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Food and Travel January 2016 Issue No 183

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Tracking a prowling leopard deep in its African heartland



# *Ahead of the* **GAME**

Heart set on a safari but don't know where to start? Kym and Tonya Illman have travelled far and wide to create their stunning photography. Allow them to share their tips for the perfect trip – and images to match

Everyone remembers their first game drive. For us, it was in Kenya's Nairobi National Park some years ago on a one-night stopover en route to Tanzania. We set out as the sun peaked above the horizon, excited and with high hopes. Later on, as we headed back to our tent we were a little disappointed that we had failed to spot any lions. Then, within sight of the camp, we rounded a bend to see a lioness standing proudly atop a stone road sign.

Turning her head towards our vehicle, she gazed at us for some time. We all raced for our cameras, which we had foolishly packed away thinking the day was over. From that moment, we were hooked.

African governments have embraced tourism to fund the provision of these vast tracts of land. It was pointed out to me by a South African private game park owner that 'everyone pays taxes, even animals'. By that he meant that for four or five hours a day, a leopard, lion or elephant may have to put up with safari vehicles sitting 30m away. Over time they have become habituated and their offspring learn from an early age that the vehicles pose no threat. Eventually, they see them as merely part of the landscape.

In fact, tourism is directly responsible for large leopard numbers in areas like South Africa's Sabi Sands. There, private game camps provide a perfect environment for them to exist, even flourish. These habitats are funded by tourists who are almost guaranteed to see a leopard if they are there for a few days. We averaged 1.4 leopard sightings a day over three separate trips to Londolozi. A rate higher than anywhere else.

## ACTIVE TRAVELLER



'The Serengeti is unequalled. Its immense plains stretch to the horizon in all directions with just a few small trees and rocky outcrops breaking up the vastness'

## WHERE TO GO

One question that people ask us a lot is: 'Where is the best safari experience?' There is no hands-down best place to go but, if pressed, I would choose **Kenya's Maasai Mara**, especially for a first safari. The park is not as vast as, say, **Tanzania's Serengeti**, so the game is a little easier to find. You will have a good chance of spotting the big five (rhinoceros, lion, elephant, leopard and buffalo) if you are there for a few days, and there are numerous airstrips so you won't have to endure lengthy road transfers. Though bear in mind that flights are from the very top end of the pricing scale.

The time of year of course plays a big part in the number of visitors. In April there are few vehicles, and the rates are lower than in July, August and September when the wildebeest migration passes. During peak season you might find 20-40 vehicles at a leopard sighting; and if the wildebeest are crossing the Mara River, it is not uncommon to see 60 or more vehicles on the banks of the river.

Tanzania has marketed itself as one of the world's prime safari destinations. The Serengeti is unequalled. Its immense plains stretch to the horizon in all directions with just a few small trees and kopjes (rocky outcrops) breaking up the vastness. These kopjes not only shelter lion prides, but also provide outstanding photographic backdrops and make great places to stop for lunch or just a break from the confines of the safari vehicle. In the Serengeti, go the extra mile and head to the **Gol Kopjes** area. The £7 car premium and the extra driving involved dissuade most people, but there are unrivalled opportunities for sensational photography and you will be largely on your own.

For every hundred people who head to the Serengeti, one or two choose **Katavi**. This park in the west of Tanzania offers a truly authentic experience, and if you go in September or October, you will be rewarded

with the most extraordinary hippo encounters on the planet. The two main pools are home to thousands. Although you will see few other vehicles, you will have to contend with bugs galore and serious heat. For the committed, these are concessions worth making. For a relatively bug-free experience, head to the Maasai Mara.

You can also get away from the crowds in **Tanzania's Ruaha National Park** and **Selous Game Reserve**. Both areas offer superb camps and an array of wildlife without the number of people encountered in the Serengeti. Selous offers the added bonus of being able to drive off-road (something outlawed in most national parks) allowing you to get closer to wildlife and take pictures from all angles.

**Botswana** is a safari hotspot. The government has chosen to cater for fewer visitors at higher rates. You will find some of the most expensive camps in the world here but you will have the area largely to yourself. **Chobe** is a dream destination for elephant photography, while the **Okavango Delta** is a must-see for boat safaris in crystal-clear water. It is also the ideal place for a helicopter flight: the scenery is rich in colour, and you normally pay only for the flight time even if the helicopter has to come from another camp.

