tribunals) has created a need for South African chain stores such as Woolworths and Shoprite, and a Steers hamburger joint; the town

centre is clogged with minibuses and four-wheel-drives, and the streets are lined with markets, restaurants, garages, furniture workshops, and also with thousands of plants – trees, shrubs, flowering perennials – neatly packaged for sale and displayed in well-ordered nurseries on the roadsides.

Together with the photographer Lloyd Ziff and East African expert Will Jones, I was here in search of the ultimate safari – a circuit for the cognoscenti. Our first stop would be Katavi in the far west of the country, a remote, little-visited national park with a reputation for big herds of buffalo and elephant. From there, we would fly to the shores of Lake Tanganyika to track chimpanzees in the Mahale Mountains. And finally we would visit a vast new private reserve bordering the Serengeti National Park, possibly the most audacious and certainly the most sophisticated safari set-up that East Africa has ever seen.

AS WE FLEW SOUTH-WEST from Arusha, the astonishing craters, salt lakes and folding mountains of northern Tanzania gave way to classic East African landscapes of vast, open grasslands dotted with trees and, very occasionally, villages. Further west,

the villages disappeared altogether and the straw-coloured countryside seemed utterly empty until, as we came in to land at the airstrip that serves Katavi National Park, the noise of the Cessna's engines flushed out zebra, buffalo, giraffe and warthogs from the scrubby woodland surrounding now-dry seasonal lakes.

Chada Katavi is a handsome bush camp with six tents spaced well apart in a grove of acacia and tamarind trees overlooking the shallow basin of Lake Chada. There is a dining tent and a small library tent, both furnished in contemporary-colonial style, with elegant place settings, heavy bronze sculptures and glossy photography books. After the rains, the views are of shimmering water and green grass tall enough to hide a hippo, but in October, when we visited, it is bone-dry, with only brittle grassland as far as the eye can see. At this time of year, bush fires are common and the black-cotton soil, fine as silt, covers everything with a coat of dust.

Chada was the first camp to open in Katavi, which is the third largest national park in Tanzania but one of the least visited. Even after recent upgrades and refurbishments, Chada remains true to its origins as a simple camp; while there



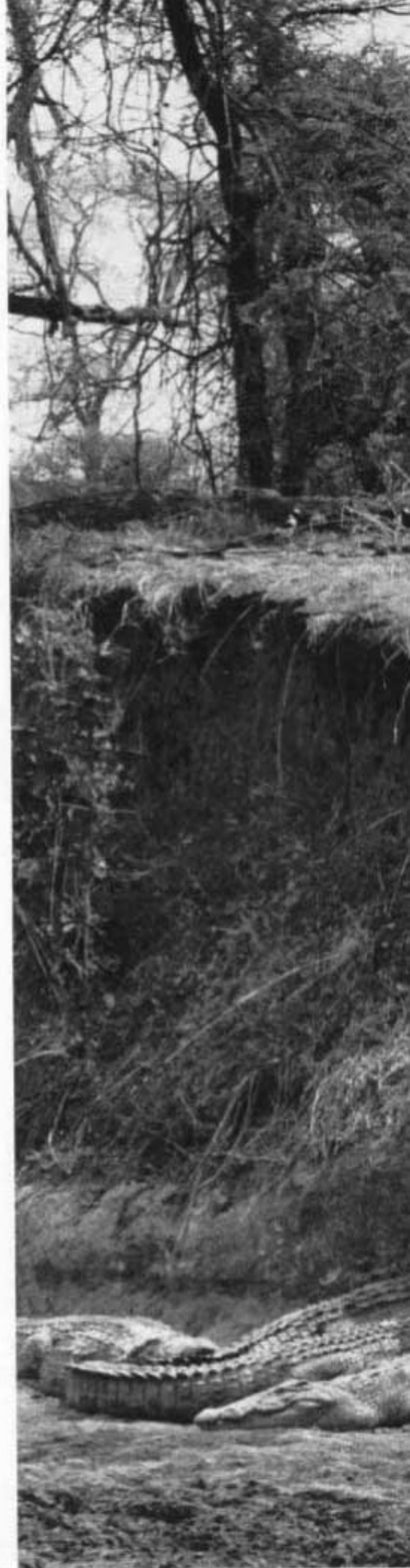
Top, Chada Katavi remains true to its roots as a simple bush camp. Above, *Borassus* palms surround the seasonal lakes in Katavi National Park. Opposite, in the dry season, crocodile caves provide shelter until the rain arrives

