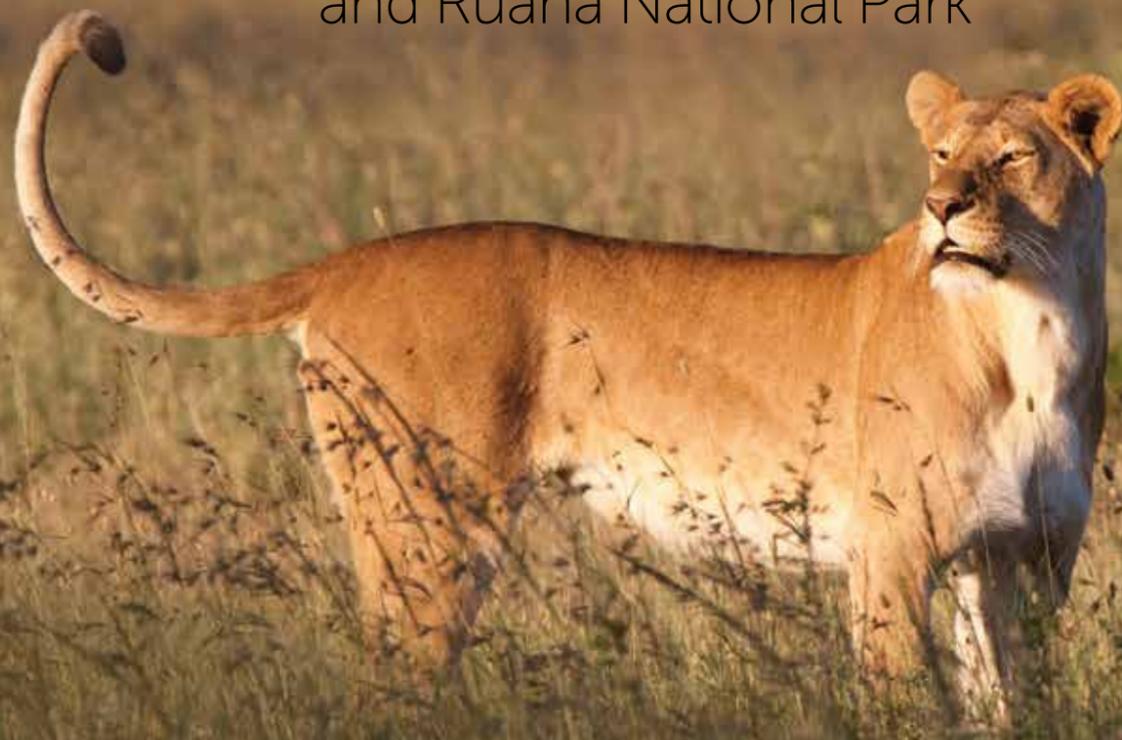


Surrounded by LIONS

The jewel of the journey: exploring the Serengeti, Ngorongoro Crater and Ruaha National Park



VILLIERS STEYN and travel partner JI de Wet faced a nasty surprise on their first day in the Serengeti but were more than compensated by the sights that awaited them.

IMAGES: VILLIERS STEYN

Every African road trip has an objective. Whether it's a long-weekend visit to Mozambique to snorkel with whale sharks or a two-week trip to Namibia to photograph desert elephants, there's always something in particular we look forward to most, irrespective of how splendid everything else is.

On our 70-day trip to East Africa our objective was to see the Great Migration

in the Serengeti. After 32 days on the road we had finally arrived on the plains – the showground for one of nature's most impressive wildlife spectacles.

All of our planning revolved around the wildebeest migration, and we'd timed our arrival at the short-grass plains of the southern Serengeti for mid-February, to coincide with the calving period. In our time on the road we'd worked up a full-scale mental

OPPOSITE AND RIGHT: These lions started their day by catching a little sun on rocky outcrops.

image that was nothing short of a National Geographic documentary, with millions of grazers as far as the eye can see and predators tormenting them from every angle in their attempts to make breakfast of their young. Our anticipation was such that we could barely keep still as we made our way down the edge of the Ngorongoro Crater and into the valley below, but as we approached the Naabi Hill entrance gate, our excitement dissipated.

