

Unity in the SERENGETI

It was an unusual sight. A large Martial eagle sat perched on a log, its expansive wings puffed out and pulled in front of it, almost in a self-embrace. A movement to the right of it caught our eye – two Tawny eagles, their eyes trained on something beneath its talons. Peering through the binoculars we made out the inert shape of a hyrax (or *dassie*). It was a prize catch, and there was no way the Martial was going to share his lunch. I can't help feeling the same way whenever I discover an amazing new place. I too want to wrap my arms around it and keep it all for myself. But then again, some discoveries are too good *not to share*.

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The warmth of the staff at Kaskaz Mara Camp, adds to the homely feeling of staying here.



With a comically full, round tummy, an afternoon nap is definitely required!

While the rolling plains of Tanzania's Serengeti National Park are famous for the magnificent annual wildebeest migration, they have become, in recent years, almost as well known for the hordes of overland vehicles and eager tourists who frequent it. It is thus an absolute luxury to find a spot in the park where you feel like you have the place entirely to yourself.

ON THE PLAINS OF THE NORTHERN SERENGETI

Kaskaz Mara Camp is just such a place. Situated in the northern reaches of the Serengeti, this area was off limits for many years due to in-fighting between the Maasai and Kuria people. Finally, through conservation education and the building of schools and dispensaries, the fighting ceased, but the area's reputation still kept

most lodges away. Gradually, though, a few intrepid companies moved into the area, including Nasikia Camps, a family-run, Arusha-based company that initially made its mark with a number of mobile tented camps.

Kaskaz, while also tented, can be found here in this largely isolated part of the park all year round. With an emphasis on creating as minimal a footprint as possible,

all 10 of the suites – as well as the main lodge area, the office and even the kitchen – are housed in these billowing tents, all arranged to take in the views of the plains in front of them as well as passing breezes. This is no camping holiday, however, and were it not for zipping open your door in the morning, you could be forgiven for thinking you were in an elegant hotel suite. Wooden floors, enveloping queen-

sized beds, and fully kitted out bathrooms ensure that you'll never think of a "tent" in the same way again!

Wildebeest are creatures of habit – so much so that the herds use the same 13 places to cross the Mara River every year. Several of these are located very close to the camp, making this the ideal base during migration season. In fact, the staff have stories of gigantic herds barrelling

right through the camp, much to the amazement of the guests lucky enough to witness it.

Even outside of migration season, there is much to see. Twitchers will be kept busy ticking "lifers" off their lists, while even the common birds – like the yellow-throated long claw, European rollers and augur buzzards – add colour to any game drive. Black-backed jackals were curious



The tents at Kaskaz Mara Camp look out towards a hill-covered horizon and plains often frequented by game.

onlookers as we picnicked in the shade of the trees, clinking our G & Ts and feasting on salads, roasted plantains and steak. Giraffe, buffalo and herds of elephants are common here, and the male of the species of perhaps East Africa's most iconic antelope, the topi, can often be seen silhouetted against the sky, standing proudly atop of a termite mound, in a pose that cannot say anything other than: "Look at me!"

The staff at Kaskaz couldn't be more different from the vain topi. Yet you can't help but marvel at their sheer enjoyment as they dance and sing – something that seems to happen regularly and spontaneously here! For welcomes and goodbyes, or just to celebrate another glorious African sunset – it is clear that the staff here love their jobs, and it's hard not to feel part of the family when their hospitality extends to inviting often rhythm-challenged guests to join in!

Songs of welcome also await you at Nasikia Camps' newest – and most luxurious – addition, Ehlane Plains. A short flight on one of Air Excel's small planes – each bedecked with different brightly coloured tail feathers – will take you from the Kogatende Airstrip to Seronera Airport. The airport is *the* jumping-off point for exploring the central Serengeti, and as such is usually a hive of frenzied activity. This is why it was a welcome relief to be met with glasses of champagne and some of Ehlane's famous chocolate brownies by Donna Duggan, who started the tour operator Maasai Wanderings and its hospitality arm, Nasikia Camps, with her late husband Naseeb "Nas" Mfinanga.

