



Tanzania, 2022

Field Notes from a Long-Awaited Journey
Version 4.0

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Tanzanian Safari, 2022



Spotted Hyena (Crocuta crocuta), Serengeti National Park

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Lioness (Panthera leo) with cubs, Serengeti National Park

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Migrating Plains Zebra (Equus quagga), Western Corridor

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Hippopotamus (Hippopotamus amphibius), Western Corridor

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Wildebeest (Connochaetes taurinus) panicking at a waterhole, Western Corridor

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African Bush Elephant (Loxodonta africana), Lake Manyara National Park

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There are some journeys that arrive early in life and some that wait.

This one waited.

For more than forty years, the idea of an African safari sat quietly in the background - not forgotten, but deferred. In 2022, we finally realised it.

What follows is not a retrospective account. It is drawn directly from my own handwritten journal kept at the time - written each day, in lodges, tents, and in the quiet intervals between drives.

What This Is

These entries are presented largely as they were written, save only for spelling mistakes and the odd grammatical error. They are daily accounts of movement, landscape, and wildlife, shaped by the immediacy of experience rather than hindsight.

They are not intended as a guide, nor as a comprehensive survey of species or places. Instead, they form a record of attention - what was seen, what stood out, and what lingered.

Where helpful, light structure and occasional headings have been added for readability. The voice, however, remains that of the moment.

A note on time and memory

Revisiting these pages some years later has been an unexpectedly emotional process.

Part of that lies in the experience itself - the scale of the landscapes, the presence of wildlife long known only from books and film. Part of it lies in encountering the original voice of the journal: a record of noticing, written without thought of publication.

What has perhaps been most striking is the simple act of remembering. This was, without doubt, the most remarkable journey I have taken - a long-held ambition realised, and a sustained encounter with places and wildlife that had, until then, existed only in books, on the small screen and in imagination.

Reading back through the journal has brought that experience into focus again, not only in its larger moments, but in the small, easily forgotten details: fleeting observations, fragments of conversation, the texture of particular days. These are things that might otherwise have faded, but which remain quietly preserved in the act of writing.

This account preserves that voice - and those moments - as far as possible.

Field Notes Context

Although somewhat apart from my observations of local wildlife, this series is still entirely within the spirit of the *Field Notes Journal*.

If the Journal is a personal natural history of place, then this is a record of a place encountered only briefly, but with lasting impact. It extends the scope of observation beyond the familiar, while remaining grounded in the same principles: attention, patience, and the act of recording.

Closing line

What follows is simply the journey, as it unfolded - one day at a time.

Arrival in Tanzania



Qatar Airlines Lounge, London Heathrow
David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



Qatar Airlines, In-Flight Catering
David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



Mount Kilimanjaro, Approach to Kilimanjaro Airport
David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)

Our journey to Tanzania had begun the previous day, Sunday the 19th of June 2022, when the Qatar Airways A380 took off from London Heathrow as flight QR4, bound for Doha. The journey was in 2 halves, the first leg arriving in Doha at 23:45 and the second leg leaving for Kilimanjaro airport at 02:10 the next day, this time on an A330.

For the aviation geek (and I am most definitely one of those!) the flights and aircraft details are:

Date	Time	From	To	Arrival	Flight	Aircraft	Age	Serial	Registration
19/06/2022	15:05	LHR	DOH	23:45	QR4	A380-861	5	254	A7-APJ
20/06/2022	02:10	DOH	JRO	07:35	QR1499	A330-302	17	0680	A7-AED

Despite the business class treatment, which was 2nd to none, after a long journey like that we were understandably a little jaded when we arrived, not to mention looking forward to a hot shower, so I was grateful we've taken the steps of buying our tourist visits ahead of time.

It didn't completely eliminate the form-filling on arrival and it had no impact at all on the lack of humour from the stony-faced immigration official who dealt with my passport, but it did mean we were the first ones through immigration, much to the amazement of Ama, the representative from "Go Vacation East Africa", our local tour operator, who was waiting for us outside.

Transfer to Arusha

The transfer, by Jeep, from the airport to the Mount Meru Hotel, on the outskirts of Arusha, was through arable land. Close to the airport, the maze crops had failed but as we drove Westwards towards Arusha, they were more successful, thanks in large measure to the irrigation systems used in the area, and were joined by rice paddies and coffee plantations, where groups of women were working the paddy fields and picking the coffee.

The roads were lined with a mix of brick-built houses and shanty-style shops and properties, dotted around, with no apparent plan to the layout, and with chickens and cattle free to roam between them. It is, after all, a rural location, not a town!

As we came closer to Arusha, in the lush foothills of Mount Meru, banana plantations joined the crops we'd seen further to the East and the roads became busier, with school children hurrying late to their morning lessons. The school day starts early, running from 07:00 to 14:00, with a break at 10:00, and as school meals aren't provided the children make their way home for lunch.

They were joined on the roads by motorbikes laid down with bags of charcoal, that provides a cheaper alternative to gas as a fuel in areas where it's permitted, though in some areas, it's banned because of the detrimental environmental impact of the tree felling needed to produce it.

Large groups of motorbikes also congregated at the roadside in the hope of attracting fares, as they act as cheap taxis for those willing to take their lives in their hands!

Mount Meru Hotel

Our first night was to be spent at the Mount Meru Hotel, located on the outskirts of Arusha in landscaped Gardens at the foot of Mount Meru. Our room was at the front of the hotel and was very comfortable, equipped with the things we'd need to make our short stay comfortable, including a kettle and sachets of instant coffee that we treated with scepticism but that were surprisingly good when we tasted them. Perhaps that's to be expected in a coffee growing region like Arusha!

Of course, it also had that thing that's held to be most precious by all long haul travellers on their arrival at their destination: A shower with lots of hot water!

Refreshed and rested, we looked out of the room window to help formulate a plan for the afternoon. The view was stunning! Across the road, or so it seemed, the foothills rose to the 4,500 metre peak of Mount Meru, a conical "stratovolcano" built by layer upon layer of hardened lava and the fifth-highest peak in Africa.

The view also showed that Arusha was bustling and on reflection we decided we'd likely be mithered to distraction by hawkers and the like if we ventured out alone.

Instead, we explored the grounds of the hotel, relaxing by the pool and making the acquaintance of the baglaflecht weaverbirds (*reichenasi*) flirting around the gardens and the bushes while we set our cold "Kilimanjaro" beers (known affectionately as "Kilis").

Field Notes

- Safari - From the Arabic *safar*, meaning journey or travel, and entering Swahili as *safari*, meaning a journey or expedition
- Village Weaver (*Ploceus cucullatus*) - *active in hotel gardens; small groups moving through ornamental trees and shrubs, frequent calling and display behaviour*

Arusha National Park



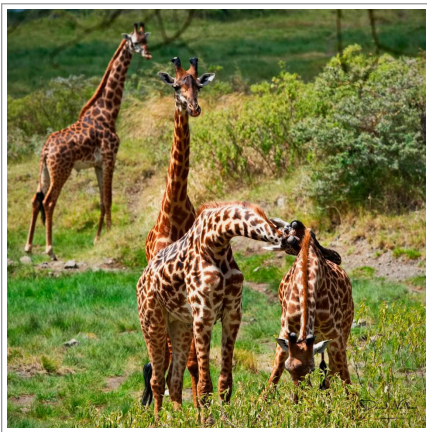
'Small Serengeti', Arusha National Park
David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



African Buffalo (*Syncerus caffer*), Arusha National Park
David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



Giraffe, Arusha National Park
David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



Giraffe, Arusha National Park
David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



Harnessed Bushbuck (*Tragelaphus scriptus*), Arusha National Park
David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



Common Warthog (*Phacochoerus africanus*), Arusha National Park
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African Fish Eagle (*Ichthyophaga vocifer*), Arusha National Park
David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



White-Fronted Bee Eater (*Merops bullockoides*), Arusha National Park
David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)

The following day, after breakfast, we re-packed and brought our cases down to reception for our briefing meeting with Ama, our "Go Vacation Africa" representative.

As he worked his way through the details our initial thoughts of “where is everyone else?” gradually turned to consternation as we realised we were the only two in our group! On one level, that’s fantastic as you pay a great deal more for a private safari! However, I was banking on a group of six, as we’d expected, so I could blend in as I’m not the most adept in social situations with strangers! Small talk isn’t my forté.

We were introduced to our driver and guide for the next 12 days, Philip. My abiding initial impression was that he had a striking resemblance to “Fuzz”, the mechanic from the National Geographic TV series “Car SOS”!

Into Arusha National Park

He drove us Eastwards, back along the road we travelled the day before, still replete with school children and motorbikes, and although there were some awkward silences, we all made an effort and I relaxed into it.

After about 20 minutes of driving, he took a side road and we began to ascend, as Arusha National Park is sited on the slopes of Mount Meru. The lowland heat gave away to cooler mountain air as we climbed, arriving eventually at the car park at the entrance to the park.

Here, our permits to enter the park had to be checked and we were delayed, awaiting confirmation of permission to enter from the “Go Vacation” office, as there had been a bit of a mix up. Ruth and I exchanged glances, hoping this wasn’t a sign of things to come for the next 12 days, and we got out of the Land Cruiser to stretch our legs.

Land Cruisers are the go-to vehicle for the Safari companies as they’re mechanically quite simple, with no sealed electronics, and so relatively easy to repair. This is in contrast to modern Land Rovers, the former favourite, that have now gone the other way and are too complex and require more specialised repair.

The cool mountain air was wonderful and the scene was still and peaceful, at least until one of the local guides tried to sell us a walking tour!

First Wildlife Encounters

With the entry permits finally sorted, we were ready for our first Tanzanian wildlife experience and, after only five minutes or so of riding over a deeply rutted and dusty track, we arrived at what Philip described as a “small Serengeti”, a large plain, filled with lush green vegetation and home to giraffe, zebra, buffalo, warthog, bush buck, egret, baboons and a hamerkop, a species of water fowl with a long flattened beak and a long crest, giving it a “hammerhead” appearance.

It was breathtaking and also a little strange on account of the lushness of the landscape, which seemed at odds with the typical African Savannah landscape featured on many wildlife TV programmes.

Around Mount Meru

Arusha was to serve only as a taster of what was to come, and in comparison to the other national parks we were to visit it’s relatively small, so one morning was sufficient to complete a circuit of the park taking in many of its varied habitats.

We saw mountain terrain opening up to a spectacular view of the planes below as we drove around the rim of the volcano that is Mount Meru. We took in the site of a family of giraffe grazing in the marshy ground down by the lakes and were blessed to be able to see an African fish eagle tussling with the corpse of a flamingo by the waters edge. Baboons greeted us in the tree-covered slopes surrounding the road as we climbed Mount Meru.

Small it may be, in comparison to Tarangire or the Serengeti, but it was a spectacular taster.

Onwards to Tarangire

From Arusha National Park, we headed back to the Mount Meru Hotel for lunch and then out on the two hour drive to Tarangire, across a vast plain dotted with herds of domestic cattle, zebra and a few wildebeest.

This used to be the route of the migration but the long, metalled road bisecting it and the settlement of the Maasai on other side, throughout the plain, has effectively blocked the route for the migrating herds and they no longer pass this way.