Confusion quickly took its place, then utter disappointment, the kind that sucks the wind out of your lungs and turns your cheeks to lead.

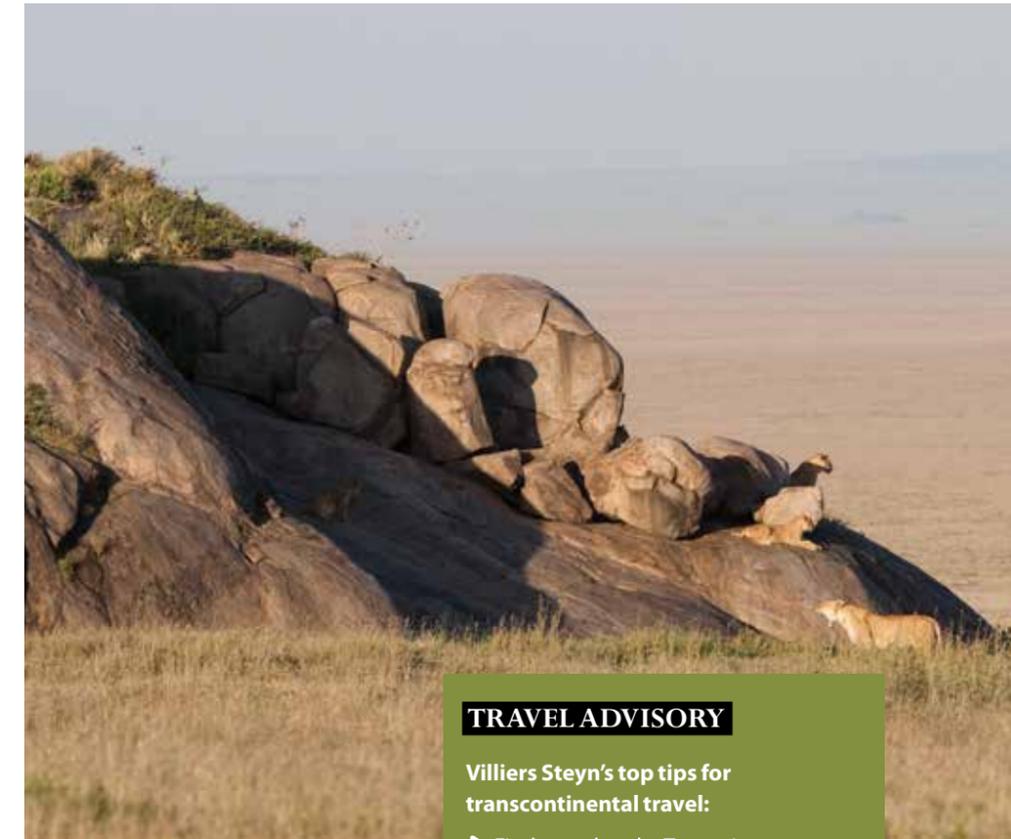
WHERE IS EVERYONE?

Nature works according to its own calendar, and we had arrived during a drought. Instead of the lush, life-giving carpet of new green grass we'd been expecting, the plains were covered in brittle yellow stubble, and instead of vast herds of noisy wildebeest as far as the eye could see, we spotted only the odd line of distant, desperate animals dragging their hooves across the dry earth like a lazy procession of ants.

"This is one of the worst droughts in years," said an equally despondent tour guide as we waited in line to pay our entrance fees. "No one really knows where they all are, but they seem to have split up and travelled far and wide in search of food."

At \$200 a night for the two of us, we already knew it was going to be an expensive week of camping, but without the main attraction it felt a bit like having the best seats in the house at a Bulls-versus-Sharks rugby game without Pierre Spies, the Beast, or Bismarck du Plessis turning up.

We had no choice but to make the most of it, so over the next week we explored most of what must be the



world's most famous national park. Despite the obvious lack of wildebeest, we realised that the Serengeti is about much more than the Great Migration.

