



GOING TO GIRAFFIC PARK

Photographs by the author

We stopped counting at one hundred and fifty giraffe of all sizes and shades.

"This is why we call this Giraffic Park," said our field guide, Frank Jephta, as we headed back to our camp for brunch after a two hour game drive in the northern region of Tanzania's Selous Game Reserve.

My wife Ruth and I were spending four days there at the invitation of Nomad. They wanted me to check out their two camps on the northern banks of the Rufiji River for future inclusion in my preferred list of offerings for clients.

Make no mistake. Selous has as many detractors as cheerleaders. Those in favor speak enthusiastically about the abundance of wildlife and the small human footprint. Detractors cite as negatives "skittish" animals and the larger likelihood of contracting malaria in this area.

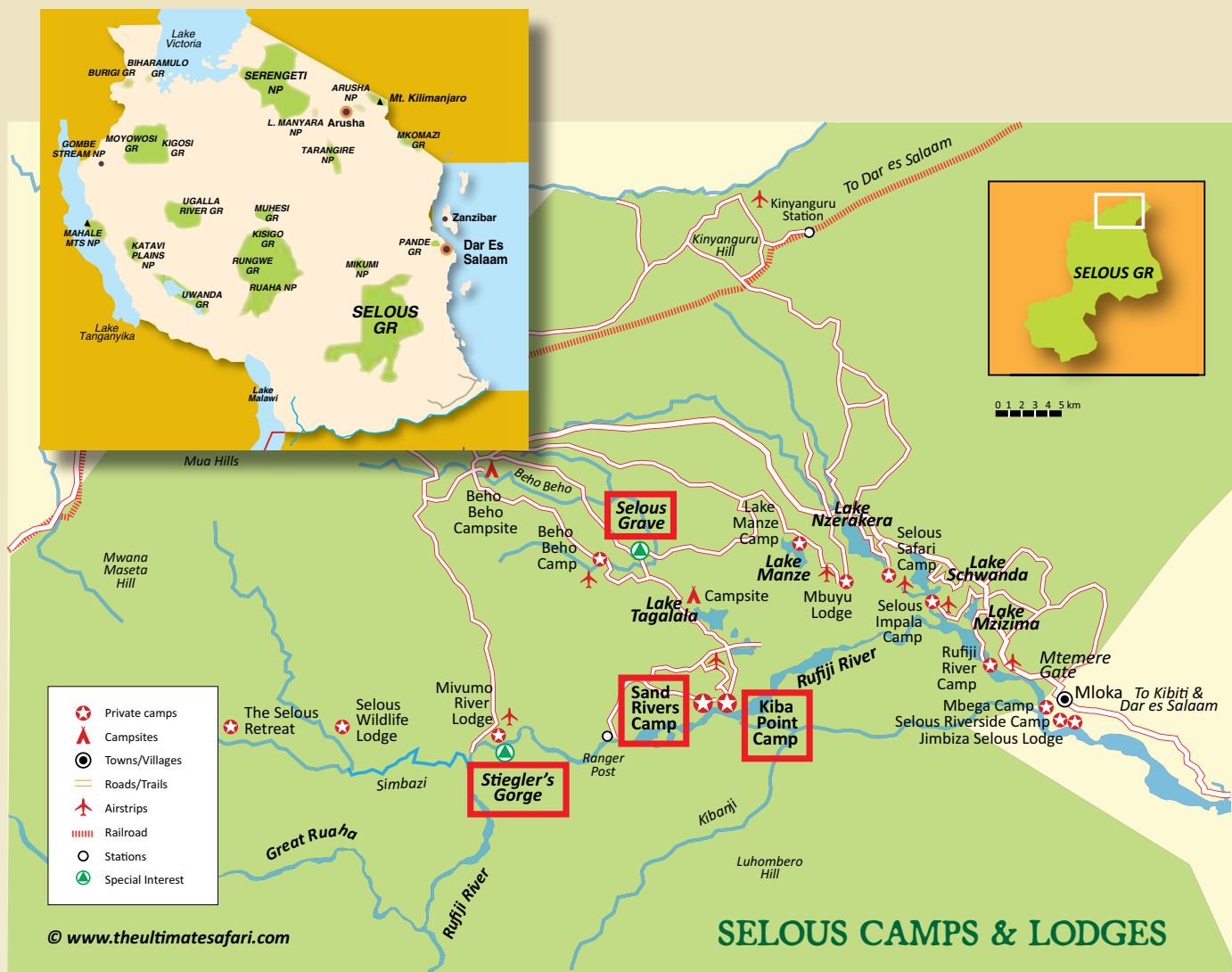
The malaria part does not really have any substance to it. Most of Africa's safari regions that are still listed as "malaria areas" hardly pose any real threat as long as travelers follow doctors' orders and take their prophylactic medication before during and after the visit.