are kilims on the canvas floors and accomplished meals served at the candle-lit dining table, guests make do with long-drop loos and bucket showers. Until recently, visitors to this remote outpost could luxuriate in the knowledge that they were more or less alone in thousands of square kilometres of African wilderness. Things have changed, of course, and on arrival we drove past two new tented camps near the airstrip and, later, a fairly substantial lodge on the edge of the vast, flat Katisunga floodplain. But compared with the Serengeti and Ngorongoro Crater, which are visited by tens of thousands of tourists each year, Katavi is still blessedly untainted by tourism.

The park is very beautiful. The classic silhouette of the shade-giving, flat-topped *Acacia tortilis* is omnipresent, along with miraculously evergreen lala palms and towering, waving *Borassus* palms; and the spectral star-chestnut tree, with its luminous, almost-white bark, haunts the woodlands. We walked on the cracked, dry bed of the great Katuma River and along hippo trails, and watched as a pride of lion patiently stalked a herd of buffalo. Returning later that day, we watched the lions feed until the sun began to set and it was time to head back to camp.

Katavi is known for its large populations of crocodile and hippo, and in October, six long months into the dry season and just before the short rains, hundreds of hippos converge on the last mud pools for hundreds of kilometres. They are dehydrated and sunburnt; tempers fray and fights break out between males desperate to dominate even these stinking vestiges of last year's rains. It is a compelling sight: a mass of bloated bodies in a morass of mud and dung. Elsewhere along the riverbanks, Nile crocodiles are piled high in burrowed-out caves with only their tails exposed. Lying still, their hearts slowed to five beats a minute, these remnants of the great age of reptiles will hibernate until the November rains once again fill the rivers and lakes and there are fish to eat and the great life cycle starts again.

The daily cycle at Chada Katavi also revolves around food: a cooked breakfast served after an early-morning drive or walking safari, a light lunch, tea at about four, late-afternoon game-viewing and then drinks with canapés, followed by dinner. In the soporific heat of the day, guests peel off to read and relax in their tents; but small camps such as this are also very sociable, with new friendships sparked









this lake, Africa's deepest and longest. The park is notoriously difficult to access, with heavily forested mountains rising steeply from the shoreline and no roads leading to it, or through it.

But if getting there is an adventure, Greystoke Mahale camp rewards you with a cinematic sense of arrival in a strange and mysterious place. Backed by forbidding mountains straight out of a Tarzan fantasy, a peculiar, shaggy-thatched building lurches up from the lake's white-sand beach like some demented primordial bird about to take flight. On either side, in the fringe of lowland forest and palm trees, are six lovely, rustic rooms, thatched and mostly open to the elements. As we waded from the boat to the beach, where smiling staff offered ice-cold tropical drinks, sunlight bounced off the blue water and white sand in a persuasive imitation of the Caribbean. Later, sweating in the depths of the jungle, I put on a surgical mask and watched man's closest relatives swing through the trees, quarrel, contemplate, groom and mate.

There are about 700 wild chimpanzees in the park, around 70 of which are habituated to humans, thanks to researchers from Kyoto University who have had a base at Mahale for more than 40 years. The area was gazetted as a national park in 1985 and Greystoke Mahale was the first camp to introduce tourists, in 1989. Although there are more chimpanzee sightings here than at Gombe Stream (the chimpanzee sanctuary further north, made famous by Jane Goodall), staff at the camp are careful to warn guests that

by intense, shared experiences. Returning just after dark one evening, for example, several of us were held captive in the dining tent by a lone bull elephant nobody had seen or heard arrive; the next day, an entire herd descended on the camp before breakfast to Hoover up tamarind pods and use the acacias as scratching posts.

WITHIN AN HOUR OF LEAVING the heat and dust of Katavi, we saw the glittering expanse of Lake Tanganyika stretch ahead like a mirage. Our rickety charter flight – the only way to get here – had deposited us on the shore outside Mahale Mountains National Park, where we were met by a sturdy, motorised dhow for the hour-long boat transfer to Greystoke Mahale camp.