Huge herds of buffalo and elephant gathered along the streams that criss-cross the valleys, a leopard sought shelter in the gigantic sausage trees that stick out like sore thumbs on the open plains, and lions spent the early morning hours warming up on rocky outcrops like real-life scenes out of *The Lion King*.

Early one morning we hit the incredible-sightings jackpot. Rounding a corner on a quiet back road, we bumped into a staggering 16 tiny lion cubs. They had clearly wandered out from the safety of a nearby koppie into the road directly in front of us. As we came to a halt among them, they remained completely unfazed and, more surprisingly still, entirely unsupervised. We watched dumbfounded as they investigated our Hilux and various rustlings in the

TRAVEL ADVISORY

Villiers Steyn's top tips for transcontinental travel:

- Find out what the Tanzanian park entry fees are by visiting www.tanzaniaparks.com.
- Remember to take cash for the Ngorongoro Conservation Area entrance, and a major credit card for the Serengeti entrance fees.
- Take plenty of warm clothes to the Simba A campsite, because it's always freezing at night on the rim of the crater.
- If you see vehicles piling up on the open plains of the Serengeti, drive in another direction. There are more than enough lions, cheetahs and leopards around to make it worth finding your own, quieter vantage point.
- Road conditions in and around the Serengeti are relatively to extremely poor, so give yourself enough time to get to your destination.
- Buy a good guidebook. I recommend Veronica Roodt's *The Tourist Travel & Field Guide of the Serengeti National Park* (R198 at www.kalahari.com).
- Avoid wearing blue in East Africa – the colour attracts tsetse flies.

roadside vegetation for an hour and a half or so before the heat of the rising sun drove them back to the shade of their koppie.

It's hard to imagine that an experience such as that can be beaten, but the highlight of the week was, in fact, a hot-air balloon ride over the park. Although we saw very little from our eagle-eyed perspective, somewhere in the silence high above the thirsty expanse we lost our hearts to the Serengeti.

Eight nights, 84 lions, 10 cheetahs and seven leopards later we left the open plains and, for the first time in 41 days, headed south.

MEETING 'MUFASA'

Our next stop was another ultimate safari destination – the Ngorongoro Crater. We'd booked two nights at the Simba A campsite on the rim of the crater (the only public campsite in the Ngorongoro Conservation Area), giving ourselves a whole day to explore the crater floor.

At last we located some of the Serengeti's missing players. Milling happily in the greenery around Lake Magadi, the centrepiece of the crater, stood tens of thousands of blue wildebeest. Among them, and nearly as numerous, lively zebra rolled in the earth, red-faced spotted hyena gnawed on the leftovers of unfortunate Thomson's gazelle calves, while elephant bulls, their symmetrical tusks barely clearing the ground, lumbered beneath massive fever trees, the only thing around to dwarf them. >

1. The adventurers happened upon 16 curious lion cubs. / 2. An elephant is dwarfed by a massive fever tree in Ngorongoro. / 3. JI and Villiers take flight. / 4. Camping at The Old Farmhouse outside Iringa. / 5. Pebble-filled beer cans were strung together as an alarm system. / 6. A leopard seeks shelter in a sausage tree. / 7. The loaded Hilux didn't miss a beat. / 8. Serengeti Migration Camp. / 9. Tourists gape in wonder as 'Mufasa' shows off.