**Zimbabwe** is often overlooked by safari enthusiasts, but it offers some stunning options and remarkable scenery, in particular the **Mana Pools National Park**. Mana is one of the few places in the world where you can see elephants standing on their hind legs to eat, and it is one of the best spots to do a walking safari with a guide.

If you want to see gorillas, head to **Rwanda** or **Uganda**. It will cost £495pp for an hour with them and you will have to hike through dense rainforest for many hours, but you will never forget the time you spend with them and their families.

## PLANNING YOUR TRIP

Transfers to and from the airport will most likely be made by light aircraft, though these can really bump up the cost. Ask to see a breakdown and work out whether you want to pay the extra. Some safari operators might offer the option of road transfers to reach camp. This is a better option for those on a tighter budget but will take considerably longer. The Cessna Grand Caravan is the safari workhorse of the skies though you will be limited to 15kg luggage in a soft bag. We are often asked how we manage to get our over-100kg on and off planes. The answer is simple: we purchase a freight seat. If you have excess luggage, consider doing the same.

Photography-wise we look for vehicles with open sides and few uprights to block shots. The most comfortable vehicles we have used to date were at Londolozi in South Africa. They feature three tiered rows of three comfortable bucket seats with no uprights to get in the way, although they do not have a canopy, which can be gruelling on hot, sunny days.

Large lenses require stabilisation, so while a Wimberley head mounted on a vehicle is ideal, sand bags on the roof or window ledge are good alternatives too. On a number of occasions we have had our guide lash a pole to the uprights along the side of a vehicle to rest cameras on while shooting. Guides have also removed seats to free up space and replaced side glass windows with roll-up plastic. A word of warning: avoid mini vans at all costs. They are found mainly in the Mara and, although cheap, they are uncomfortable, get bogged down often, and are hopeless for photography.

Communication on safari is a haphazard affair. Some camps have wi-fi, most do not. Sometimes there is phone coverage in the tent, other times the camp staff will have to direct you to a specific spot where you might get a signal. To avoid exorbitant data roaming and phone call charges, pick up a local SIM card (sometimes we buy cards from two different carriers for better coverage). But forget posting photos on Facebook from the field; it is rarely possible.

Make sure you bring plenty of cash for tipping. Guides normally receive £7pp a day, a driver £3 and general camp staff will share an extra £3, which can be deposited in a tip box.

A medical kit is a must, although many travel agents and operators do not raise the issue – perhaps because it adds to the cost of a safari or in case it spooks a nervous traveller. However, you would be mad not to bring a range of medications as it is near impossible to get your hands on any when out in the bush.

**'The best way to shoot low angles safely is to use a hide. At Mashatu lodge, Botswana, a sea container has been buried near a water hole. Instead of searching for animals, they come to you – much more comfortable. Always ask if a reserve is in the vicinity of a hide, or if you can get access to one'**

## BEHIND THE LENS

Photography is the main draw for us – Tonya and I have toured six African nations, stayed in more than 34 camps and shot in excess of a quarter of a million photographs. We found the best cameras are a Canon 200-400mm lens on my 1DX and a 70-200mm on one a 5D Mark 3. But even if you are not as mad on taking pictures as we are – or in possession of professional kit – you will still want to capture the best possible images of the wildlife.

If you are heading to Africa for the photography, ask your agent or camp manager if there will be a specialist photography guide available well in advance. Such a guide will know where to position the vehicle for the best lighting, will suggest different angles, and sometimes offer to shoot using your spare camera if he does not have his own, giving you some bonus shots.

At the start of each day, before we head out of camp, we reset all cameras and take a test shot. It is not uncommon to come across something worth photographing minutes from camp, and nothing is more frustrating than having to swap lenses or change half-a-dozen settings before you can start shooting. We also reset our cameras to something neutral following each sighting, eg ISO 500 and f/5.

The best way to shoot low angles safely is to use a hide. At Mashatu lodge, Botswana, a sea container has been buried near a water hole. Instead of searching for animals, they come to you – a much more comfortable way to shoot. Always ask if a reserve is in the vicinity of a hide, or if you can get access to one.

The chances are that you will encounter plenty of dust on safari, which is not good for your equipment. Use the Maasai Shuka picnic blankets to cover your gear while in transit, and regularly clean your camera's sensor throughout the day by turning it on and off.

