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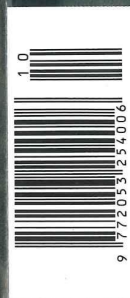
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the experience

Wild At Heart

From the exclusive luxury of the Mwiba Lodge in the southern Serengeti, *Catherine Fairweather* immerses herself in a magically remote wilderness, witness to the great millennia-old migration of the wildebeest

Photography by Don McCullin




out of this world

Under the open skies and on the vast rolling plains of the central Serengeti, the ground beneath our jeep vibrates and the horizon is a heaving blur of muzzle and flaming nostril and hooves. The wildebeest are on the move, snorting, moaning, kicking up the earth and sending dust devils spiraling into the air; one-and-a-half thousand of them, trailing herds of zebra, Grant's gazelle, eland and impala in their wake. Meanwhile, the predators, the lions, hyena and vultures, stand by in anticipation of the kill. The millennia-old journey of the wildebeest, chasing the rains and grasses on their cyclical loop through the vast Serengeti ecosystem, is also a drama of life and death. The thousands that are not carried off by predators die of thirst and starvation, while thousands more are born in the southern savannah between January and March. One of the great natural wonders of the world, the migration is a spectacle that has, until now, eluded me, despite my 30 years of visiting and sometimes living in Africa. But the Serengeti National Park is so vast – larger than Switzerland – and the movement of the herds entirely dependent on the unstable fluctuations of the rains, that it pays to travel with an experienced outfit, which is mobile and flexible enough to carry you to wherever the action is.

As it is, when I arrive at Legendary Safari's classic tented Serengeti camp in the game-rich Lamai triangle a week earlier, I am told that the first wave of migrating herds has already passed through, thundering by the mess tent and disappearing days later in a cloud of dust. Now, only the lazy stragglers and weaklings (a few zebra, the odd antelope) and a couple of warthogs remain, grazing in the aqueous sunlight on the recently rain-soaked plains. I swallow my disappointment.

By way of consolation, the camp is delightful, with its campaign-style furnishings, hot bucket showers and high teas. And at this time of year the open plains are a Persian carpet of wild flowers, fireball lilies and white inks. There is plenty to see on the various drives and walks through this surrealist's dreamscape with its termite mounds capped by Magritte-style clouds. Being free to roam is one of the privileges afforded to Legendary's guests. On the summit of the sun-baked *kopjes* (hills) I see prides of lions, relaxed and intent on digesting their kill, then yawning, cleaning a whisker and rolling around on their backs as their young play tag up the trunk and across the branches of a thorn tree. After months of fasting, the orgy is on – a python in fat coils basks on the banks of the Sand River, the outline in its trunk of the unlucky oribe it has swallowed whole just as graphic as the snake drawings in *The Little Prince* >



GREAT PLAINS
The atmospheric
swimming pool at
Mwiba Lodge

out of this world

by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. The monsoon-drenched land seems to positively hum with life, growth and procreative energy. Flowers burst into bloom, fireflies fill the night sky with dancing light and the burbling and beeping of frogs and insects, along with the occasional growl of a wild cat, churn up the hours before dawn like an overactive digestive system.

I explore the place by land cruiser, on foot and even from a hot-air balloon, gliding so low above the herds that I can see the whites of the eyes of a panicking hare, spinning round on its own shadow, and the saliva strands trailing from a hyena's grin as it lopes off, stage-left. It's a strangely intimate way of observing the wildlife before the balloon, given another blast of heat, lifts high over the Mara River and the lush plains that sparkle in the first rains.

But it was the migration I had come to see and with the herds moving inexorably southwards, Legendary was determined I would find them. A whole morning's drive and a 40-minute flight later, I find myself in the Seronera – the epicenter of the Serengeti and where this piece begins – trying to hold my camera steady, surrounded by all those wildebeest on the move. Like marching ants, great columns of them fan out as far as the eye can see across the long grasses of the plains. Inevitably the spectacle draws the migration of Toyotas too, and at the end of the afternoon, after lunch under a jacaranda tree spent idly observing crocodiles on the river banks below, I am happy to abandon the herds and humans to fly out in a privately chartered plane southbound for the peace and solitude of the Mwiba private game reserve, Legendary's new lodge.

