



THE PLACE WHERE THE LAND GOES ON FOREVER

Pictures by the author

Recently, my wife Ruth and I went to Serengeti in Tanzania to see what to include in our offerings to discerning safari clients in search of comfort and class in the midst of the Great Migration. Following is a brief account of our findings in what turned out to be a most memorable meandering along the migration trail.

Serengeti derives from the Maasai word "Siringet" meaning "the place where the land goes on forever." Add more than two million wildebeest, zebra and other ungulates to this vast landscape dotted with flat-topped Acacia trees and you have the Great Migration.

No one can tell with accuracy exactly when this arduous annual trek in search of better grazing will start. And no one can imagine the magnificence of this spectacle until they go there and see for themselves. Words are inadequate to describe it and pictures, as Ruth remarked when I showed her my pick from thousands taken during our recent trip, "tell only part of the story."

Migration

Our encounter with the Great Migration started towards the end of May when we woke up in our tent in the middle of the night to a droning that sounded like a zillion bullfrogs at full throttle. We were at *Serengeti*

under Canvoas—a CC Africa mobile camp right smack in the middle of the migration along the Western Corridor of Serengeti. From that night on the droning of the wildebeest was only occasionally interrupted by the haunting barking of the accompanying zebra. We had started two days earlier at the Ngorongoro Crater, staying at a most unusual CC Africa lodge on its western rim named *Ngorongoro Crater Lodge* or *NCL*, for short. Our one day excursion into the Crater was pleasant with ample viewings of animals and modest vehicle traffic.

This was late May. Once June starts the Crater becomes a zoo. Too much traffic and little control over how many vehicles may crowd in at a special sighting. Both the Crater and Serengeti are national parks with no off-roading and plenty of 4x4 traffic dusting up the roads. Therefore those who wish to include Ngorongoro Crater on their way north to experience the migration should do so in late May unless they are prepared to fight the traffic from June until the end of August.

So why... ►



Wildebeest stampede - Serengeti

So why go there? This deep, volcanic crater is the largest unflooded and unbroken caldera in the world. At about 13 miles across, 2,000 feet deep and 115 sq miles in area, the Ngorongoro Crater is a breathtaking natural wonder. Wildlife is plentiful and still (thank heavens) far outnumbers the *homo sapiens* that crowd the dirt roads. Wildebeest and zebra are largely sedentary. The 10,000 wildebeest and 5,000 zebra have no need to move as water and grazing are always available. It is also home to large tusker bull elephants and plenty of big cats.

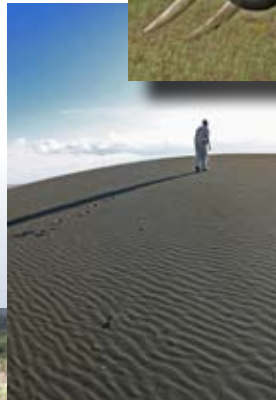
During the wet season Lake Magadi in Ngorongoro Crater stretches to the edge of the Lerai Forest and during the dry season it sometimes disappears altogether. We saw thousands of Lesser Flamingo mingling with lesser numbers of their greater cousins, the Greater Flamingo. Although this sea of pink hardly competes with the millions of flamingoes gathering at Lake Natron to the east of Serengeti, it still offers an impressive sideshow to the rich

Clockwise from bottom left: Maasai herdsman in Ngorongoro Crater; Olduvai Gorge, Shifting Sand; Ngorongoro Tusker elephant; Topi on the run; Zebra migration.

variety of wildlife residing inside the 30-mile radius of Ngorongoro Crater.

An amazing sight was a Maasai herdsman nudging his cattle towards a waterhole. Considering that that the Crater has more big cats per square mile than any other part of Africa the question naturally follows: "What does he think he is doing?" Our guide quickly dispelled any fears we might have had. "Lions," he remarked nonchalantly, "are afraid of the Maasai."

In the old days the Maasai occupied most of the Serengeti. Killing lions was a rite of passage to manhood. In the fifties their elders signed away their claim to the territory and in return were granted grazing and watering rights for their livestock in the Ngorongoro Conservation Area. I suspect the Serengeti lions must have



passed word along to their cousins in the Crater to stay clear of the Maasai warriors and herdsmen.

Olduvai

An hour's drive north of Ngorongoro Crater Lodge is Olduvai Gorge (originally *Oldupai* in Maasai) made famous by the archeological discoveries of Louis and Mary Leaky. The first skull of *Zinjanthropus*, commonly known as 'Nutcracker Man' or Zinj, who allegedly lived about 1.75 millions years ago, was found here. Other important finds include the remains of *Homo habilis* and *Homo erectus*, believed to be the closest ancestor of modern man or *Homo sapien*.

After a visit to the little museum we arranged to have our guide take us to the Leaky compound which has remained intact and is still utilized in part by visiting volunteers ready to dig. What a hardy couple, I thought, when I saw the sweltering shack where the Leakys lived for many years while searching for Zinj.

The young Maasai who accompanied us on this journey suggested that we continue on to the Shifting Sands, a further half hour journey north. This large dune of fine, grey volcanic ash originated during an eruption at Mt. Lengai (the mountain of God) and has moved along intact at the rate of about thirty four feet per year. While we simply stand in awe of this natural wonder the Maasai come here to worship.

As we turned south our Maasai guide asked to be dropped off at his village. Dressed in Western clothes he looked somewhat out of place surrounded by his family in traditional colorful shoulder blankets. The same young man who was sitting on the backseat of our vehicle text messaging friends on his cellphone was now ready to be reintegrated for the weekend.

