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THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Saturday/Sunday, October 22 - 23, 2016 | D1

Where the Wild Things Are

If you go against the herd, an African safari needn't kill your kids' college fund. Here, one writer's no-frills adventure and seven more ways to go responsibly a-pe



SEARCH PARTY Doroobo Safaris leads unfussy walking safaris in Tanzania, and pitch mobile camps on land owned by a Maasai village.

BY SOPHY ROBERTS

SOON AFTER I HEARD about the Petersons, a band of brothers and their families who lead bare-bones private safaris in Tanzania, I booked a two-night trip with them. They don't have a fixed camp but instead pitch simple tents in remote areas. They lead walking safaris through the Maasai Steppe, classic savanna country studded with acacia and rocky outcrops, carrying nothing but a gun (for protection against a rogue animal, not for hunt-

ing). The brothers' old-school approach appealed to me, as did their safari's price tag: from around \$350 per person a night, far less than what many African wildlife vacations cost.

Most people think of a safari as one of the most exorbitantly priced trips you can take—and they aren't wrong. Rates at tented camps in the prime safari areas, such as Kenya, push \$1,000 a person a day. The top operations load on the luxuries—a Champagne breakfast in the bush served by a chef in whites, infinity pools overlooking watering holes, a retinue of staff that

make Teddy Roosevelt's safaris look underserved. But the flourishes can sometimes feel out of sync with the reality. You're still sleeping in a canvas tent in the middle of the wilderness.

I met Mike Peterson at a lonely airstrip in Tarangire National Park in the country's north. He spoke in a Midwestern accent tempered by his African childhood. Mr. Peterson and his three siblings were brought up in remote Tanzania as the children of Lutheran missionaries from Minnesota. Their company, Doroobo Safaris, now employs four members of the next generation of

Peterson boys, three of whom guide safaris, as well as over 60 Tanzanians. Their business is almost all word-of-mouth. The Petersons are the real deal, said Will Jones, who runs high-end travel company Journeys by Design, who tipped me off about them.

I was traveling in November on the cusp of the green season—a tourism-industry euphemism for the rainy months, a cheaper time of year to visit Africa. "There is nothing like wildlife to tell you rain is coming," observed Mr. Peterson when we drove toward our camp in Please turn to page D10

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ADVENTURE & TRAVEL

GO WILD WITHOUT GOING BROKE

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the inky light of late afternoon. "The animals start moving. They sense the change." We saw elephant and wildebeest and a pair of yellow-collared lovebirds. They darted through the bare, pepper-colored branches of a baobab tree, the canopy looking like a wild tangle of roots. "God got angry and planted that tree upside down," said Mr. Peterson.

We stopped frequently on the way to the camp to take in the surroundings. Mr. Peterson showed us the small things in the landscape—the insects and the butterflies, not just the megafauna. When we drove out of the national park into village-owned land nearby, he pulled up beside a rocky outcrop bunched by the sun. In its lee, hidden from view, was Doroobo's mobile camp (the Petersons have exclusive use of four areas in Tanzania where they put a camp whenever they have a booking). Aside from the khaki canvas dome tents for sleeping (each with two camp beds) and washstands and jugs outside, there was a separate shower tent, a loo and a simple canvas canopy where a table was laid for dinner with plastic Tupperware. Two Maasai were cooking on a fire. Beside them was a goat, tied to a tree. We were the only guests. As with many mobile safaris, Doroobo doesn't mix groups of travelers. Once you book the camp, it's all yours.

"The thing that makes a safari really special is where you are—in the nooks and holes of the wilderness where you can be sure you are alone," said Mr. Peterson as we knocked back a beer with the falling sun. We looked out over a vista of acacia woodland, empty save for a tower of giraffes, their necks almost indistinguishable from the trunks of the acacia trees.

The next morning, we left the jeep at the camp and went walking. We visited an olup camp—a warrior meat-eating camp—made up of temporary straw huts that a group of Maasai men had just departed after an annual feast. The earth was dark with blood. Mr. Peterson explained how the notches on the trunk of an acacia tree denoted how many days they had stayed—he counted 55. Nearby were the horns from the six steers they consumed during their stay. He showed us the remains of herbal remedies (roots, bark) that are made into soups to ward off sickness. "It's like a Maasai spa retreat," said Mr. Peterson of the olup camp. "The warriors get really into it, going into this trance-like state."