Field Notes

- Arusha National Park - Located on the slopes of Mount Meru; a compact park encompassing montane forest, crater rim, marsh, and open plain habitats
- African Buffalo (*Syncerus caffer*) - seen grazing in open grassland; large groups present on the 'small Serengeti' plain
- Giraffe - family group observed feeding in marshy ground near lakes
- African Fish Eagle (*Ichthyophaga vocifer*) - observed at waterside feeding on flamingo carcass; characteristic presence around lakes
- Common Warthog (*Phacochoerus africanus*) - encountered in open areas; typical alert posture and rapid movement when disturbed
- White-fronted Bee-eater (*Merops bullockoides*) - active in open habitat; aerial feeding behaviour
- Hamerkop (*Scopus umbretta*) - seen near wetland; distinctive hammer-shaped head profile
- Migration Route (Tarangire region) - former wildebeest migration path now disrupted by road infrastructure and settlement, limiting seasonal movement

Arrival at Tarangire National Park



Termite Mounds, Tarangire National Park

David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



Elephant Bones at the entrance to Tarangire National Park

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Male Lion (Panthera leo) in the evening sun, Tarangire National Park

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Plains Zebra (Equus quagga) at a waterhole, Tarangire National Park

David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



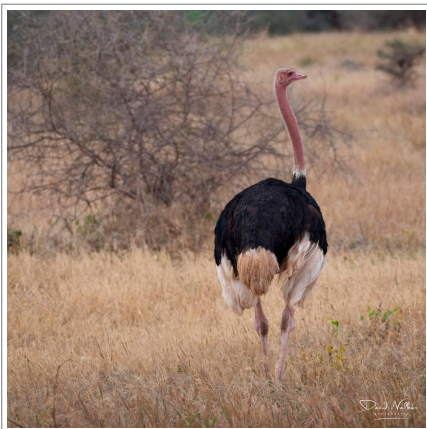
East African Eland (Taurotragus oryx pattersonianus), Tarangire National Park

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East African Eland (Taurotragus oryx pattersonianus), Tarangire National Park

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Common Ostrich (Struthio camelus), Tarangire National Park

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African Bush Elephant (Loxodonta africana), Tarangire National Park

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African Bush Elephant (Loxodonta africana), Tarangire National Park

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The entrance to Tarangire took us along a long drive marked by two huge baobab trees, through a landscape that is the quintessential African landscape so familiar from the wildlife programs that I've avidly consumed since my teens.

While we waited at the entrance for Philip to arrange our permit, we stepped out of the Land Cruiser for a while to stretch our legs. To the side of the ranger station was a large flat area hosting two *huge* termite mounds, some 2 to 3 metres high. Nearby was a mound of elephant bones, skulls and immense leg bones, collected by the rangers. Tarangire is famous for its population of elephants and one hopes these bones are the result of old age rather than poaching.

First Sightings

As we drove away from the ranger station at the entrance, permit in hand, we passed through vast plains of straw-coloured grasses peppered with acacia and baobab trees and home to herd of zebra, wildebeest, eland and impala.

Groups of giraffe and African bush elephant made an appearance, here and there.

The Lion

Within minutes of entering, with the lowering sun casting a soft, golden light over the scene, we saw a male Lion settling down to rest in the long grass near a water hole where zebra and wildebeest had come to the water's edge to drink. Lying on his side, the Lion almost completely vanished, only the occasional tail-flick giving away his position amongst the golden-coloured grass that almost perfectly matched the colour of his fur.

Evening Drive

We drove through the park in the evening sun, encountering zebra on the roads and passing by family groups of elephant, including some youngsters, on either side of the road.

We had our first sighting of the strutting secretary birds, looking for the snakes that are their prey amongst the brush, saw ostrich, the males exhibiting the pink necks of their breeding plumage, and, at one point, passing by a bull elephant in must, the pungent smell of the musk following us as we drove by.

Tarangire Kuro Treetops Lodge

As darkness fell, we arrived at our base for the next couple of days, the Tarangire Kuro Treetops Lodge, and after check-in were escorted to our very lush tented room, supported on stilts some 20-or-so feet above the ground.

This was our first encounter with the protocol for moving around in Bush based accommodation. We were provided with a whistle and a couple of blows summoned a guard with a torch who escorted us to dinner in a very classy tinted restaurant, complete with fine silver and table linen, overlooking the nighttime bush and spectacular starry skies.

Field Notes

- Tarangire National Park - characterised by baobab-dotted savannah and seasonal water sources; known for large elephant populations
- African Bush Elephant (*Loxodonta africana*) - family groups observed across open savannah; one bull encountered in musth, with strong associated odour
- Lion (*Panthera leo*) - male observed resting in long grass near waterhole; effective camouflage in evening light
- Giraffe - small groups dispersed across open landscape, browsing among acacia
- Plains Zebra (*Equus quagga*) - present in herds on open plains and near water sources
- Blue Wildebeest (*Connochaetes taurinus*) - seen grazing in mixed herds with zebra
- Secretary Bird (*Sagittarius serpentarius*) - observed walking through grassland; characteristic ground-hunting behaviour
- Common Ostrich (*Struthio camelus*) - males showing pink breeding colouration of neck
- Termite Mounds - large structures (2–3 m) present near park entrance; significant ecological feature of savannah systems

Tarangire National Park



Tented Accommodation, Tarangire Kuro Treetops Lodge
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African Buffalo (Syncerus caffer), Tarangire National Park
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African Buffalo (Syncerus caffer), Tarangire National Park
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Lioness (Panthera leo), Tarangire National Park
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Wildebeest Kill (Connochaetes taurinus), Tarangire National Park
David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



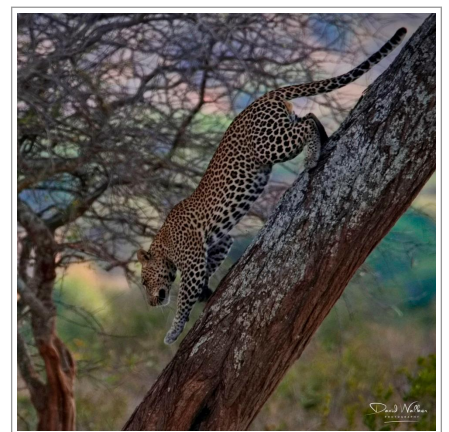
Lion Cub (Panthera leo), Tarangire National Park
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Leopard (Panthera pardus), Tarangire National Park
David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



Leopard (Panthera pardus), Tarangire National Park
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Leopard (Panthera pardus), Tarangire National Park
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African Bush Elephant (Loxodonta africana), Tarangire National Park
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Superb Starling (Lamprotornis superbus), Tarangire National Park
David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



Wildebeest, or Brindled Gnu, (Connochaetes taurinus), Tarangire National Park
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Wildebeest, or Brindled Gnu, (Connochaetes taurinus), Tarangire National Park
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Black Backed Jackal (Lupulella mesomelas), Tarangire National Park
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Von Der Decken's Hornbill (Tockus deckeni), Tarangire National Park
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Lilac-Breasted Roller (Coracias caudatus), Tarangire National Park
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Tarangire National Park
David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



Tarangire National Park
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Morning in Camp

We woke at 6:00 am while it was still dark. It was chilly in the tented room and we were very grateful that housekeeping routinely pull down the covers on each side of the tent as part of the evening routine of preparing it, and had done so the previous evening while we were at dinner.

We arranged a wake up with coffee at 6:00 am and the friendly housekeeper duly arrived with a pot of hot water and coffee, for which we were both extremely grateful. The rooms don't have kettles, so we were reliant on the housekeeping staff for this service.

Our early breakfast was very generous but much too large for me and also, perhaps, demonstrated an attempt to "try too hard". The cooked elements were fine but the pastries were more than a little "floury" and hadn't risen. We discussed it and felt they should, perhaps, constrain themselves to what they're good at and what can be provided from a kitchen in the bush.

I hasten to note that this is a *very minor* criticism, as we were comfortable and well treated.

This first morning also underscored why an escort is needed when moving around the camp: Near the steps down from our tent, on its platform, was a pile of fresh dung as it seems a group of elephant had passed through during the night.

Into the Bush

We were on the Safari trail again by 07:45 and as soon as the Sun was up the ring-necked doves began the ubiquitous soundtrack of the African bush, a continuously repeated soft "oo-oo-rrrooo" that seems to say "work harder, work harder" over and over again.

My wildlife records testify to a plentiful and diverse set of encounters on our day in Tarangire but for me the following are the highlights.

Buffalo

An encounter with a large herd of buffalo, one standing off briefly in the middle of a road, head raised in haughty fashion. They have every right to be haughty! They're extremely dangerous, known locally as "the black death", and are quite capable of staging an ambush on those on foot in the parks, including the park rangers.

Lioness and Cubs

My second highlight was coming across a Lioness with a wildebeest kill nearby. Her behaviour made Philip think she had young, as she kept standing up staring off to the horizon, sniffing the air. Sure enough, in a den consisting of a shallow scrape under some low shrubs she had two 6-month old cubs, our first sighting of cubs so far.

Leopard

My third and final highlight from Tarangire, saving the best for last, was right at the end of the day. Philip had the radio on for much of the time as the guides used it to pass on Tips and the locations of interesting sightings, sharing the information between one another.

Courtesy of this grapevine, he heard of a sighting of a leopard and we headed off to the reported location at pace.

When we arrived, we were treated to an encounter with a leopard lazing up a tree, some 500 metres or so away but clearly visible through our binoculars or the camera, with its 600 mm lens.

Philip told us that, often, they can be wary of things being pointed at them - is it a camera? Or a poacher's gun? We were joined by another land cruiser and, perhaps, it was the long lenses or, maybe, just time to move but, either way, it rose from its position observing us from the tree and made its leisurely descent down the trunk, that was angled at about 45°, jumping the last metre or so into the long grass where we lost sight of it.

We were very privileged to have an encounter with this elusive cat and it inspired our choice of souvenir for the expedition as, much later, we were to buy a beautiful ebony carving of a leopard in precisely the same pose as we'd observed the real animal, gracefully making its way down a tree trunk.

Return to Camp

After our encounter, we returned to the lodge about 16:00 to 16:30 with plenty of time to chill out before dinner.

Field Notes

- African Buffalo (*Syncerus caffer*) - large herd encountered; one individual displaying alert, confrontational posture on road
- Lion (*Panthera leo*) - lioness observed with wildebeest kill; presence of two cubs (~6 months) in nearby den
- Leopard (*Panthera pardus*) - adult observed resting in tree; descended trunk and moved into grass; typical arboreal behaviour
- Ring-necked Dove (*Streptopelia capicola*) - persistent early morning vocalisation forming characteristic soundscape of camp
- African Bush Elephant (*Loxodonta africana*) - evidence of nocturnal movement through camp (fresh dung near tent platforms)
- Guide Communication - radio network used by guides to share wildlife sightings; enables targeted tracking of key species
- Predator Behaviour - lioness vigilance and scenting behaviour indicative of nearby cubs; leopard arboreal resting likely for safety and observation

Arrival at Lake Eyasi and Kisima Ngeda Lodge



Tented Accommodation, Kisima Ngeda Lodge, Lake Eyasi

David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



Lake Eyasi, from the escarpment overlooking Kisima Ngeda

David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



Sunset at Lake Eyasi, Tanzania

David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



The Dining Area, Kisima Ngeda Lodge, Lake Eyasi

David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)

We left Treetops after breakfast on the final game drive out of Tarangire National Park, seeing some of the larger animals we'd seen the day before - wildebeest, zebra, impala and so.

It was an overcast and cool morning, with light rain early on, and the big cats were nowhere to be seen.

The Road to Lake Eyasi

Heading west from Tarangire, we stopped to refuel at a garage that was organised (possibly!) chaos, where a couple of colourfully dressed street hawkers tried very hard to sell us souvenirs, and were persistent enough that, on Philip's advice, we wound the Land Cruiser windows up and let the moment pass.

From there, it was onwards to Lake Eyasi over a very dusty, terracotta-coloured road that gradually gave way to an uneven, rocky, stone-coloured surface.

