

Tanzania: Set free on safari

Simon Horsford jumps at the chance to leave the hired guides and the comfort of home behind to travel unassisted through Tanzania's national parks.

We had no guide, the camps were unfenced, and we weren't allowed to carry a gun. This was a safari like no other: we had the freedom to explore the parks and lakes of northern Tanzania but we were on our own.

I had a fleeting sense of following in the footsteps of David Livingstone or Richard Burton - albeit equipped with a Land Rover, satellite phone and a fridge stocked with beer.

This was a trip that promised a rare chance to step away from day-to-day comfort zones. It may not have required us to behave like Ray Mears or Bear Grylls - I was not about to eat lizards or insects, undergo Maasai rituals or build a shelter out of sticks - but it was going to be demanding and unpredictable.

Most African safaris are strictly organised and regimented, so the concept of being allowed to strike out on your own, without a guide or driver, is unusual. Safari Drive has been running such adventures since 1993 and says the concept is aimed at those with an "adventurous streak, who have been on safari and know enough to look after themselves".

It runs similar trips to Kenya, Namibia (best for first-timers), Zambia, Botswana, Malawi and Oman and is planning to expand into Ethiopia.

Tanzania is said to be the toughest because of the lack of infrastructure and the poor state of the roads. When I first received the itinerary, I looked at it with trepidation - we were going to travel some 800 miles in eight days, over rough terrain in some of the remotest parts of the country.



The camping was described as "challenging".

By that they meant washing facilities were scarce and lavatories involved a shovel. If I didn't crash or lose the way, then I surely would be gored by a buffalo, savaged by a lion or fall into a long-drop.

But doubts were soon put to rest on our arrival in Arusha. With my chum, Patrick Drummond, an old Africa hand who was also filming the trip, I caught the twin-prop air shuttle to Kilimanjaro from Nairobi and then on to a charming lodge at Ngurdoto on the fringe of Arusha national park.

The next morning, over coffee at the base camp of African Environments, the ground handlers for Safari Drive, we were given an extensive briefing on our vehicle (a Land Rover Defender with roof-top tent), the equipment (including satellite phone and a GPS gadget), route and safety: "Never leave the tent after dark without extreme caution". They had no worries on that score - once I was in the tent there was no way I'd be venturing out till sunrise.

The information digested, we began our journey, but not before topping up on supplies - the last chance we'd have - from the supermarket. We had already been supplied with a chest-full of tinned and dried food and we added fresh meat, cheese, fruit and - essentially - beer, wine and drinking water.

Tarangire National Park was first on the schedule and we made the most of the rare stretch of sealed road en route. Stopping briefly at the park gate to pay entry and vehicle fee, and watching other travellers waiting for their guides and drivers, it was satisfying, and a little nerve-wracking, to know that we were heading unaccompanied into the bush.

With our first "campsite" some two hours away, we had ample opportunity to admire the diverse mix of grassland, marshland, forest and crops of prehistoric-looking baobab trees for which the park is known. That afternoon we were lucky enough to see elephant, lolling lazily around a swampy mudbath; later, after passing herds of buffalo and plains game, we spotted hyenas and the remains of recent lion kill.

If the animals were much in evidence, I couldn't say the same for our campsite, Hondohondo, named after the Swahili term for a hornbill. The sun was beginning to set, but just in time we came across the clearing and set up camp. We learnt at once that dusk isn't the best time to unpack, if only for the buzzing of flesh-hungry mosquitos.

But refreshed by a cold beer we quickly organised firewood, the roof tent and the gas stove and soon worked out what was to become our routine. Supper was steak, beans and jacket potatoes (wrapped in tin foil and cooked on the fire) and a beer or two. The camp was bathed in moonlight and a hyena called. This was proper wilderness - and it felt good.

Awakening to the sound of chattering superb starlings and babblers, we wolfed down our own version of bush tucker - bacon and eggs and a mug of tea - before navigating back through the park; the early departure paying off as we spied a lion lounging in a tree.

It was now that the Land Rover's off-road abilities began to be tested as we headed for Lake Eyasi, following a spectacular route through brutally harsh, stick-dry landscape of the Crater Highlands.

The road might have been fine for the Maasai and their cattle and donkeys, but was less amenable for a vehicle. After begging directions we eventually made it to the lake, and after further questioning found the community-owned campsite (run by the Maasai) at Endabagah.

The camp wasn't as remote as the night before, with villagers now and then wandering past our Land Rover, stopping to chat or mock the cooking skills of a couple of wazungu (white people), but we were there for a reason - to find the Hadza bushmen the next day.

