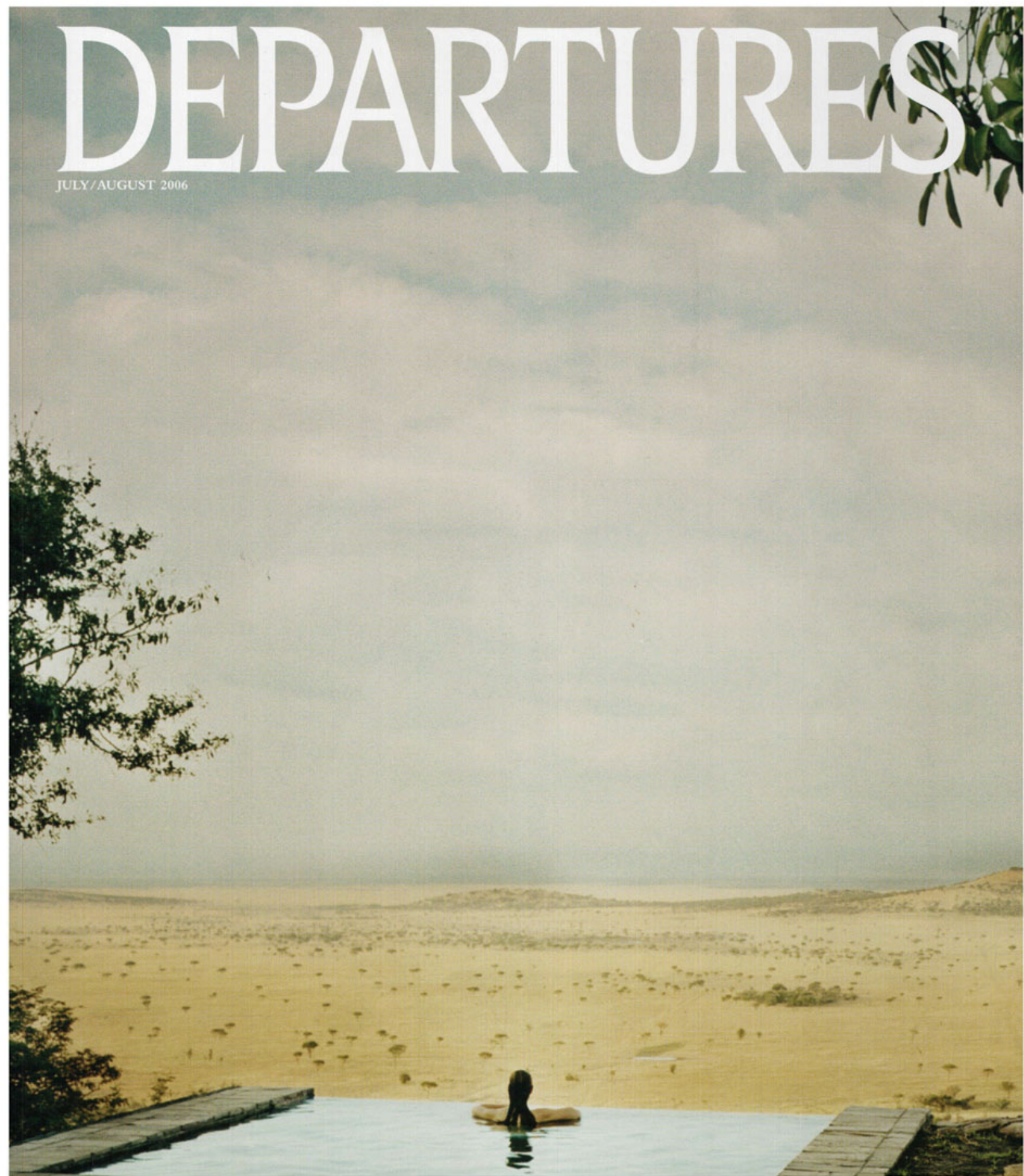