Kisima Ngeda

Kisima Ngeda tented camp nestles amongst a palm and acacia forest on the shore of Lake Eyasi, at the foot of a high escarpment overlooking the lake. We arrived in the early afternoon, in time for a late lunch, and were greeted by the owner, Mariana, a lovely Argentinian woman who was originally born and brought up on a cattle ranch on the Pampas, the lowland South American grasslands famous as the home of “gauchos” and the country’s beef herds.

Originally coming to Tanzania as a student backpacker in 1995, she met her future husband there and subsequently returned to run the camp with him, a native Tanzanian, and had been doing so for the past 25 years.

The Camp

The camp has beautiful views over the 80 kilometre long Lake Eyasi, that remains unspoiled in spite of a couple of years of very heavy rain that have seen the levels rise to engulf some of the land at the former Lake edge. The tops of dead trees poking up above the surface of the lake bear witness to the destruction.

Mariana said they’d seen hippos grazing not far from the camp but we weren’t fortunate enough to see them, though there were lots of wading birds and herons.

Lunch was a set of lovely salads accompanying some lamb koftas and, while simpler fare than the meals at Treetops, it was so much better - just delicious.

Our tented room was very, very reminiscent of the accommodation at Elephant Hills in Kao Sok, Thailand. A brick-built bathroom was sited behind and abutted a tented main living area with a second roof covering the whole, made of palm, bamboo or similar. Most likely palm, given the make-up of the surrounding forest.

This suited us down to the ground and, again, it was simpler and in many ways more elegant and comfortable than the room at Treetops, notwithstanding the surface sophistication of the latter.

It also has the singular advantage that we didn’t get motion sickness, an unfortunate side effect of the suspended floors at Treetops!

Field Notes

- Lake Eyasi - seasonal soda lake approximately 80 km in length; fluctuating water levels influenced by rainfall; fringed by escarpment and woodland
- Kisima Ngeda Lodge - situated within palm and acacia woodland at lake edge; open, low-impact camp design integrated with surrounding landscape
- Water Level Changes - recent heavy rains have raised lake levels, submerging former shoreline; dead tree remains visible above waterline
- Wading Birds - herons and other waders present along lake edge; typical of shallow soda lake habitats
- Habitat Transition - shift from savannah (Tarangire) to lake-edge woodland and escarpment environment; corresponding change in wildlife presence and activity

The Datoga Tribe



Bead working and singing inside the women's house, Datoga village

David Walker, Field Notes Journal (All rights reserved — not licensed for reuse)



Song of welcome during our visit to the Datoga women's house

David Walker, Field Notes Journal (All rights reserved — not licensed for reuse)



Song of welcome during our visit to the Datoga women's house

David Walker, Field Notes Journal (All rights reserved — not licensed for reuse)

After lunch, we set out from Kisima Ngeda on the first visit of two “cultural” days in our itinerary. I must confess that I was sceptical as my original concept for our adventure was entirely focused on the wildlife. In the end, though, I was to be very pleasantly surprised and have some great memories from visiting the Datoga.

The Women's House

Our first port of call was to visit the women, the nine wives of the chief of the tribe, who welcomed us into their home. We sat in a circle with them and engaged in a two-way discussion, with our guide acting as interpreter.

I really like the fact that it was a two-way thing, not just “the locals on display for the tourists”.

Multi-coloured gourds, made of red earth and dressed in brightly coloured beaded jackets, hung from the ceilings and the women were decorated with colourful beaded bracelets and necklaces. Sunlight streamed in through the single opening provided by the door, to light the dark interior of the house.

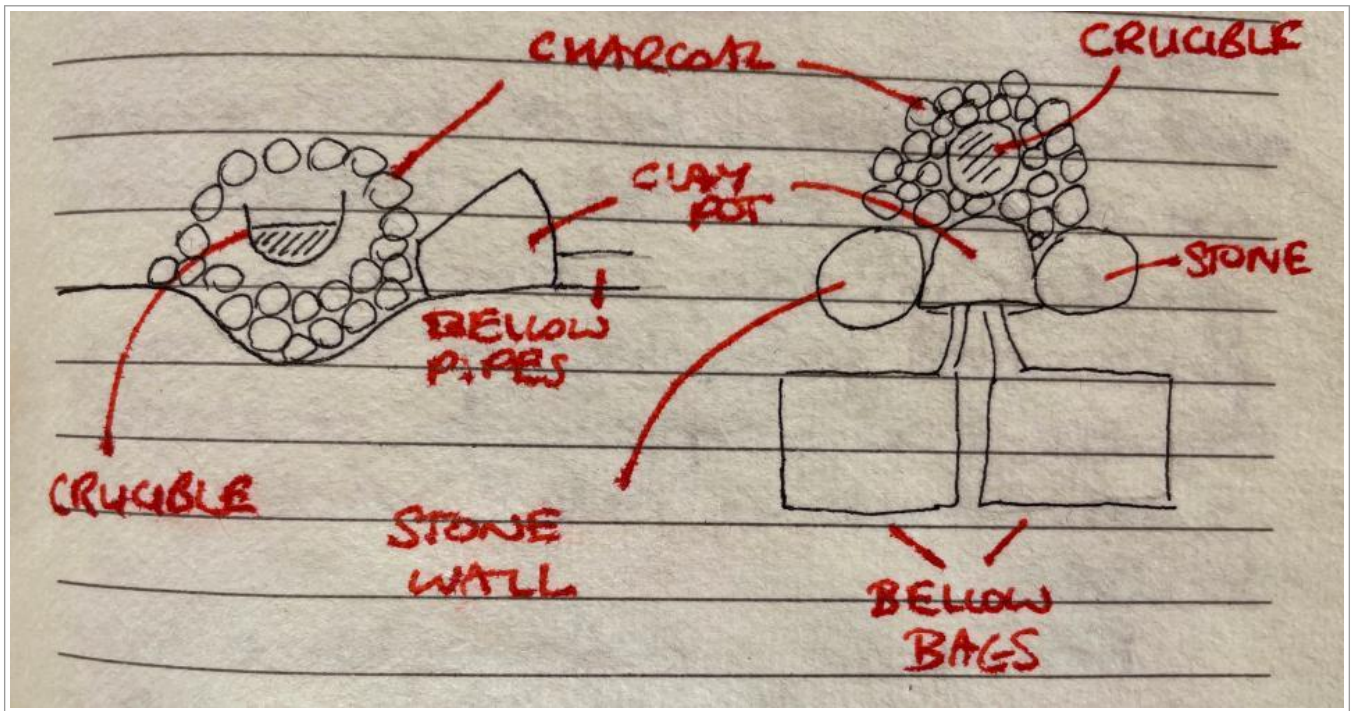
We sat on modern benches arranged along the walls around the room while questions went to-and-fro and the women worked on more necklaces and bracelets that they would barter with other tribes and sell at local markets. One also demonstrating grinding maize with a traditional grindstone - *hard work!*

The Blacksmiths

Our visit with the women ended with them singing a song of welcome before we headed off to see the blacksmiths.

They were located in a different part of the village. The house was typical Datoga construction, vertically aligned branches and tree trunks with the gaps filled in with mud and twigs and a roof made of green grass, turf and weeds to provide better insulation.

The “yard” for the house was banded by high, rough, brushwood “hedge” and the kiln was constructed here:

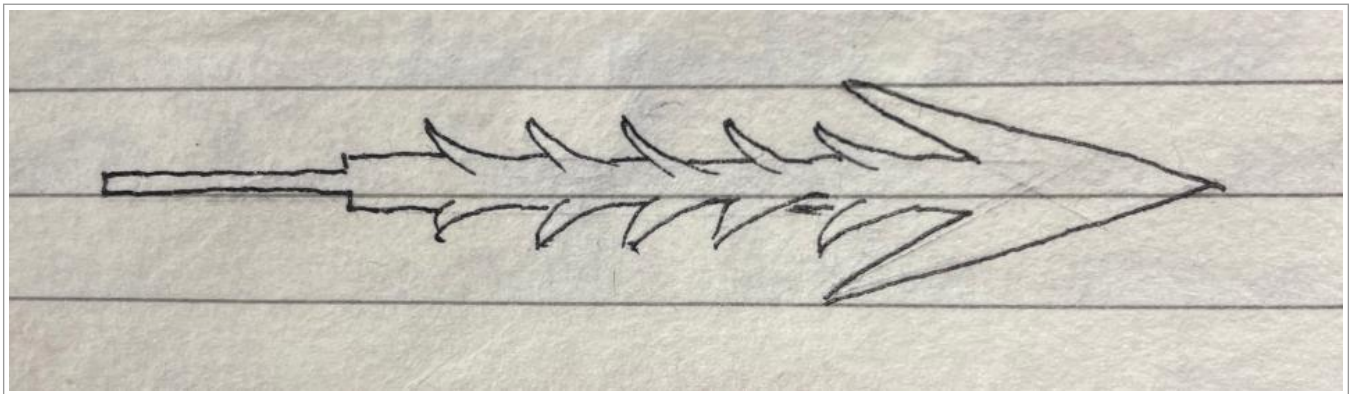


Sketch of a Blacksmith's Kiln, Datoga Village

David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)

It was constructed in a hollow as shown, and smelted old padlocks and the like in only *10 minutes*. The resulting ingots were hammered to shape and decorated to form bracelets.

Just as impressive was the smith who hammered out a 6-inch nail to form an arrowhead, a task that took him a mere 25 minutes in total:



Sketch of an Arrowhead Forged from a Nail, Datoga Village

David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)

Through the Village

On the way back to the camp, we stopped to walk through our guide's village, witnessing a Pentecostal preacher in the main square and stopping to talk to a man making mud bricks for a building.

From there, we drove back to Kisima Ngeda, taking a detour to climb the escarpment behind the camp to watch a spectacular sunset over Lake Eyasi. We saw Mariana and her husband taking an evening walk by the lakeside with their two dogs, a Great Dane-Ridgeback cross and local mongrel puppy.

Dinner that evening was tilapia and we enjoyed a good, long chat with Mariana before heading back to our tent, where the wind rustling the palm leaves sent us off to sleep. Even the surprisingly noisy bush babies in the surrounding forest couldn't keep us awake!



A photograph taken together at the end of our visit, outside the women's house

David Walker, Field Notes Journal (All rights reserved — not licensed for reuse)

Field Notes

- Datoga - pastoralist and agro-pastoralist people of northern Tanzania; known for metalworking and distinctive beadwork traditions
- Beadwork - bracelets and necklaces produced by women; used for adornment, trade, and sale at local markets
- Gourds - decorated vessels made from dried calabash; often coated and adorned with beadwork for functional and decorative use
- Grinding Maize - traditional hand grinding using stone tools; labour-intensive process for preparing staple food
- Blacksmithing - metal reworked from scrap (e.g. nails, padlocks); smelted and forged into tools and ornaments using simple kiln structures
- Kiln Construction - sunken, earth-lined structure enabling rapid heating and smelting; fuelled with locally available materials
- Arrowhead Production - hand-forged from iron nail; shaped and finished using hammer and anvil techniques

- Lake Eyasi Escarpment - elevated ridge overlooking the lake; provides wide views across seasonal waters and surrounding woodland

The Hadzabe Tribe and Onwards to Ngorongoro

Leaving Lake Eyasi

Our day started with an early breakfast at Kisima Ngeda tented camp and an opportunity to say goodbye to our hostess, Mariana, and sign the visitors book.

Once again, breakfast outshone Treetops in its quality and we had the added benefit of the company of some bats flitting around. There were two distinct species, one that seemed to be a microchiroptera and a larger type that seemed to be a species of megachiroptera. I made a mental note to look up the species but that was a little optimistic as, so far, I've not found any information on bat species at Lake Eyasi and the list for Tanzania as a whole is quite extensive!

