

# ASILIA GAZETI

VOLUME 2 • 2020

## WATERS OF LIFE

Saving Tanzania's  
secret wetlands

## PLASTIC TACTICS

How little changes  
make a big difference

## STAR OF THE SHOW

Behind the lens with leading  
wildlife filmmaker Keith Scholey



# WE ARE FAMILY

Asilia is like a big, extended family, says HR Manager Devotha Malimi – and she should know

“Just call me Mother,” says Devotha Malimi with a throaty laugh. “Everyone does.” Devotha has been part of the Asilia family for over 10 years. Today, she says she’s a proud mother to 540 of the Asilia family in Tanzania. “And that doesn’t include my two biological children.” Another laugh.

Devotha is a friendly fixture at Asilia’s Tanzania headquarters, managing the safari company’s human resources in the region, which makes her responsible for all staff in Tanzania. This might explain her nickname. “I don’t like being called Madam or HR Manager. And I don’t want to draw a line between employees and me,” she says. “Our structure works like a family.”

She first joined Asilia in 2008 as a receptionist, looking after travel logistics for the executive team. Her fabulous people skills and commitment to growth have helped her advance her career with Asilia, managing Tanzania’s HR function.

Like many happy families, Asilia has seen a considerable growth spurt in the past 10 years. With 19 camps over a vast part of East Africa, the company is still growing. Asilia officially launched in 2004, but its roots run deep, having brought together some of Africa’s longest operating family-run safari companies: Rekeru Camp, dating back to 1986, and Oliver’s Camp, which started in 1992.

Launching with just three camps, Asilia quickly established itself as a leading light in the world of safari experiences, conservation and community engagement. “When I started, Asilia wasn’t as big as it is now – but I’m so proud of what we still offer our employees, and what we give back. The company is bigger, but our family way of life has been maintained. That makes me very proud,” Devotha says.

The company’s conservation and community projects (see page 14) keep

increasing, too. “We do so much now,” Devotha explains. From the Twende Porini programme, which brings in local schoolchildren to experience the bush and learn about vital conservation work, to the scholarships offered to people from disadvantaged backgrounds, Asilia pours as much effort into giving back as it does in creating extraordinary experiences for its guests.

It’s those extraordinary experiences that keep things current, and Asilia is never one to rest on its laurels. The latest exciting innovations include the reopening of Namiri Plains in Tanzania’s Serengeti; the introduction of the first electric game drive vehicle at Ol Pejeta Bush Camp in Kenya; and the launch of Asilia by Air (see page 4), a thrilling range of flying safaris, all offset via a social enterprise, Carbon Tanzania.

But it’s the people that keep guests coming back, says Devotha, and those human connections – from eagle-eyed guides who know how to find wildlife and really bring the landscape to life, to talented chefs who can whizz up the most remarkable meals in the middle of the bush – run deep. “Every staff member is empowered and loves what they do. I’ve witnessed guests crying when they leave, because they have become part of the Asilia family.”

The best part of her job, Devotha says, is seeing people grow in their careers within Asilia, just like she did. “One of our head guides, Hamza, started out as a trainee, then worked his way up from a walking guide, and now travels everywhere, training up others.”

What would she like to do next? “That is a very difficult question,” she laughs. “I consider myself a mother, and every mother knows that it’s very difficult to find someone to look after your children!” Devotha is keeping it in the family, and that’s just fine. □



DEVOTHA MALIMI, TANZANIA HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGER

AN ELEPHANT IN RUJHA, NEAR KIVUHALA, TANZANIA

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Photographed by MARIUS SWART  
Wildlife Photographer

# INSIDE TRACK

*The hottest happenings in East Africa right now*

## A CHIMP'S EYE VIEW

**W**ant a new perspective on the world? Head up into the lofty heights of Rubondo Island's tropical canopy and stay in Asilia's brand new tree houses, set to open in 2021. Asilia's second lodge on this lush island (where they are the sole operator) in Lake Victoria, the Rubondo tree houses are perfect for those seeking true adventure.

The unspoiled tropical forest offers a front-row seat to an astonishing variety of birdlife, as well as herds of roaming elephant, while the lake is home to hippo, crocodile and the iconic Nile perch. But the most famous residents are the Rubondo chimpanzees, and guests have the chance to track and observe these fascinating creatures on foot as part of a conservation-driven habituation project.

The tree houses are a thrilling addition set on a spectacular private bay, only accessible by boat or all-terrain vehicle: just three bedrooms and a shared area built high up among the branches and linked by a treetop walkway. Built six metres above the ground, this enchanting setting provides an unparalleled lookout into the trees, where birds flap, butterflies flit, monkeys chatter, and views stretch across the tranquil bay in front of the lodge.

The tree houses are ideally placed for accessing the chimpanzee-trekking area; indeed, their design is inspired by chimpanzee nests. The rough and irregular external shape is made of recycled plastic collected from Lake Victoria, while the interiors are light, bright and colourful, reflecting the vibrant tropical forest outside.

Each room features an outside deck facing the canopy with beautiful views of the bay. Even the shower has views of the surrounding trees, via a skylight. A stroll along the walkway leads to the main area, allowing for a closer look at butterflies at specially placed feeding stations. The canopy walk also provides further information about the trees, orchids and other unique sights.

An ideal stay includes two nights in the main camp and one night in the tree houses, combining chimpanzee-trekking with game drives, boat safaris and jungle walks, plus fishing for Nile perch.



### DID YOU KNOW?

The chimpanzees on Rubondo originate from 16 rescue chimpanzees shipped over from European zoos between 1966 and 1969 by Professor Grzimek, a German conservationist. Their descendants now thrive on this protected island paradise.