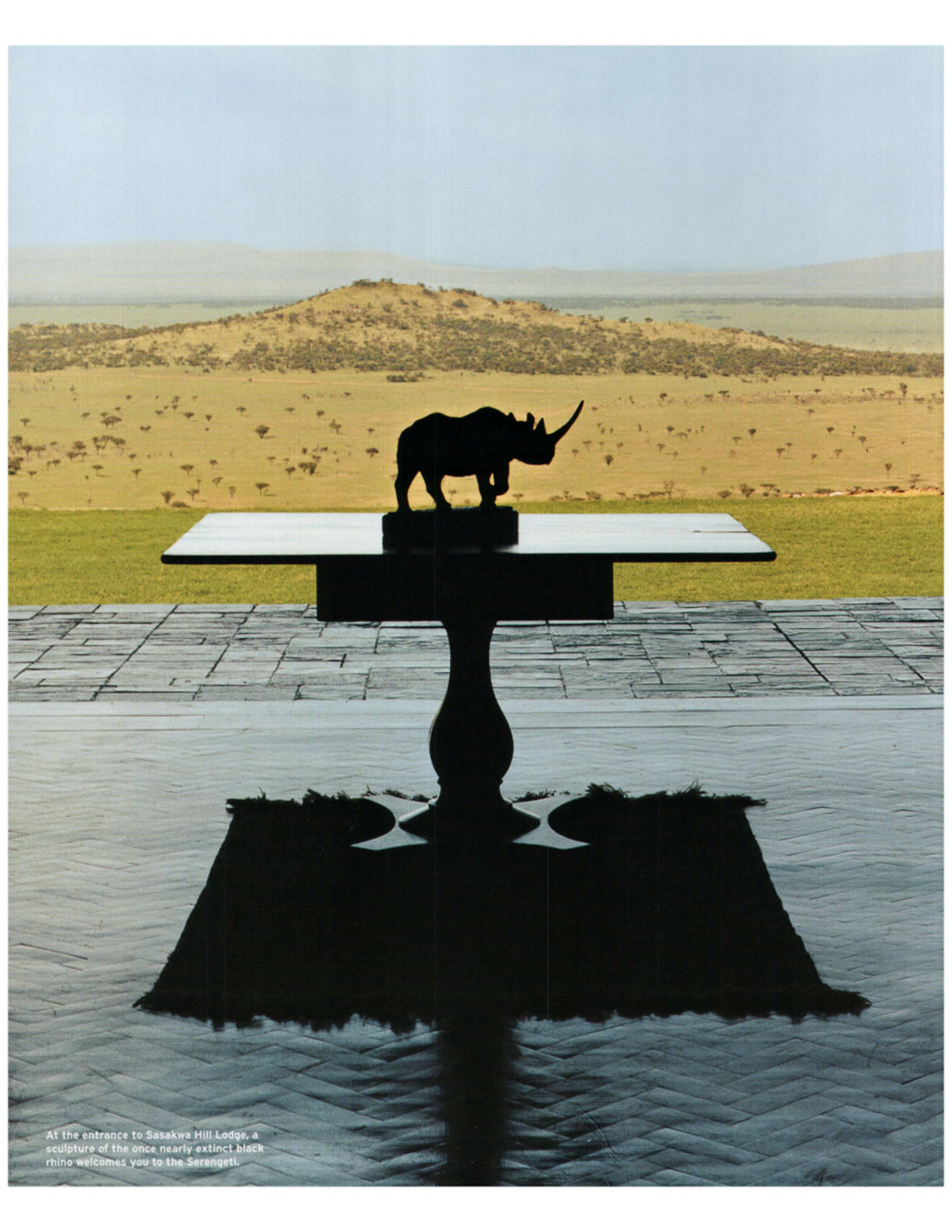