WHERE TO STAY

- > **Simba A public campsite, Ngorongoro Conservation Area:** Simba A consists of a gigantic unfenced lawn that overlooks the crater and is usually teeming with overlanders. Facilities include flush toilets and hot water. No pre-bookings can be made; read more at www.ngorongorocrater.org.
- > **Nguchiro and Lobo public campsites, Serengeti National Park:** the only two public campsites in the Serengeti – a cluster around Seronera (which includes Nguchiro, where we stayed), and Lobo – are unfenced, and contain basic facilities with flush toilets and cold showers, as well as small thatched enclosures in which you can safely store crates and cooler boxes. There is no power. No pre-bookings; read more at www.tanzaniaparks.com/serengeti.html.
- > **Serengeti Migration Camp, Serengeti National Park:** this luxury camp, found on the bank of the Grumeti River at the northern tip of the park, consists of 20 elevated safari tents. All meals are included, but not game drives or park entrance fees. Pre-bookings: tel +255-272-500-630/9, videar@elewana.com.
- > **Kisolanza, The Old Farm House, 50 km south-west of Iringa:** a number of lush private stands provide one of the best camping options between Mbeya and Dar es Salaam. Each grassy stand has a thatched lapa and braai spot. There are clean communal bathrooms with hot showers, and a restaurant and shop selling fresh vegetables and meat. Pre-bookings: tel +255-754-306-144, info@kisolanza.com.
- > **Ruaha public campsite, Ruaha National Park:** this unfenced patch of earth on the bank of the Great Ruaha River has only one shade tree and basic facilities (flush toilets and cold showers). Lion, elephant and other wildlife frequently walk through the camp. No pre-bookings; read more at www.tanzaniaparks.com/ruaha.html.

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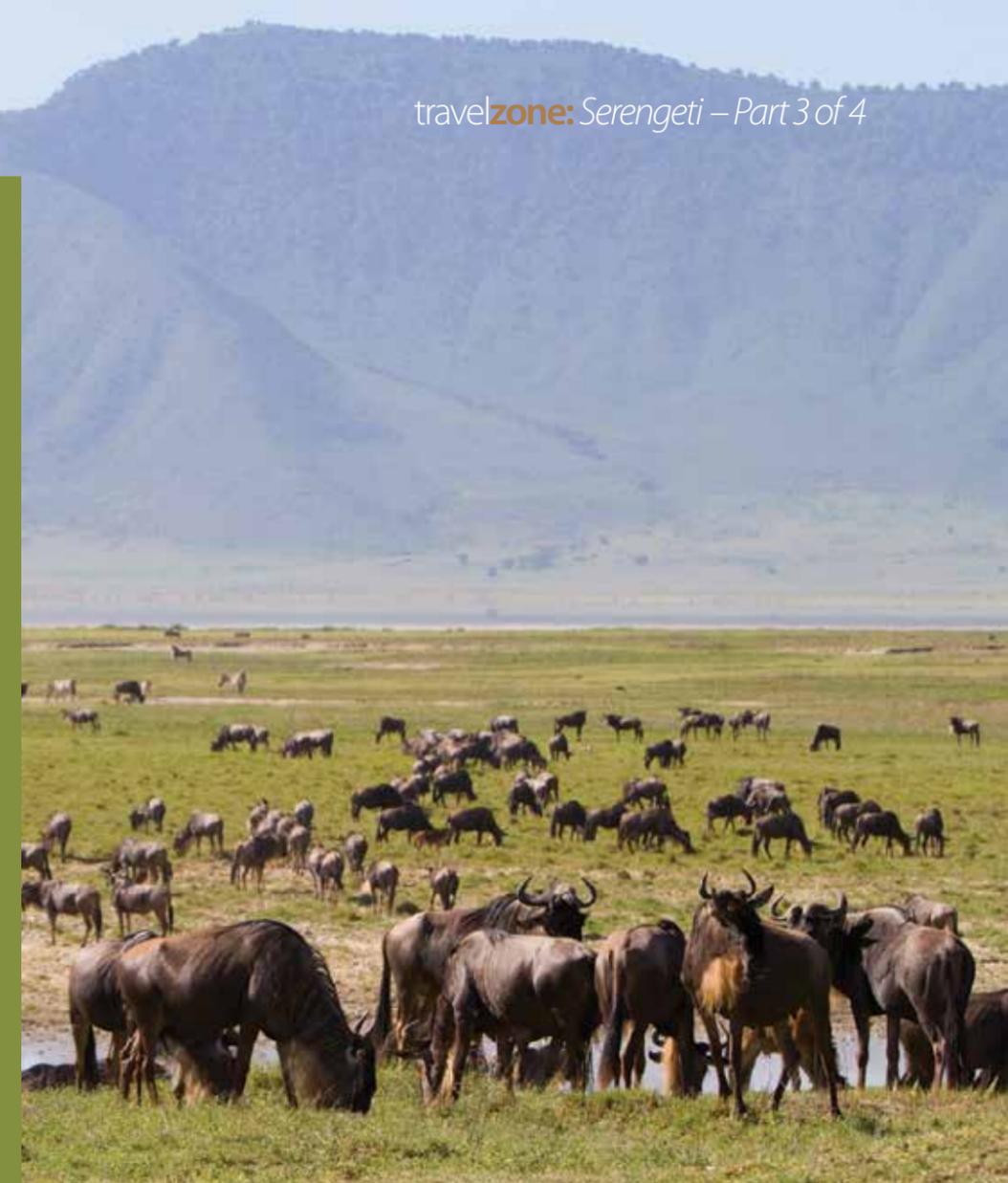
THE GREAT MIGRATION

