

Safari Bond

Tanzania abounds in national parks with dramatic landscapes. **Devanshi Mody** scouts a few with her mother, encountering captivating wildlife and insightful guides on the way.



A confusion of wildebeest captured during the frenzy of the Great Migration. Right: Serengeti Bushtops offers day-long game drives for wildlife enthusiasts.

MUM IS IRKED. Our Masai guide at Serengeti Bushtops (bushtopscamps.com) is a tad cavalier. She wants him dismissed for insensitivity to her orthopaedic impairments. However, we realise Timun has that startling instinct that only those raised in the wild do. He ferrets out the 'Big 5' in one game drive, describing a rhino snoozing under a bush with that keen Masai eye.

He also speaks with astonishing intuition and empathy about travelling families of animals and their physical and psychological challenges. Just then, we see a wildebeest baby that has followed zebras across the Mara River jagged with crocodiles, leaving behind its family in the frenzy of the Great Migration. Some zebras peer anxiously across the water: Timun elucidates they too have crossed without their families and will risk the crocodiles to seek their kin. As for the little lost baby wildebeest, too disoriented to cross back, Timun forecasts the zebra will adopt it.

When we encounter solitary elephants or disgruntled old buffaloes, Timun says they can't keep up with the herd or have been expelled by virile youngsters. As for lazy lions, they demonstrate the law of karma—their wives hunt, purveying victuals which the lions expropriate, conceding but left-overs to the lionesses and cubs. Unsurprisingly, lions find themselves forsaken in old age, not always able to hunt and perish from starvation.

FROM LEFT: SHUTTERSTOCK; COURTESY OF SERENGETI BUSHTOPS SAFARI CAMPS



▲ The Wilderness Usawa mobile camp offers a restful stay in the Serengeti.

▼ Four Seasons offers private bush dinners.



As we linger by the river to see some straggling wildebeest cross, Timun, startlingly well-informed about Mahatma Gandhi's freedom struggle, reveals how the white man implemented 'divide and rule' in Africa, as in India, creating conflict between tribes and boundaries between people. An artificial line the British drew separates Kenya from Tanzania so he needs a visa to visit family in Kenya across the river.

Mum can't endure day-long game drives, Timun's charisma notwithstanding. She prefers the appeal of our luxury tent—low on impact, high on style, endowed with an all-wooden jacuzzi-studded private deck which lends itself to massages. Mum clearly rates massage over Masai. I embark solo into the jungle with Timun. But over a riverine picnic, a cornucopia of breads, cheeses, salads galore, Timur transmits that our inimitable butler Peter transferred mum at 9 am to breakfast where the attentive William served her.

Next morning, with our exquisite bush breakfast comes a serenade not by Mozart but the trumpet of elephants as a boisterous bunch almost gate-crashes our matutinal ritual. Timun adroitly allays the elephants but William shows he is boss at breakfast, busying around us and serving me an entire bottle of bubbly.

We transfer to Four Seasons Serengeti (*doubles from ₹95,850; fourseasons.com/serengeti*), Serengeti's most-sought address, establishing that what safari-goers want is an ultra-luxe hotel in the jungle with some lions thrown in. If the Four Seasons doesn't dispense food for thought, it does dispense the best F&B in all Tanzania. The sparkling rosé is dangerously addictive although the sommelier succeeds in offering me an exceptional chardonnay, and pinotage complements Tanzanian cuisine at Boma Grill, unless you prefer a private bush dinner.

Asilia's Jabali Ridge (*doubles from ₹66,694 asiliaafrica.com*), staggeringly beautiful and a destination lodge that created a destination of remote Ruaha National Park, presents cutting-edge suites echeloned up a ridge overlooking raw, rugged wilderness. Mum and I are in the gorgeous private Jabali House whose seductions beguile mum away from a morning game drive which culminates with a surprise champagne



FROM TOP: SHUTTERSTOCK; COURTESY OF &BEYOND NGORONGORO CRATER LODGE

▲ Zebras and flamingoes are a common sight by the waterbodies in the Ngorongoro Crater.

▼ A scene from a safari offered by Ngorongoro Crater Lodge.

breakfast set in the embowers of an acacia high above a rivered valley.

Mum has missed out and is game for the evening drive. Our guide Christian disambiguates a leopard slumbering on a tree it seems an extension of. Then, he ferrets out a bat-eared fox that melds into the rock outcrop. As we zoom on, suddenly Christian jerks back. How did Christian differentiate the lion's mane from the effusion of grass? He's the biggest, handsomest lion in spare Ruaha where lions are puny. Suddenly, he slides under our jeep and makes himself at home, smacking the

vehicle cataclysmically with his tail and paws, thumping, whacking, knocking restlessly. Half an hour on, the lion hasn't moved. Another jeep from camp sidles up, watching the fun, their guide chuckling away mischievously, "We'll send you dinner. And breakfast too." "Don't forget the champagne," I say, "And the strawberries too."

