

African

U N D E R
S K I E S



Richard Stidworthy, one of Audley's safari specialists, recently spent several weeks exploring Tanzania's lesser-known southern parks and reserves.

Tanzania is a vast and beautiful country that is home to the densest animal populations in the largest parks and reserves in Africa. In the north are the awe-inspiring Ngorongoro Crater and the Serengeti National Park where millions of wildebeest follow the rains in the annual cycle of the Great Migration, familiar to many from wildlife documentaries. But there is more to safaris in Tanzania than these parks and late last year I set out to explore the vast game-rich wilderness areas of southern Tanzania.

My first stop was the Selous Game Reserve which at 45,000 square kilometres is the largest game reserve in Africa. However, despite the fact that it is only 30 minutes by light aircraft from Tanzania's main city, Dar es Salaam, the Selous receives only 1% of Tanzania's visitors. The reserve supports huge populations of large mammals, with estimates of 65,000 elephants, around 150,000 buffalo and 4,000 lions making it their home. There are also large numbers of wild dog, wildebeest, zebra, eland, kudu, hartebeest and impala living within the Selous.

The Selous is bisected by the Rufiji River and it is along the banks of the river and in the surrounding areas where the best game viewing is available. I spent several

days at the small and comfortable camps that are spread out along the banks of the river, taking part in the game drives, walking safaris and boat safaris that each of the lodges offer.

I watched a family of elephant in the moonlight until they drifted along the sand river and into the shadows.

During my game drives, I encountered lions lazing in the shade of large acacia trees, whilst around the corner zebra and giraffe ambled through the dense thickets and open grassland. I came across a small pride of wild dog finishing off their meal of warthog, and just before lunch one day I saw a Marshall eagle take a young impala and drag it under a tree whilst vultures gathered in the upper branches waiting for their turn. Early one morning, I set off on foot with an armed guard and guide and in the course of a couple of hours, we walked in a slow arc examining the spoor of lions, tracked a small herd of elephants from a distance and encountered giraffes, zebras, impala and



wildebeest before returning to the riverbank for breakfast.

However, it was the Rufiji River itself that left the strongest impression on me. As the river has carved its way from the western highlands to the Indian Ocean, the changing course has created a labyrinth of waterways and lakes. Hundreds of pods of hippo wallow all day before leaving the water in the cool of the evening to graze upon the grasses. In a boat I floated alongside hippos, and approached huge crocodiles basking in the sun on the banks. Small islets covered in tall palms sit in the middle of the river and as we drifted past one, I came face to trunk with an elephant breaking its journey across the river. From the water were excellent views of the elephants, buffalo, giraffe and waterbuck that shuffle down to the water to drink, and I saw a profusion of birdlife, from the beautiful fish eagles perching on the highest branches, to the wading birds on the water's edge and the bright kingfishers that flashed across in front of us.

A four-course dinner under the African stars whilst hyena and lion circled just out of the fire's glow.

Leaving the Selous behind, I continued further west, flying into the remote and untamed Ruaha National Park. Hotter and dryer than the Selous and with even fewer visitors, it is regarded by many as Tanzania's best-kept game viewing secret. The park is home to a range of habitats and this diversity is reflected in the prolific birdlife, with over 450 species recorded, and the wide variety of wildlife.

At the small, remote but luxurious lodges the focus is on game drives, although walking safaris are possible with an armed ranger. During my morning and afternoon game drives, I had superb sightings of elephants, zebra, giraffe, and both greater and lesser kudu. One afternoon, we passed antelope and giraffe as we followed a female cheetah and three young cubs swaggering across an open plain. Leaving the cheetah behind we came across a pride of 23 lions slowly tracking a herd of over 300 buffalo along a dry riverbed. As the light faded we returned to the lodge for a four-course dinner under the African stars whilst hyena and lion circled just out of the fire's glow. Later that night, I was awoken by a family of elephant munching on a tree within a couple of yards of my bed. I watched them in the moonlight until they drifted along the sand river and into the shadows.

The next morning, I regretfully left the wilderness behind but was rewarded with some time in the tropical Indian Ocean archipelagos of Zanzibar and Mafia.



Travel file

A 12-night safari visiting the Selous Game Reserve and Ruaha National Park costs from £2,235 per person based on twin share. The trip can easily be extended with time relaxing or exploring in the Mafia or Zanzibar archipelagos. For further details please call Richard or Heather on 01869 276 250.