Mahale Mountains National Park is about halfway down the eastern shore of







Dinner table at dusk on Lake Tanganyika at Greystoke Mahale camp. *Opposite, top*, the equestrian centre at Singita Grumeti Reserves is one of the finest in Africa. *Below*, main pool at Sasakwa Lodge, Singita Grumeti



Greystoke Mahale on Lake Tanganyika is a luxury base from which to track chimpanzees in the Mahale Mountains. Opposite, there are 700 wild chimpanzees in the mountains; about 70 are habituated to humans

there can be no guarantees. On our visit, luckily, the habituated chimps, known as the Mimikire group, were close to camp and relatively easy to reach.

Dr Magdalene Lukasis-Braum, an inspiring young Polish vet who worked closely with Jane Goodall at Gombe Stream, runs Greystoke Mahale with her South African husband, Doug Braum. The couple took up their posts in March last year and the timing now seems prescient: in early June a flu-like epidemic broke out in the Mimikire group. It was a heartbreaking experience for Lukasis-Braum to watch mothers carrying their dead babies around like rag dolls, trying to wake them, grooming and caressing them, and to see orphaned juveniles pining to death. Seven weeks later, 13 chimpanzees were dead and autopsies confirmed what Lukasis-Braum already knew, having seen it before at Gombe Stream: the cause was a human strain of the pneumonia virus, introduced by a researcher or tourist (the new season had just started).

Since then, Lukasis-Braum has worked hard to get more stringent rules enforced in Mahale Mountains National Park. No children under 12 are allowed to visit the chimps, nor is anyone with a cold or flu. Visitors must stay at least 10 metres away from the chimps and wear surgical masks, and visits are limited to groups of six in strictly enforced, hour-long sessions organised by the Tanzania National Parks Authority.

We went 'chimpanzeeing' with Tolo, our Greystoke guide, and Mahamedi Seifu Kalunde, a traditional medicine man from the local Tongwe tribe who has worked in the forest for more than 30 years. Tracking chimpanzees through the jungle can be tricky: the primates roam incessantly in search of fruit, nesting overnight before moving on each morning. Trackers follow a network of trails, but for 'off-roading' they must hack at the tangled brush with machetes, and there are streams, slippery rocks and vertiginous inclines to negotiate. It is dark and humid in the forest, the silence punctuated by the snort of bush pigs in the undergrowth and the screech of red colobus monkeys in the tree canopies above.

Chimpanzees love to eat fruit, but they love to eat red colobus monkeys more. We watched them ambush a troop of their favourite prey and, although the hunt was unsuccessful, it gave us a glimpse of the animals' ferocity. An adult male chimpanzee has the strength

of four men, and once a colobus monkey is caught, it is quickly ripped apart in a feeding frenzy. Catching up with a berry-eating family group the next day, we found a scene of dappled, bucolic serenity, disturbed only by the energetic thrusting of a young male mating with a much older female. Male 'displays' to females can be flamboyant or coy – waving a branch, wiping a leaf across his lips – but once the female allows intimacy, the male usually ejaculates after 10 thrusts.

If chimps are the stars of Greystoke Mahale, Lake Tanganyika is a worthy supporting act. The beach is wide, white and soft and the water is clear and, when filtered, pure enough to drink. After a morning spent tracking chimps, guests are free to go swimming, snorkelling,

canoeing or fishing. The camp has all the trappings of civilisation, with pre-dinner drinks served at a bar carved into rocks overlooking the lake and elaborate four-course meals served on the beach under the stars. But it is the primitive heart that beats just beyond Greystoke's candle-lit reach in the forests of the Mahale Mountains that truly makes the camp memorable.

BY HAPPY ACCIDENT, we arrived at Singita Grumeti Reserves – the most glamorous new private game reserve in East Africa – the way many wealthy guests do: by private plane. When our connecting flight from Lake Tanganyika failed to materialise, Humphrey Carter, the reserve's immaculately dressed pilot, was dispatched to collect us. It





was an auspicious start. Thousands of wildebeest were on hand to welcome us months after the annual migration was supposed to have moved on, and other wildlife appeared as if on cue: a healthy herd of fat-bellied zebra clattered along a rocky ridge like mountain mules; at dusk a silent parade of placid elephants lumbered past our Land Cruiser; plains game posed in perfect silhouette against a limitless

sky; a lone giraffe watched quietly from the shade of an acacia.