We walked, looking for wildlife, finding far less than the herds I've seen from the back of game-viewing vehicles on other safaris. Yet the slow pace instilled my time with Mr. Peterson with a greater sense of discovery. We traced baboon tracks in the mud. We listened to the call of a hoopoe

HOW TO SAVE A BUNDLE ON AN AFRICAN SAFARI

1 Travel in the green season

A euphemism for the rainy season (in Zambia, they call it the "emerald season"), this slower time of year has many benefits, including lush landscapes and great birding. On the downside, you may have to work harder to find the wildlife since they can find their water everywhere, not just at the water holes safari lodges created to attract them. Kenya and Tanzania have two rainy periods (the short showers in November, and the longer rains in April and May, when you risk daily downpours). In Zimbabwe, where the green season falls between November and April, prices can be almost 50% less than in high sea-



The Hide in Zimbabwe

son. For example: From Nov. 1 to Dec. 10, a six-night safari—three at The Hide in Hwange (thehide.com), and three at Changa on Lake Kariba (changasafari-camp.com) costs \$1,675 a person. In Botswana, in early January when the rains are light, expect to pay

around \$495 per person a night in luxury lodges with pools, such as Lebala or Lagoon—ask for the 5 Rivers rate (wondzo.com). Explore Inc. also offers a green-season safari in Botswana and Zimbabwe with savings of about 40% if the same trip it were done in July (exploretour.com).

2 Watch the currency fluctuations

Though many up-scale lodges in southern Africa raised prices significantly in 2015 to counter the devaluation of the South African rand (down 16.44% since the end of 2014 against the dollar) some of the best safari values can still be found in South Africa and Namibia. Unkumbe Safari Lodge in South Africa's popular Sabi Sands, have not touched their rates for 2016 and are going up just \$18 a person a night for next year. This lodge was always good value, said Rob Slater, co-director at Safaris Consultants, and now it's a bargain at about \$207 a night (unkumbe.com). In Namibia, where the local dollar is pegged one-to-one to the rand, Mr. Slater recommends Mushara Bushcamp near Etosha National Park, costing \$82 (including one meal), plus \$27 per child (aged 4 to 12, sharing their parents' room). Game drives cost \$40 per person (mushara-lodge.com).

3 Steer away from iconic parks

Tourists typically pay a fee to access protected wildlife areas, including many top parks. Look a little off-center, however, and you'll find vertiginous bargains. At Rwanda's Parc National des Volcans, for instance, a gorilla-tracking permit costs \$750 per person. Across the border in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the permit for Virunga National Park costs \$400. Lodging is also cheaper in Virunga: Rates at the prettily located Bukima Tented Camp (virungatented.com) in the shadow of Mount Mikeno start at \$335. In Botswana, an alternative to the popular (and pricey) Okavango is Mashatu Game Reserve, in the wildlife-rich Northern Tuli Game Reserve. Rates at Mashatu Tent Camp (mashatocamp.com) are as low as \$296 a person on the four nights for the price of three deals, through May 2017.

4 Brave a self-drive safari

There's good reason to be cautious with a self-drive safari—crime in South Africa, dangerous roads in Kenya—but not in Namibia, where the itinerary is mostly sparsely populated country. Safari Drive is a reputable outfitter with its own fleet of Land Rover Defenders and Toyota Land Cruisers, equipped with satellite phones and camping gear, as well as a tent that pops up on the roof of the Land Rover. The company customizes the itinerary in advance, and if you'd rather not sleep atop your vehicle, they'll book lodges or camps along the way. In the green season—from January to March, in the main wildlife area of Etosha—a two-week camping self-drive safari for two costs about \$230 a person a day (safaridrive.com).

5 Consider a set-departure group trip

Most safaris are private affairs, which means you'll be stuck paying the full expense of the small-plane charters or ground transfers. But if you join a group of travelers, signing up for a safari with a fixed departure date, prices are more competitive. Yes, you will be traveling with strangers, but even at the smartest lodges, you'll likely wind up touring and dining with other guests. Aardvark Safaris has mastered this market: It offers over 50 set-departure safaris for about \$445 per person a day in low season (December through April) for mobile safaris. That's about a \$200 per person saving on a privately booked equivalent (aardvarksafaris.co.uk). In Uganda, Wild Frontiers offers 14 set departure itineraries a year, all of them incorporating encounters with mountain gorillas. A six-day set departure costs from around \$2,000 a person (wildfrontiers.co.uk).