EMPAKAAI CRATER, NEAR ASILIA'S THE HIGHLANDS

## TAKE TO THE SKIES *Asilia* BY AIR

“Wow” moments are pretty much a given on an East African safari, but now Asilia is injecting those experiences with even more allure, offering a selection of curated Asilia by Air flying safaris. Weaving together the highlights of Kenya and Tanzania, six new itineraries hop between different Asilia camps, with expert on-the-ground teams creating unforgettable experiences at each stop. Each flying safari is evaluated and the carbon emissions offset via Carbon Tanzania. The routes take in some of the region's most iconic sights, from the majesty of The Great Migration in the Masai Mara to the mystical depths of the vast and ancient Ngorongoro Crater, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. As well as covering a huge area and maximising time on the ground, guests get to take in the vast African landscapes from above – perhaps catching sight of animals, the snowy peak of Mount Kilimanjaro or the sandy, white beaches of Zanzibar en route. [asiliaafrica.com/asilia-by-air](http://asiliaafrica.com/asilia-by-air)



UNITED AIRLINES HAS LAUNCHED ITS FIRST AFRICAN ROUTE IN YEARS, OFFERING A SEASONAL NON-STOP FLIGHT BETWEEN NEW YORK AND CAPE TOWN. RUNNING THREE TIMES A WEEK FROM DECEMBER TO MARCH, THE ROUTE OFFERS AN IDEAL SPRINGBOARD FOR AN EAST AFRICAN TRIP. [UNITED.COM](http://UNITED.COM)



### CHEERS TO THAT

Sayari, in the northern Serengeti, is launching Asilia's first microbrewery, made by Sweden's WAYOUT ([wayoutintl.com](http://wayoutintl.com)). As well as four unique beers, it will create soft drinks and purified drinking water – still and sparkling – using solar power. This will limit waste and reduce the need for transport. We'll drink to that...

## PURCHASE WITH PURPOSE

The shops in Asilia's camps stock a variety of beautifully curated items, most of which are made locally. The WomenCraft range, for example, is a handmade selection of woven homewares, providing increased economic opportunities for more than 300 women in the post-conflict border area of Rwanda, Burundi and Tanzania. From handmade table mats to decorative wall hangings and colourful baskets, each item has its own story to tell and can be discovered in all of our camp shops. As well as WomenCraft products, Asilia shops offer a wide range of goods made by different local companies, many of which are nonprofit.



## SWAHILI CHICKEN CURRY

Here's how to recreate this delicious dish, part of the Swahili tasting menu at Jabali Ridge

SERVES 4-6 people

### INGREDIENTS

- 1/4 cup sunflower oil & 2 tbsp for frying
- 2 small onions, chopped
- 3 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 tsp fresh ginger, minced
- 1 chilli (green or red), deseeded, finely chopped
- 1/2 kg fresh tomatoes, skin removed and roughly chopped in cubes
- 1 tbsp tomato paste
- 3 tbsp curry powder
- 2 tsp cumin powder
- 2 tsp garam masala
- 2 cloves
- 1 tsp turmeric
- 5 cardamom seeds
- 1 cup coconut milk
- 1 small bunch fresh coriander
- 750 g chicken deboned and cut into 2cm cubes



### METHOD

**STEP 1** Heat the 1/4 cup sunflower oil on medium heat in a large pot. Sauté onions until translucent, then add garlic, ginger, curry powder and spices and stir until darker in colour and fragrant (around 5 minutes).

**STEP 2** Add the tomato paste and fresh tomato. Simmer on a low heat for 20-30 minutes, stirring occasionally.

**STEP 3** Add the coconut milk and simmer gently for 5-10 minutes until the sauce combines. Set aside.

**STEP 4** Heat remaining 2 tbsp sunflower oil in a large

frying pan and sauté the chicken cubes until browned but not cooked through. Do not overfill the pan, so as to ensure that the chicken browns quickly but does not overcook.

**STEP 5** Add the chicken to the curry sauce, reheat and serve hot with rice, chapattis and sambals.

**TOP TIPS** The curry sauce improves with time. For the best results, make it a day or two in advance, then simply add the sautéed chicken on the day you want to serve it. It can be kept in the fridge for up to two weeks and can also be used with vegetables, lamb, beef or seafood.



SAY HELLO TO...

## DIANA SHAMBI

Originally from Moshi, below Mount Kilimanjaro, Diana is the manager of Roho ya Selous, a remote camp in southern Tanzania. Set in a vast wilderness in the heart of Selous Game Reserve, Roho ya Selous is known for its extraordinary game viewing, including one of Africa's largest populations of wild dog.

**THIS IS WHAT I'VE ALWAYS DONE.** My parents passed away when I was 12, so I left Moshi and was sent to boarding school in Kenya. But during the holidays I would come back and help my auntie, who worked for a tour operator. She trained me up in the travel industry.

**MY FIRST PROPER JOB WAS SUCH FUN.** I worked in a backpackers' lodge in Arusha, organising safaris for guests. It was fun because I was young and I got to meet other young people from all over the world. I would help them with their travels and talk about my country during the day, and in the evening I would hang out with them. From there I moved to The Selous to work in my first game reserve. It was a big change.

**I'M NOT A TOWN PERSON AT ALL.** Although I grew up in the city, moving to the bush was easy. I love the bush. I love how peaceful it is. Town life is too hectic for me - too much pollution, too much noise. Roho ya Selous has so much to offer - game drives, boat safaris and walking safaris.

**I DIDN'T FIND ASILIA - ASILIA FOUND ME.** Some managers from Asilia came to stay in my camp and I hosted them, not knowing who they were. They

must have liked what I did because they gave me a business card and asked me to apply. I joined as an assistant manager at Namiri Plains in the Serengeti in 2016.

**MY TEAM WAS MADE UP ENTIRELY OF MEN.** That was fine because all the places I'd worked had been the same. It was 30 men and me, but I was used to it and they always respected me. And then in 2017 I was promoted to manager and I was so happy; I knew that it was time for me to prove that I could do it.

