



Plain sailing

For migrating animals, getting around the Serengeti is a perilous business – but *Christopher Silvester* finds it can be a walk in the park if you know the right people

NOTHING QUITE PREPARES YOU for the magnificent vastness of the Serengeti Plain.

Having flown to Migori, been driven across the border from Kenya into Tanzania and then flown to the heart of the Serengeti, I was met by my guide, Kennedy. On our drive to the Roving Bushtops camp, we saw many wonderful sights. First, a waterhole – more of a mud bath, actually – that was stuffed with hippos. Some black-faced vervet monkeys finding lunch on the ground. A blacksmith lapwing, so-called because its call sounds like a hammer hitting an anvil; some Egyptian geese; a serval, which is spotted like a leopard but has a more pointed jaw; some ruffs. Then a gathering of eagles: some short-tailed eagles, some steppe eagles and a butler eagle. A couple of vultures landed on the ground to feast on insects, probably termites.

Later, we saw a huge number of swallows flying in a circle, accompanied by a couple more eagles, apparently eating termites while on the wing. We also saw a kori bustard, the heaviest flying bird, which can weigh up to 18 kilograms and therefore prefers to walk rather than fly for much of the time.

Undoubtedly our best sighting on this drive was a female leopard asleep in an acacia tree, and nearby its cub, also asleep, in a desert date tree. Kennedy drove us past a cluster of igneous granite rocks, where the leopard cub had been born six months earlier. This cub would now be feeding on francolins, guinea fowl, mice and rabbits until it's old enough to catch impala. Minutes before we reached the camp, we passed a couple of spotted hyenas. One was bathing in a mud pool, while its shy companion crouched in the grass. >>

« For our evening drive, we were joined by Amos, a spotter. We passed a small herd of elephants heading towards some hills, two spotted hyenas with their young, various birds (a rufous-naped lark, some crowned lapwings), and then a vast mixed herd of migrating wildebeest and zebra. The latter are the keystone species of the Serengeti, because they mow the grass and make it habitable for other animals such as cheetah, ostriches and bustards. There are reckoned to be more than 1,350,000 wildebeest and more than 250,000 zebra in the Masai Mara-Serengeti ecosystem, which spans the border between Kenya and Tanzania.

Soon we saw our first kill. A juvenile martial eagle, perched atop an acacia tree, swooped down on to the grass below. It transpired that its prey was a baby Thompson's gazelle, its back probably snapped by the eagle's dive. Its anxious parents approached the spot where the eagle now guarded its prize beneath outspread wings. There was nothing for them to do but move on and mourn silently. I reflected on this as I enjoyed a sundowner looking towards the horizon, where slate-grey clouds were illuminated by distant flashes of silent sheet lightning.

After dinner, the usual security escort back to my tent was replaced by a vehicle and driver, because a group of elephants had quietly infiltrated the compound. My 'tent' was the last word in luxury, with wooden decking, an en suite bathroom, powerful air conditioning and wifi. Its canvas walls were rolled up during the day and the decking also had a verandah with sun loungers.

Roving Bushtops owes its name to the fact that it ups sticks twice a year and moves from one part of the Serengeti to another. I was here towards the tail end of the great migration, in which wildebeest and zebra move south to follow the rain that waters the grass on which they depend for their survival.

Some of the camp's spotters and most of the security personnel are ex-poachers – that is to say they poached not for trophies but for bush meat inside the confines of the Serengeti National Reserve. They have been shown the error of their ways and now prefer employment within the safari industry to the risk of imprisonment.

I took a hot shower at 6am and watched some elephants through the window. It was Monday morning in the Serengeti, there was dew on the ground and a hot-water bottle in my lap when I took my seat in the Toyota



Land Cruiser for a full day's game drive. Our first sighting was a white-bellied bustard, which was honking like a goose. Then we saw a clan of hyenas, four of them feeding, another three resting and being disturbed by flies. In the distance a procession of wildebeest and zebra were crossing the track in single file.

Suddenly, a male lion appeared and lay down not far from the hyenas, and we were off the races, as it were. Gradually, a total of 19 hyenas turned up, attracted by the lion's presence, because he might have made a kill for them to scavenge. The hyenas were growling and appeared to be challenging the lion's presence, but he adopted an air of supreme indifference. One hyena was carrying the head and part of the spinal cord of a wildebeest and began to taunt the lion, moving up close to him, then backing away. Other hyenas joined the taunting until they realised the lion was not going to play along.