Between January and March when the migrating herds spill into the region from the Serengeti National Park on the northern boundary, on their way to the birthing pastures of the Ngorongoro Crater, Mwiba also offers an amazing corridor for safari and migration viewing away from the crowds. The homestead itself is made up of eight sensational canvas, stone and hardwood structures, built on stilts high above the banks of the Arugusinyai River. Surrounded by ancient fever trees, coral trees and giant euphorbia, the lodge on 126,000 acres of acacia woodland, rocky gorge and savannah is the private home of Texan tycoon Dan Freidkin, who makes it available to paying guests when he isn't there. Decorated in natural shades with collections of tribal artefacts and lit by lanterns, it could surely be Africa's most comfortable and romantically remote wilderness lodge – with no other in the area to compete for wildlife sightings. You can even watch elephant and buffalo drinking below in the rock pools of the riverbed from a deckchair on the terrace.

Wildlife is fast returning to this land which suffered for decades from being overgrazed by cattle. One of the downsides of safari is usually the relative immobility of the experience: huge amounts of food and no exercise. At Mwiba, however, I walk everywhere – sometimes

with the inspired Jennifer Denton, my South African guide, sometimes accompanying the local Hadzabe tribes (distant relations of the bushmen of the Kalahari) on their hunting treks. You have to keep up a cracking pace, especially when they have gorged on honeycomb extracted from deep inside a baobab's trunk. The beauty of Mwiba is that you can be as free-ranging as you like: setting up camp for the night, as I did, on one of the tree platforms beside a waterhole, or next to the incredible 3,000ft escarpment that looks down over the soda plains of Lake Eyasi, one of the most ancient regions of the eastern Rift Valley and a natural habitat for flamingos and waders in the shallows.

