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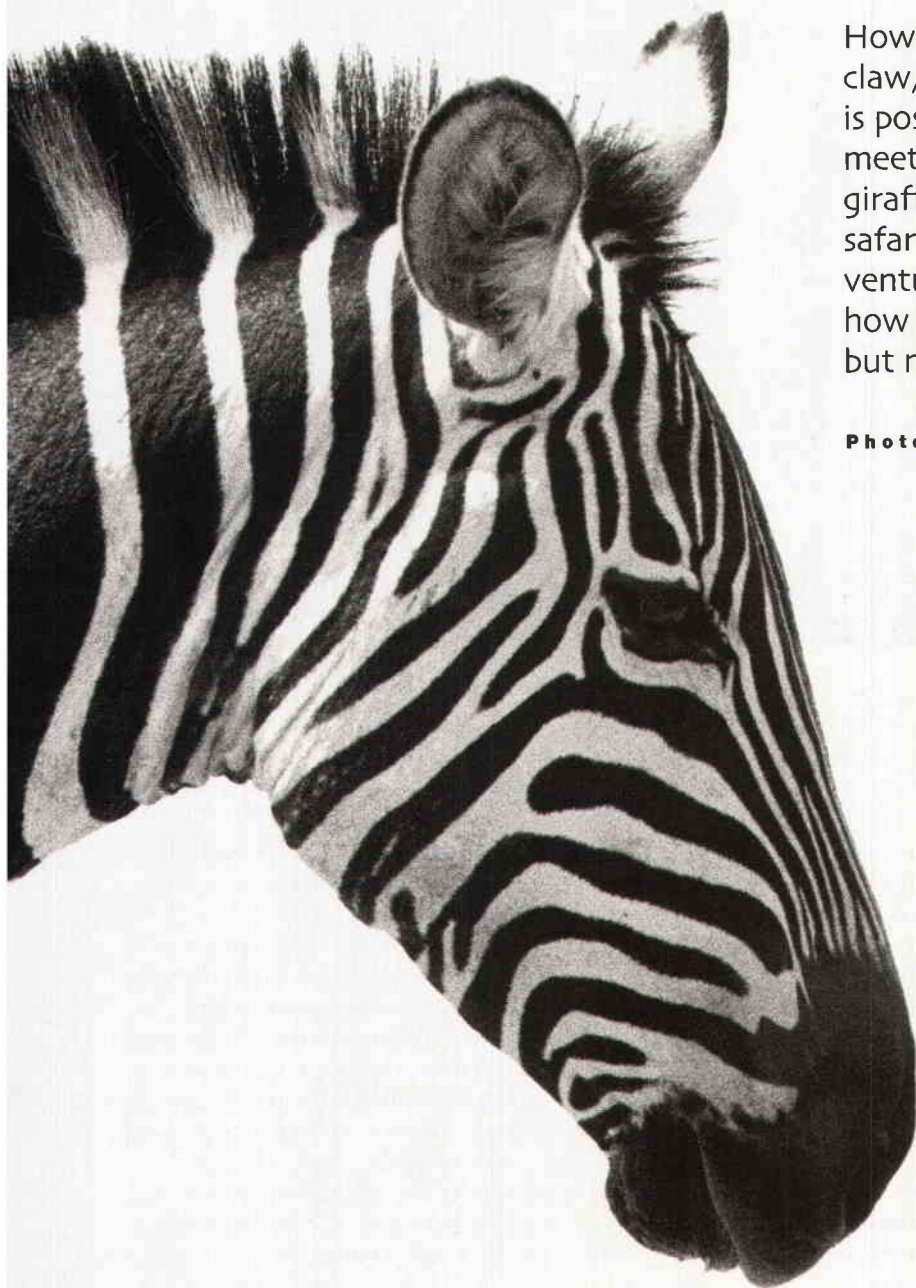
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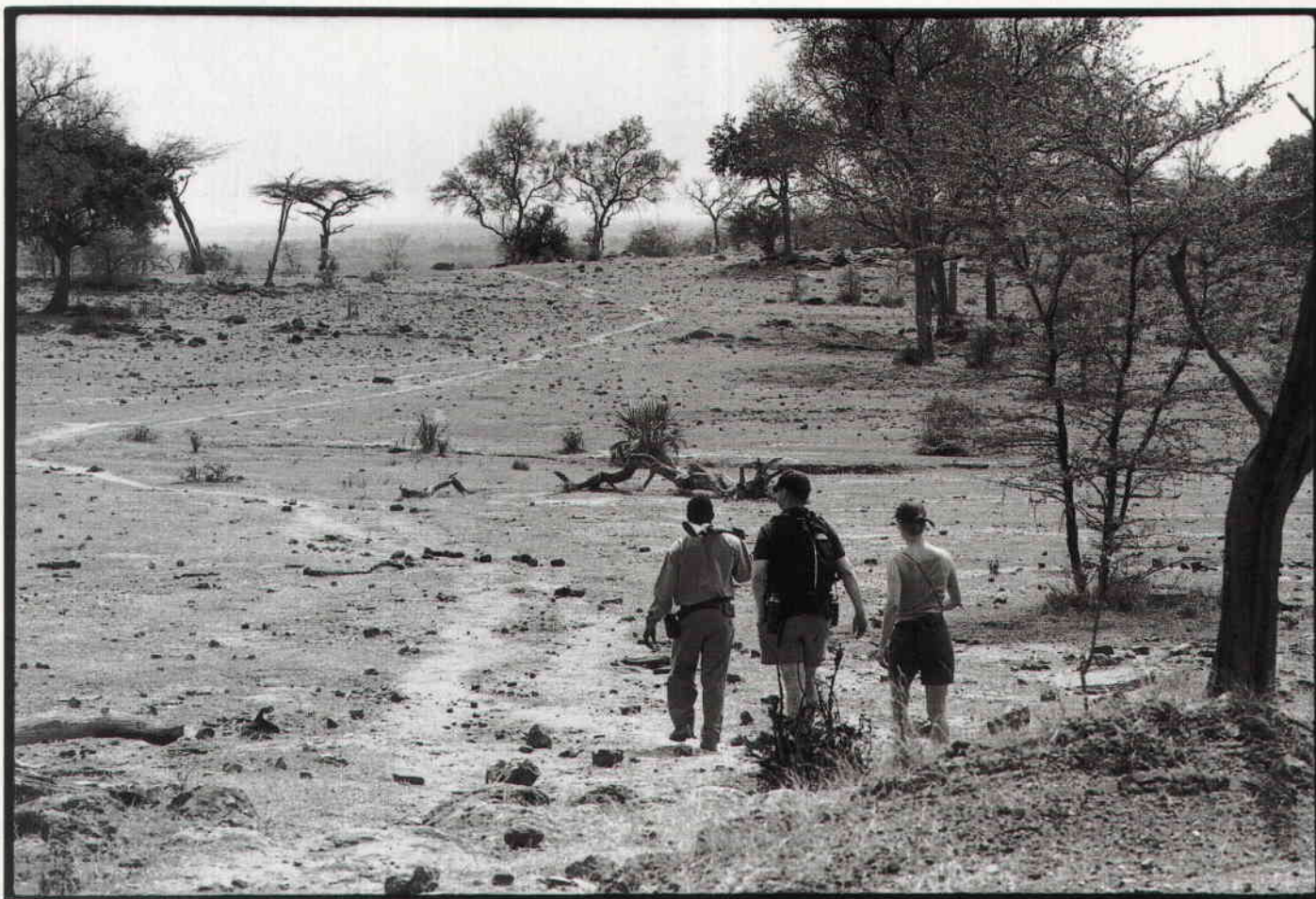