Tanzania's last hunter-gatherer tribe, the nomadic Hadza, live in stick huts and move on every couple of weeks. Their existence is under threat from government and commercial intrusion and, worse, Arab hunters who want to buy the land to use as a private arena to shoot the wildlife indiscriminately.

In broken Swahili we found our way to a school at Olpiro, where one of the teachers helped us track down a Hadza family. We had no idea what to expect but found Mohamet, his wife Julia and grandmother Yati deep in the bush and busy cooking a maize broth in a pot on the fire.

Mohamet may have been wearing football shorts rather than antelope skin, but one look at his bow and arrows, with poisoned tips, was enough to know he was a serious hunter who had to kill to feed his family.

Yati, meanwhile, kept laughing at us. Maybe it was my skinny white legs, or the fact that we had just got the Land Rover stuck in a stream and needed an entire class of local schoolchildren to help us dig it out.

Later, en route to the Ngorongoro highlands, we stopped to buy spears and a knife and sheath from a group of passing Maasai. The landscape was now changing dramatically, and the arid valley gave way to unbeaten and seldom-used tracks.

Slipping the Land Rover into difflock, it was like driving on shale as we climbed to the top of the Rift Valley. Here the scenery changed again, to rolling, grassland studded by hills and manyattas (Maasai encampments of low, round houses); it was the most beautiful of sights.

That night was spent at the Landana Luxury Tented Camp. The term "luxury" was used in its loosest sense, but this Maasai-owned camp was just what we needed - a hot shower to wash off two days of dust and dirt

and a supper of sweet potato kebab, beef stew and a drink around the fire with the well-travelled local Maasai chief, Sanguyan Oledorop.

Driving through the Serengeti the following day, we sped across the short-grass plains, where the kopjes stood out against the limitless landscape and the shimmering African sun; these are volcanic "islands" that bubbled to the surface millions of years ago. Now they are a favoured place for lions to snap up prey looking for water. We missed out on lion but had the mesmerising treat of watching a cheetah stalking a Thomson's gazelle.

The scenery changed again as we entered the wooded valleys and savannah of the park's Seronera district, where hundreds of plains game were migrating in single file. Hippo, baboon, groups of 30 or 40 elephant, giraffe and Corey bustards were in evidence as we headed for the camp which, again, proved impossible to find without asking the locals.

That night, the winds were up, drowning out the usual night-time yelps, barks and grunts from the bush. In the morning I was greeted by the sight of two perplexed-looking baboons who scarpered when I waved the kettle at them.

The stunning Lake Natron, a 500-square-mile "soda" lake bordering Kenya and dominated by Oldonyo Lengai volcano, was our final destination and the toughest drive yet. At Sale, the main village of the Sonjo people, a dozen smiling, dusty-faced children rushed out from their thatched huts to ask for biscuits and sweets. Never can Nice biscuits have been so popular.

The scarcity of animals was more than made up for by the beautiful scenery, including a forest of candelabra trees. A narrow and rubble-strewn track, known as Seventeen Corners, took us precariously off the escarpment and on to the first proper glimpse of Lengai, the sacred mountain of the Maasai and East Africa's only active volcano.

To add to the strange moonscape of craters and gullies, the mountain was smoking, something it does intermittently and not a sign it's about to erupt.

As sunset approached, it was by the lake that we got a feeling for the area and its beauty: the pinkish white crust underfoot is made up of soda crystals, which cover the surface during the dry season - I imagined it would feel like walking on meringue.

After a night in the basic but friendly Lake Natron Tented Camp, we were taken by our Maasai guide, Thomas, for a three-mile walk to the lakeshore. On the way he revealed why the toothbrush tree is so called (quickly fashioning a "toothbrush" out of a branch) and how to start a fire using two sticks and donkey dung (he did it in seconds: I gave up after five minutes of cackhandedness).

Finally it was time to return to Arusha and reflect on an adventure that brought a refreshing sense of freedom and isolation, far from creature comforts and the usual distractions.

But it was also a trip that was about interacting with tribal people and getting the most out of a magnificent landscape. On this safari, the wildlife was just a bonus. It was also time for a shave.

Essentials

Getting there: Kenya Airways (01784 888222; www.kenya-airways.com) has return flights from London to Kilimanjaro, via Nairobi, from £515.

Staying there: **Safari Drive (01488 71140; www.safaridrive.com)** offers tailor-made journeys to Tanzania, Kenya, Botswana, Zambia, Malawi, Namibia and Oman. A 12-night Tanzania trip (exploring the Serengeti, Ngorongoro Crater, Lake Manyara and Lake Natron) costs from £1,450 per person. The price includes a fully-equipped Land Rover Defender, camping equipment, extensive food starter pack, emergency back-up and some pre-paid national park and camp fees.