



Courtesy Asilia Namiri Plains

TANZANIA

Asilia Namiri Plains Review: First In

by ALEX POSTMAN
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Asilia rebuilds an eco-cbic safari camp in its own corner of the Serengeti.





Three sandy-haired lion cubs lie in the shade of a towering pile of rocks, occasionally climbing over their siblings or pouncing onto a mound of grass. They seem as blithe as kids in a playground, only they aren't, our Maasai guide, Manja, tells us. On the far side of the kopje, we find their mother lying next to a male lion—not the cubs' father. The male, his mane rippling in the wind when he lifts his head to peer at our vehicle, is staking her out as a mate. The lioness has hidden her cubs, who channel her fear, Manja explains: If the male interloper finds them, he will surely kill them.

This unfolding drama would distress anyone. But it's also a raw exhibit of nature's beauty turned ruthless—one of the many reasons that people visit **Africa**—and here we had a private viewing. As guests of **Namiri Plains**, we had this part of the Serengeti—Tanzania's largest National Park, known for the sight of 10 or more cars circled up around a lone elephant—practically to ourselves.



Namiri (Swahili for “big cat”) is an isolated savannah east of the Seronera air strip that was closed to tourism until five years ago, when the safari company **Asilia**—known for venturing into less-touristed regions—won permission from the Tanzanian government to build a temporary tented camp on the land. With a renegotiated lease, the completely new camp was constructed on the site of the old one, and opened on September 1 as Asilia's third Reserve (top-tier) property and this area's only lodging.

The new camp has been built with respect for its privileged position. It is knit inconspicuously into the surroundings, with 10 khaki canvas tents arcing around a low-slung, ranch-style structure. The building is made from rocks cut from nearby Lake Manyara, which were formed by ancient ash deposits from **Ngorongoro** volcano. (Asilia has a light-on-the-land ethos, which carries through to the solar-powered generators and gray-water recycling system.) But the modest exterior belies the building's emphatically chic insides—no wonder, as Namiri's creative force is Caline Williams-Wynn, the hottest designer on the safari circuit, best known for her stylish realizations of Wilderness Safaris' **Bisate Lodge** in Rwanda and **Mombo Camp** in Botswana, not to mention Asilia's Highlands and Jabali Ridge, both in Tanzania. With a poured concrete floor, slouchy leather couches and rattan furniture, macramé wall hangings and straw pendants swaying in the breeze, the setting could be Tulum or Canggu—until the view from the open-sided building onto a grassy ridgeline that attracts lolling lions and prancing impalas snaps you back into place. In another nod to the Serengeti's circle-of-life setting, the bar at one end of this breezy rectangular lounge/dining area is fronted by a soil-and-paint fossil mural inspired by the nearby Olduvai Gorge, where in 1959 paleontologist Mary Leakey discovered the oldest hominid.

Likewise, the guest tents bear no trace of the colonial tropes—campaign chests, pith helmets—that have become so tired and problematic in safari lodgings. Instead, the spacious room feels like a sophisticated cottage built with the same stone walls and raw plywood ceiling as the main building, warmed by accents like vintage milking stools, baskets woven in Dar Es Salaam, and handmade pillows, all in a tasteful palette of saffron, gray, and layered natural textures. Thoughtful touches like a grab-in-the-dark braided leather pull for the bathroom lights, full-length mirror, humongous towels, and plenty of hooks betray a woman's thoughtful touch, often lacking in **safari camp design**. A (recycled plastic) verandah extending under the stretched canvas awning supports stuffed chaises and beanbags as well as a deep oval tub overlooking the ridgeline—a setting that may persuade you to forego your afternoon game drive.



The pool at Namiri Plains overlooks the savannah and will soon be heated.

Courtesy Namiri Plains

I did exactly that, in favor of a nap on the chaise, followed by a deep, tendon-plucking massage in the free-standing spa (incorporating the Africology line from South Africa) and sipping a Tusker by the gleaming communal plunge pool, which will soon be heated. One can also lose hours browsing Namiri's charming library, lined with a Wunderkammer of curios—warthog tusks, honey badger and hyena skulls, a first edition of *Leakey's Luck*—and a panel recounting the legend of Bob and Ziggy, two local leonine legends who dominated several area prides for decades until Bob died in 2018. The room also houses Namiri's excellent gift shop, a smart curation of hand-beaded earrings by Sidai Designs, a women's enterprise in nearby Arusha; chunky bracelets of upcycled brass hand-crafted in Kenya by Soko; locally woven baskets and beaded clutches. I learn later from the others returning to the campfire boma from the afternoon drive that, fortunately, the cubs have so far survived the day.

Dinners are also exemplary of Asilia's down-to-earth approach, which drops the culinary contrivances of many other luxury safari brands (who needs drizzles and foams in the bush?) in favor of fresh mezze served family style—typically grilled beef, chicken, or fish skewers and fresh salads, though the kitchen is always ready to serve up a Swahili platter of green banana soup, coconut beans and ugali (polenta). Senior staff and guides eat alongside guests, another barrier-dropping tactic that makes a stay at Namiri stand out. The camp is staffed entirely by Tanzanians, including top management, who at other top-tier camps are more often South African or European. “It means a lot to me, and to all of us here,” assistant manager Brian Mshana tells me with palpable feeling, “as Tanzanians we have the chance to show the world what we're capable of.” ♦