ENCOUNTER

How near to nature, wild in tooth and claw, do you want to get? In Tanzania it is possible to walk through wilderness meeting zebra, elephant, lion and giraffe along the way, thanks to a small safari company. **Dalbert Hallenstein** ventures into the real Africa, learning how to survive bumping into a hippo – but not how to sleep in the jungle

Photographs by **Oliviero Olivieri**





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 ANY PEOPLE HAVE VISITED African game reserves, and photographed lion, rhino and elephant at close range from the safety of a Jeep or Land Rover. Few have tasted the real Africa: walking for days in the midst of wild animals, sleeping out in the open under a simple mosquito net in the company of scorpions, cobras, crocodiles and roaring lions. But it is now possible to do that in relative safety and great comfort.

One of the last great uninhabited wildernesses left on earth is in Southern Tanzania, where two young men have formed a company, Nomad Safaris, to guide clients through the stunning but dangerous territory. They are Alex Hunter, aged 35, a white, Kenyan-born African, and Festo Msoffe, aged 34, a black African from the Kilimanjaro area of Northern Tanzania.

The Selous Game Reserve – as the wilderness is known – is vast, covering an area larger than Switzerland. Dominated by the huge Rufiji River, it consists of hilly, scrub-covered savanna and tropical, riverine jungle, with elephant, lion, giraffe, buffalo and crocodile populations that are denser than anywhere else in Africa. The area is named after the British hunter Frederick Courtney Selous, who was killed there in 1917 in a skirmish between the Germans (colonisers of what was then called Tanganyika) and the British.