Now for some light relief. A white-breasted buffalo weaver appeared, then a vulture. We moved on to a cluster of granite rocks with

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trees and shrubs sprouting from it, one of many such igneous extrusions in the Serengeti. What was the corpse of a young wildebeest doing jammed between the branches halfway up one of the trees? It had been put there by a leopard, Kennedy explains, to keep it safe from other predators such as vultures and hyenas. The vultures wouldn't be able to see it from above and hyenas can't climb trees. A leopard can lift almost twice its body weight and, pound-for-pound, is one of the strongest cats on the planet.

Next we passed 15 marabou storks standing in the grass, warming their wings for later flight. Across the plain, moving in one direction, were thousands of wildebeest – like black ants, said Kennedy. We spied a bat-eared fox looking up from the grass cover. It uses its large ears to detect subterranean movement of termites on which it feeds. A southern ground hornbill was pecking inside the cavities of a dead tree, in search of insect larvae, while a family of black-faced vervet monkeys were clinging to the tree's upper branches.

Suddenly we came upon an abundance of safari vehicles, around 20 of them. We were all here to catch sight of three cheetahs – young brothers. Five is the largest number in a coalition of cheetahs and that particular one is in the Masai Mara. Three's company for them, but 20 vehicles of gawping safari tourists was definitely a crowd as far as we were

The tents at Roving Bushtops offer luxurious living in the wildest of settings

10.30am flight to Nairobi. I took tea in my room at 6am and we set off at 6.30, barely having time to notice three white egrets perched on a single tree branch. We weren't long from the camp when we saw our now familiar clan of hyenas, in roughly the same place as the previous day. Some guinea fowl scuttled past – bush chickens, as they are called here. There were some zebras, plus a cheetah sitting on the ground.

Trees are very scattered throughout the Serengeti. The grass is rich in minerals and especially beneficial for the lactating mothers of the vast herds of wildebeest, as a result of which their babies are very well developed and able to stand upright three minutes after they are born. It takes mother and child half an hour to catch up with the constantly moving herd. We passed the same rocky outcrop as the day before and looked for the leopard kill up the tree, but it was gone. A large, solitary bull elephant wandered past. It was in must, dribbling urine over its hind legs to attract females.

Some dwarf mongooses were running from a termite mound as we rumbled past; a pair of hippos were grazing in the cool morning air. They can travel up to 18km at night while feeding furiously. Once the ground

concerned. We passed some Thompson's gazelles and Grant's gazelles and then came across a languid and well-fed male lion under an acacia tree, using the crook of two branches to stretch against and occasionally using its paw to flick away the flies on its cheeks. We passed another rock formation and spied a lioness lying majestically at the top. This time there were 12 vehicles watching the show.

Lunch was taken under the shade of a sausage tree, so-called for its heavy, sausage-like seed pods – lethal if one were to drop on your head. I enjoyed a Kilimanjaro beer and a lavish packed lunch prepared by the Roving Bushtops chef.

After lunch we resumed our progress across the Serengeti, which is a Masai word for endless plain. We soon came across two more cheetahs walking away from a kill and vultures already fastened on to the carrion. Further along we saw some reed bucks whistling an alert to their fellows. At a distance from them of 200 yards were two lionesses. This was a pride of eight lions: an adult male, an adult female and six young ones.

My final sighting of the day was a colony of baboons – unless you include the small herd of Topi antelope grazing near my tent, where I received a much-needed deep-tissue massage from receptionist/therapist Esther. Sitting in a vehicle for most of the day takes a toll on your muscles.

My Tuesday morning game drive took place on my way to Seronera Airstrip for my

heats up and the sun is beating down, these most photo-sensitive of mammals must seek water or die. Kennedy drove me to a long stretch of river where no fewer than 80 hippos – at my approximate count – were wallowing in its muddy shallows. The river was not flowing. A bright green croc was lying on a rock nearby.

As we neared the airstrip, we saw a marabou stork – its nickname of 'undertaker' attributed to its drab plumage – and a bachelor group of young impala. They had been forced out of their herd by a dominant male, whom we found nearby, surrounded by his harem. Eventually, one or other of the young bachelor males would challenge his authority in an antler duel and possibly displace him. Dominant males are so busy mating that they become weak and might need a sabbatical to regain energy and return to reclaim their thrones. Just before we reached the airstrip, we saw a southern ground hornbill with a breakfast of lizard in its beak.

And so ended my visit to the Serengeti. As General MacArthur said after the Japanese had forced him out of the Philippines, 'I shall return.' 🍷

Rates at Roving Bushtops start from \$1,700 per person per night, based on two sharing. This includes full board, drinks including cellar wines, private dining in guest tent, private game drives accompanied by a ranger and Kuria spotter, unlimited aromatherapy massages, wifi, laundry and airstrip transfers.

Web bushtopscamps.com/destination/roving