But the "skittishness" complaint is not totally unfounded. Those of us wildlife photographers who have been traversing Southern and East Africa for years to capture wildlife on film or digital chips will tell you Selous does present a special challenge.

"Out here you have to be quick on the draw," I remarked as I clicked away at a galloping herd of giraffe and a group of zebra kicking dust in the air soon after they spotted us.

Even a troop of Yellow Baboons made a rapid retreat when they saw our vehicle approaching. (Baboons are usually quite bold and inquisitive).





The reason for all of this skittishness is hardly a secret. Eighty percent of Selous Game Reserve is open for hunting and a mere twenty percent is reserved for photographic safaris. The dividing line is the Rufiji River and during the dry season animals that have been in the firing line down south cross into the northern zone still expecting to face danger whenever humans approach.

"I have been told that there are no giraffes down south," I wondered aloud. "Why would they be on the run?"

"Probably been cautioned by the other animals to be careful," Frank suggested.

"Maybe," I thought, "but what about the lions. They were quite comfortable with us around. Did they not get the message?"

One of our highlights of the trip was observing a female lion with her daughter showing great affection as they licked and kissed each other. Two big cats as content as any domestic pets in a loving household.

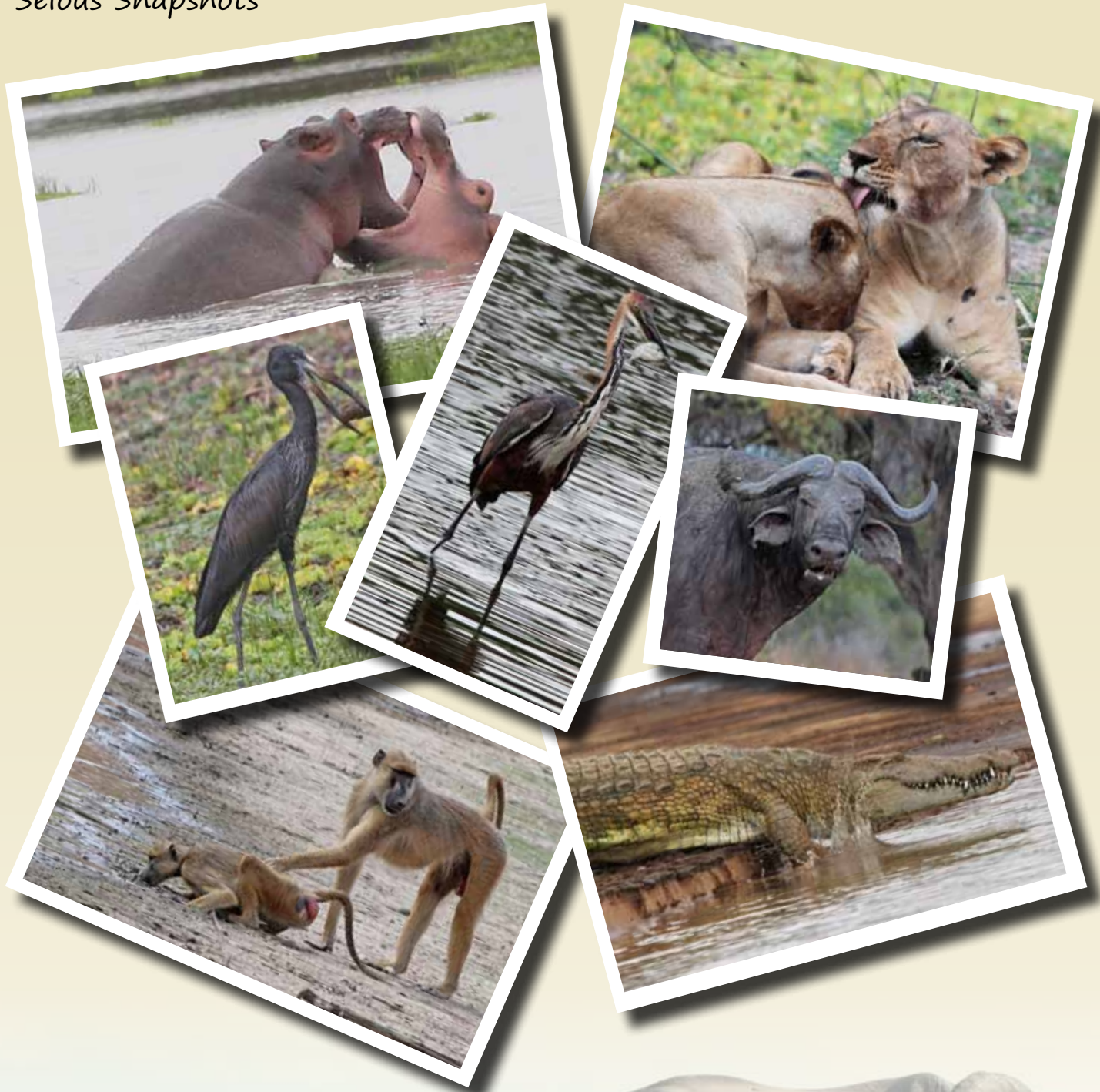
They seemed oblivious to the fate of their cousins being fired at by trophy hunters down south. Something that has not escaped the attention and ire of one of the world's foremost lion protectors, Dereck Joubert.

"We are buying the hunting licences in the Selous Game Reserve and tearing them up," Joubert told a reporter.

This is part of Joubert's campaign to try and ensure that lions do not join the dodo bird and other unfortunate creatures on the extinction list. "A half a century ago," he points out, "there were more than 450,000 lions roaming across Africa and today there are fewer than 20,000 left on the whole continent."