The Selous has remained untouched, the largest primeval equatorial reserve in Africa, thanks to the ubiquity of the tsetse fly, which spreads diseases fatal to cattle. The area can only be visited comfortably during the dry season, which lasts from July to late September. After this, the rains begin and the River Rufiji swells and floods all the low-lying land. Travel – even by foot – becomes almost impossible.

Since there are no proper roads, the journey to the Selous from Dar es Salaam can take three days by Land Rover. The only sensible option is the hour-long charter flight, much of it following the river – on which the mysterious black spots visible from the air turn out to be huge hippos wallowing in the water. Hunter and his partner Msoffe meet our group of six at the airstrip, having driven there in a large double-decker Land Rover from the Sand Rivers Lodge, about six-and-a-half kilometres away.

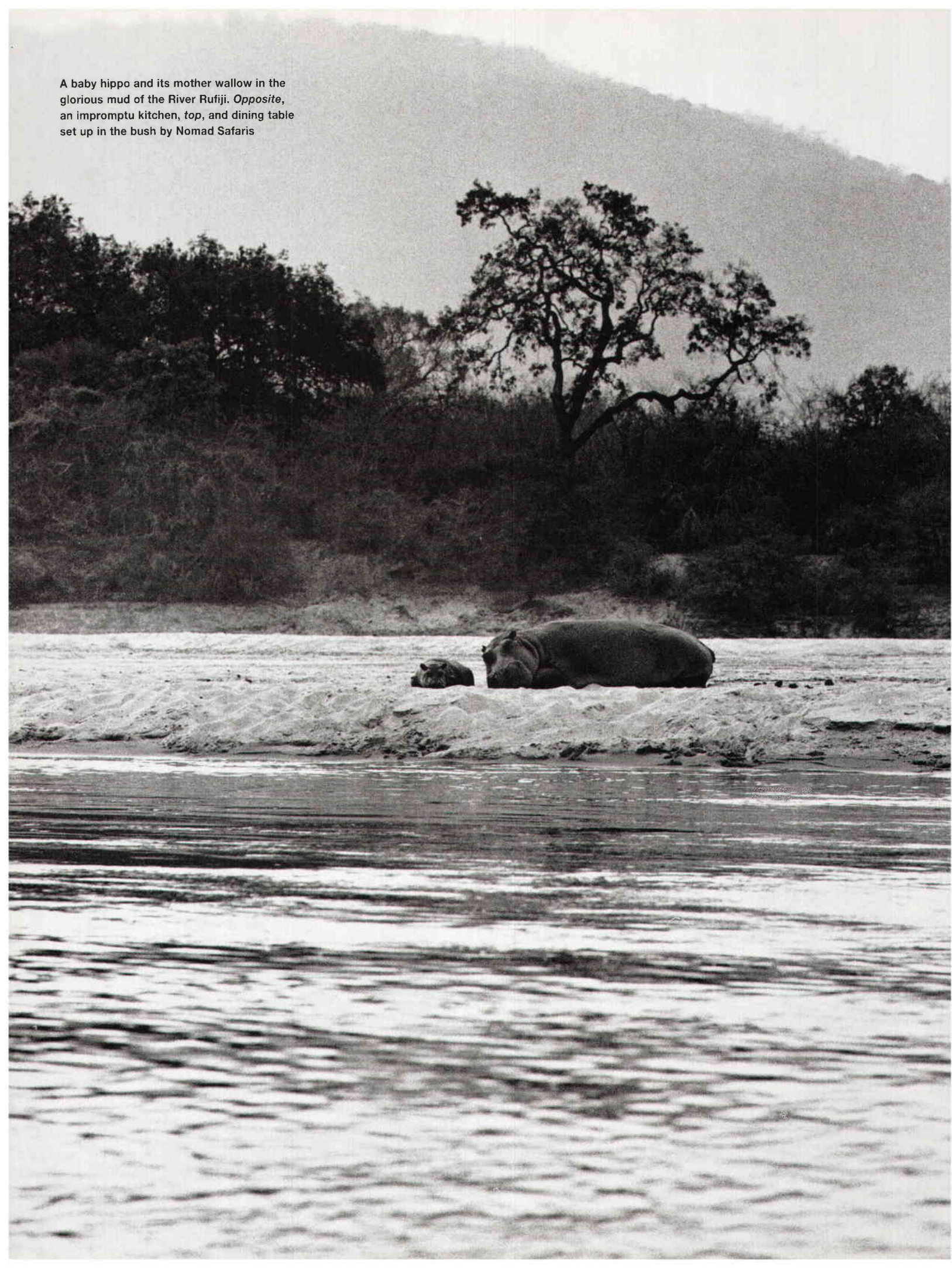
The luxurious, six-bedroom lodge was built in 1995 in traditional African style with thatched roofs. Owned by Richard Bonham, Hunter's brother-in-law, it is probably the most isolated lodge on the continent. Hunter and Msoffe are employing the lodge's expertise and resources in their new enterprise: its chefs and waiters service the mobile jungle camps. The lodge also offers the alluring prospect, after the jungle trek, of a night or two in a comfortable bed, plus a real bathroom, armchairs and a swimming pool.