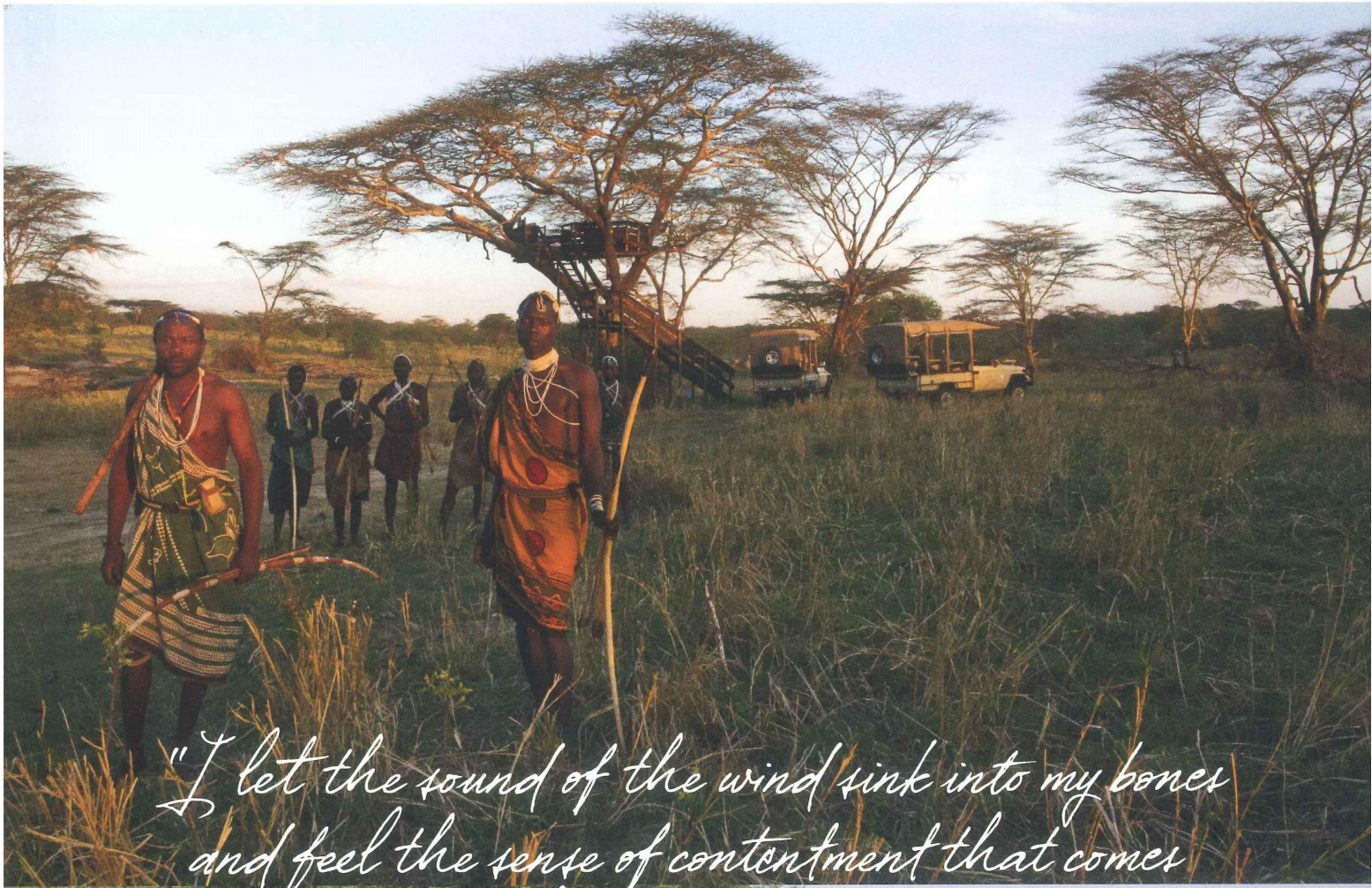
And while the herds had still to migrate into the region in October, there is still plenty to see. I spend mornings hanging out with a young leopard who plays hide and seek beneath the 4x4, makes out to stalk his mother who is watching out of the corner of one eye from her rocky outpost nearby and practices his pouncing technique on a frog in the mud. The thrill of the African Safari experience is always infused with this kind of adrenaline rush, the heart-in-your-mouth moment when the same young leopard's curiosity almost gets the better of him and he tries to get into your jeep, or when we have to back the 4x4 away from the "pretend-charge" of an elephant, his ears flapping in alarm. It is there in the warning bark of the zebra before the crouching cheetah makes his dash for the kill and in the buffalo galloping en masse through the bush. But what I remember best about Mwiba is not the drama, not even the thrill of hunting with the local Hadzabe tribes or watching them dance at one of the exotic banquets that was staged for us in the starlight of the bush. Rather it is the space and time the place offers just to sit and stare. To simply be. In one lovely hide (there are 33 scattered across the reserve) beside a shaded pond and waterhole, I spend several happy hours in solitary contemplation of nothing more sensational than a couple of ducks mating. Six hours gazing out through peephole windows, slowly chewing my egg sandwich and listening to the sound of my own breath as I observe a lilac-breasted roller bird drink, a lizard do push-ups and a tortoise blink – the closest thing to meditation that I have ever achieved.

I let the sound of the wind sink into my bones and feel the sense of contentment that comes from being absorbed in the moment; totally relaxed, yet tuned in and alert. And this is the memory that lingers beyond the thrill of the spectacle that is two million hooves galloping towards the rains, galloping towards life itself. ■

Four nights at Legendary Serengeti and three nights at Mwiba Lodge, from £6,377 per person, for two adults sharing - includes privately guided game drives and walks and return flights to Kilimanjaro, available through Journey's by Design, journeysbydesign.com; flights with Kenya Airways, from £761, kenya-airways.com

ROOM TO ROAM
Above: the tree hides and Hadzabe tribesmen at Mwiba
Right: the great migration of wildebeest through the Seronera at the epicenter of the Serengeti





"I let the sound of the wind sink into my bones and feel the sense of contentment that comes from being completely absorbed in the moment"