The Hadzabe

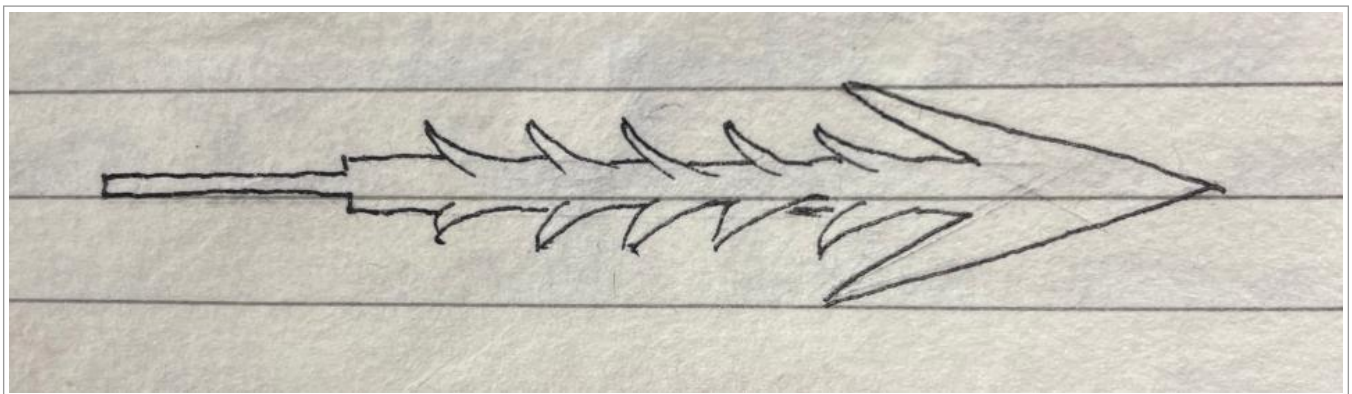
From Kisima Ngeda it was a short drive of 20 minutes or so to the camp of the Hadzabe tribe, who use clicks, ticks and other guttural sounds as part of their language and words.

They were an *extremely* friendly and welcoming group and they greeted us with fist bumps. I asked our guide, coincidentally also called David, if this was their usual way of greeting but apparently not. The government taught them to fist bump in place of handshakes - the COVID pandemic even reached the African bush!

During the day the Hadzabe men and women remain separate, so we first joined a group of men gathered around a small but very smoky fire that they had lit to warm them through at the start of the day.

Hunting and Demonstration

The leader of the group was very entertaining and gave us a performance acting out the hunt for each type of animal they hunted, playing both the hunter and the prey, accompanied by appropriate sound effects when the prey was finally captured and killed!



Sketch of an Arrowhead Forged from a Nail, Datoga Village

David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)

His performance demonstrated the use of different arrowheads for different species including, interestingly, the arrowhead we've seen the Datoga make the previous day. It's used either as-is or a plant-based poison is applied, wrapped around the barbed section, that stops the heart once it enters the bloodstream. These iron arrowheads are used for medium to large size prey.

Into the Bush

After the introductions, we followed a small group of four of the tribe into the bush on a foraging expedition. They picked berries that they ate on the spot, and hunted the smaller birds, killing two that they cooked over a freshly made fire in front of a huge 1,000 year-old baobab tree. They offered us some, but we politely refused on the advice of our guide.

Reflections

On returning to the Hadzabe camp, we made a brief visit to the women, who were making bead bracelets and similar items of jewellery for their own personal use and to barter.

As with our visit to the Datoga, while I was originally sceptical regarding the cultural visits on the itinerary, by the end of our time with the Hadzabe, and in spite of the fact that I stank of smoke from the campfire, I was really very impressed with the cultural excursions. Although they weren't something we've been interested in when we booked the Safari I'm very glad they were included.

Onwards to Ngorongoro

From the Hadzabe, we drove back along the same dusty, terracotta-coloured roads we travelled along the day before, refuelling at Karatu and taking an interesting trip into its back-streets to a panel beater to have some spot welding done to fix some minor damage to the Land Cruiser!

Then, it was on the Ngorongoro Serena Lodge, a luxurious hotel some 2,300 metres up on the crater rim with panoramic views out over the floor of the caldera. Spectacular but more than a little chilly, so we were particularly grateful to find that during the evening turndown room service left us hot water bottles!



A photograph taken together during our visit with the Hadzabe, in the bush near Lake Eyasi
David Walker, Field Notes Journal (All rights reserved — not licensed for reuse)

Field Notes

- Hadzabe - hunter-gatherer people of northern Tanzania; known for use of click-based language and traditional hunting practices
- Hunting Demonstration - use of role-play to explain hunting techniques and prey behaviour; communication through gesture and sound
- Arrowheads - iron points (often obtained through trade) used for medium to large prey; barbed design allows application of plant-based poison
- Poison Use - plant-derived toxins applied to arrowheads; enter bloodstream on impact and act systemically

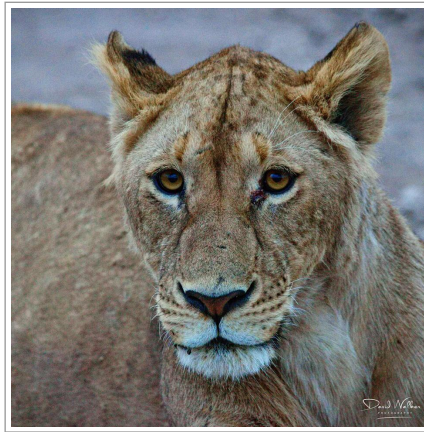
- Foraging - berries gathered and consumed in situ; opportunistic hunting of small birds using bow and arrow
- Baobab Tree (*Adansonia*) - large, long-lived tree characteristic of the region; observed as focal point during foraging activity
- Cultural Exchange - interaction structured as demonstration and shared experience; guided interpretation between groups
- Ngorongoro Crater - collapsed volcanic caldera; high-altitude rim (~2300 m) overlooking enclosed ecosystem below

The Ngorongoro Crater



Lion (Panthera leo) in the early dawn light, Ngorongoro Crater

David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



Lioness (Panthera leo), Ngorongoro Crater

David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



Lioness (Panthera leo) in the early dawn, Ngorongoro Crater

David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



Lioness (Panthera leo), Ngorongoro Crater

David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



Lioness (Panthera leo), Ngorongoro Crater

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Lions (Panthera leo), Ngorongoro Crater

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Grey Crowned Crane (Balearica regulorum), Ngorongoro Crater

David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



Yellow-billed Stork (Mycteria ibis), Ngorongoro Crater

David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



Grant's Gazelle (Nanger granti), Ngorongoro Crater

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Thomson's Gazelle (Eudorcas thomsonii), Ngorongoro Crater
David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



Thomson's Gazelle (Eudorcas thomsonii), Ngorongoro Crater
David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



A grumpy old man! African Buffalo (Syncerus caffer), Ngorongoro Crater
David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



Wildebeest (Connochaetes taurinus) walking across the Ngorongoro Crater floor
David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



Wildebeest (Connochaetes taurinus) grazing together, Ngorongoro Crater
David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



Wildebeest (Connochaetes taurinus) aggression, Ngorongoro Crater
David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



Zebra (Equus quagga), Ngorongoro Crater
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Hippopotamus (Hippopotamus amphibius), Ngorongoro Crater
David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



Lion (Panthera leo), Ngorongoro Crater
David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



Lion (Panthera leo), Ngorongoro Crater
David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)

Descent into the Crater

Unlike the other National Parks we'd visited so far, there are no residences down in the Ngorongoro Crater itself so our day was to begin with a short drive to the entrance to the crater and a descent down to the caldera floor.

The gates are open between 6:00 and 16:00 each day and the previous evening Philip had asked us what time we wanted to head out the following day. As we were there to see the wildlife and he was the expert, as our guide and a former park ranger, we asked his advice and that was, in essence, the earlier the better to catch the early morning wildlife.

So, we were up in time to begin our descent into the crater at 06:00.

Our aim throughout our safari was to observe whatever wildlife we were lucky enough to encounter so keeping a tally wasn't the point, but by this time we had been blessed to see all-but-one of the "big five", leaving only the black rhino unaccounted for, so it was impossible not to hope, at least a little, that we might see one:

Name	Scientific Name	Seen
Lion	<i>Panthera leo</i>	✓
Leopard	<i>Panthera pardus</i>	✓
African Buffalo	<i>Syncerus caffer</i>	✓
African Bush Elephant	<i>Loxodonta africana</i>	✓
Black Rhinoceros	<i>Diceros bicornis</i>	✗

Our hope was tinged with realism, though, as the crater covers some 264 square kilometres and at the time there were only 50 black rhino in it!



The Ngorongoro Crater, viewed from the crater rim David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)

It was cold as we began our 600 metre descent and we were to experience the full gamut of warmer weather, chillier weather and drizzle on the way down! The road was somewhat precipitous so, as Ruth has a fear of heights, it was quite advantageous that it was still dark, the early dawn only just beginning to break as we arrived at the crater floor, the drizzle having given way to better weather by this point.

First Light

Almost immediately, we had our first encounter with a pair of lions. The lioness was, perhaps, the most beautiful animal I'd seen to date. There was just something about the way she lay serenely observing her surroundings, although she did then break the spell a little by "shouldering arms" to have a good scratch, a gesture any cat-owner will recognise and appreciate!

With the itch satisfied, she got up and gradually strolled away from us, the lion following doggedly behind, and Philip joked that he thought they were probably "on honeymoon"!

Across the Crater Floor

It was in the crater that we had our first sighting of the Grey Crowned Crane (*Balearica regulorum*), the national bird of Uganda. We watched as it fed in the short grass, its ornate crown and sharply defined plumage standing out against the rather more muted tones of the surrounding ground.

We saw a yellow-billed stork strutting past a pair of plump pelicans, hunkered down in the long grass by a small stream and wildebeest, Grant's Gazelle and the ubiquitous Thomson's Gazelle were all very much in evidence, though, interestingly we saw very few hyena and no giraffe at all. Philip indicated that the steep climb down the crater rim is a descent too far for a giraffe to make.

A Stalking Lion



Lion (*Panthera leo*) stalking two buffalo, Ngorongoro Crater David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)

Mid-morning, we drove to one of the field stations in the crater for a comfort break. The station was tucked behind an area of lush wet land and trees and there were buffalo grazing peacefully in the long grass. Sitting in the Land Cruiser quietly observing the scene we spotted some movement to the left. Surely not? But, yes, a solitary lion seemed to be stalking the buffalo. Given the power and strength of the African Buffalo this was definitely *not* a good plan on the lion's part and Philip said it was likely relatively young and inexperienced. Thankfully, it didn't follow through!

Lunch by the Pool



Rush-lined pool, Ngorongoro Crater David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)

We'd taken a packed lunch provided by the Lodge and chose a spot by a rush-lined pool for our lunch. As we ate, a group of zebra made their way single-file over the ridge behind us, stopping behind us to graze. It was at this pool that we saw our first hippopotamus, including some youngsters.

The Return Journey

After lunch, as we were now at our furthest point from the entrance to the crater, we began to wind our way back to the crater rim. We witnessed wildebeest walking across the parched landscape in the baking afternoon heat and, at one point, we witnessed some wildebeest aggression, two adults charging one another and locking horns a few hundred metres from the Land Cruiser.

We didn't see the black rhino in the Ngorongoro, but, as we made our way back towards the rim, we felt that the crater had already offered more than enough.

