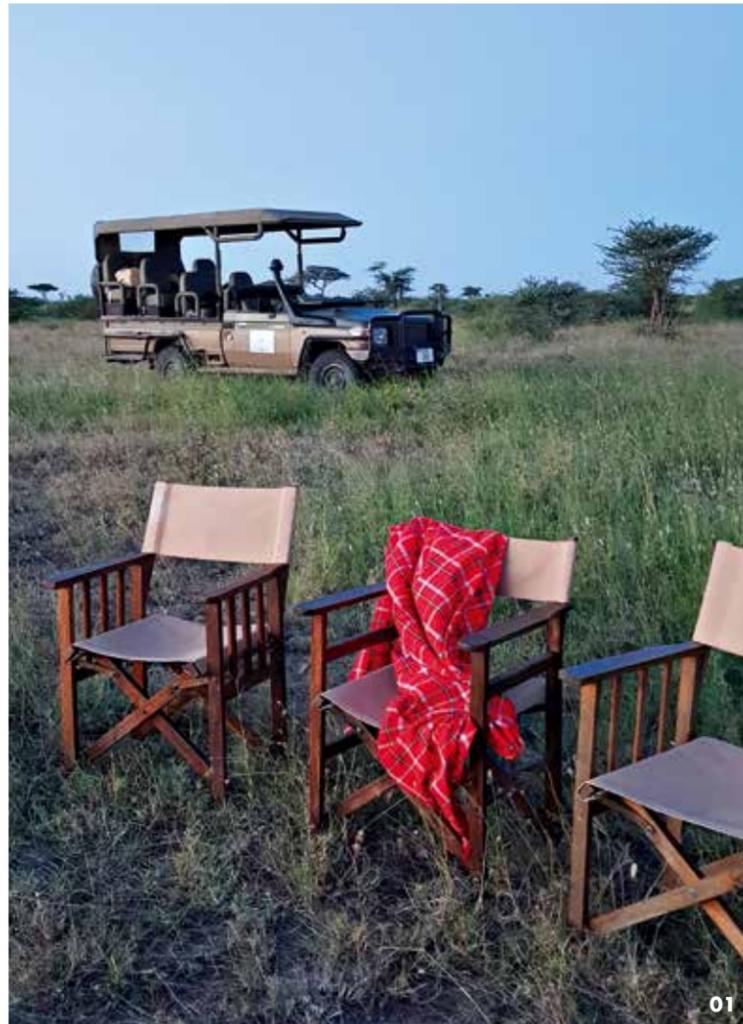


Maasai wanderings

WORDS: DORRIA WATT

As the sun sinks below the horizon, silhouetting a lone acacia tree against hues of orange and red, it highlights the endless vista across the Serengeti. The only sound breaking the stillness is the rustling of animals preparing for the night. An old Maasai proverb comes to mind: "The night has ears"



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- 01** A picture perfect sundowner spot.
- 02** Silhouettes of sunset in the Serengeti.
- 03** The beautiful interior of the 90m² luxury tented suite at Ehlane Plains – everything is made locally.

The Serengeti National Park was established in 1952 and is one of the most sought-after destinations in Africa. Divided into three sections, it has one of the oldest ecosystems on earth and a tapestry of ever-changing landscapes, with flora that includes the classic savannah, endless plains, forests and dense bush.

The park is most famous for the annual 800km migration of over a million wildebeest, which move clockwise from south to west and north after the long rains in April, before heading south around October to calve. The 14 753km² area is home to a rich diversity of wildlife, which makes for thrilling game drives. These are stop/start affairs, as dedicated and knowledgeable local guides with perfect vision spot camouflaged animals and birds and share fascinating facts about each one. They are

proud of their country and delighted to share its secrets.