# DEPARTURES

JULY/AUGUST 2006

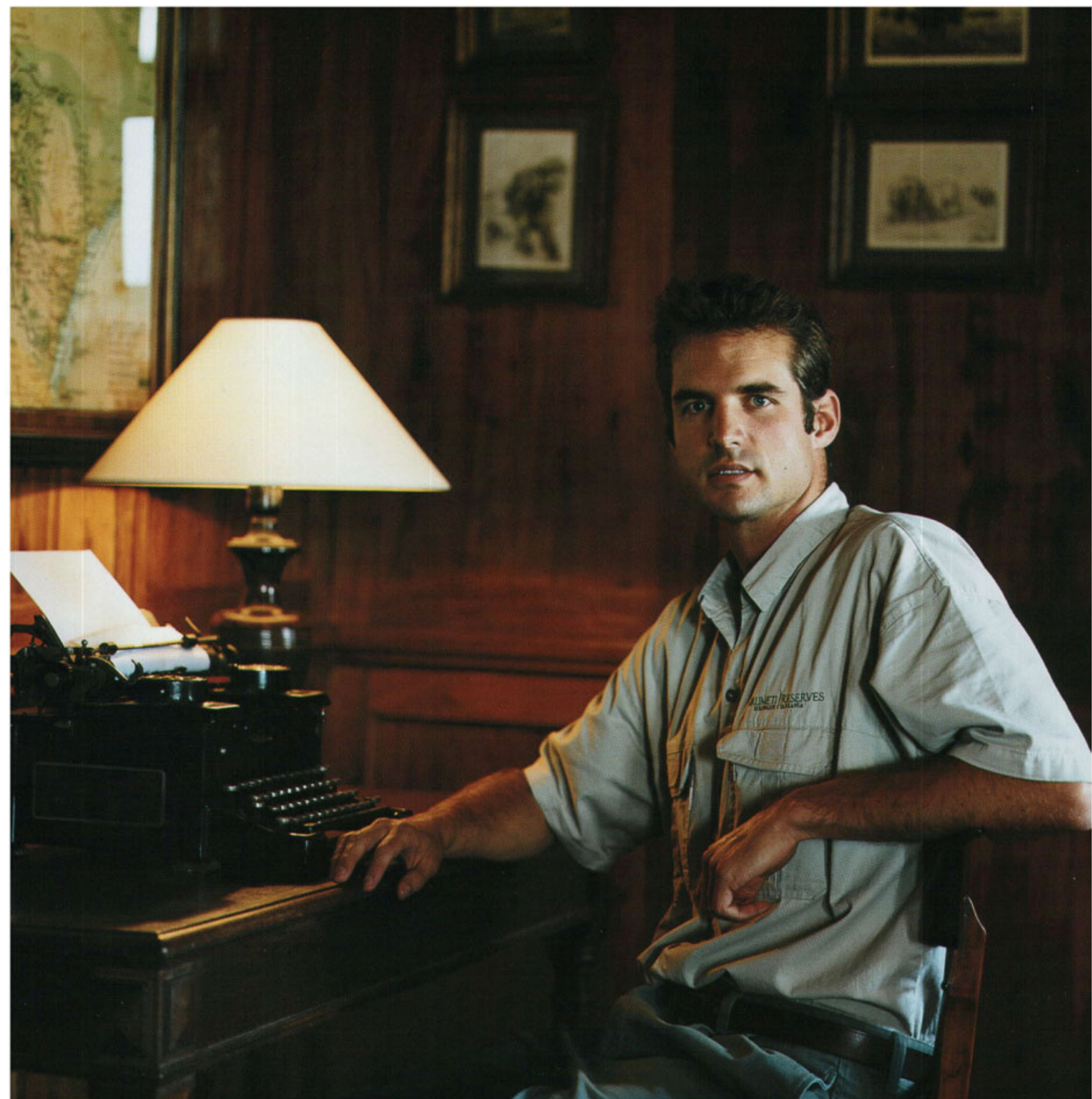






At the entrance to Sasakwa Hill Lodge, a sculpture of the once nearly extinct black rhino welcomes you to the Serengeti.











# T

ANZANIA, Africa—Standing on the Gatsby-green lawn of Sasakwa Hill Lodge, I am reminded of Alexander the Great, who, it is said, wept when he realized there were an infinite number of worlds. The vista is astonishing, a seemingly endless landscape of savanna and sky. Sasakwa is the grandest of three camps on the 350,000 acres known as Grumeti Reserves. It officially opened in January yet appears to have been here forever. Its wide veranda and massive slate façade suggests a classic colonial-era manor house, conjuring up images of those Anglo-African mansions built by the likes of Karen Blixen and immortalized in the film *Out of Africa*.

"Would you care for a drink?" someone asks. "Pimm's Cup? Gin and tonic?" I don't honestly know. I am too lost in Grumeti's infinite number of worlds—the majesty of the views, the architecture of the lodge, the limitlessness of the Serengeti Plain.