Field Notes

- Ngorongoro Crater - large volcanic caldera (~264 km²) with enclosed ecosystem; supports high density of resident wildlife
- Lion (*Panthera leo*) - pair observed at first light; relaxed behaviour with close association between individuals
- Grey Crowned Crane (*Balearica regulorum*) - feeding in short grass; ornate crown and contrasting plumage highly visible against muted landscape
- Yellow-billed Stork (*Mycteria ibis*) - observed foraging near wetland; slow, deliberate feeding behaviour
- African Buffalo (*Syncerus caffer*) - present near wetland areas; one individual briefly stalked by a lion
- Black Rhinoceros (*Diceros bicornis*) - present in low numbers (~50 individuals within crater); not observed during visit
- Wildebeest (*Connochaetes taurinus*) - large numbers across crater floor; observed grazing, movement, and intraspecific aggression
- Hippopotamus (*Hippopotamus amphibius*) - group observed at pool, including juveniles; typical semi-submerged resting behaviour
- Habitat Structure - mix of open grassland, wetland, and scattered woodland supporting diverse species assemblage

The Olduvai Gorge and on to the Central Serengeti



The Olduvai Gorge, Rift Valley, Tanzania
David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



Secretary Bird (Sagittarius serpentarius), Central Serengeti
David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



Secretary Bird (Sagittarius serpentarius), Central Serengeti
David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)

Leaving Ngorongoro

We had a lie-in this morning as we didn't need to take our breakfast until 7 am, meeting Philip in the lobby of the hotel at 07:45 ready to depart at 8 am.

I'd promised to share with him a picture of a leopard that I'd taken in Tarangire and did that ahead of our meeting.

On the Crater Rim

Leaving the Ngorongoro Serena Lodge, we pretty much immediately saw an elephant and giraffe by the roadside on the crater rim, which was very interesting as giraffe aren't found in the crater itself on account of the difficulty in making the descent.

Olduvai Gorge

We drove around the crater rim road and down onto the plain beyond to the Olduvai Gorge, the "Cradle of Humankind", where the Leakeys did their groundbreaking archaeological work that, ultimately, identified the Rift Valley as the place where Homo sapiens first evolved.



The Olduvai Gorge, Rift Valley, Tanzania, viewed from the rim David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)

Just being there, looking out over the gorge with its layers of coloured earth corresponding to different archaeological and even geological periods, had quite a profound effect on me. It was quite an emotional experience to be in the place where we all, ultimately, come from.

The Gorge is named after the wild sisal that grows everywhere in it but there's a typo in the name! The Maasai word for the plant is *oldupai* but the German palaeontologist who first recovered fossils from the area made a mistake and swapped the *p* for a *v*.

At the Boundary

From Olduvai, it was dry, dusty roads all the way to the border between the Ngorongoro NCA (conservation area) and the Serengeti National Park.



Boundary between the Ngorongoro NCA and the Serengeti National Park David Walker, Field Notes Journal (All rights reserved — not licensed for reuse)

We stopped at the boundary and Philip gave us a quick photo opportunity and an explanation of the route of The Migration.

The Maasai were moved out of the Serengeti and into the NCA to stop them from blocking the route of the migration, as they have elsewhere. That didn't prevent some Maasai women trying to sell us some bead bracelets, at least until they spotted some reserve wardens heading our way in a Land Cruiser.

At the sight of them, the women first tried to hide in a shallow ditch on the Serengeti side of the border but when this didn't deter the wardens, they high-tailed it off into the NCA, along with the kids who were with them, as they're not supposed to be at the border between the National Park and the NCA.

Into the Serengeti

From the border, we travelled along more dusty roads to the checkpoint for entry into the National Park, some kilometres further on, and then on an ad-hoc game drive to our next accommodation, during which we saw a good selection of wildlife including another leopard, that we were very lucky to see, and a pair of secretary birds, one of which had a snake hanging out of its mouth that it seemed to be struggling to get down!

The unfortunate reptile did eventually vanish, and we continued on, the landscape opening out ahead of us.

Field Notes

- Olduvai Gorge - important archaeological site within the Rift Valley; associated with early hominin fossils and the work of Louis and Mary Leakey
- Name Origin - derived from Maasai word *oldupai* (wild sisal); spelling altered in early European records
- Ngorongoro Conservation Area (NCA) - multiple-use area allowing wildlife conservation alongside traditional Maasai pastoralism
- Serengeti National Park - protected ecosystem supporting large-scale migration of wildebeest and associated predators
- The Migration - seasonal movement of wildebeest and other herbivores across Serengeti–Mara system, following rainfall and grazing
- Leopard (*Panthera pardus*) - second sighting during transit; typically elusive and often only briefly visible
- Secretary Bird (*Sagittarius serpentarius*) - ground-hunting raptor observed with snake prey; prey subdued and swallowed whole
- Road Transit - long, dry tracks between regions; wildlife encounters often opportunistic rather than concentrated

Arrival at "Fawltly Towers"

Arrival and First Impressions

Philip had confirmed with his own company booking officer that we were booked to arrive at our next accommodation at lunchtime however this didn't prevent the lodge staff from being entirely unprepared for our arrival.

In fairness to them, they did sort things out reasonably quickly, showing us to our room that was good, if a little dirty in places (under the bed) and very sizeable (enough to accommodate two four-poster beds). It did need airing though, and we were left to work out how to open the tent sides ourselves and we did find the previous occupants pillowcases on the floor by the bed!

The bathroom was ... interesting! There was a bath in front of a full-size window that occupied the rest of the wall that was clearly intended to provide panoramic views of the African bush but had no blinds for those occasions when they might be needed. Evidently, the designer was a bit of an exhibitionist!

The walls were "decorated", though I use the term loosely, with slate tiles painted with gloss paint that was peeling in places.

The toilet was in a three-quarter height cubicle in the corner with a glazed door on the cubicle. Mercifully, it was frosted glass - the designer may have been an exhibitionist but he, or she, clearly had limits!

Lunch and the Lodge Revealed

Lunch was as "interesting" as the bathroom. Walking from our room to reception, that I'll come back to shortly, we passed herds of grazing zebra in the grounds, which were nice to see, but we were simultaneously treated to the smell of burning meat. Yum!

When the meal arrived at our table, the epic scale of the generosity of our hosts was revealed. A portion of boiled rice on the scale of Mount Meru was accompanied by a portion of meat stew that would've struggled to achieve full coverage on a small soup spoon.

The waiter who served us evidently trained at the **** *You Bloody Tourists* school of hospitality - service with a snarl. You have to admire the consistency.

The lodge was clearly somewhat confused about its identity as it was advertised as one thing but, as we sat down to lunch, we noticed a card on the table with an entirely different branding on it. In fact, and unusually, there was hardly any branding anywhere, except on the customer feedback QR code on the aforementioned card.

In fairness, though, I can understand why they want to keep it hush-hush. That way, if you were to look it up on TripAdvisor, you might mistake it for somewhere really good!

Reception, Reality, and Dinner

I promised to return to the subject of reception. They'd evidently gone for the "Old MacDonalds Farm" ambience as it was *exactly* like driving into a farmyard! Once Philip had driven the Land Cruiser around the wheel-less truck that was dumped unceremoniously on the track leading up to the place, reception itself was a cross between a barn and a cargo loading bay for trucks.

This is one of those camps where it's not safe to wander around alone after dark. After all, you might be chased and eaten by former guests that have gone feral in their desperation for a decent meal! For your protection, a Maasai warrior (allegedly) escorts you to and from your room out-of-hours.

As an aside, the men's toilets in reception were evidently made for him: having pushed the "pull" handle to open the door, demolishing the wash basin that's ideally positioned to prevent the door from opening more than a crack (the Lord help any oversize tourist who stays here!), you're confronted by a urinal that's damned-near chest height. Older gentlemen with "weak flow" need not apply!

It was with a great sense of relief that we drove away from the wretched place for our afternoon game drive. The topic of conversation immediately turned to our impressions of the place, as Philip could tell we weren't impressed, and nor was he. He said he'd see if we could be moved, though it later turned out that this wouldn't be feasible. After an epic game drive, it was with a sense of trepidation that we returned to the room and showered for dinner.

Sadly, our worst fears were to be realised!

We were escorted to the bar and dining area and, as we were early, ordered a beer each and sat in the seating area sipping it, expecting to be shown to our table when the time came and dinner was ready.

Silly us! For all their other manifest defects, the staff were evidently all cast members in "the Midwich Cuckoos", with ESP coming as standard! Clearly, they expected us to read their minds to know dinner was ready.

When the meal, a buffet, had been brought out and all the other guests had been seated, we decided that even one of their dinners was preferable to starvation and got up to seat ourselves. A staff member immediately leapt to our side (well, sloped up moodily, at any rate) and asked if we knew our table. When we said not, he seemed mortally offended, as though we'd suggested he sell his granny into slavery with some Barbary Coast Pirates! As I said, ESP is evidently standard for both staff and guests.

Dinner, as I've said, was a buffet and while the soup was okay, if watery, and the rice was, in fact, quite good, the beef stew was inedible. Well, I say "beef" but it was more lumps of gristle with a few shreds of meat attached that the hyena they evidently stole it from had spat out as something even it didn't find palatable!

Clearly, what we thought was low "mood" lighting in the dining area is actually darkness intended to prevent the guests from seeing the horror story unfolding on their plates, so it was with relief that we took our leave and headed back to the room.

Field Notes

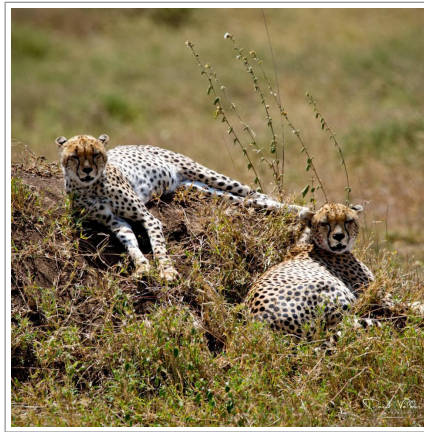
- Accommodation quality - by and large, this was quite excellent across the journey; this was the only consistently poor experience

- Staffing - both disorganised and, in some cases, seemed intentionally inhospitable
- Shared humour - crucial to successfully navigating and remembering the experience!

At the Kill: Lioness and Cubs



Cheetah (Acinonyx jubatus), Central Serengeti
David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



Cheetah (Acinonyx jubatus), likely mother and youngster, Central Serengeti
David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



Ah, lunch! Giraffe, Central Serengeti
David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



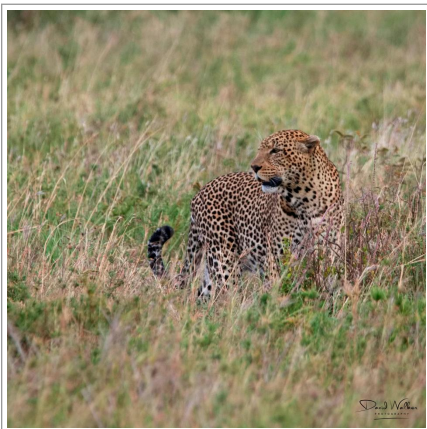
Spotted Hyena (Crocuta crocuta), Central Serengeti
David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



Spotted Hyena (Crocuta crocuta), Central Serengeti
David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



Spotted Hyena (Crocuta crocuta) on the prowl, Central Serengeti
David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



Leopard (Panthera pardus), Central Serengeti
David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



Leopard (Panthera pardus) and cub with remains of a kill, Central Serengeti
David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



Topi (Damaliscus lunatus), Central Serengeti
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Lioness (Panthera leo) and cubs, Central Serengeti
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Lioness (Panthera leo) and cubs, Central Serengeti
David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



Lion Cub (Panthera leo), Central Serengeti
David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



Lion Cub (Panthera leo), Central Serengeti
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Lioness (Panthera leo), Central Serengeti
David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



Lion Cub (Panthera leo), Central Serengeti
David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



Lioness (Panthera leo) and cubs, Central Serengeti
David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



Paws for thought! Lion (Panthera leo), Central Serengeti
David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



Lion (Panthera leo), Central Serengeti
David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)

A Strategic Avoidance of Breakfast

We declined breakfast the following morning as we didn't want to catch a notifiable illness from whatever they'd managed to scavenge from the plains overnight, so we just went for coffee instead. It tasted like rehydrated hippo dung but it was at least warm and wet.