We spend the first night up north at a semi-permanent tented camp called KasKaz Mara, part of Nasikia Camps. There is a raw beauty about the location, with the 10 tents and central dining, lounge and entertainment areas built to blend in with the unspoilt natural environment. The birdlife is spectacular, and a highlight is seeing a martial eagle protecting its prey, a rock hyrax, from a pair tawny eagles doing their best to steal it. On our drives we encounter an A to Z of animals, and it feels as though we're watching the National Geographic channel live.

On day two we fly from Kogatende to Seronera en route to the Ehlane Plains Camp, which opened in February. "Ehlane" means "wilderness", and it's one of only three camps to have a concession within this eastern plain that's known as Soit le Motonyi. The camp's opulence isn't apparent from the outside, but each 90m² tent houses king-size beds, a lounge, workstation and a beautiful bathroom with a wood and glass shower. The tents and decks are designed for privacy and offer endless vistas across the plains.

The eight tents include two family units and two outdoor platforms, giving visitors the choice of sleeping beneath a star-studded African sky or cocooned indoors wrapped in luxurious linen. Either way, you drift off to the night sounds of the bush.

Ehlane Plains was the vision of Naseeb "Nas" Mfinanga who, together with his Australian-born wife, Donna, started Maasai Wanderings and Nasikia Tented Camps. The completion of the camp, which was built in just four weeks, was bittersweet. Nas never got to see it; he died tragically in an aeroplane crash last November. It was up to Donna and the incredibly supportive management team to bring his vision to life.

My tent, "The Lion's Den", is dedicated to Nas, who was known fondly as Simba by the staff. I'm struck by his meticulous planning, with everything from colour schemes, fabrics and furnishings all manufactured locally in Arusha. Although this is a semi-permanent camp, the floors are laminated wood and the tents are fully draped, with subtle lighting from chandeliers. Ehlane defies the concept of traditional camping and is both remote and intimate. You are free to curate your own experience, whether watching the sunrise from your veranda, enjoying sundowners around a fire under a blanket of twinkling stars or being sociable in the communal area.

Each Nasikia Camp is eco-friendly and operates off the grid without compromising on luxury with hot showers, fine dining and all the five-star touches. Yes, there's wi-fi!

Again the wildlife sightings were plentiful: baboons, buffalo, elephants, topis, warthogs, wildebeest, zebras and even a cheetah, which ambled across our path. The area is big cat country, and it didn't disappoint, we came across a pride of lions with four cubs, lazily dozing in the midday



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sun, sated after brunch.

This privately owned and funded company embraces eco-tourism, so it's unsurprising that giving back and uplifting the local community is part of its ethos. Fluent in Kiswahili, Donna is determined to continue the legacy that began with Nas. The efforts include anti-snare programmes and job creation, with 250 Tanzanians employed at the camps, in the workshop that manufactures all the tents and decor, and in the garage that services all vehicles.

A key focus is education. Fewer than 10% of Tanzanians

Ehlane defies the concept of traditional camping and is both remote and intimate.

make it to secondary school, which Donna is determined to change. She has helped start and support schools in Maasai villages and works alongside government schools to improve facilities and learning opportunities.

Every school day, over 4 000 learners at five primary schools benefit from a daily meal and free education. Donna also supports 118 children in secondary school and four university students.

Despite it being a Sunday, we visit the Matim Primary School in Arusha to meet headmaster, Mr Lango and the Grade 7 pupils. Here, 1 152 children (three to a desk) are taught by 18 teachers. Besides the feeding scheme, the school now boasts a library, IT facility and netball and soccer teams, as well as gardening and reading clubs. Staff have benefited from exchange programmes such as twinning with a school in Donna's hometown of Wynnum, in Australia.

While a visit to the Serengeti is on most bucket lists, experiencing it alongside Donna and her team is extraordinary. Nas and Donna's love of Tanzania is evident; the camps showcase the country's natural and cultural heritage with pride. They walk their upliftment talk, as do the dedicated staff who are charming, skilled, friendly and fiercely proud of their country.

• Visit: maasaiwanderings.com and nasikiacamps.com



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