On the other side of the debate there are those who argue that hunting subsidizes game reserves. The Tanzanian park authorities insist that without this income the sanctuary north of the Rufiji River would be unsustainable. Trophy fees in Tanzania have remained unchanged over the past twenty years, making it a popular bargain basement for hunters from all over the world.

Selous Snapshots



While I fully support Dereck Joubert's insistence on the need for a curb on lion hunting I do not side with those in favor of a blanket ban on all forms of hunting. Let's not lose sight of the fact that hunters were the first conservationists in Africa, setting aside large tracts of land as national parks. Frederick Selous and his close friend and admirer, former President Teddy Roosevelt, were both hunters and naturalists.

Drawn from a privileged life in Victorian England to the wilds of Africa—his father was Chairman of the London Stock Exchange—Selous made a name as explorer, hunter, conservationist, author and soldier. It was in the latter capacity that Selous, who commanded a battalion in East Africa during World War 1, was shot and killed at the age of 64 by the Germans near the Rufiji River. Selous was buried at the very spot where he fell in the game reserve that today bears his name.

I had occasion to visit his grave. It is a modest slab of slate under a tamarind tree with a bronze plaque. The inscription reads: *Captain F.C. Selous D.S.O. 25th Royal Fusiliers Killed in Action 4.1.17*. Simple and straightforward and blending in with nature—the way Selous would have liked it.

Today there are more serious threats than hunting to the preservation of the 21,000 sq. mile Selous Game Reserve as a pristine World Heritage Site. Recently Tanzania's Natural Resources Minister announced the approval of plans to mine uranium in the park. It would, he argued, only affect 1 percent of the reserve and provide much needed revenues and job opportunities.