**ASILIA LETS ME MAKE MY OWN DECISIONS.** I'm trusted to run things and make the decisions. We have so many different types of guests, and I love talking to them. I get to learn new things and it doesn't feel like I'm working. It feels like they are coming to my house and they are getting to know things about my area while I'm getting to know things about them.

**I'M PROUD THAT I CAN PROVIDE FOR MYSELF.** I don't have to rely on anyone, not in terms of rent or my house or anything. And I can also help out my family and my friends. That is a really good feeling.

PHOTOGRAPHS: EDWIN REMBERG/ALAMY, KATRINA SORRENTINO

# ART OF AFRICA

The 1-54 Contemporary Art Fair takes the cream of the continent's contemporary talent to the global stage

**E**ast Africa has long been celebrated for its traditional art, with vibrant sculptures and weavings characterising any visit to Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda or Uganda. But a new breed of contemporary artist has emerged in recent years, presenting Africa in a different light, and the world is taking note.

Former banker and art curator Touria El Glaoui, who has been listed among the 100 most powerful women in Africa by *Forbes*, acted on this increasing appetite back in 2013 and launched the 1-54 Contemporary African Art Fair in London. The name refers to the number of African nations: one continent, home to 54 countries. She was onto a good thing; the fair has grown into a leading international art event, dedicated to contemporary art from Africa and its diaspora. Today it has annual editions in London, New York and Marrakech, offering a dynamic platform that is radically changing how the rest of the world views African art.

Now in its eighth year, the London edition is held in prestigious Somerset House every October, with commissioned installations taking over the huge courtyard. Last year, for example, a specially created sculpture by Angolan artist Kiluanji Kia Henda took pride of place.

Some 45 galleries from 19 countries exhibit at the fair over four days, showcasing the very latest work to emerge from the continent, including that of artists such as Shabu Mwangi from Kenya and galleries ARTLabAfrica and Circle Art Gallery, both from Nairobi. Accompanying the show is 1-54 FORUM, a popular programme of talks that explores artistic and cultural trends, as well as critical thinking and ideas.

The fair extended its reach in 2014 when it launched in New York, followed by Marrakech in 2018. The shows are going from strength to strength: more than 18,000 people visited last year's London edition, helping to build a growing global interest in contemporary African art. [1-54.com](http://1-54.com)



A REVERSED RETROGRESS. SCENE 1 (2013) BY MARY SIBANDE

## 48 HOURS IN KIGALI

What to do in the dynamic Rwandan capital



### INEMA ARTS CENTER

Located in the heart of the city, this contemporary art gallery is the place to visit for appreciating (and buying) works by artists from around Africa. [inemaartcenter.com](http://inemaartcenter.com)



### THE RETREAT HOTEL

This pretty boutique hotel is also Kigali's first eco-friendly, 100% solar-powered resort - making for the perfect conscious and comfortable stay. [heavenrwanda.com](http://heavenrwanda.com)



### KIGALI GENOCIDE MEMORIAL

Built in 2004 in memory of the victims of the 1994 Rwandan genocide, this is a stark and powerful reminder of the country's once turbulent past. [kgm.rw](http://kgm.rw)



### KIMIRONKO MARKET

Head to colourful Kimironko Market for eye-catching fabrics, baskets and souvenirs. Or just wander around, absorbing the buzzy atmosphere. [tripadvisor.com](http://tripadvisor.com)



### QUESTION COFFEE

This lively coffee shop not only sources its beans from Fairtrade farms throughout Rwanda, but all proceeds go toward training female farmers. Win-win. [questioncoffee.com](http://questioncoffee.com)



# WASTE NOT, WANT NOT

Recent recipient of a World Tourism Award for positive impact, Asilia is taking groundbreaking steps to reduce its plastic waste

**W**e all know we need to reuse, recycle and, above all, reduce the amount of single-use plastic that we use – an estimated 79 percent of all discarded plastic ends up in landfills and the environment. This is doubly concerning for Asilia and other safari companies that not only depend on pristine landscapes, but also know that dealing with waste in their remote locations is both complicated and costly. Just imagine the fuel needed to bring a crate of water bottles from a city out to an isolated camp in the middle of a national park – let alone the journey back out to be discarded or recycled.

Encouragingly, though, Africa is leading the charge in outlawing single-use plastics: of the 74 countries worldwide to have

banned lightweight plastic bags, almost half are on the continent. Kenya and Tanzania introduced bans in August 2017 and June 2019 respectively, along with stiff fines and prison sentences to enforce them.

Asilia and other leading safari companies in the region are a step ahead. Guests on game drives are now routinely given water in reusable flasks and lunches in cardboard boxes, while soft drinks and condiments are stored in aluminium tins, and bathroom amenities provided in refillable bottles.

Some companies have gone further still, replacing bubble wrap with packaging made from shredded paper and recycled fabric, using beeswax wraps instead of cling film and installing their own water-bottling plants.

Asilia, winner of a 2019 World Tourism Award for positive impact, has always

striven to lighten its eco-footprint. The company has been carbon neutral since 2009, and in 2015 redoubled its efforts to eliminate plastic waste, reducing it by 63 percent over four years.

Switching to stainless-steel water bottles in 2016 was a game-changer, says Community and Environment Coordinator Epimark Lastone. Overseeing these and other sustainable initiatives are Asilia's in-camp eco-warriors, who also sort waste for recycling. From the Masai Mara, waste is taken to Taka Taka Solutions in Nairobi, which recycles 90 percent of the waste it collects by turning food waste into compost, rubber tires into Maasai shoes and paper into tissue paper.

From the northern Serengeti, waste goes to Arusha, where wine bottles are turned into goblets and candlesticks at a social enterprise called Shanga, and plastic bottles and nylon rubbish bags are melted down and mixed with sand to make paving blocks by Green Venture; the rest goes to the government landfill.