Every photographer is looking for the sharpest images; while you probably use the shutter button to focus, I would urge you to change to 'rear-button focus'. It is a simple change on most cameras in the settings and once you start using your right thumb on the AF-On button (for Canon and Nikon cameras), you will never go back.

It is vital to sync cameras to the local time, down to the second, and it's good to carry more high-speed memory cards than you are likely to use too. Set your camera to shoot to the CF card. Shooting to an SD can cost you shots when shooting in high-speed mode. Be sure to label your cards too. At the end of each day, take all the cards out of the cameras and download to a laptop. Ensure that each card is put back into the correct camera.



## BOOKING YOUR STAY

If you are in search of luxury and want to see the greatest number of animals in the shortest possible time, I would head to South Africa's Sabi Sands. There are numerous camps that offer superb accommodation, fine food and wine, air-conditioned tents and comfortable safari vehicles. The number of vehicles at a sighting is managed via two-way radio: normally no more than three at a time and for a maximum of 20 minutes or so. Given that these game parks are smaller than national parks, animals are easier to find and night drives are possible. However, the bush is much denser than the open plains of the Mara or Serengeti, so transport is more of a challenge.

Once you have selected a country or area, you will need to choose camps/lodges. Here you have a multitude of options. It is important to understand where a camp is located in relation to the game. It is pointless saving £50 if you are outside the park and have to travel hours to get to the game. Paying a little more to be close to the action is advisable if you do not have time to waste. Next, do you want a permanent structure or a tent? Do you want hot running water in the room or are you happy just to use a bucket shower? Do you need air conditioning? Answer these questions before you contact an agent. The more exceptions you can make, the less you'll pay.

We prefer smaller camps of up to about eight tents/rooms) with in-room power so that we do not have to take batteries to the lounge area each night for charging, and those with a dedicated lounge area where we can edit photos before or after dinner each evening.

Meals will be an integral part of your experience and while many camps stipulate group dining, do not be afraid of asking to be seated separately. Almost every meal will involve a soup starter, rice or potato with a meat main course, and a dessert which is normally a soft gooey offering or fruit – rarely ice cream or chocolate.

We almost always take a packed breakfast with us as we do not return until after 11am. Most guests return to camp around 9am for a cooked breakfast, with lunch typically served around 1pm. Make sure you are aware of what drinks are included in your rate. Some camps include all beverages, others provide beer, wine and basic spirits, while a few ask you to pay for everything except water. Again, factor in these costs to your taste before you enquire.

Be sure to check if park fees are included in your accommodation rate. Some operators exclude them to make quotes appear cheaper. It is only when guests arrive at the park gate that they find they have to pay up to £60pp extra each day.

## Six of the best CAMPS IN AFRICA

**Angama Mara, Maasai Mara, Kenya** An excellent new camp open less than a year where all tents have a 180-degree view of the park below. A highlight is the great migration from July to October. [angama.com](http://angama.com)

**Katavi Wildlife Camp, Katavi National Park, Tanzania** A classic tented camp in one of the greatest wilderness areas on Earth. If you can overlook the heat and insects in September and October, you'll revel in the wildlife, particularly the hippo action. [katavivildlifecamp.com](http://katavivildlifecamp.com)

**Londolazi, Sabi Sands, South Africa** Luxurious accommodation, good food and wine and an easy and well-managed safari experience. A great first-time safari option. [londolazi.com](http://londolazi.com)

**The Hide, Hwange National Park, Zimbabwe** One of the best tented camps in Africa with a submerged photography hide, large rooms and a charming dining area surrounded by a range of landscapes. [thehide.com](http://thehide.com)

**Tortilis Camp, Amboseli National Park, Kenya** A permanent camp with glorious views of Mount Kilimanjaro, a pool and large, open common areas. Base yourself here to spot elephants. [tortiliscampamboseli.com](http://tortiliscampamboseli.com)

**Zarafa Camp, Botswana** The height of luxury at a corresponding price. A few large and luxurious tents and plenty of countryside to explore. You'll see few others on your journeys outside the camp. [greatplainsfoundation.com](http://greatplainsfoundation.com)

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHS TAKEN FROM *AFRICA ON SAFARI* BY KYM AND TONYA ILLMAN (PAPADAKIS, £30). TO BUY THE BOOK AT A SPECIAL PRICE, TURN TO READER OFFERS ON PAGE 113.