Finally, the stud lion extracts himself and we scoot to camp where our private chef curates a private dinner of Swahili beans, spinach, *kachumbari*, and coconut rice.

Asilia's new Retreat at Namiri Plains (*asiliaafrica.com*) ravishes. Namiri Plains is in the most deliciously romantic, secluded Eastern Serengeti and our safaris are helmed by savvy young Juma, Tanzania's most knowledgeable birder. Although Namiri is endowed with lions, they're just lolling about around camp, Juma takes us far to Barafi, endless plains whose kopjes are encrusted with enormous lions and on whose termite mounds cheetahs slumber.

Decorum reigns at &Beyond Ngorongoro Crater Lodge (*doubles from ₹24,3415; andbeyond.com*). Mum and I are consigned to a stand-alone suite with tremendous views of the legendary Ngorongoro Crater. Lunching on al fresco terraces, you feel you are levitating over the crater whose waterbodies blaze with flamingos as pink as the rosé.

The deck is too nippy for sundowners but this wildly opulent lodge where chandeliers



FROM TOP: COURTESY OF THE WILDERNESS USAWA; COURTESY OF FOUR SEASONS



▲ The eponymous lodge offers tremendous views of the legendary Ngorongoro Crater.

sway in jungle winds has a plush bar lounge with blazing fire. A couple from California have invited their families on safari. The boy's parents have come from far-away Korea. As we clink over homemade *dawa* (gin, lemon, honey) we're alerted about vegetarian canapés. This is the sole Tanzanian camp that ensures vegetarian meals and in-suite snacks.

After breakfast comprising mostly of sparkling rosé, my guide Henry and I embark on an epic voyage into the crater when he describes four endangered rhinos with his Masai eyes. Less pretty are lions devouring a wildebeest whose foetus has been wrenched out and left unceremoniously across our path. Living and dying aren't easy in the jungle.

The crater's enchantments are such that we don't lunch until 4.30 pm when Henry serves up Masai family tales: He's a Christian and has resisted paternal pressure to acquire another wife, several more, for wives equal cows and cows equal prestige in Masai culture.

Families straddling continents convene at Ngorongoro Crater Lodge, we discover over sundowners, this time conducted on the deck with a booming fire. As the evening manifests Indians from Surat, Pune, and Mumbai I wonder if we're back in India. But the night sky is inimitably African.

We are late for our transfer to the new Wilderness Usawa mobile camp (wildernessdestinations.com) in the Serengeti. The coffee our guide George bears has got cold, but the homemade goodies are just as excellent. And George's attention lavished on mum is only more profuse.

That evening around the campfire a South African couple aver they are meeting on safari for he moved to London where his son is with his ex-wife. Throughout supper, they discuss friends

from fractured, restructured families with taped-up lives and dislocated emotions.

Vinay Sapra of Lifestyle Safaris whom destiny catapults my way miraculously manoeuvres not just accommodation but the poshest thereof in sold-out Zanzibar days before Christmas.

At the outrageously exotic Melia Zanzibar (*doubles from ₹32,598; melia.com*) we're at the exclusive Level, ensuring mum, ailing after seven weeks of travel, the room closest to the lobby. Staff do acrobatics to please us, even shifting supper from their jet-set, sea-set Jetty Restaurant to The Level restaurant for mum's convenience and engineer a massage in an impregnable spa to restore mum.

Next evening, nobody minds when I whimsically switch from fine dining restaurant Tamu to swinging Swahili Night under the stars with a raging Swahili food buffet, lively band, and Masai show.

Visiting the Slave Museum in Stone Town, it occurs to me that Zanzibar isn't just a terrific beach getaway but sustained Africa's ghastliest slave market. As we spend hours scrutinising every word on slavery, we reel with horror. We read about girls kidnapped from outside their huts, families decimated, suckling babies torn off their mother's breast and cast to the bushes, diseased slaves left for dogs to ravage.

That night, as we dine at The Jetty I realise the privilege of family. And the joy of family travel. Mum begs to differ, especially as Deepesh Gupta from Auric Air had to hold back our international connection because I've cut things too adventurously close! 🌐

GETTING THERE

Air India (airindia.com) operates direct flights from Mumbai and New Delhi to Nairobi. From here, **AirKenya Express** (airkenya.com) operates various flights to Masai Mara.

TOURS

Lifestyle Safaris & Holidays offers Tanzania Bush & Beach Extraordinaire – A Family Affair including 12N/13D at exclusive hand-picked properties. From ₹11,67,187 per person; lifestylesafaris.com