Serengeti

The next leg of our journey took us by Cessna Caravan (the favorite and reliable workhorse in the African bush) in a roundabout way to Grumeti Airstrip. Regional Air is the premier air operator in Serengeti.

A ranger met us at the airstrip with a landrover to take us to the mobile camp where we first encountered the migration. *Serengeti under Canvas* is situated in Western Corridor the national park and even though we were camped right in the bush, game drives were on the beaten track. Off-roading is strictly *verboden*. For those used to private concessions where rangers take them up close to the animals this does not sound appealing. But thousands of migration animals ignoring roadways and human traffic as they surge northward, more than make up for this restriction.

These CC Africa tents are moved every two months to give guests the best possible vantage point. Replete with a soft king-size bed, chandeliers powered by portable generators, and stylish campaign furniture, these tents ensure that clients suffer no hardship. Your personal butler prepares your shower fifteen minutes before your arrival back from the game drive. Just the right temperature in a canvas bag equipped with a showerhead, this is an experience not to be missed.

Singita Grumeti

Our final destination was the Singita Grumeti Game Reserve that Wall Street guru Paul Tudor Jones financed and had the good sense to pass along to Singita to develop and manage. Anyone familiar with Singita's properties in South Africa's will know what I mean.

Purchasing the rights to 350,000 acres along the Serengeti's Western Corridor and developing three outstanding lodges and an infrastructure that provides jobs for some seven hundred tribespeople in the region, Jones certainly made more than his fair contribution to conservation and community development.

The migration was in full swing when we arrived and this being a private game reserve, off-roading was allowed. The wildebeest had crossed the Grumeti River. Following in their wake were the big cats, the hangers-on and bottom-feeders. In one single afternoon I saw more vultures than I have encountered on tens of safaris in the past.

First stop... ►



Flamingoes at Lake Magadi

First stop in Singita Grumeti GR was Sabora Tented Camp where, once again, we were reminded that the exterior usually belies the splendid interior when it comes to accommodation in the bush. After all, the idea is to blend the exterior with the bush. But inside there are no limits to the creature comforts.

The flagship property Sasakwa—perched on a mountain like an eagle’s nest—offers the ultimate view from luxury and comfort that has to be experienced to be believed. This stone and slate colonial-style lodge with its charming private cottages—replete with sitting and drawing rooms, huge bath and bedrooms, porch and plunge pool—takes bush chic to another level. Faru Faru is a little bit more basic which simply means that it is luxury without a few of the extras.

Singita Grumeti can be an add-on to the migration experience or a standalone trip. June, July August are the best months to see the migration moving through this area. But the dry months of September and October are excellent to view the plentiful resident wildlife as they gather in large numbers around the remaining waterholes.

Lying in wait... ►



Clockwise from bottom left:

Faru Faru lounge; Sasakwa bedroom and bathroom; Ngorongoro Crater Lodge drawing room; Sabora tented bedroom; breakfast at Serengeti-under-Canvas.





Lying in wait

Lying in wait along the Great Migration route are predators of all kinds. The big cats and hyenas and, of course, nature's clean-up crew, the vultures.

Every year more than a half a million wildebeest and fellow-traveling ungulates perish on the plains and in the rivers—where jumbo-sized crocodiles maul many and feast on the wounded and wasted left helpless in the stampede. But then nature has its own way of compensating. New births more than make up for the loss.

Planning a trip...▶



PLANNING YOUR TRIP

Once you have made up your mind to go to Serengeti and/or Singita Grumeti Game Reserve, please let us know. We at The Ultimate Safari will be happy to arrange this trip to suit your personal needs.

Points to consider

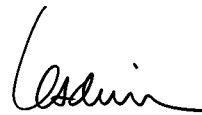
Logistics: Going to Serengeti from the United States is best done by flying on KLM from various major airports in the United States to Amsterdam, connecting to a direct flight to Kilimanjaro International Airport. Arrival is in the evening and departure for various Serengeti destinations the next morning by Regional Air. Therefore an overnight stay in Arusha is required.

Timing: June/July/August are prime months for the Great Migration but late May can be good – especially if you wish to avoid the big traffic in Ngorongoro Crater and the central plains of the Serengeti National Park. In the private Singita Grumeti Game Reserve game viewing is always limited to a few guests. Even though the migration has largely passed by then the dry months of September/October can be good months as resident wildlife gather around the remaining waterholes.

Duration: Depending on your commitments at home, trips can be anywhere between one week and fourteen days. Those who have a very limited time frame may simply want to go to Singita Grumeti Game Reserve, spending a few days each and the three lodges. Ideally, however, I would include Ngorongoro Crater Lodge and, especially during the migration, Serengeti under Canvas.

Staying in touch: This is an issue for those among us who have business that simply cannot wait. My wife is in the real estate business and cannot tolerate being out of touch for too long. At all the places where we stayed there were wireless facilities –barring, of course, Serengeti-under-Canvas. Later we discovered that if you subscribed to the local cellphone service provider you might have had a voice connection there as well. In Singita Grumeti Game Reserve financier Paul Tudor Jones has installed an elaborate communication system via satellite to keep abreast of happenings on Wall Street while relaxing out there. Imagine making telephone calls from this remote outpost in Tanzanian as if you were sitting in New York! Almost as incongruous as the Maasai who was text messaging his friends in the back of our vehicle on our way to the Shifting Sand...

Have a great summer!



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