The name Serengeti is derived from the Masai word meaning "an extended space." The size of Northern Ireland, the plain occupies about 1.5 percent of Tanzania. For many, it is *the* image of Africa: vast savannas dotted with acacia trees and home to the great herds and prides. It may be the best-known and most abundant ecosystem in the world. Four decades ago close to 1,000 Eastern black rhinos roamed the Serengeti—today that figure is fewer than 70. In response to this precipitous decline, 25 such rhinos from all over East Africa are scheduled to be reintroduced to Grumeti Reserves over the next few years. And Grumeti's three extraordinary new camps are making it possible to watch their return.



"Conservation takes three things," says Luke Bailes, whose prestigious South Africa-based Singita group recently announced plans to market and manage Grumeti, "wildlife, community, and tourism. They all must work together in perfect balance. Each is dependent on the other. If you take one away, the whole thing collapses. And the only model guaranteed to ensure sustainability is one made up of low-impact, high-value issues." What Bailes is of course trying to say in a politically correct manner is that in order for conservation and tourism to work together, the property must be (a) accessible at a high price, which makes it (b) exclusive to a very limited number of people, which (c) guarantees minimal impact on the environment. Grumeti Reserves, developed by 51-year-old American fund manager Paul Tudor Jones II, is based on just such a model.

Jones's CV is fairly basic, due in no small part to the fact that he's aggressively—and admirably—private. (My own trip was arranged with his full knowledge and complete support; DEPARTURES was granted the exclusive first look at Sasakwa. That said, Jones declined to be interviewed for this story, preferring, I was told, that Grumeti, not he, be its subject.) Born in Tennessee, Jones attended the University of Virginia, majored in economics, and was a welterweight boxer; he recently donated \$35 million to the university for an athletic arena named after his father, John Paul Jones. He is behind Wall Street's astonishingly successful Tudor Group and was a founder of the Robin Hood Foundation. Jones collects art and has homes from Connecticut to the Chesapeake Bay area. He's considered a serious environmentalist, committed to restoring the African wilderness; he does hunt on occasion, reportedly only with bow and arrow.

The investment in these three camps—Sasakwa, Sabora Plains Tented Camp, and Faru Faru River Lodge—is said to be \$45 million. I can't help but think that Australian newspaper mogul Rupert Murdoch spent close to that for his Fifth Avenue apartment in Manhattan. Both have wireless Internet.

"Grumeti has the potential to become one of the great and most iconic African preserves in the world," says Bailes, who owns three camps in Sabi Sands Game Reserve, on the border

of South Africa's Kruger National Park. He should know. After all, it was Bailes who refined the "boutique" safari with touches like gourmet dining, air-conditioning, world-class architecture, and hot-stone massages. All was done while emphasizing an "authentic" experience that is also painstakingly ecologically sound. If the Singita properties have come to represent the modern boutique safari, Grumeti Reserves may be the new benchmark, pushing the envelope even further.







