

Picture Perfect

Tanzania's allure is easy to see — and not just from behind a camera lens.

Story and photos by Stirling Kelso

Don't get me wrong. I'd always wanted to go on an African safari. Who wouldn't care to see cheetahs run, zebras gallop and baboons play, all in their native habitat? Still, I didn't understand why this particular experience topped so many bucket lists. I'd sat through countless friends' in-the-bush slide shows, feigning interest while cursing the invention of the digital camera: How many pictures could you take of one impala — or was it a gazelle? — trotting through high grasses? "Africa is addictive," my friends would say. "It gets in your blood."

I'm a city girl, I'd think to myself. Give me a tasting menu over tsetse flies anytime.

The next thing I know I'm 9,000 miles from my home in Austin, flying over the Serengeti National Park in northern Tanzania. I am traveling with Micato Safaris, a veteran luxury-tour operator known

A shy, lone giraffe rounds a rare rock formation on the plains of the Serengeti National Park.





From top: an African fish eagle perches atop a tree in the Serengeti National Park; the Singita Sasakwa Lodge villa's private infinity pool overlooks the Serengeti; a candelabra cactus in the park holds poison that protects it from birds and insects.



for its authentic and comprehensive safari experiences in southern and eastern Africa. I understand just how meticulous Micato's planning process is when, before I depart, a package arrives with a handsome suitcase, passport holder and other useful items for my trip. This stellar service continues as I disembark from our Qatar Airways flight from Houston through Doha to Dar es Salaam, Tanzania's coastal capital, and a Micato representative whisks me and my travel group through customs, an experience that usually gives me more anxiety than coming

face to face with a herd of African buffalo. Within the hour, I'm meeting our guide, Lewela Mwawaza, who will be at our side for the rest of the trip — checking us into hotels, holding our hands on 12-seater planes and directing us on every safari.

For safari goers, Dar es Salaam is clearly a jumping-off point, but it's worth exploring this textured city with a trusted guide while you're there. We overnight at the newly rebranded Dar es Salaam Serena Hotel in the heart of the city's business district. While luxury lovers may need to recalibrate Champagne tastes, the 221 refreshed rooms here are large and comfortable, with dark wood furnishings and king beds. For views of the Indian Ocean, ask for executive rooms on floors three through seven.

Back on the puddle jumper over the Serengeti, the pilot, just one row in front of me, leans back. "The wildebeest migration," he says, pointing to a peppered landscape below. My eyes adjust, taking in part of the herd of 1.5 million dotting the grassy canvas, currently making their way north to the Maasai Mara in Kenya. I'm moved to tears, either coming to terms with the fact that I'm witnessing one of the world's greatest natural wonders or lamenting the hard truth that my camera's zoom lens is at the bottom of my suitcase, in the back of the plane.

We land on a dirt runway and pile into one of Micato's Land Cruisers, loaded with off-the-grid goodies such as leather pillows, cotton blankets and cup holders for, in my case, glass-bottled Cokes. As I wave goodbye to my pilot, I see him prop thorny branches next to his airplane's wheels. "Hyenas love the tires," Lewela says, catching my curious stare.

Wildlife spotting begins the moment we drive off and a herd of impalas scatters ahead. I fling myself to the side of the open-roofed vehicle, snapping pictures in running mode of the delicate golden animals. Beyond them I see zebras, followed by a pair of female ostriches battling it out for a prim male's attention in an orchestrated mating ritual. (I hope he's worth the effort, I think to myself.) Best of all, we are surrounded by elephants, more than 20 of them lumbering across our red gravel road — what they no doubt consider an irritating break in their 5,700-square-mile feedlot. I look down at my camera: In one hour, I've snapped more than 200 photos.

We roll up to the Four Seasons Safari Lodge Serengeti, the first southern African property from the prestigious hotel family, where we get a preview of the luxury property that officially opens in December. A brightly dressed Maasai guide leads me to one of 77 rooms, beautifully appointed with a canopied bed, deep soaking tub and floor-to-ceiling windows that overlook a watering hole where still more elephants refuel. That evening, I spot baboons



A pride of lionesses and their cubs lounge midday in a tree in Serengeti National Park. Opposite page: This Singita Sasakwa Lodge villa bathroom boasts one of the best views on the property.



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climbing a boulder to watch the sunset, their eyes, and mine, glued to a sky streaked with brilliant orange, pink and yellow.