About half-an-hour's drive from the airstrip, we stop at the top of an escarpment overlooking a vast valley containing a lake and a herd of at least 500 grazing buffalo. Near the edge of the escarpment is a line of wooden-framed canvas chairs; a table neatly covered with a large selection of cognacs and whiskies; a cool box full of beer, wine and soft drinks; and three African waiters, elegantly dressed in military gear, standing to attention.

After drinks, Hunter gives a short lecture on bush security. 'The most dangerous animals,' he says, 'are hippos and buffalo. Hippos kill more people in Africa than any other animal. They can charge at remarkable speeds if they find an object between them and the water; and they will either crush the victim under their huge weight or bite them in half with their massive jaws. As for



A baby hippo and its mother wallow in the glorious mud of the River Rufiji. *Opposite*, an impromptu kitchen, *top*, and dining table set up in the bush by Nomad Safaris







splash. I try to go back to sleep. But there it is again: snorts, growls, grunts and thumps. It goes on for what feels like hours. I lie in bed, terrified, waiting for the moment when, inevitably, a large hippo lumbers into my tent and crushes me. With the light of dawn, peace descends and I get up and look outside. There is a well-worn track leading to a sort of slide down which the hippos have slipped back into the river after a night spent grazing on grass and bushes.

After a breakfast of bacon, eggs and sausages, we set off at 7.30am – as we will do every morning – and walk until the heat becomes unbearable, soon after midday. In the mornings we cover

roughly 10km, with long pauses to observe the various animals – elephant, lion, giraffe and zebra – we meet along the way. To come across a herd of giraffe or a pride of lions with their cubs while on foot is a powerfully moving experience. The fact that there is no barrier between you and them produces an intense exhilaration. On only two occasions is there actual danger, the first involving an aggressive hippo, the second an irritable buffalo.

The camp has been set up for lunch, the kitchen staff having driven ahead before us. We are greeted, shown to chairs and served with drinks and hors d'oeuvres. We rest on a canvas tarpaulin for an hour and then eat – quiche, stuffed bread and roasted buffalo ribs with cucumber, stuffed tomatoes and carrots. By 4pm the day is beginning to cool and we walk again for a couple of hours.

The nights are often alarming. One camp is set up on the dry bed of one of the numerous 'sand rivers' that, in the wet season, become fully fledged torrents. But when he finds three hippo tracks between the tents, Hunter decides that it must be moved. As the sun goes down we observe a pride of lion nearby. Msoffe assures us that placing hurricane lamps strategically around the camp will prevent any danger. But young lions roar all around us; and while Oliviero, our photographer, is taking a shower after dark, a lion suddenly roars just behind him. He runs away, leaving his watch. The next morning he finds it chewed to pieces by a hyena.

The most memorable night, though, is that spent beside Lake Tagalala, which has an estimated 11,000 crocodiles, the highest concentration of them in the world. The African crocodile is the



The swimming pool at the Sand Rivers Lodge. *Opposite*, animal skulls standing in front of the lodge's thatched bungalows

biggest species – and they are everywhere. Our camp is set up on a beach where normally, during the day, a dozen or so bask in the sun. As we are being served drinks by the lakeside, Festo admits that he could not sleep during the first night he spent by the lake. I awake at 3am with an anxiety that my feet, which are pointing towards the lake, are going to be bitten off.

During lunch the following day, we look out in wonder across to the other side of the lake. A herd of elephant are grazing with their young, munching peacefully alongside giraffe, wildebeest and buffalo, and in the company of huge, dozing crocodiles. It looks like the Garden of Eden.

Our last day is spent in the luxury and calm of the Sand Rivers Lodge, with its marvellous panorama of the river. We rediscover the delights of privacy: each guest has their own individual, beautifully appointed bungalow. Yet in this sumptuous opulence, there is a feeling of restlessness, even boredom. Something is missing. It is the Africa that we have just discovered: the real Africa.