To make the most of your Serengeti visit, it's crucial to understand the dynamics of the Great Migration. Up to a million and a half wildebeest travel about 2 000 km annually in search of food and water, and are joined by up to 200 000 Thomson's gazelle, 150 000 zebra, 30 000 Grant's gazelle and 12 000 eland. The herbivores travel clockwise over an enormous region that includes the Serengeti, Masai Mara, and Ngorongoro conservation areas. It may deviate dramatically in years with high rainfall or drought, but the general pattern looks like this:

- **Early wet season** (January to March): the animals are mainly on the short-grass plains of the Ngorongoro Conservation Area and the Serengeti. This is also when the wildebeest drop their young. The best areas to drive are around Lake Ndutu, Naabi Gate and the Gol Kopjes.
- **Late wet season** (April to June): as the plains dry out there's a general movement to the north-west along the Simiya, Mbalageti, Nyabogati and Seronera rivers. Many of the herds move directly north through the heart of the Serengeti – the perfect time to visit one of the lodges or campsites at Seronera.

➤ **Early dry season** (July to October): between June and August most of the animal herds are in the western corridor of the Serengeti, where they cross the Grumeti River. From August to October, they traverse the Mara River into the Masai Mara Game Reserve in Kenya. Watch these spectacular crossings from the Serengeti Migration Camp.

➤ **Late dry season** (November and December): most of the animals migrate south along the eastern boundary of the Serengeti, to reach the short-grass plains in the south by mid-January. This is a great time of the year to camp at Lobo in the Serengeti, or to visit the Ngorongoro Crater.



ABOVE: The Ngorongoro crater floor brims with wildlife.

It was the lions that stole the show that day, though – all 27 of them. Every time we thought we'd seen them all, we'd bump into another relaxed pride parading past a swarm of open-roofed Land Cruisers, wide-eyed tourists snapping away while 'Mufasa' and company strutted their stuff.

The scene as we drove back up the crater just before dark as the sun gilded the Lerai fever-tree forest and the hordes of animals settled in for the evening on the vast green carpet is the most beautiful sight ever.

SLEEP WITH ONE EYE OPEN

From the Ngorongoro Crater we headed south for a few days, past Lake Manyara

and through the cities of Dodoma – Tanzania's capital – and Iringa.

We stopped at Kisolanza – The Old Farm House, where we were able to buy fresh vegetables and meat produced and prepared right there on the farm.

After a slow start to the following morning, we doubled back to Iringa and then turned north-east to Tanzania's largest national park, Ruaha (20 300 km²). And so the most extraordinary and unforgettable afternoon began.