The animals wouldn't have been so calm and cooperative five years ago. Back then, they would have been shot by local entrepreneurs and poachers and sold for the cooking pot, or bagged as trophies by rich Americans armed with high-powered rifles. Back then, this 140,000-hectare tract of land on the western boundary of the Serengeti National Park was a continuous

The terraced lawns of Sasakwa Lodge command magnificent views of the Serengeti





Sabora Tented Camp is decorated with a 1920s theme. *Opposite, top*, bath with a view in one of the air-conditioned tents at Sabora. *Below*, a cottage at stylish Sasakwa Lodge





# TOP OF THEIR GAME

Continued from page 117

who smiled and nodded as they left for the airstrip on our second morning.

Singita's Cape Town-based decorators, Cécile and Boyd, had just updated Sasakwa Lodge, the 'bush hotel' I had dismissed as unworthy of our custom. Designed by the architects Wimberly Allison Tong & Goo to resemble a colonial manor house, with stone cladding, a slate roof and wide verandahs, the lodge had originally been dressed in expensive Home Counties frou-frou; but now African opulence reigns. The setting cannot be bettered, with heart-racing views south over the Serengeti plains from the terraced lawns, the infinity-edged swimming pool and each of the seven guest cottages' plunge pools. Seduced by such extravagant beauty, I easily overcame my prejudices and checked in for our last night in Tanzania.

We opted for conventional early-morning and late-afternoon game drives – extendable here, on privately leased land, to night drives; but there is also a spa, tennis, croquet, badminton and archery. The equestrian centre is one of the finest in Africa, with immaculate stables for 16 horses, a riding track, dressage arena, a choice of the best English or Western tack, and professional guides Martin Dodwell and his partner Alison Mundy. They have built up an impressive stable of thoroughbreds and warmbloods. Outrides are currently restricted to the land around Sasakwa Hill, but there are plans for full riding safaris traversing the entire reserve.

After my ride, in the somewhat incongruous setting of the equestrian centre's cavernous tack room, I met Swiss-born Barbara Schachenmann, who is in charge of community development for the Grumeti Fund. She had driven for hours to meet me, taking time off from her work in the dusty, densely populated villages on

the northern boundary of the reserve, first created in 1974 when people were cleared off to make way for the new hunting blocks. The ban on hunting at Singita Grumeti has had a profound impact on the villagers' traditional way of life, and the Grumeti Fund has been financing small-scale projects such as fish farming, chicken breeding and a piggery to create alternative sources of protein, and a sunflower-oil press, vegetable garden

electricity was introduced only a year ago, the speed of the changes has created enormous challenges for the villagers and the conservation project on the other side of the boundary, which is now patrolled by armed anti-poaching squads.

As all profits are channelled into the Grumeti Fund, guests at the lodges make a real contribution to the success of both the community projects and conservation. And with Paul Tudor Jones the only

legal hunter in the area (he apparently uses a bow and arrow), thousands of poachers' snares cleared and arrests made, there has been a noticeable increase in the number of animals. But the most significant addition will be the introduction this year of two captive-bred rhino, to be followed by the reintroduction of wild rhino, which have been poached to extinction in the Serengeti.

Singita Grumeti Reserves reopened in June after its annual two-month closure, during which decorators Cécile and Boyd completed their work at Sasakwa Lodge, tweaked the decor at Sabora Tented Camp and applied the finishing touches to the brand-new Faru Faru Lodge. It is five years since the community

and wildlife conservation projects were established; it is time to get the tourism project off the ground. **T**

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and beekeeping business to sell products to the lodges and to locals.

The fund also pays for adult-education workshops and student scholarships. But Schachenmann knows only too well the pitfalls of creating pockets of prosperity in a landscape of poverty. Eighty boreholes were sunk in the early days, for example, with little thought given to ongoing maintenance; now water harvesting is considered the way forward. Instead of creating 'showpiece' schools with smart new buildings, Schachenmann wants to improve existing ones by raising the standards of teaching and equipment. In an area where

### Weather to go: Tanzania

Tanzania's game reserves are hot and dusty towards the end of the season, in October. Go earlier, when the landscape is still fresh and green from the rains. **Best month:** June

Sunshine	Temperature	Rainfall	Humidity
7hrs	14°C min 27°C max	None	Medium

expanse of three hunting blocks: Grumeti Game Reserve, Ikorongo Game Reserve and the Fort Ikoma Open Area, a 'buffer' zone between human settlement to the north and wildlife conservation to the south, where government quotas for hunting trophies went ignored and poaching unmonitored.