# T

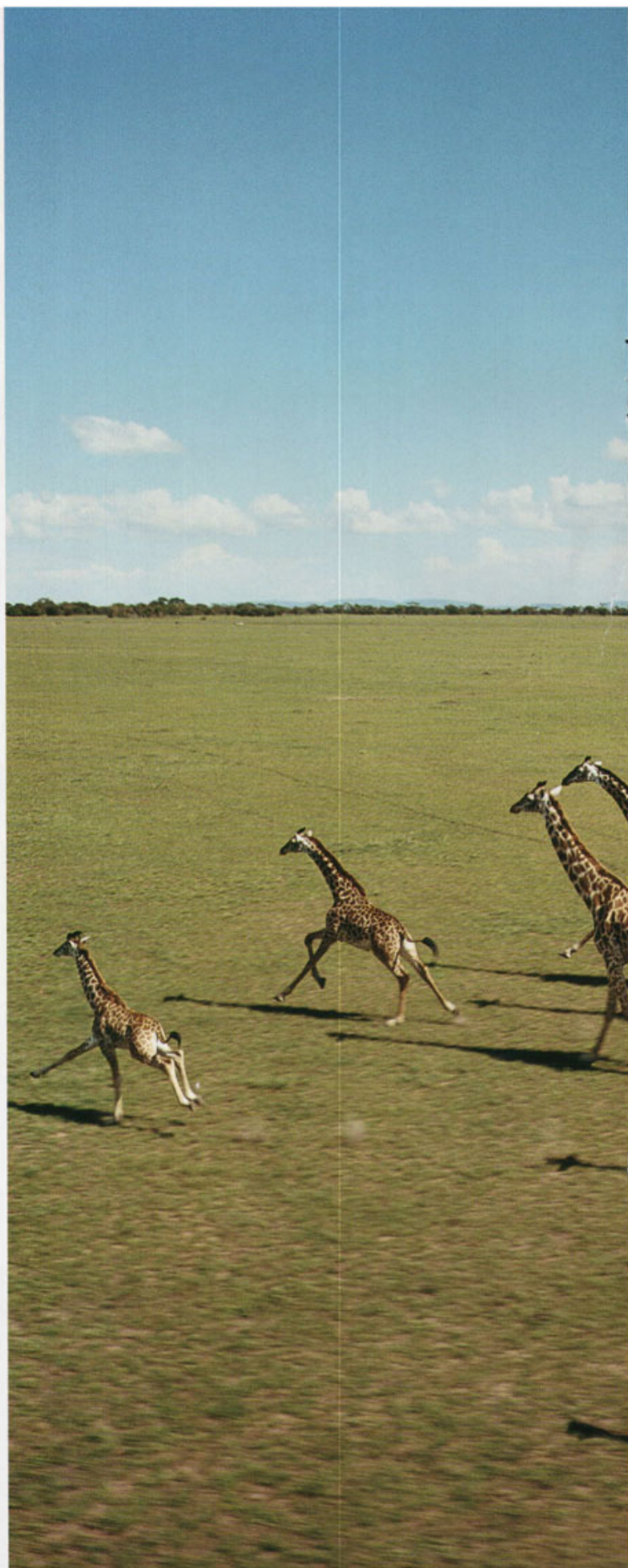
he flight from Nairobi on Air Kenya takes two hours with a change at Mount Kilimanjaro. From there, it's a private charter to Grumeti. (The entire trip, from JFK on British Airways, took 34 hours. Flying direct

from New York to Nairobi on your own private plane—say, a Gulfstream V—takes around 14 hours.) It's late March and Kilimanjaro is, as on so many days, obscured by clouds. But once on the ground at Sasakwa, the weather is beautiful: hot and dry. The high altitude of Grumeti pretty much guarantees a temperate climate. Our party of six is met by a khaki-clad task force of rugged outdoorsy types—a mix of Brits, Aussies, and Africans—in open-air Land Rovers, lemonade and ice-cold towels (for self-facials) at the ready.

In the week to come, we will divide our time between the tented camp at Sabora and the much grander Sasakwa. (Faru Faru, the romantic Tarzanlike camp nestled among the tall sycamore trees by the Grumeti River, is not set to officially open until November.) Bailes believes that authenticity is critical to the long-term success of any high-end property, and he's up front about making sure that he has Jones's full support "to differentiate the various experiences." Bailes plans to make absolutely certain that all three camps perfectly reflect what Lawrence Durrell famously called their own "spirit of place." The idea, he explained, is for guests to travel among the three, which, considering their proximity to one another (40 minutes by Land Rover), are amazingly different both architecturally and geographically—Sasakwa being on the savanna, Faru Faru at the river, and Sabora on the plains.

Sabora was built back in 2004 as a place for family and friends. "A tented camp, for sure," photographer Simon Watson told me before I left, "but a tented camp from one of Napoleon's eighteenth-century campaigns in North Africa." Later it was expanded, becoming a retreat for similarly like-minded conservationists for whom the safari experience needed to be private (each camp accommodates no more than 28 guests), exclusive (since this is not public property, one rarely sees another vehicle), and luxurious (private airstrip, infinity pools, and separate spas for each camp). Like safaris of centuries past, Grumeti's also involve a considerable investment in expensive armaments; albeit of the Nikon and Swarovski variety.