THE REALISATION OF A VERY SPECIAL DREAM

Donna, who is originally from Australia, moved to Tanzania to nurse in the local hospitals, but instead of heading back home after her tenure was up, her life took an unexpected turn when she met and fell in love with her neighbour, Nas. His was a



The accommodation here is the height of "tent chic".



Spontaneous singing and dancing are the order of the day at Nasikia Camps. After all, why wouldn't you sing if you lived in such a beautiful place?

real rags-to-riches story. Although he had to leave school to become a hawker to support his family, he became well known in Arusha for his gift of the gab and sheer likeability. Together with Donna, he used his knowledge of the Serengeti and his wonderful ability to make connections with people to start a small tour operating business, Maasai Wanderings. Later, they set up Nasikia Camps, which has grown to such an extent that their portfolio now consists of one mobile camp and four permanent ones, with three more on the way.

Tragically, last year, while working on Ehlane Plains, Nas passed away. The camp was to be their flagship and was a special passion project for Nas, who had planned virtually every detail, from the design of the rooms, to the type of furniture they would house. Though devastated by his death, Donna and her family of over 200 staff knew that, come what may, Nas' dream for Ehlane *would* come to fruition. Completed in February, the camp now stands as a testament to the amazing man behind it, and the family who built it.



The tents at Ehlane Plains have a distinctly romantic feel.



The Martial eagle, wings posed almost in a self-embrace

THE ISOLATION OF THE EASTERN SERENGETI

Like Kaskaz, Ehlane Plains is located in another corner of the Serengeti that until recently was a “no-go” area – this time due to a now completed cat research project. Ehlane Plains was one of the first camps to nab a spot in this eastern part of the park, and it is a relief to embrace the blissful feeling of isolation the further you drive from Seronera. The location of the camp plays off this “middle of nowhere” feeling, as its appearance below as you crest a hill comes as a wonderfully unexpected surprise.

As too, does the design of the camp itself. The tents here have a decidedly Bedouin quality about them, while lattice work in the bathrooms and wood-backed showers remind one both of a Zanzibari beach hotel and a Scandinavian sauna – an odd-sounding combination, but one that works. The tents are positioned so that when your early morning coffee is delivered, and your tent flap lifted, you can snuggle in bed and watch the sun rise over the horizon. For an even more unimpeded view, three of the tents also boast stargazer platforms, where you can choose to spend the night under the incredible starry skies.

The camp’s “crazy chef”, so called because of his high energy and penchant for somersaults, ensures that every meal in the romantically draped dining room will leave guests with happy tummies and taste buds. Afternoons spent in the lounge, reading bird books, playing traditional Tanzanian games, or simply enjoying the view are punctuated only by the gentle attentions of the staff, who are always on hand to pour you a cup of coffee or a glass of wine.

A glass of wine and a game drive are also good bedfellows, particularly after a successful afternoon of spotting a pride



As Nasikia Camps’ flagship property, Ehlane Plains is full of wonderful touches and attention to detail.

of lions sprawled on one of the many rocky outcrops that rise from the plains in this part of the Serengeti. A toast to the completion of Ehlane brings good luck as we see a lone leopard stalking the dusk on our way back to camp.

It is not often that one gets to see a dream come true in such intricate detail as the realisation of Nas’ vision for Ehlane Plains. But perhaps more impressive than the camp itself is the beautiful feeling of “umoja” (unity) shown by all the staff at

Nasikia Camps. “Nasikia” means “I hear” or “I feel” in Swahili, and that is just what a trip to these camps is all about – being part of a family, of hearing its stories and those of the Serengeti, of falling in love with Tanzania, and of feeling a sense of those outstretched wings – not to hide this experience from the world, but rather to share it with more people, more members of the family.

For more information, please visit www.nasikiacamps.com.

Arusha Coffee Lodge

The town of Arusha is the main gateway to the Serengeti’s Northern Circuit, and there is no better place to stay before you head off on your adventure than Arusha Coffee Lodge. As the name would suggest, the hotel – which has 12 Plantation Suites and 18 Plantation Rooms – is situated in a coffee estate. So you can expect lovely green surroundings and great coffee – in the Bistro, the Jikoni coffee shop, or in your room. You can also shop for souvenirs at Shanga, a workshop and gift store which employs disabled artisans who make everything from glass and fabric work to paintings. www.elewanacollection.com