From southern Tanzania, plastic, paper and glass bottles are collected by The Recycler in Dar es Salaam, which manages a range of waste products – sorting recyclables, incinerating medical and hazardous waste, and breeding maggots to process food waste organically. Since it was founded in 2014, it has recycled 7 million plastic bottles.

Lastone says: "Individual Asilia camps and lodges set their own targets for waste reduction and report back monthly – on how much food waste is composted, waste water recycled, and plastic packed into bags and taken out of camp, maximising the return leg on the same trucks that bring in the supplies."

Other initiatives remove the need for

transportation, offering both environmental and practical benefits. The remote camps in the northern Serengeti and on Rubondo Island in Lake Victoria, more than a day's drive from Arusha, have their own vegetable gardens to supply the kitchens, while at Matemwe on Zanzibar, supplies come wrapped in banana leaves.

Plastic waste is a huge problem on Zanzibar, despite a ban on plastic bags since 2006; sustainable waste-management company Zanrec calculates that nine tonnes of plastic were removed from Matemwe's beaches in one year alone. Asilia was the first company on Zanzibar to partner with Zanrec, which now works with 70 hotels around the island and estimates that trash the weight of a Boeing 747 gets dumped into Zanzibar's environment every single day.

The company's services include composting, selling plastic, glass and metal, and upcycling waste products into notebooks and drinking glasses, as well as supporting hotel staff in implementing waste separation. Asilia guests are invited to take part in clean-ups, putting their rubbish into a giant Taka Taka (trash) tuna called Travis.

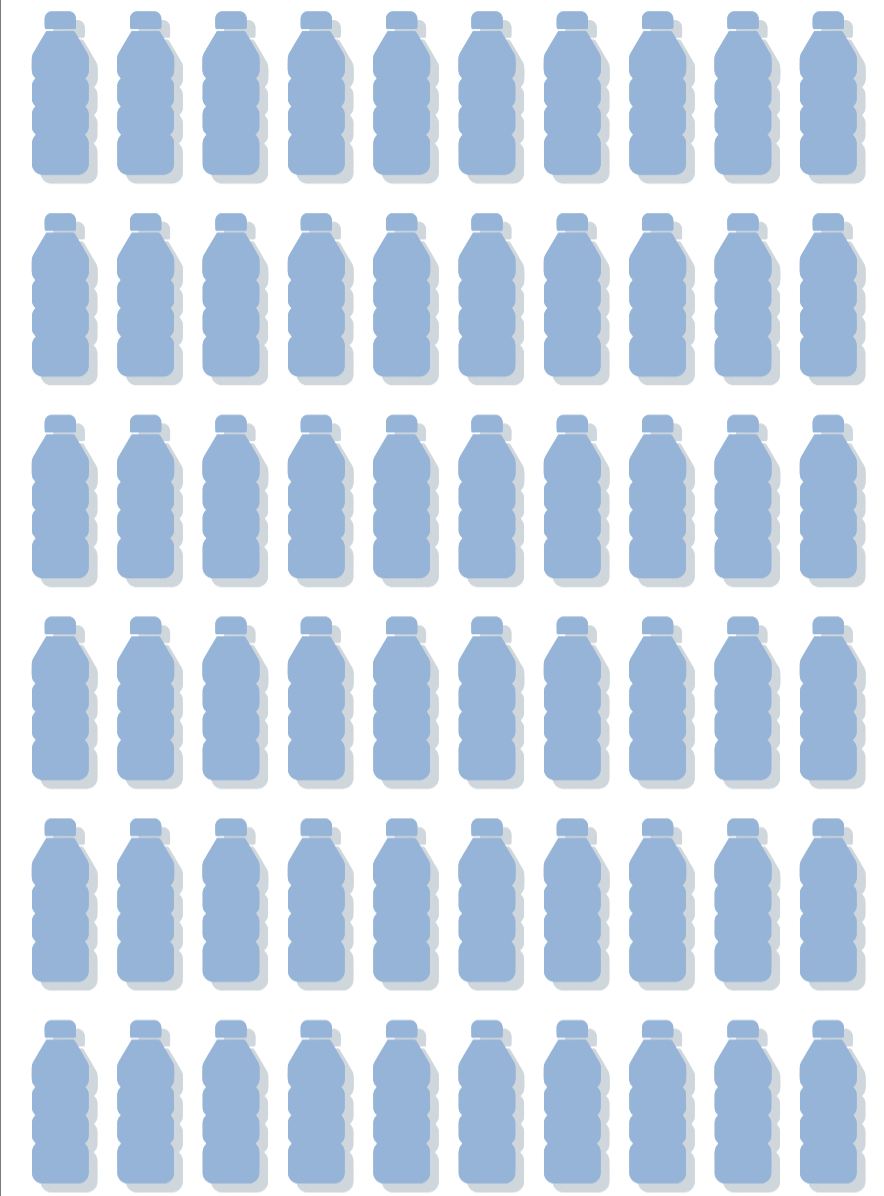
A partnership with Scandinavian start-up WAYOUT is behind another Asilia first: a solar-powered microbrewery in the bush. Launching at Asilia's flagship luxury camp Sayari in the Serengeti when it reopens in June, the micro-plant will make four unique craft beers and soft drinks on site, as well as purifying water and producing sparkling water (see page 4). This will help cut plastic waste dramatically, eliminating up to eight tonnes of carbon dioxide per month, while producing the perfect sustainable sundowner. How refreshing. □ *Lisa Johnson*



PHOTOGRAPH: NICHOLAS DALE / ISTOCK; ILLUSTRATIONS: FREEPRK/WWW.FLATICON.COM

TRAVIS THE GIANT TAKA TAKA (TRASH) TUNA AT MATEMWE, ZANZIBAR. OPPOSITE: A CHEETAH CUB CHEWING ON A PLASTIC BAG

2015



**66%** REDUCTION IN PLASTIC WATER BOTTLES USED IN ASILIA'S KENYA AND TANZANIA CAMPS IN FOUR YEARS. (EACH BOTTLE = 1,000 BOTTLES)

2019



ASILIA PRIDES ITSELF ON CONTINUING TO MAKE A POSITIVE IMPACT IN EAST AFRICA. HERE ARE A FEW OTHER WAYS THEY ARE REACHING THIS GOAL.