We opt for an all-day drive with a packed lunch in tow for our first day in the bush. Within minutes, I'm positively giddy over all of the animals I'd previously had enough of in photo form. Submerged in cool waters, hippos send up delightful sprays of water; crooked-necked vultures are especially ominous as they attack a hoofed corpse; and a pride of six female lions and three cubs stretch and snooze in a nearby tree. By late afternoon we've trekked through vast plains and past ancient boulders to meet up with the beginning of the wildebeest migration. Fearlessly driven by their desire for food and water, they surround our vehicle, emitting guttural honking noises from their awkward bodies. I smile, in awe that my experience with these primitive beasts, by air and now by land, has come full circle.

We say goodbye to the Four Seasons and board a bush plane to Singita Grumeti, a reserve located along the Serengeti's western corridor. Singita has made a name for itself in high-end travel circles as a premier safari destination —

like Micato, it topped *Travel + Leisure's* World's Best List this year — and with very good reason. It has three lodges (as well as a mobile camp and a private house) that are stunning and distinctive; an ideal combination of plush creature comforts, impeccable design and a sustainable relationship with the commanding surroundings. Even more impressive, the 350,000 acres are privately owned, meaning — unlike in the national park — safari vehicles can off-road, taking guests even closer to the wildlife.

The Singita Sasakwa Lodge, where we spend our first night, is an Edwardian manor house and cottages situated on a hillside overlooking the rippling green Serengeti landscape. With an unknowing nod to my transplanted Texas roots, I'm upgraded to the same villa George W. Bush and kin stayed in on holiday last December. The four-bedroom villa is decorated with antique African maps, leather-bound books, footstools upholstered in zebra hides and crystal decanters filled with port and sherry. I'm relegated to the kid's room, though my budding bigger-is-better ego is swiftly comforted by the original Winnie-the-Pooh sketches that adorn my walls, not to mention the view of the private infinity pool

outside of my window. At lunch, I spoon salt out of sterling bowls onto my grilled tomato salad, wishing I'd ignored Micato's thoughtful packing list and brought a cocktail dress and stilettos.

On our first game drive, off-roading in Grumeti Reserves' open-air vehicles, we're in search of cheetahs. We quickly come upon two males, playfully lounging and taking turns keeping watch. It's hard to look away from their long graceful bodies, but I adjust to the larger picture, taking in golden grasses, surrounding acacia trees and a perfectly arched rainbow. My camera's memory card instantly maxes out.

Later, we return to Sasakwa for a dinner that includes cheese-and-spinach souffle and grilled beef medallions paired with European and South African wines. I get my tasting menu, after all.

After another game drive the next morning, we move to a second Singita camp, this time the Faru Faru Lodge. Here, golden gravel paths cut through thick jungles and link our tented suites. Black-faced monkeys cross my entryway as I head to my room, detailed with bamboo walls, outdoor showers and Swarovski telescopes ideal for stargazing. I fall asleep writing stamped postcards, another gift from Micato.

It's hard to climb out of my soft bed the next morning, but many of the area animals are nocturnal and are more likely to be active as the day breaks. We aren't disappointed. By half past 7, we're inching up on a pride of female lions, playfully rolling over and twitching their tails in an endless battle with aggressive flies. Suddenly, one lioness arches her back, stretches and paws her way in the direction of our vehicle (did I mention it was open-air?). I'm frozen, glancing at our guide Lewela for cues. "She's just looking for shade," he says, unconcerned, pointing to the thin shadow our vehicle is casting.

We end our game drive on top of a hill where surprise sundowners await. Thunder strikes just as we start sipping dawas, cocktails made with lime,



honey and vodka but, after the rain passes, we warm ourselves by a bonfire under the stars.

Tomorrow, I begin my journey back to Texas, though I now understand that my heart is split between two homelands. I reluctantly part ways with Africa, knowing we will soon meet again.

In the meantime, I can't wait to show off my photos. **360**

THE DETAILS

When to go The high season in the Tanzanian Serengeti is the dry season, June through August, though animal sightings are common year-round. While you're sure to encounter rain in April and May, you'll also benefit from off-season rates.

Good to know All U.S. travelers need a visa to enter Tanzania. For more information, visit tanzaniaembassy-us.org. All U.S. travelers also need to be updated on various shots and medications before visiting Tanzania.

Getting there Qatar Airways, 877-777-2827 or qatarairways.com.

Safari guide Micato Safaris, rates available upon request; 800-642-2861 or micato.com.

Lodging

- Dar es Salaam Serena Hotel, doubles from \$200 per night; serenahotels.com.
- Four Seasons Safari Lodge Serengeti, doubles from \$586 per night; fourseasons.com.
- Singita Grumeti, from \$850 per person per night; singita.com.