6 Take over a camp exclusively

If you fill up all the rooms in a safari camp that usually sells room by room, you can bargain for a 15% discount, advises Will Jones of Journeys by Design. Other camps, designed to be used exclusively by a single group, can be a good way to get bang for your buck, like taking a villa in Europe. For example, South Africa safari specialist Deborah Calmeyer suggests Tanda Tula Field Camp, in South Africa's Greater Kruger region, close to the uber-expensive Royal Malelane. At Tanda Tula, which sleeps eight in tents stylishly outfitted with lanterns and kilim rugs, rates run about \$471 per person per night (tandafrica.com). A good value for Kenya is Acacia House in the famed Maasai Mara reserve, which costs \$400 a person based on four people, including a private vehicle and guide (asiloafrica.com).

7 Calculate transfer costs

A significant share of a safari's cost is spent getting into the bush using small planes. Consider safari areas within easy driving distances of mainstream hubs, such as the Maasai Steppe in northeastern Tanzania, where Doroobo Safaris operates, which is a four-hour drive from \$350 per person. You take a walking safari to reach each camp. The transfer from the international airport at Lusaka to Mfuwe town is about \$350 per person round trip (bushcampcompany.com). "If I had to choose one place in Africa offering the best value for money, which is different from cheap, it is this operation," said Michael Lorentz, a South African safari guide and founder of travel outfitter Passage to Africa, which caters to the very top end. Also in Zambia, Remote Africa offers a six-night, \$3,384-per-person walking safari staying at Flatdogs Camp, Chikoko Tree and Crocodile River Camp with package costs inclusive of the charter flights (remoteafrica.com).



Waiting for a bush plane to Tarangire National Park.

bird. We saw hartbeest, perhaps the handsomest of the antelope, their proud stance like something out of a Renaissance painting. Back at the camp, we washed off the dust, using bucket showers suspended from a tree; the roof open to the sky. For dinner, the Maasai staff cooked the goat I had noticed on arrival, butchered it on the rocks, and cooked it over the campfire. The rawness of Doroobo might make it a poor choice for a first-time visitor to Africa, but unlike safaris in more popular areas, where you often wind up in a jeep caravan to look at a single leopard in a tree—revealed on radios by other guides—this less obvious choice feels like an older Africa.

Even before the Peterson children could walk, they went on safari with their parents, traveling on weekends with just a backpack, tent and a pickup. "When people asked us to take them with us, we decided to make a business of safari, camping in the places we knew," said Mr. Peterson. "We started with just two vehicles: a '49 and a '54 short-chassis open-top Land Rover. Our guests would sit on coolers at the back. We still have the '54. We like it this way." He took in the heat of the evening campfire, an arc of stars growing overhead. "It should be simple to come to Africa to sleep in a tent, don't you think?"

Virunga National Park, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.



Kenya's Acacia House.



Kenya's Acacia House.

Zambia's Mfuwe Lodge.



Zambia's Mfuwe Lodge.

WORKOUT IN THE WILD // THREE HEART-PUMPING ALTERNATIVES TO THE USUAL SAFARI

► In South Africa's Mount Anderson Reserve, Cycle Mashatu operates single-track mountain biking safaris with just enough animals to keep the riding interesting but not so many that a buffalo will likely knock you off your saddle. Their three-night, four-day safari takes in grass-

lands grazed by eland, zebra and wildebeest. From \$275 per person a day, mbsafaris.com.
► Not far from Kenya's Lewa Wildlife Conservancy—one of the loveliest areas in the country and home to a thriving rhino population—visitors can zip up wind-

ing tracks on a four- to five-hour day safari by buggy or quad bike through the Ngare Ndare Forest. From \$50 per person, based on two sharing a buggy, quad Kenya.com. Accommodations are extra.
► Hiking with the honey-hunters of northern Kenya as they smoke

wild bees out of the trees in the forests adjoining Ngwesi Group Ranch, is about as authentic a safari as it gets. The eponymous lodge, atop a pretty hill, is the diamond in these harsh, hot and sandy Cmaesi-owned and run by the local Maasai community. From \$300 per person, ngwesi.com

COVER: FROM TOP: THE HIDE; COURTESY BUSHCAMP; MICHAEL LORENZ; ZAMBIA AFRICA; SOPHY ROBERTS; L. MIKE PETERSON