In the meantime the authorities dusted off plans shelved some time ago to harness the Rufiji River in an effort to cope with power shortages in the country. Like the uranium mining operation plans of a power plant that would severely impact on Rufiji's scenic Stiegler's Gorge elicited strong protests from the conservation community.

It is too early to tell whether environmentalists will be able to stop these intrusions in Selous Game Reserve as they did in Serengeti where they managed to kill plans for highway across the park that would have severely impacted the Great Migration and all the wildlife depending on this unique occurrence.

Hippodrome might be an equally appropriate appellation for Selous, I thought, as we cruised down the Rufiji River on a small boat, the outboard engine purring softly behind us with Frank at the controls.

We were threading carefully between pods of hippos on our way to Stiegler's Gorge. Being at the helm of this little craft required the skill of the captain of a ship in the Arctic. Evading collisions with these large semi-submersed creatures and avoiding the shallow waters during the dry season presented quite a challenge..

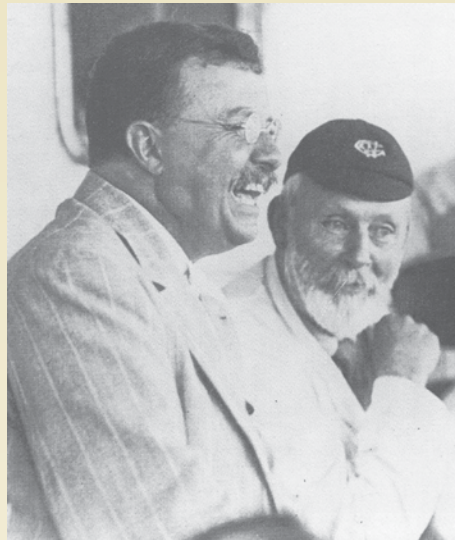
"They estimate the hippo population in the river at about fourteen thousand," Frank observed as several heads popped up ten yards away.

Next in number are the crocodiles sunbathing on the sandbanks. But the prize sight was the pelicans combining clumsiness on the sandbanks with grace and beauty in flight.

We stop along the way to observe birdlife and a few stray elephant and waterbuck before we entered what could best be described as a smaller replica of the Grand Canyon lined with immense black rocks. Named after a Swiss explorer who was killed here by an elephant in 1907, Stiegler's Gorge averages 330 feet in depth. Frank

pulled up to a sandbank and assisted us out of the boat before proceeding to set up brunch on a folding table. What a loss it would be, I thought, if this should all be submerged by a hydro plant.

Visiting Selous' Grave



Roosevelt and Selous





*Cruising along
the Rufiji to
Stiegler's Gorge*





Selous, Giraffic Park or Hippodome—by whatever name—is worth a visit. Even though somewhat skittish, wildlife is plentiful and varied. The human footprint, at least for now, is hardly noticeable and game drives are essentially private affairs. Certainly a welcome relief for those who are repulsed by the heavy traffic in some parts of Serengeti and other popular parks.

Accommodation for us was in Nomad Tanzania’s Sand Rivers Camp and Kiba Point—both situated on the banks of the Rufiji River with excellent views, luxurious accommodations and outstanding food. Top-notch hospitality at the camps came with a knowledgeable field guide who had a passion for his vocation.

Selous is best approached either by air or road from Dar es Salaam. Scheduled air to this city from the United States is through Ethiopia (Ethiopian Airlines), South Africa (South African Airways), Europe (BA, KLM), or the Middle East (Emirates).

We are ready to assist you with arrangements to visit Selous or any of our preferred destinations where wildlife is plentiful and *homo sapiens* a rare species. Not only in Tanzania but other East and Southern Africa safari countries we evaluate properties to be sure that our clients get an experience worthy of the money and mileage expended in traveling all the way to Africa.

Please visit www.theultimatesafari.com for further information about African safaris and feel free to e-mail me with any questions.

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Kiba Point



Sand Rivers Camp