An Epic Game Drive

Our game drive compensated for the foul accommodation as it was truly epic. The highlight of the day was an encounter with two lionesses at a an eland or hartebeest kill with three cubs, of approximately one month old, gnawing at the bones with mum.



Lioness (*Panthera leo*) suckling young cubs, Central Serengeti David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)

We were fortunate enough to witness her suckling them, rolling over on her back to give them access. They were quite possibly the cutest things I've ever seen and, in all likelihood, the highlight of the Safari thus far if it's possible to pick a highlight from so many amazing experiences.

Driving away from them, we noticed the lion, sheltered in a shallow gully and hidden by the bushes, keeping an eye on them.

Today we also came across two lionesses chilling up in the branches of a tree, a foretaste of Lake Manyara where the tree-climbing lions are famous.

A Temporary Change of Heart

When we got back to "Fawltly Towers", and arrived back at our room, I found the camp was starting to grow on me, in spite of the frosty reception and the culinary horror stories. While the bathroom remained "entertaining", as I've said, the room was okay so I was feeling better disposed towards the place as we headed up for dinner.

In all likelihood, my mood was the impact of having had such a terrific game drive.

We were served at table, on time, and although the meal was an odd mixture, something that seems to be a common theme with them, it was at least edible.

3 a.m. Update: I've got the squits! Where did we put the damned Immodium ... ?!

Field Notes

- Wildlife encounters - Close observation of a lioness with cubs at a recent kill, including suckling behaviour, alongside additional sightings of lions resting in trees.
- Behavioural notes - Male lion observed at distance from the kill site, likely maintaining a watchful position rather than feeding directly.
- Environmental context - Central Serengeti: open plains interspersed with shallow gullies and scattered trees suitable for resting lions.
- Human context - A reminder that exceptional wildlife experiences can significantly reshape perception of otherwise poor accommodation—though not always for long.

Departure from "Fawlty Towers"

I was a bit apprehensive about breakfast the following morning. The Imodium had done its magic but I really did *not* want to shit my way across the Serengeti, leaving a brown scar across the landscape!

However, Philip had said that we should have breakfast as it was to be a late lunch, so it was with some trepidation that I ordered a plain omelette. When it came, I stuck to it and the toast, opting to forgo the cold baked beans and the questionable Frankfurter sausage that had been cut in half to spread it round the plate so as to make it appear more than it actually was.

Reflections

Before shaking the dust of the benighted place off our shoes we had to pay our bill and, predictably, they had to scramble round amongst the disorganised stack of invoice books behind the bar.

While they did that I was stood by the staff tip box and while there was no way I was going to give them any money, I did think of a few choice tips for them:

1. Stop sourcing meat from bush kill scraped off the plains in the wee small hours after the predators have caught it for you
2. If the portion's small, it doesn't matter how many bits you cut it into to spread it round the plate in an attempt to make it look big ... it won't!
3. Learn how to make fire, then use it to heat up the baked beans for breakfast - our early ancestors managed it 1.7 million years ago so you can too!
4. Drop the fake Maasai act and the spear and use security guards like everyone else - the only way he was going to protect us from predators was if they died laughing

Having paid our bill, the final insult was having to collect our own baggage from our room as we left. At the mere suggestion that they might collect it for us, the man behind reception looked at us like we were something that had just dropped out of the Sphinx's nose! So, we just told him we'd collect them ourselves and off we trotted, humming the "Fawlty Towers" theme tune along the way.

On the way back to the farmyard, we encountered the one staff member who understood that the key word in the phrase "*hospitality industry*" is the first one and that qualifying to work in it involves actually being hospitable. Hurrying over to us, exclaiming "Mamma Mia!", he promptly took charge of our bags. I felt sorry for him - he needed to move on to an establishment that would appreciate him.

On the Road Again

It was with a sense of profound relief that we hopped into the Land Cruiser and headed out for our next camp, in the Western Corridor of the Serengeti, where Philip told us we should expect to see ungulates rather than the big cats.

Field Notes

- Serengeti Western Corridor - western extension of the Serengeti ecosystem; characterised by river systems and large concentrations of grazing ungulates

- Safari Logistics - long travel days between camps often require early departures and delayed meals; reliance on camp standards varies
- Camp Variability - quality of accommodation and hospitality can vary significantly between locations, influencing overall experience of travel
- Guide Insight - expectation set for Western Corridor wildlife focus shifting towards large herds (ungulates) rather than predators

The Western Corridor and The Migration



Plains Zebra (Equus quagga), Western Corridor

David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



Plains Zebra (Equus quagga), Western Corridor

David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



Plains Zebra (Equus quagga), Western Corridor

David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



Plains Zebra (Equus quagga), Western Corridor

David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



Mixed herd of wildebeest (Connochaetes taurinus) and plains zebra (Equus quagga), Western Corridor

David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



Mixed herd of wildebeest (Connochaetes taurinus) and plains zebra (Equus quagga), Western Corridor

David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)

First Sight of the Migration

The game drive we did on the way to our camp in the Western Corridor brought us our first encounter with The Migration, the great circular motion of over 1 million wildebeest, accompanied by zebra, following the rains and the fresh grazing and water they bring. Entering the Western Serengeti marked a change in the scale of our wildlife experiences.

Zebra on the Plains



Migrating Plains Zebra (*Equus quagga*), Western Corridor David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)

The encounter came in the form of what seemed to be a *vast* heard of zebra, crossing the road to a river to drink, though Philip estimated their number to be somewhere in the region of 5,000. As with many of our experiences on our safari, they had a powerful emotional impact as it was a truly beautiful thing to behold.

They seem to fill the plains all the way to the foothills of the hills rising in the distance, flooding into it from a point somewhere off to the left at the rear of the plain. It was an incredibly peaceful scene, with only the occasional whinny to break the peace.

Wildebeest on the Move



Wildebeest (*Connochaetes taurinus*), Western Corridor David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)

Further along our way, we were treated to an equally sizeable herd of wildebeest, with a smattering of zebra interspersed within it. The herd seemed to graze its way towards the road and then pause, waiting for some unseen signal from one of its members, before filing across the road and heading to the opposite horizon as a single column, in search of the river where they could quench their thirst. It was a truly magnificent sight.

Mbalageti Safari Camp

Arriving at our next accommodation, Mbalageti Safari Camp, we could tell at once that it was going to be superb. The warm welcome, The spotlessly clean reception, the perfect decor and the whole feel of the place just oozed quality. It couldn't have been further from "Fawlty Towers"!

Our room was a part-tented, part-fixed chalet with a sizeable and well appointed bathroom that had none of the exhibitionist tendencies of the previous place. The water was solar heated, wonderfully hot and available in copious amounts to feed a fabulous "rain" shower that felt wonderful and was oh-so-welcome after a dusty drive across the western corridor.

The chalet was positioned on the hillside with spectacular views out over the plain, far below, from the veranda. We could see a heard of buffalo assembling on the plain from our high vantage point.

Lunch was served a restaurant with views out over the African bush that rivalled those from our veranda. The food was fresh and delicious; a garden salad, butter chicken and a fruit salad, selected from the menu on check-in. Not a tinned Frankfurter to be seen!

Evening Game Drive and The Herd



Wildebeest (*Connochaetes taurinus*), Western Corridor David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)

The evening game drive provided more extraordinary experiences that have become indelibly aged into our memories of an already unforgettable trip. We first encountered a lone and massive bull elephant crossing the road. It was all macho aggression until Philip challenged it with the Land Cruiser at which point it ran off, not quite with tail between its legs but definitely eager to put as much distance as it could between it and us.

Most jaw-droppingly spectacular, though, was a *massive* herd of migrating wildebeest, crossing the road in a column and flooding out into the plain on the other side, filling it as far as the eye could see. Philip estimated their number at about 50,000 head.

Return to Camp

As we headed back, the day seemed to catch up with us all at once. It had been immense in every sense—miles travelled, the scale of the herds, moments that still hadn't quite sunk in. Tired but quietly exhilarated, we rolled back into camp with the promise of a good dinner ahead, the kind that feels especially well earned after a day like this, and the even greater pleasure of sitting still for a while and letting the scale of it all begin, slowly, to make sense.

Field Notes

- On scale and perception - This was our first real encounter with the Migration, and with it a shift in perception. Numbers that would be extraordinary anywhere else—hundreds, even thousands—became almost incidental against the scale of the herds moving through the Western Corridor
- The Migration - The Great Migration is a continuous, circular movement of wildebeest, zebra and other grazers across the Serengeti–Mara ecosystem, driven by rainfall patterns and the search for fresh grazing and water
- Mbalageti Safari Camp - Located in the Western Serengeti, the camp's elevated position offers wide views over the plains—an ideal vantage point during the migration season

Taking to the Air



Preparing the balloon, Western Serengeti
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Preparing the balloon, Western Serengeti
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Preparing the balloon, Western Serengeti
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Preparing the balloon, Western Serengeti
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Upright and ready for take off, Western Serengeti
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Taking flight over the Western Serengeti
David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



Coming in to land in the Western Serengeti
David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)

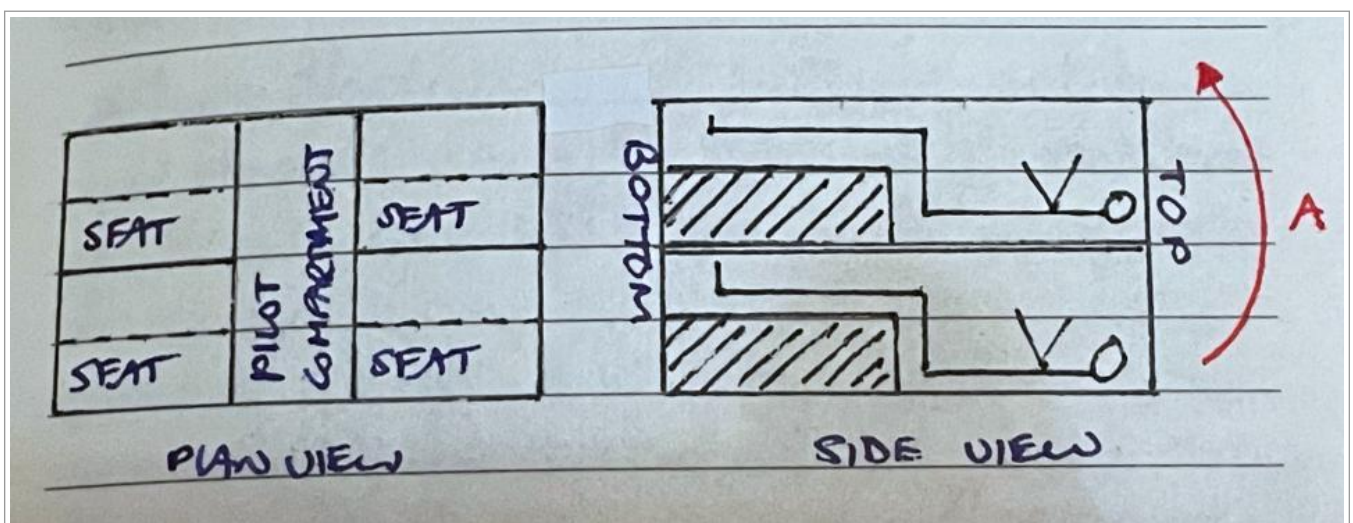
Before Dawn

The next day saw an early start from our base at Mbalageti as we needed to be at the starting point for our balloon safari over the Serengeti at an early hour.