INFORMATION

GETTING TO TANZANIA

British Airways (0845 773 3377; www.ba.com) flies daily from Heathrow to Dar es Salaam from £580 return in February.

KLM (0870 507 4074; www.klm.com) flies daily from Heathrow to Dar es Salaam, via Amsterdam, from £550 return in February. **Coastal Travels** (00 255 22 211 7959; e-mail: coastal@twiga.com)

flies daily from Dar es Salaam to the Selous from US\$240 return

TOUR OPERATOR

Journeys by Design (01273 623790; www.journeysbydesign.co.uk) tailor-make Tanzanian journeys, which include private walks in the Selous with Nomad Safaris' Hunter and Msoffe. A two-week Tanzanian journey with five nights in the

Selous and nine nights on the islands of Pemba and Zanzibar costs from £2,950, excluding international flights.

HEALTH AND SAFETY

Although no inoculations are compulsory for entry into Tanzania, it is recommended that you consult your GP.

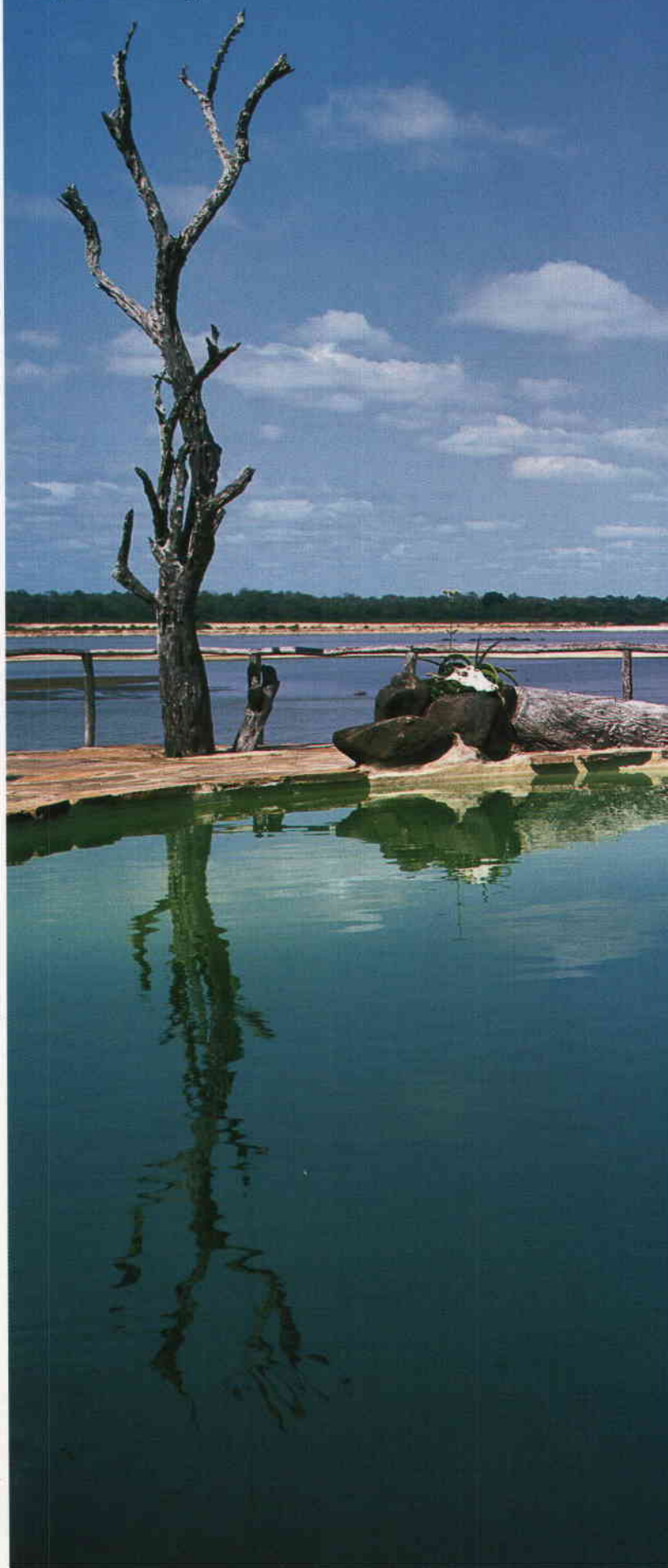
Malaria is endemic and an inoculation will be required.

MONEY

The local currency is Tanzanian shillings, but it is best to travel with US dollars for incidentals.



Map: Graham Parrish





We look out in wonder to the other side of the lake. A herd of elephant are grazing with their young, munching peacefully alongside giraffe, wildebeest and buffalo, in the company of dozing crocodiles