



Beyond the Bucket List



Arm Audit

Elson's flashlight carves a bright path into the night, darting from side to side along the tall grass that lines the pathway to my tent. There are no fences at Ehlane Plains Camp, so between sunset and sunrise, guests have to be escorted to their lodgings by one of the staff members.

I half hope, half fear that the beam will pick up a pair of animal eyes. This area is known, after all, for big cats like lion, leopard and cheetah.

"Have you ever crossed paths with something dangerous at night?" I ask. Elson chuckles and shakes his head, then stops to look at the sky. "Look, that is Mars over there," he says, pointing to a fleck of red glitter that sparkles boldly on the velvety black expanse overhead. "That's Jupiter. And that one, over there, is Venus."

He sees me to my tent, and wishes me *lala salama* – a good night's rest – before

vanishing into the night, back in the direction of the main lodge. Tanzanian Kiswahili is said to be especially gentle and soft on the ear. Maybe it's the sweetness of the greeting, or the sleepy, sated feeling of yet another delicious dinner – but I feel safe, pleased and happy, like a child.

Gustave Flaubert said that travel humbles us. "You see what a tiny place you occupy in the world." That is certainly true. Although, peering into the inky darkness around me, I also imagine the opposite might be the case. At Ehlane Plains Camp, tucked away in a remote corner of the central-eastern Serengeti, it would be easy to convince yourself that you're the *only* person, or even the *first* person, to occupy this beautiful wilderness.

The following morning, I wake up at 5h30 – an hour before our game drive departs. It's day three of our safari, but I have already settled into a new rhythm that makes my

usual office routine seem like a strange dream, distant and irrelevant.

Here, every day starts with a plunger of delicious Tanzanian coffee delivered to my tent. This is followed by the morning game drive, back to the camp for a quick rest and lunch, then afternoon game drive from about 15h30, and finally back to the camp after sunset for dinner and bed. No two game drives are ever the same.

The first two days of our safari we were hosted at Kaskaz Mara Camp in the northern part of the Serengeti, close to the border with Kenya. At this time of year, the drama of the great migration hums through the region like an electric current.

Referring to "the great migration" is somewhat of a misnomer. The great herds of wildebeest are, in fact, *constantly* migrating in a giant, clock-wise circle – their movements determined by factors like the weather,



rainfall and the availability of resources such as grazing and water.

Although the timing of the migration can change from year to year, the wildebeest can generally be found in the short-grass plains of the southern Serengeti from January to March. Most wildebeest calve during this time, which attracts an array of opportunistic predators and makes for exceptional sightings.

From April, the herds begin to migrate north, moving through the western and central parts until August. The period from August to October sees the herds moving first across the Mara River and into Kenya's Maasai Mara National Reserve, and then returning to Tanzania and the Serengeti when rainfall and the accompanying siren's call of sweet, fresh grass lure them back across the Mara.

This is the period that is commonly referred to as "the great migration" – and

it is highlighted by the high drama of the treacherous river crossings. Once the wildebeest have moved back into the Serengeti, they make their way south along the eastern part of the park to arrive back to the short-grass plains in December, just in time for the rains.

Some 80 % of the great herds take part in the migration every year. Those who stay behind are usually old or otherwise weakened. They have lost their membership to the greater herd, along with the safety that it offers.

There is a series of about 11 points along the river where the wildebeest cross every year. Research has shown that wildebeest are likely to cross at the same point every time, and they are also likely to use the same point where their forebears had crossed.

Kaskaz Mara Camp is located close to several of these points, and during our stay we were

fortunate enough to witness two crossings in one day, the first one at Point Seven where a relatively small herd crossed a stretch of water that looks deceptively narrow.

Nothing prepares you for the brutality of a river crossing.

The chance that all of the animals will make it to the other side is next to zero. Driven by instinct and the fear of being separated from the herd, the wildebeest launch themselves into the Mara River. Their spindly legs thrash and scramble against the slippery rocks, seemingly ill-suited to the task. Henry, our guide, explains that it is not uncommon to see animals breaking a limb in this way.

Crocodiles lurk opportunistically, their silent shapes making a mockery of the wildebeest's frenetic see-sawing across the churning brown waters. The current is strong, and over the course of these months, many wildebeest – especially


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the young – will not be able to resist its deathly tug.

The second crossing occurs at a point known as “The Junction”, with many hippos that gather there to witness the spectacle.

One hapless gnu quickly found itself trapped between the jaws of a crocodile. It tried desperately to keep moving, but the crocodile had managed to manoeuvre itself around the wildebeest’s head, a toothy deadweight hanging obscenely from the animal’s face. This wildebeest was lucky, though, as a hippo intervened and chased the crocodile away. The wildebeest scrambled to the riverbank on weary legs, and managed to lope off to join the herd on the other side.

Nature’s normal rhythm reaches a fever pitch at this time of year. The landscape has turned into a larger-than-life memento mori, with skeletons and skulls that dot the landscape. A femur here, a jawbone fragment with teeth intact there . . .

Scavengers like vultures, spotted hyenas and marabou storks are fat and lazy. In the shadow of a large shrub, we spot a beautiful male lion munching on a wildebeest’s head. Behind him, a lioness carries the remains of a tail in her mouth, playfully shaking her head.

Ehlane Plains Camp is located close to Seronera Airport, a 20-minute flight in a Cessna Caravan from Kogatende, the closest airport to Kaskaz Mara Camp. Here the difference in the landscape is

remarkable. “Serengeti” is a Masai word meaning “endless plains”, and in this part of the park it is particularly apt.

Normally, while away from work, the thought of emails piling up in an unattended inbox would fill me with dread – the kind that closes around your throat like a polo-neck that shrunk in the dryer. But in the fuchsia glow of sunrise over the Serengeti, unanswered emails seem no more real than an imagined monster under the bed.

Now I know that being on safari doesn’t feel like a holiday – it feels like a way of life, an alternative way of being. And I understand that this is the closest I will ever come to witnessing a world without human interference. True freedom. True Africa.

Text: Deidre Loots
Images © Jacqueline van Wyk

Camp Profiles:

Nasikia Camps are an intimate collection of mobile and semi-permanent camps located in the prime wildlife-viewing areas of Tanzania’s northern safari circuit, and allow guests to experience the wilds of the Tarangire National Park, the incredible herds of the southern Serengeti plains, and the gauntlet of the Mara River.

Nasikia Camps is a sister company to Maasai Wanderings, a Tanzanian tour operator that believes in ploughing its profits back into the local community. Nasikia Camps manufactures its own tents, furniture, decking, curtains and all the other tent furnishings from an impressive workshop in Arusha.

Kaskaz Mara Camp is located a short drive from Kogatende Airstrip and the Mara River viewing area. The 10 tented suites provide an ideal base for prime migration viewing, with cotton curtains dancing in the breeze, oversized beds, elegant furnishings and hand-carved decor with Swahili flair. Kaskaz Mara Camp epitomises style and grace in the far northern Serengeti.

Ehlane Plains Camp is located in the far eastern plains of the Serengeti, a remote and wildlife-filled pocket of the savannah. “Ehlane” is a Zulu word that means “wilderness”. It is a clear description of the extraordinary and newly accessible location, which presents an unsurpassed display of predators and predator activity. The area is unique: unspoilt, silent and remote.

Please visit www.nasikiacamps.com and www.maasaiwanderings.com.

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