On the way to our campsite JI – perched on top of the Hilux and holding our freshly purchased stockpile of wood in place – spotted three rogue male lions dashing across the road in



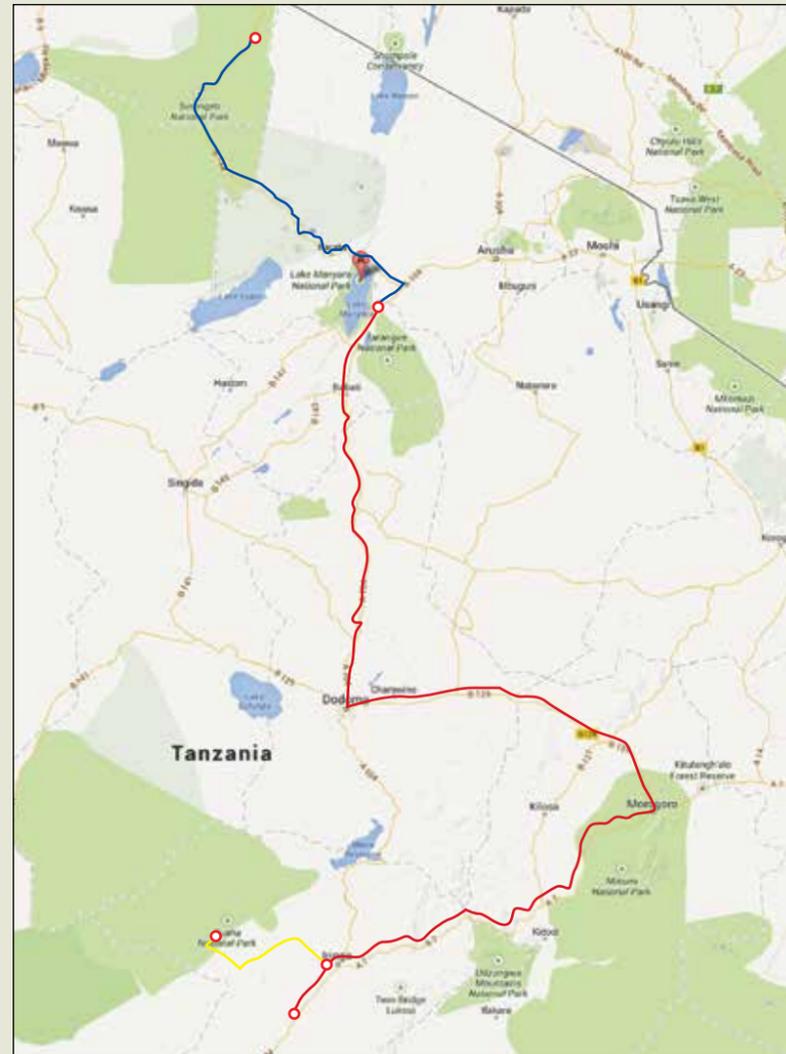
ABOVE: An elephant and calf go about their business in Ruaha National Park.

a communal area where they were obviously less than welcome.

Not long after that, as we pulled into our campsite on the bank of the Great Ruaha River, we were welcomed by another lion, this time an old female taking a nap under the only available shade tree – the one we'd intended to camp beneath. Eventually she joined nine other lions which had been watching the commotion with interest from the other side of the bank. In the space of just a couple of hours, our lion tally was 12.

Rather than stay in the camp and lose a staring contest with our toothy neighbours, we headed out on a game drive just after 3pm, eager to explore the park. Winding dual-track roads led us past herds of

THE ROUTE



ABOVE: The third leg of the Pretoria-to-Serengeti journey included the Serengeti National Park and the Ngorongoro Conservation Area.

elephant, long-horned Grant's gazelle and breathtaking river scenes.

Two hours and another three prides later, we'd counted an astonishing 40 lions. Who would have guessed that Ruaha, a park in the middle of nowhere that attracts only a fraction of the visitors the Serengeti does, could be so overwhelmingly productive?

That night we slept lightly, and wouldn't have rested at all had it not been for Ji's ingenious makeshift campsite perimeter alarm: a few empty

beer cans filled with pebbles and suspended from fishing line strung between a series of storm pegs.

We couldn't have asked for a more exciting way to end our month-long stint in Tanzania.

Read about the fourth and final leg of the intrepid Villiers and Ji's journey in our next issue, when the travellers tackle a string of impressive M's: Malawi, Mana Pools, Matobo, Mashatu and Mapungubwe. 🚩



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