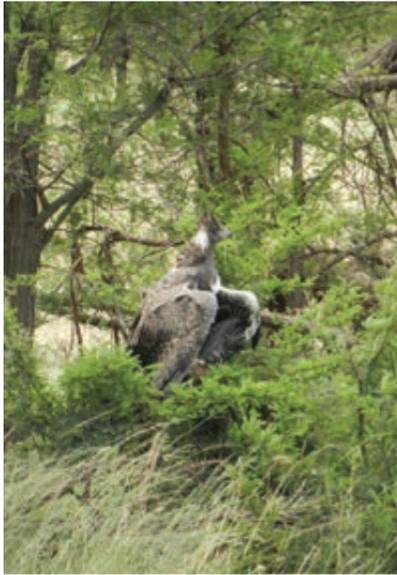


Hear and Feel the Serengeti

Text: Nicky Furniss
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It was an unusual sight. A large Martial eagle perched on a log, its expansive wings pulled in front of it, almost in a self-embrace. To the right, two Tawny eagles, their eyes trained on something beneath its talons. Peering through the binoculars we made out the inert shape of a hyrax. It was a prize catch, and there was no way the Martial was going to share his lunch. I cannot 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.

While the rolling plains of Tanzania's Serengeti National Park are famous for the annual wildebeest migration, they have also become almost as well known for the hordes of 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.

Rolling Plains

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 fighting between the Maasai and Kuria people. Finally, through conservation education and the building of schools and dispensaries, the fighting ceased, and 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 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 tents, all arranged to take in the views of the plains as well as passing breezes. This is no camping holiday, however - wooden floors, queen-sized beds, and fully kitted-out bathrooms



ensure that you will 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.

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 - add colour to any game drive. Black-backed jackals were curious 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 standing proudly atop a termite mound, in a pose that cannot say anything other than "Look at me!"

The staff at Kaskaz could not be more different from the vain topi. Yet you cannot 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 is hard not to feel part of the family when their hospitality extends to inviting 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 will take you from the Kogatende Airstrip to Seronera Airport where we were met with glasses of champagne 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

Australian-born Duggan moved to Tanzania to nurse, 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, Mfinanga. His was a real rags-to-riches story. Although he had to leave school to become a hawkler 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, Mfinanga passed away. The camp was to be their flagship and was a special passion project for Mfinanga, 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, Duggan and her family of over 200 staff knew that, come what may, Mfinanga's 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.

Eastern Isolation

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 sudden appearance as you crest a hill comes as a wonderful 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 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 boast "sky beds" adjacent platforms where you can spend the night under the stars.

The camp's "crazy chef", so called because of his penchant for somersaults,

ensures that every meal will leave guests with happy tummies. Afternoons spent in the lounge reading, or playing games 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 of lions sprawled on one of the central Serengeti's many rocky outcrops. A toast to the completion of Ehlane brings good luck as we spot a lone leopard stalking the dusk on our way back to camp.

It is not often that one witnesses a dream come true in such intricate detail as the realisation of Mfinanga's vision for Ehlane Plains. But perhaps more impressive than the camp itself is the beautiful feeling of *umoja* (unity) shown by 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, 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. ■



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