ELECTRIC 4X4 INTRODUCED AT OL PEJETA BUSH CAMP



NO PLASTIC STRAWS OR EARBUDS IN CAMPS



SOLAR PANELS ARE FEATURED THROUGHOUT ASILIA'S CAMPS



RECYCLED MATERIALS USED TO BUILD ASILIA'S CAMPS



ASILIA'S CARBON FOOTPRINT IS OFFSET WITH CARBON TANZANIA



RECYCLING INITIATIVE SET UP AT MATEMWE



PHOTOGRAPH: CONOR MCDONNELL

# LEADING MAN

Keith Scholey, the director behind dozens of powerful wildlife documentaries, talks about filming in the Mara, his most intense encounters – and working with Sir David Attenborough

**W**here does a wildlife-documentary filmmaker go to relax? “The Masai Mara every time,” Keith Scholey of Silverback Films says. “I go there to reconnect.

There’s nowhere better.” Perhaps that shouldn’t come as a surprise. The veteran BBC and Netflix filmmaker was born in Dar es Salaam in Tanzania and moved to Kenya when he was two years old, where he lived until he was 13. What’s more, his career has involved a huge range of groundbreaking documentaries, often with Sir David Attenborough at the helm.

His award-winning programmes and films include the BBC’s *The Blue Planet*, Netflix’s *Our Planet* and Disney’s *African Cats*, but his interest in wildlife started early. “My parents loved going on safari. It sounds weird to say it now, but in the 1960s, tourism hadn’t kicked off and not many people would go on safari from Nairobi.”

But Keith and his family would, heading into Amboseli National Park in southern Kenya, where there was just one very simple place to stay – a camp with self-catering cabins – and no more than about 24 people exploring the park at any given time. “There was a huge bull elephant who would wander through camp,” he says. “We’d see hunts happening. We had amazing adventures.”

But then he was sent to boarding school to “the strange country” of England where, he laughs, “it took a long time to get used to the cold and wet.” Despite this, his love for wildlife didn’t diminish. He went on to study zoology at the University of Bristol, gaining an undergraduate degree before completing a PhD, which often took him back to East Africa for his fieldwork. “If I have any specialities, Africa would be one,” Keith explains.

He joined the BBC in 1982 as a researcher on Sir David Attenborough’s series *The Living Planet*, and he’s worked with him ever since. Keith moved through the ranks of the BBC’s Natural History Unit, devising, producing and directing a number of series including *Wildlife on One* and *Big Cat Diary*. “I was, rather unkindly, called a suit,” he chuckles. His rise through the organisation culminated in a top job: overseeing all factual programming for the BBC.

It was *Big Cat Diary* that spurred him to get back to what he loved best: filmmaking. “We wanted to make



ABOVE, FILMING IN THE MASAI MARA. OPPOSITE, KEITH SCHOLEY AND SIR DAVID ATTENBOROUGH

a movie about big cats, so we did.” He headed back to the Mara in 2008 with co-producer Alastair Fothergill OBE (with whom he now runs the award-winning Silverback Films) to make *African Cats* – where his association with Asilia Africa began.

“We followed a mother cheetah with five cubs, and an amazing lion pride that straddled the Mara River,” he explains. The crew, which was creating the film with Disney, needed to find a camp somewhere that had easy access to both sides of the river. There were only two spots in the whole Mara where you could cross, and Rekeru was one of them, perfectly positioned to access both sides. “Gerard [Beaton, Asilia’s regional operations director] set up a private film camp in the forest behind Rekeru, and a fly camp on the other side of the river.”

Gerard ran all the logistics on the ground, transforming his family’s camp – where he lived with his wife and two small sons – into the film crew’s base camp. The set-up was just what the team needed, and over the next couple of years, two film crews, headed by Owen Newman and Sophie Darlington, followed

“[MAKING A WILDLIFE DOCUMENTARY] IS LIKE DIRECTING A DRAMA. THE STORYTELLING PROCESS IS THE SAME. AND YOU HAVE TO FIT TWO YEARS’ FILMING INTO 75 MINUTES”



ABOVE, THE AREA IS FAMOUS FOR ITS HIGH DENSITY OF BIG CATS, SUCH AS THESE THREE BROTHERS, PHOTOGRAPHED NEAR REKERO.

BELOW LEFT, THE CREW FROM SILVERBACK FILMS WORKING ON DAVID ATTENBOROUGH: A LIFE ON OUR PLANET IN THE MASAI MARA. BELOW RIGHT, SIR DAVID ATTENBOROUGH ON LOCATION IN THE MASAI MARA



PHOTOGRAPHS: CONOR McDONNELL, LAURA MEACHAM

the lion and cheetah families. As Keith says: “They would go for six to eight weeks, sometimes longer, three to four months each year.”

The crew on location was relatively small – just eight people. Sophie, for example, would drive and film from her own car, which ensured that she could manoeuvre exactly where she wanted to be to catch a shot, working with a second spotter vehicle to find the animals. “You want your impact to be as low as possible. You don’t want to be tearing the Mara up with lots of vehicles,” says Keith.

The day-to-day challenges of shooting a documentary are often the same, no matter what is being filmed. “When you wake up each morning, you have nothing,” says Keith. “So the first thing you have to do is find your animals.” You get pretty good at finding them, he says, as you get to know their habits and rhythms, but it can take until lunchtime to track them down. And sometimes they’d simply vanish: “A whole lion pride can just disappear for three or four days because they roam over such a huge area.” Thankfully, the professional guides, or “spotters,” really understand animals and can work out how to find them, while also anticipating what they might be doing in 10 minutes’ time – which is crucial for keeping track of their movements.