In 2002, Paul Tudor Jones, a billionaire Wall Street hedge-fund manager (who also founded Pamushana, a private game reserve in Zimbabwe), stepped in to buy the leases on all three blocks, establishing the Grumeti Reserves in 2003. At the same time, he bought up the government's full allocation of hunting licences and trophy fees, ensuring that only he is legally permitted to hunt here. With a stated mission to rehabilitate the land and restore the wildlife to sustainable numbers, Jones set up a non-profit organisation, the Grumeti Fund, worth millions and initially entirely funded by himself, dedicated to game conservation and also to community development.

Plans were drawn up to build three safari camps to support the fund: Sabora Tented Camp, Sasakwa Lodge and Faru Faru Lodge. The first two opened to the public in August 2004 and December 2005 respectively, and by June last year a management deal was signed with Luke Bailes's Singita Management Company, the South African ecotourism outfit with a formidable reputation for luxury safaris with five-star service, food and fine wines.

Faru Faru Lodge was still under construction when we visited, so we had booked into Sabora Tented Camp. I had dismissed the grand Sasakwa Lodge, rather sniffily, as a 'bush hotel' and thought the tented option would keep us grounded. What I hadn't anticipated was a tent with air conditioning, Wi-Fi and a direct-dial telephone connected to an exchange in Chicago. Nor had I grasped how thoroughly the camp's 1920s theme had been indulged, with two vintage Chevrolets parked at jaunty angles outside the main tent as if the occupants had been spirited away moments earlier, leaving a scattering of pith helmets, silverware and a wind-up gramophone amid the Persian-rug splendour of their safari command centre. The six guest tents were just as elaborate, with shot-silk curtains, four-posters, antiques, black-and-white photographs in silver frames and sherry in crystal decanters. The only other guests were an elusive honeymoon couple in sunglasses, pressed khakis and whites

*Continued on page 150*



camps are closed in April and May. Tsetse flies can be a problem at Chada Katavi and Singita Grumeti, depending on the season. They won't make you sick, but can be a painful irritant if they take a liking to you. Avoid dark clothing, particularly blue or black. Malaria is endemic and Deet-based insect repellents and anti-malarial medication are essential.

#### THE FLIGHTS

**Kenya Airways** (01784 888222; [www.kenya-airways.com](http://www.kenya-airways.com)) flies from Heathrow to Kilimanjaro International Airport via Nairobi from about £410 return in August. **KLM** (0870 507 4074; [www.klm.com](http://www.klm.com)) flies from Heathrow to Kilimanjaro International Airport via Amsterdam or Nairobi from about £550 return in August.

#### THE COGNOSCENTI'S SAFARI CIRCUIT

The author's itinerary was created by Will Jones at **Journeys by Design** (01273 623790; [www.journeysbydesign.co.uk](http://www.journeysbydesign.co.uk)). A trip similar to the one taken, with one night in Arusha, four at Chada Katavi, three

at Greystoke Mahale and three at Sabora Tented Camp costs from £4,700 per person. With three nights at Sasakwa Lodge rather than Sabora it costs from £5,915 per person. These prices include internal but not international flights, in addition to Journeys by Design. Singita Grumeti Reserves recommends UK tour operators **Cazenove & Loyd** (020 7384 2332; [www.cazenoveandloyd.com](http://www.cazenoveandloyd.com)) and **Tim Best Travel** (020 7591 0300; [www.timbesttravel.com](http://www.timbesttravel.com)). Nomad Tanzania will recommend other tour operators on request.

#### FURTHER READING

Philip Briggs, *Tanzania* (Bradt Travel Guides, £16.99); Jane Goodall, *Reason for Hope: A Spiritual Journey* (Time Warner International, £9.99); David Hosking and Martin Withers, *Traveler's Guide: Wildlife of Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda* (Collins, £14.99). Out of print but worth tracking down are Bernhard and Michael Grzimek's *Serengeti Shall Not Die* and Iain Douglas-Hamilton's *Among the Elephants*.