On the plus side, this meant an early morning mini game drive in the darkness on the way and, just outside our camp, we encountered a porcupine trotting along the road ahead of the Land Cruiser. We followed it for a few minutes until it toddled off into the bush. We were very fortunate as Philip indicated that porcupines are very difficult to see.

Preparing the Balloon

Once at the starting point, as dawn began to break and the sky lighten, we were treated to a ginger coffee, which was a damned fine wake-up and doubtless put hairs on everyone's chests!



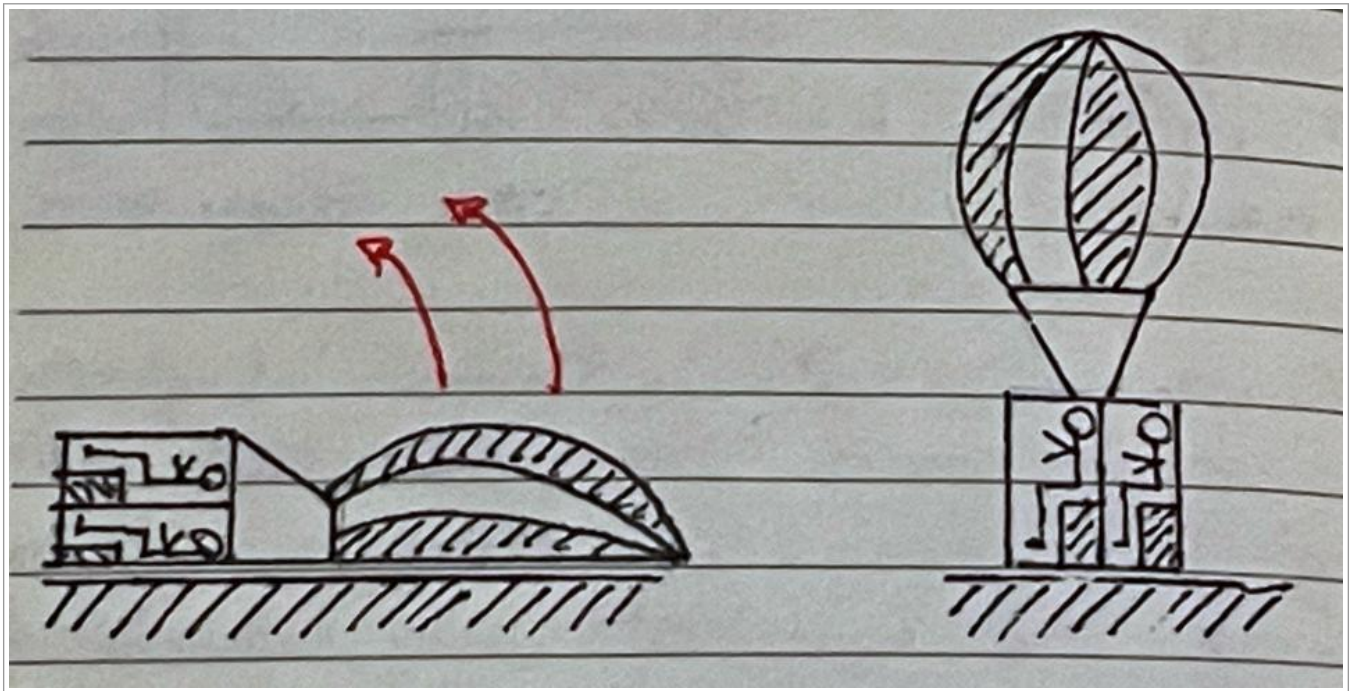
Field Sketch of arrangement of the hot air balloon basket, Western Serengeti

David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)

Once we were all thoroughly awake, it was time for the pre-flight briefing. As the plan view shows, the basket was divided into four passenger compartments, each with a bench seat, around a central pilot compartment giving access to the burner and the controls.

Taking Flight

We got into the basket with it on its back or side, as per the sketch, and sat on the bench seats as shown by the stick people in the diagram. Once we were all seated, the balloon was filled with cold air using some fans and blowers and all that remained was for the pilot to use the burner to heat it up, whereupon the basket righted itself as the balloon rose, rotating as shown by the arrows in the following sketch:



Field Sketch of uprighting a hot air balloon, Western Serengeti

David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)

We were all attached to the balloon via a belt, much like an airline seatbelt, hooked into a carabiner on a long strap that gave plenty of room to move but ensured there were no falling-out-of-the-basket mishaps.

Over the Serengeti



Taking flight over the Western Corridor David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)

Once upright, Mohammed, our pilot, told us we could stand up immediately, as it was such a calm day, and with that the balloon was released from its moorings and we began to rise into the dawn, moving quite quickly with the wind. It was a magical experience - so smooth, calm and, above all, quiet when compared to takeoff in an airliner. The silence was only punctuated by the noise of the burners as the Mohammed occasionally fired them.



Road crossing the plains, Western Corridor David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)

We didn't go very high and spent much of the flight not too far above the level of the treetops, giving the best opportunity to see wildlife - buffalo, elephant, giraffe and, at one point, a column of wildebeest being harassed by four hyenas.



Herd of African Buffalo (*Syncerus caffer*) entering an open plain, Western Corridor David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



Herd of African Buffalo (*Syncerus caffer*) entering an open plain, Western Corridor David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)

The Landing



Coming in to land, Western Corridor David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)

The landing was, quite genuinely, fun - we were told to take our seats and the pilot brought the balloon down until we could hear the grass tops scraping the bottom of the basket as we swept over it at a speed of about 11 knots. Eventually, the basket landed and tipped gently over into the position it was in when we first boarded, at which point we unclipped and clambered out.

While the crew, who followed us to the selected landing spot in Land Cruisers, busied themselves packing up the balloon and basket, Mohammed recounted the tale of the early beginnings of hot air ballooning and why it became associated with champagne. The champagne carried specially created labels with the mark of King Louis XVI, who approved the early flights, and it was intended as evidence - some might say a bribe! - to prevent superstitious locals from killing the occupants of the basket and destroying the balloon as a work of the devil!

Breakfast in the Bush

Mohammed's talk was rounded off with a champagne toast before we headed off for breakfast, sat at a table laid with fine linen and silver tableware, in the middle of the African bush. As we were served by very well dressed waiting staff, I was reminded of something very like a scene from an episode of Hercule Poirot, set in the 1920s Art Deco era.

Field Notes

- Balloon Safari - hot air balloon flights conducted at dawn to take advantage of calm conditions; allow low-altitude observation of wildlife and landscape
- Flight Conditions - early morning air typically stable with minimal wind variation; enables smooth, controlled flight close to ground level
- Wildlife Observation - elevated perspective reveals movement patterns of herds and interactions less visible from ground level
- Landing Technique - controlled descent often involves ground contact followed by tipping of basket; passengers seated and secured during landing
- Ballooning Tradition - post-flight champagne custom originates from early European ballooning; used to celebrate safe landing and reassure local observers
- Bush Breakfast - meals served at landing sites are a common feature of balloon safaris; combine logistical support with staged experience

The Western Corridor and the Grumeti River



Giraffe, Western Corridor
David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



Giraffe, Western Corridor
David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



African Buffalo (Syncerus caffer), Western Corridor
David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



Hippopotamus (Hippopotamus amphibius), Western Corridor
David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



Hippopotamus (Hippopotamus amphibius), Western Corridor
David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



Hippopotamus (Hippopotamus amphibius), Western Corridor
David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



Nile Crocodile (Crocodylus niloticus) at the Grumeti River crossing, Western Corridor
David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



Nile Crocodile (Crocodylus niloticus) at the Grumeti River crossing, Western Corridor
David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



Wildebeest and zebra at a waterhole, Western Corridor
David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



Wildebeest and zebra at a waterhole, Western Corridor

David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



Wildebeest and zebra at a waterhole, Western Corridor

David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



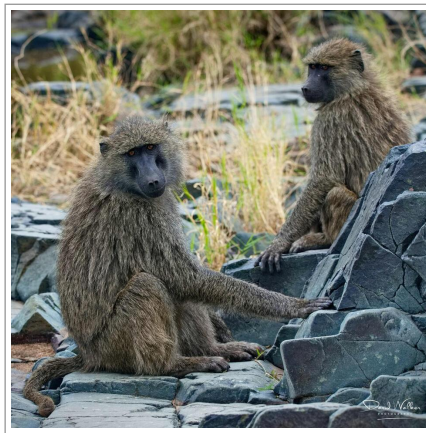
Colobus Monkey (Colobus guereza), Western Corridor

David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



Colobus Monkey (Colobus guereza), Western Corridor

David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



Baboon (Papio anubis) at the ford across the Grumeti River, Western Corridor

David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)

The Grumeti Crossing



Wildebeest carcasses at the Grumeti River crossing, Western Corridor David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)

After breakfast, we headed out with Philip for a game drive that was to take the rest of the day. Our route took us across the Grumeti river and at the crossing point we found the river choked with wildebeest carcasses, to the extent that the water's surface was completely obscured. They had tried to cross upstream but the water level was high, and they tend to keep on coming, trampling those that have gone before underfoot, so many drown.

It seems that, in contrast, the zebra, that often accompany the wildebeest in the migration herds, have more sense and there were no zebra carcasses in the group.

There was a Nile monitor lizard perched on one carcass and, while not pleasant, the smell was just about bearable!



Wildebeest carcasses at the Grumeti River crossing, Western Corridor David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)

On the Plains



Wildebeest panicking themselves (there was no danger) at a waterhole, Western Corridor David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)

From the river, we made our way to a vast open plain where a column zebra and wildebeest were visiting a water hole, wading out belly-deep to drink, and then, having quenched their thirst, fanning out over the plain to graze.

It was a beautiful, peaceful scene: The file of animals appearing over a small rise to drink, zebra hee-hawing in the background and the air filled with the soft, nasal grunts that earned wildebeest the name “gnu” in the Khoikhoi (Khoekhoe) languages of Southern Africa, a name that was picked up by Dutch and Afrikaans speakers and from there made its way into the English language. I could’ve stayed and watched all day but, of course, we had to adjourn for lunch and continue our game drive.

The Return

Our return route took us back over the crossing we used earlier in the day. This time, after an afternoon in the baking African sun, some of the bodies had started to bloat and discolour and the stench was unbearable, to the extent that it made me retch.

Philip drove us away from the spot as fast as he could to a spot upstream, where there were Colobus monkeys in the trees, their long tails with white bushy ends hanging down from their perches in the branches.

Crossing the River

From there, we headed back to Mbalageti but the day’s treats weren’t quite over. Another column of wildebeest and zebra were crossing the Grumeti, just downstream from the ford that leads to the camp, and Philip did a short off-road drive to get us to a vantage point where we could watch the iconic scene.

We had a surprise when we turned round to go back to the road, though. The plain had been empty when we drove off it to watch. Now, though, it was packed with wildebeest and zebra, filling up over the course of only a few minutes. A testament to the vast numbers of animals in the migration.

We had much to talk about at dinner that evening, the events of the day still fresh in our minds and not yet fully settled.