Some of the most interesting sequences, though, are shot when the animals behave in a way that hasn’t been anticipated. “There was one time when our lion pride found a dead hippo on the river bank and then two very large crocodiles came in to eat it, too. There was a crazy standoff with our big male lion snarling at an equally aggressive crocodile. The lions won. Then later, two young lions from the same pride swam across the river and a crocodile grabbed one. The lion went under but somehow must have thrown off the crocodile and made it to the other bank.”

Editing is hugely important to bringing across the overarching narrative, Keith explains. “It’s always going to be a jigsaw. Just imagine shooting a cheetah on a hunt. They cover one kilometre from the start to the end, so you can either film the start or the end. That means you have to shoot a number of hunts to create a convincing sequence.” It’s also about truncating time and leaving out what Keith calls the boring bits. “It’s like directing a drama,” he says. “The storytelling process is the same. And you have to fit two years’ filming into 75 minutes.”

Working with wild animals for his entire career has brought about some intense encounters. Keith recalls one experience involving an enormous bull elephant called Gilbert, who they’d been filming in the northern Masai Mara. Will Craig, his guide, knew Gilbert well and they had, says Keith, an understanding where the elephant knew implicitly that Will was in charge.

Then, one day, Keith was sitting alone with his cameraman in their vehicle – a wide-open 4X4 customised without doors for easier filming – when Gilbert came wandering over. “He was looking at us and you could see he was thinking, ‘It’s those two idiots and there’s no Will!’” says Keith. “There was suddenly this sucking noise and he reached in and blew our car full of dust. He was making his statement without hurting us. That communication was amazing.”

“SIR DAVID ATTENBOROUGH IS FAR MORE REMARKABLE THAN THE MAN WHO APPEARS ON THE SCREEN. HIS BREADTH OF KNOWLEDGE, HIS WISDOM, HIS SENSE OF HUMOUR, EVERYTHING ABOUT HIM – HE IS A GREAT MAN IN THE TRUEST SENSE”

A few years later, Gilbert was shot by a poacher. “I’ve had surprisingly few scary interactions with animals. The scariest things in the bush are people.”

While his career highlights generally involve animals, Keith’s enduring relationship with Sir David Attenborough has been life-changing. He has worked with the wildlife legend since he was 24, collaborating on everything from the BBC’s *The Secret Life of Plants* to the Netflix series *Our Planet*. “He is far more remarkable than the man who appears on the screen,” he says. “Every time I see him, I learn something else. His breadth of knowledge, his wisdom, his sense of humour, everything about him – he is a great man in the truest sense.”

Attenborough’s standards are incredibly high, Keith explains, which drives those around him to give their best. At 94, he is still working as hard as ever, even on location. Most recently, the crew was back at Asilia’s Topi House in the Masai Mara, filming the trailer for their latest collaboration with the World Wildlife Fund – *David Attenborough: A Life On Our Planet*. This feature film, released in cinemas and on Netflix in April, reflects on his lifetime as a naturalist and the devastating changes he has witnessed. Keith calls it Sir David’s witness statement, and says, “It’s about the changes he’s seen and what we need to do about it.”

While Keith agrees that the past few years have seen a big shift in public opinion, in part thanks to the hard-hitting facts featured in documentaries such as *The Blue Planet*, he says, “If anything, we feel we haven’t brought about change quickly enough – the [natural environment] is still going down the rubbish chute, it’s being destroyed. So we’re being much more proactive in our filmmaking. If we don’t bring about a change in the next 10 years, the natural world will be lost. It’s an urgent time.”

What’s next for Keith? “Topi House in the Masai Mara,” he says. But this time he’s going on holiday. “The Masai Mara is, I feel, the most peaceful place in the world. And there’s no Wi-Fi!” □ *Francisca Kellett*



## AFRICA ON THE BIG SCREEN

When the team from *The Lion King* came to the Masai Mara, Asilia knew exactly where to take them

2019 was a big year for lions. The release of the hotly anticipated photorealistic version of Disney’s *The Lion King* put the spotlight on the Masai Mara, where much of it was filmed – and helping the film crew throughout was Asilia, acting as on-the-ground guides in some of the area’s most beautiful locations.

The area was an obvious choice for the film crew. It is, after all, known as the “land of big cats,” famous for having Africa’s largest concentration of lion, as well as a great place to spot leopard, cheetah and serval (see page 18). Add to that the vast open grasslands, the cinematic skies and the epic wildlife diversity and you’ve got the perfect backdrop for a wildlife extravaganza just made for the big screen.

One of the most stirring parts of the movie, for example, was filmed close to Rekeru in the Masai Mara. This majestic area, known as Rhino Ridge, is featured in the spine-tingling opening scenes and was the only live-action shot used in the film.

Asilia took care of the crew for two weeks, hosting them at Rekeru while they shot scenes in the most diverse and beautiful locations, including the Aberdares, Lake Magadi, northern Kenya, Mount Kenya and the Masai Mara.

And a fun fact from the film set: when the crew captured the perfect sunrise shot at Rhino Ridge, they played *The Lion King*’s theme song, *Circle of Life*, in the game drive vehicle.

### LIGHTS, CAMERA, AFRICA

Six classics filmed in Kenya and Tanzania:  
*The African Queen* (1951)  
*Where No Vultures Fly* (1951)  
*Born Free* (1966)  
*Out of Africa* (1985)  
*To Walk with Lions* (1999)  
*The Lion King* (2019)

Three locally produced films worth checking out:  
*Maangamizi: The Ancient One* (2001)  
*Masai: The Rain Warriors* (2006)  
*Munyurangabo* (2009)



**DID YOU KNOW?**

Usangu has two distinct seasons. From December to May, in the wet season, channels are flowing and the river is full, offering great water-based activities such as boating, canoeing and birding. The dry season, from June to November, offers multi-day safaris and overnighting in fly camps, as well as swimming in hot springs, and off-road driving expeditions, with the opportunity to help researchers.