Sasakwa is characterized by very grand public rooms, terraces, even a billiards room. Seven individual "cottages" are turned out in formal English colonial style. Each is romantically named after figures like Hemingway and Denys Finch Hatton. Sabora, on the other hand, features six lavishly outfitted tents with kilims and colonial furniture, crystal glasses by canopied beds, über-thread-count sheets, and gauzy-glam mosquito netting so sumptuous that Nicole Kidman could wear it wrapped around





her to the Academy Awards. Sasakwa's equestrian stables—which suggest some grand estancia outside Buenos Aires—house 16 horses for riding English or western. Many of the horses are Thoroughbreds of impeccable provenance, such as Almasi, a dark-bay gelding whose sire is listed as Northern Quest from the States. But whether at Sasakwa or Sabora, one's days pass pretty much the same: early-morning and late-afternoon game drives interspersed with swims, massages, or long, luxurious naps.

A

frica is, of course, the stuff of great storytelling, romantic and mythic—Rudyard Kipling's *Jungle Book*, Hemingway's *The Snows of Kilimanjaro*. On our last

night, as we gathered around a table set outdoors on that Gatsby-green lawn under a million stars, we heard another one, equally romantic and mythic. After an extraordinary feast—Norwegian smoked salmon, Parma ham with local grapes, rack of lamb, prawn-and-chorizo risotto, Gorgonzola with truffles, and a sticky-toffee pudding—the story was told. This time, we heard about the leopard at infinity's edge.

The staff had heard there were leopards in these parts, but it was one creature no one had yet seen. As leopards are very nocturnal, sightings tend to be rare. But one morning a worker claimed he saw one while walking to the camp.

Why, he wondered, with all the construction, tractors, and trucks, not to mention people themselves, would a leopard come so close to the camp? That night, as the staff cleared the dishes and readied themselves for bed, someone hatched the idea. It was July after all. The height of the dry season. The Great Migration was in progress—the time when all wildlife was in search of that rare commodity called water. So a few of the staff headed out of the kitchen, through the grand drawing room, and onto the porch overlooking the lawn. There, in full moonlight, was a leopard. He was drinking at the edge of the pool.

For some reason I thought about the naïf French painter Henri Rousseau. Though he never visited Africa, Rousseau managed to conjure up images of extraordinary creatures in similarly magical settings. "Dad," my son turned to me and said, "maybe the title of your article should be 'A Leopard at the Edge of Infinity.'" He might have been right. ■

*A seven-night safari, with visits to all three camps, begins at \$8,550 per person and includes all flights within Africa, meals, accommodations, ground transfers, guides, vehicles, and park fees. The Great Migration, which is when the animals are seen at their most abundant, occurs from June through October; the wildebeest calving season is late December through March. My own brilliantly arranged Gnameti trip was organized by Will Jones at Journeys by Design (44-1273/623-790; [journeysbydesign.com](http://journeysbydesign.com)).*





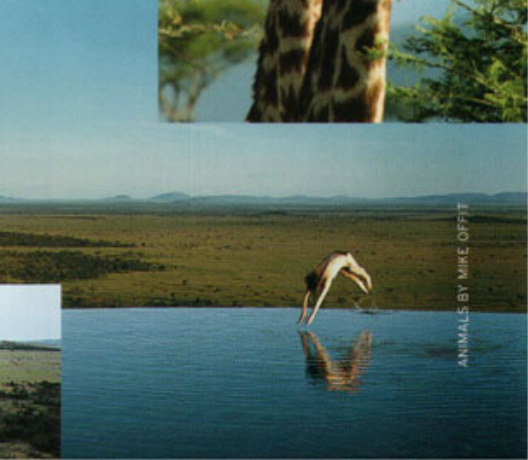




DURING THE DRY SEASON **THE SERENGETI PLAIN**  
IS THICK WITH WILDEBEEST, ZEBRA, AND GIRAFFES.







ANIMALS BY MIKE OFFIT



"A TENTED CAMP, FOR SURE, BUT A **TENTED CAMP** FROM ONE OF NAPOLEON'S 18TH-CENTURY CAMPAIGNS IN NORTH AFRICA."



Lanterns lit at dusk set the scene for an evening in Sabora's library and dining room.

(#12449) Adapted from the July/August 2006 issue of DEPARTURES magazine. Copyright © 2006 by American Express Publishing Corporation. All rights reserved.