Field Notes

- Grumeti River - major river in the Western Serengeti; a key obstacle during the migration, particularly in periods of high water
- Migration Mortality - river crossings are a significant source of mortality for wildebeest; animals may drown due to crowding, strong currents, or steep banks
- Wildebeest Behaviour - strong herd instinct leads to continued forward movement even in dangerous conditions; individuals often follow those ahead without hesitation
- Zebra Behaviour - zebra often accompany wildebeest but show more selective crossing behaviour; may delay or avoid hazardous entry points
- Nile Monitor (*Varanus niloticus*) - opportunistic scavenger; observed feeding on carcasses at river crossing
- Colobus Monkey - arboreal primate observed in riverine woodland; distinctive black-and-white colouration with long, tufted tail
- Watering Behaviour - herds approach water in loose columns; individuals drink before dispersing to graze
- Acoustic Landscape - wildebeest vocalisations (‘gnu’) and zebra calls contribute to characteristic soundscape of the plains

Leaving the Serengeti



Leopard (Panthera pardus) with cub, Serengeti National Park
David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



Leopard (Panthera pardus) with cub, Serengeti National Park
David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



Lake Manyara Kilimamoja Lodge
David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



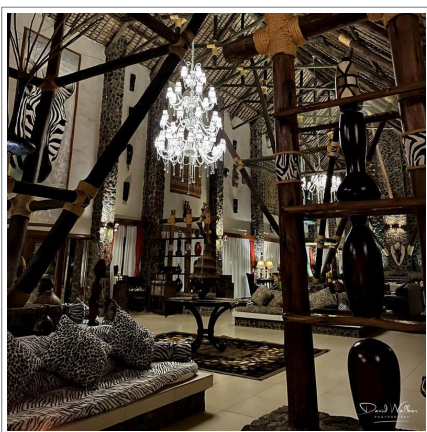
Lake Manyara Kilimamoja Lodge
David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



Lake Manyara Kilimamoja Lodge
David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



Dinner at Lake Manyara Kilimamoja Lodge
David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



Lake Manyara Kilimamoja Lodge
David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)

Leaving the Serengeti

The next day was a transfer day, taking us from Mbalageti in the Western corridor to the Naabi gate of the Serengeti by 11:55 a.m. to avoid having to pay the \$75-\$90 per person park fee for another day.

Although the main focus was travel, we did fit in a mini game drive during which we were fortunate enough to see a female leopard with a cub, aged around six months, tucking into the remains of a kill up a tree.

At that age, the cub had yet to learn the grace and elegance of its mother. So, whilst she leapt gracefully to the ground, it hesitated, calling after her, and only reluctantly half backed down the trunk and half fell out of the tree to follow!

From the Serengeti gate, where we enjoyed a picnic lunch, it was driving all the way, round the Ngorongoro crater and on towards Lake Manyara.

Arrival at Lake Manyara Kilimamoja Lodge

Our accommodation for the next two nights was to be the Lake Manyara Kilimamoja Lodge, situated on the rim of the Rift Valley. We drove into the beautiful gated grounds to be greeted by staff who lead us into the hotel, treating us like royalty and insisting on opening doors ahead of us, much to Philip's amusement as he could see we weren't used to that kind of treatment!

We were escorted through a high-ceilinged and immaculate dining area and bar, decorated with "tribal" ebony carvings, skins and African-themed reliefs, and then out into the grounds, set with chalets named after African wildlife in Kiswahili. Our chalet was called "Chui", leopard, which was very appropriate given the luck we'd had sighting them during our game drives.

The room was just *spectacular*! It was a huge suite with a four-poster bed, separate bathroom area, separate loos, two indoor showers and one outdoor and a veranda that gave breath-taking views out over the village and the valley below.

The separation between the bathroom and the sleeping areas brought back memories of a previous wildlife-orientated trip, to Elephant Hills, in Khao Sok, and the Sarojin, in Khao Lak, Thailand.

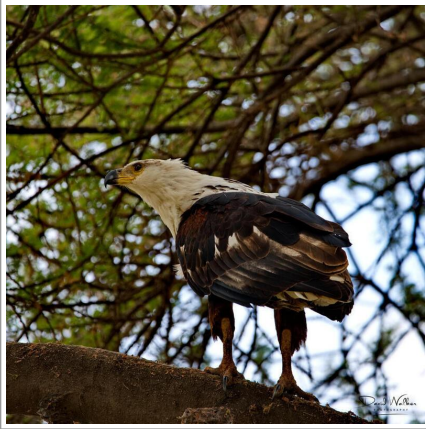
This was a taste of *real luxury* to round off our Safari.

Field Notes

- Serengeti Exit Timing - park fees are charged per 24-hour period; departure times are often planned to avoid additional charges
- Leopard (*Panthera pardus*) - female observed with cub (~6 months old); cub behaviour less coordinated, still developing climbing and hunting skills
- Tree Caching - leopards store kills in trees to protect them from scavengers such as hyena and lion
- Naabi Hill Gate - main southeastern exit of the Serengeti; marks transition from plains to Ngorongoro highlands
- Rift Valley - major geological feature of East Africa; Lake Manyara lies within its western escarpment
- Lake Manyara Region - area characterised by escarpment views, groundwater forest, and proximity to local settlements

- Hospitality Contrast - transition from remote safari camps to established lodges; marked difference in comfort and service

Lake Manyara National Park



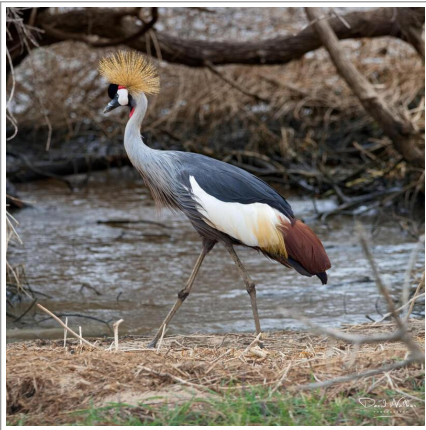
African Fish Eagle (Ichthyophaga vocifer), Lake Manyara National Park
David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



Baboon (Papio anubis), Lake Manyara National Park
David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



African Bush Elephant (Loxodonta africana), Lake Manyara National Park
David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



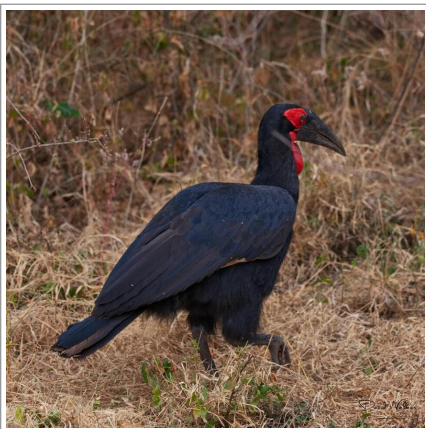
Grey Crowned Crane (Balearica regulorum), Lake Manyara National Park
David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



Lion (Panthera leo), Lake Manyara National Park
David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



Martial Eagle (Polemaetus bellicosus), Lake Manyara National Park
David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)



Southern Ground Hornbill (Bucorvus leadbeateri), Lake Manyara National Park
David Walker, Field Notes Journal (CC BY 4.0)

Lake Manyara

The following day started with a game drive round Lake Manyara. The preceding two years had seen excessive rainfall compared to more normal years and this had caused the lake to expand and engulf some of the forested areas and plains that formerly formed the lake shore.

The reduction in available land had seen a reduction in the herd of antelope, zebra and wildebeest normally found there, that had moved on due to their habitat loss.

Even in this somewhat degraded state, Manyara was still beautiful and, though we missed out on the tree-climbing lions for which it's famous, we were lucky enough to see an adult male lion striding majestically across some grassland and to have a magical encounter with an African Fish Eagle that repeatedly swept low over our position, startling the vervet monkeys we were watching, with their black faces and blue Jingle Bells!

Manyara wasn't as rich in wildlife as, say, Tarangire, but the wildlife was still there, as we encountered it, and the park, being at altitude like Arusha, was green and lush. There's hope for it to recover if there's a return to more normal levels of rainfall for the next few years.

Mto wa Mbu

After a picnic lunch, we had our third cultural encounter. After our experiences with the Datoga and the Hadzabe tribes I had high expectations but, sadly, in this instance the visit simply got on my nerves! It was a visit to Mto Wa Mbu, "Mosquito Village", and had the following agenda:

- A walk around the banana plantation owned by the village
- Visit a villager's house
- Visit some tribal arts to see their carvings
- A visit to an artisan community that worked in the village
- A visit to another tribe living in the village that make the local beer with an opportunity to taste it
- A visit to the fruit and vegetable market
- A visit to The Rice Fields

Reflections

In fairness, the visit to the banana plantation, where we learned how different types of banana are planted, irrigated, grown and harvested to eat as fruit, cook with and make beer was very interesting.

Similarly, learning how the local beer is made and, more importantly, used as a means to bring people together with a shared cup, especially to resolve conflicts, was also very interesting. As for the beer itself, it was utterly revolting to my taste but at least I've tried it!

Visiting the rice fields was of interest if only because we'd passed so many by the roadside.

In spite of this, the afternoon irritated the hell out of me to the extent that I had to really focus in order to concentrate on the culture aspects and learn something. Why?

Most importantly, we were tired after 11 days on Safari and would much have preferred to relax at the lodge, enjoying the luxury of our chalet, than be dragged, hot and in need of a shower, round a “cultural” visit we didn’t ask for and didn’t want

Further, the “cultural” aspects of the visit were a thinly veiled excuse for attempts to sell us stuff we didn’t want - for instance, we spent at most five minutes observing the woodcarver and having his craft explained before we were shown to the stalls where carvings for sale were laid out, while at the artists’ commune they dispensed with the niceties altogether and went straight “here are some paintings - want to buy?”.

Our guide for the afternoon didn’t help matters as he persisted in questioning us “do you know this plant?” And “do you know this tree?” and then expressing mock surprise, as though we were stupid, when we said not. This got very, very tiresome and in the end I had to bite my tongue to avoid telling him to stop asking us, cut to the chase and *just bloody well tell us!*

Evening

It was with a great sense of relief that we headed back to Kilimamoja Lodge to relax and enjoy our last luxurious dinner before heading to Zanzibar in the morning.

Field Notes

- Lake Manyara Hydrology - lake levels fluctuate with rainfall; recent high levels reduced available shoreline habitat for grazing species
- Habitat Shift - flooding of plains and forest margins can temporarily reduce densities of large herbivores
- Lion (*Panthera leo*) - adult male observed moving across open grassland; tree-climbing behaviour not observed on this visit
- African Fish Eagle (*Haliaeetus vocifer*) - repeated low passes over water; characteristic call and hunting behaviour
- Vervet Monkey - small primate observed in woodland; noted for expressive facial markings and social behaviour
- Mto wa Mbu - multi-ethnic village near Lake Manyara; known for agriculture, craft production, and cultural tourism
- Banana Cultivation - multiple varieties grown for fruit, cooking, and brewing; central to local agriculture
- Local Beer - traditionally brewed using banana or grain; often consumed communally as part of social practices

Our Safari Draws to a Close

The 2nd of July had dawned and our Safari had drawn to a close. I wasn't sure how I felt about that.

On one level, I was very, very sad - it had taken 43 years from the release of David Attenborough's *"Life on Earth"*, in 1979, for me to realise my dream and see in person the dramatic and awe-inspiring scenes that were depicted in the wildlife documentaries I watched and that so-inspired me as a 14-year-old.

It's a passion for wildlife and conservation that has stayed with me throughout my life.

And now that face-to-face experience had come to an end.

Sad, then, but also satisfied, grateful and extremely happy with the experience we had had. Realistic, too, as I don't think either of us could do another day of game drives and another early start!

We had a lie-in, leaving Kilimamoja at 9 a.m. and heading directly to Arusha for lunch at the Mount Meru Hotel, where we started, and then on to Arusha's airport where we said farewell to Philip and, after a brief wait in the "rustic" shelter that, in fairness, served well enough as a departure lounge, boarded our flight with "precision air" to Zanzibar, saying farewell, too, to mainland Africa.

Field Notes

- Arusha - gateway city for northern Tanzania safari circuit; point of arrival and departure for many itineraries
- Mount Meru Hotel - established hotel in Arusha; commonly used as a staging point for safari itineraries
- Safari Rhythm - multi-day game drives involve early starts and extended travel; cumulative fatigue often shapes the final days of a journey
- Zanzibar - island archipelago off the coast of Tanzania; commonly paired with mainland safari as a coastal extension