PHOTOGRAPH: MARTIN HARVEY/ALAMY

# PRESENCE NOT PROFIT

Tanzania's Usangu region – one of the world's last great unexplored wetlands – is under threat. Asilia's latest conservation efforts set out to turn the tide

Imagine being one of the first visitors to an unexplored wetland wilderness. Not only is it unexplored, akin to a mini-Okavango Delta without the crowds, but it is also home to huge prides of lion, endangered wild dog, roan, sable and 100-strong eland herds.

Welcome to the Usangu Wetlands project.

Usangu Game Reserve, covering 5,000 km<sup>2</sup>, was annexed to Ruaha National Park in 2008, creating East Africa's largest national park at 23,000 km<sup>2</sup> (almost the same size as Rwanda). The Usangu area has hugely diverse habitats, from cathedral-like miombo woodlands to the Ihefu swamp that feeds the Great Ruaha River, keeping its wilderness and wildlife alive.

But all is not well. "The swamp is shrinking because of overexploitation from agriculture and livestock," says Doug Bell, Asilia's Usangu project manager. "That's causing the dry season's water levels to decline on the Ruaha River."

The 475 km river has national significance, sustaining a massive ecosystem that includes the Rufiji River, the lifeblood of Selous Game Reserve, and feeding reservoirs that generate 60 percent of Tanzania's electricity.

Asilia's ethos of supporting conservation and communities through long-term sustainable tourism in undeveloped areas needing protection has a long history. Tourism was introduced to Rubondo Island on Lake Victoria, for example, and in Kogatende, northern Serengeti, with the openings of Rubondo Island Camp and Sayari respectively.

Good relationships with the government are crucial for the company's work. Asilia first visited Usangu in 2017 and its track record has earned the trust of Tanzania's National Parks Authority (TANAPA). The result is Tanzania's first public-private partnership within a national park.

Building positive relationships with the local communities is also paramount. The communities were originally forced to relocate outside the park, but recompense through employment, improved grazing lands and education never materialised. With no rangers in place to protect the wetlands, people gradually returned, illegally continuing their farming, grazing and poaching.

"Communities are just as important as



TOP: GUESTS WILL BE ABLE TO JOIN RESEARCHERS COLLARING LION. ABOVE, THE USANGU REGION IS HOME TO ENDANGERED ROAN AND, OPPOSITE, WILD DOG ARE COMMONLY FOUND IN THE WETLANDS

conservation. Without their support, conservation will really struggle," says Doug. "In meetings with Asilia's Positive Impact team, village elders said they'd never been consulted before. The entire community respects them, so if they're on board, the younger generations follow. Our biggest challenge is creating far-reaching sustainable community projects."

Potential projects for Usangu's 10,000 neighbours include improving agricultural practices, supporting veterinary care for livestock (healthy livestock means that local people are less likely to have to go into the reserve), creating jobs, helping with education and teaching children about conservation.

"Kids are crucial; they're the future custodians for this environment," says Doug.

Asilia is still learning about Usangu's environment, conducting the first biodiversity audit on the entire ecosystem – covering everything from mammals and fish to birds and botany. "No one knows what's here," says Doug. "We've already discovered a previously unknown type of shrew."

Researchers have collared roan, sable and lion, and now they're habituating them to vehicles and walkers. "It's challenging. Some lions have grown up without ever having seen a vehicle," he explains.

This research phase also allows Asilia to plan for tourism, discovering the best wildlife locations and experiencing the area's seasonality. "We can't just flick a switch and put up a camp," says Brandon Kemp, Asilia's southern Tanzania country manager. "We need to understand the area and bring in tourism gradually, getting visitors involved from the start and feeling they're part of the adventure."

With the background work done, Asilia's new camp and two fly camps open in mid-2020, when guests can join researchers and veterinarians in collaring wild animals on special set-departure research trips. "They're pretty amazing," says Brandon. "It's hands-on: you're out there with experts, touching the animals and really getting involved."

Between those collaring trips, Asilia will work with private professional guides who will bring clients keen to experience true wilderness. "This is our 'presence not profit' concept," Brandon stresses. "They'll be affordable safaris. The game's skittish, so we're getting animals used to people. We're not trying to make money, we're here to protect the area."

"Perhaps in two to three years' time, with more relaxed animals, we'll have the option of upgrading our camps in the area," says Brandon. "By then, we'll be well-established here and we'll have helped protect Usangu." The future's never certain, of course. But with the help of Asilia's latest conservation project, Usangu is finally getting the protection it needs. □ *Sue Watt*

Asilia Adventures offers a three-night collaring trip at Usangu Expedition Camp. Contact [safari@asiliaafrica.com](mailto:safari@asiliaafrica.com) for further information.



# Make Love NOT ROAR

A tender moment caught on camera by Petros Zouzoula, an Asilia guest



## CARNAL CARNIVORES

The lions were completely oblivious to us. The pair mated over two days, and we were invisible to them. We'd discovered the lion and lioness while on our first safari at Rekeru, an incredibly lucky find thanks to our brilliant guide, Senchura Kaleku.

We returned several times to witness this extraordinary event, watching a variety of game – both big and small – move around the couple, all being completely ignored. The lions were totally absorbed in each other, with just one thing on their minds.

After two days of vigorous activity, both animals were visibly exhausted, and this is when I took this image. The lion persisted. He nudged his female companion and gave her a few licks, as if to remind her about what they were meant to be doing. She rolled playfully onto her back.

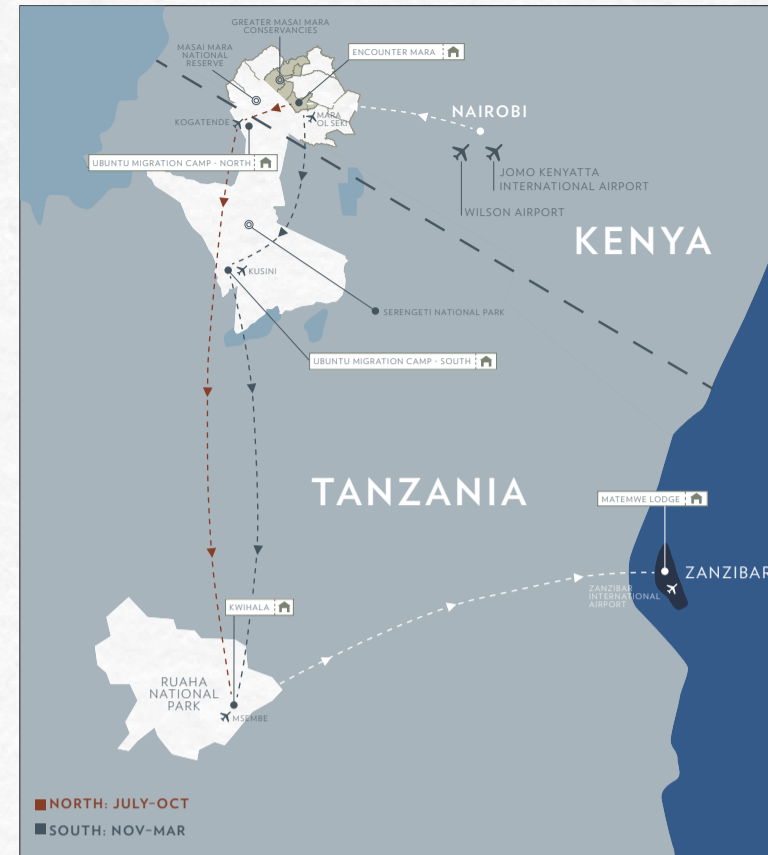
It was a touching scene and one that reminded us, more than at any other part of our trip, about what we have in common: how we are just a small part of the animal kingdom. □

*Do you have an extraordinary Asilia experience you'd like to share?  
Tag us @asiliaafrica and #MyAsiliaSafari*

# TAKE FLIGHT

From supercharged safaris to tropical beach bliss: an awe-inspiring adventure

Taking 13 days and covering some of East Africa's most beautiful highlights, this journey begins in Kenya's Masai Mara, searching for cheetah and discovering the intricacies of the fascinating Maasai culture, before flying across the border to Tanzania's Serengeti. Here, guests stay in a mobile tented camp that moves with The Great Migration, and then fly south to remote Ruaha, finishing with a hop over to the beautiful beaches of Zanzibar.



## DAYS 1-3

**FLY FROM** Nairobi to the Masai Mara, then drive to rustic-chic Encounter Mara, a tented camp that blends the adventure of sleeping under canvas with modern-day comforts. Head out on game drives to spot big cats and take a guided visit to local Maasai communities for an authentic insight into their lives. In the evenings, join other guests around the campfire before a delicious three-course dinner.

## DAYS 4-6

**FLY INTO THE SERENGETI**, ARRIVING AT UBUNTU MIGRATION CAMP. THIS MOBILE CAMP GETS AS CLOSE AS POSSIBLE TO THE GREAT MIGRATION - THE 2 MILLION WILDEBEEST, ZEBRA AND GAZELLE THAT MOVE ACROSS THE REGION. DAYS END WITH MAGICAL MEALS BENEATH A CANOPY OF STARS.

## DAYS 7-9

**FLY SOUTH** to the hidden gem that is Ruaha National Park for a stay at Kwihala, surrounded by baobab forests, dry riverbeds and miombo woodland. Game drives might come across herds of elephant digging for water, while night drives allow the chance of spotting nocturnal species such as the bat-eared fox.



## DAYS 10-12

**THE FINAL** leg of the trip takes you over to Zanzibar to stay at Matemwe Lodge, perched on an outcrop overlooking a sandy, white beach that gently slopes down into the Indian Ocean. Mnemba Atoll is right on your doorstep, offering staggeringly beautiful diving and snorkelling over colourful reefs. Fresh seafood, tropical cocktails and relaxing massages set the tone, and each chalet features a large hammock made for gazing at the ocean and watching the occasional traditional dhow drift past.



THE SERVAL USUALLY HAS A PALE-YELLOW COAT WITH BLACK SPOTS.

## THE MAGIC OF MANJA

"As soon as I heard about Manja, I was desperate to see him for myself. The now-famous melanistic serval, a rare black beauty, had been spotted and I needed to get him on camera. Fast-forward a few weeks and I arrived in Tanzania. My legendary guide, Tony, met me at the airstrip and we headed off toward Namiri Plains, catching up and chatting away, barely even scanning the grasslands. And then, bang, there he was, this beautiful black serval, just minutes from camp. We spent a few hours with him, keeping our distance, observing his movements until the sun went down. This sleek, enchanting cat seemed to glide through the long grass, ears flicking around while in search of an afternoon snack. He was amazing, and I'll never forget this special encounter."

**GEORGE BENJAMIN**, Wildlife Photographer  
Namiri Plains, Serengeti, TANZANIA

**EQUIPMENT USED:** CANON D5, 500MM (ISO 1000, 1/800 SEC @ F/4)

FOR MORE INSPIRATIONAL ASILIA BY AIR TRIPS, CONTACT YOUR TRAVEL AGENT OR [SAFARI@ASILIAAFRICA.COM](mailto:SAFARI@ASILIAAFRICA.COM)

# Asilia

GENUINE SAFARIS | GENUINE DIFFERENCE



FRONT AND BACK COVER,  
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TANZANIA

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