

A massive wildebeest herd crossing the Mara River



THE GREATEST SHOW ON EARTH

Camp-hopping along the route of East Africa's Great Migration, Iroshini Chua is awestruck by the region's wild beauty and discovers the importance of local conservation efforts

PHOTOS: KEVIN & IROSHINI CHUA; SINGITA

In the distance, a cloud arose from the banks of the river, blanketing the opposite hillside. Within the mist was what looked like black ants scuttling up the slope in a mesmerising pattern of meandering columns. As we drew closer, the soaked bodies emerging from the water glistened and steamed in the morning sun, taking shape to reveal thousands upon thousands of wildebeest. The sheer number was bewildering.

Behind us was a scene equally as dramatic. The entire landscape was enveloped in freshly kicked up, swirling dust. The thunder of hooves of a thousand more animals running towards the river interspersed with the bleating of the wildebeest added to the deafening cacophony. Our jeep found a safe spot on the bank, offering front-row seats to view what many in the travel industry dubbed The Greatest Show on Earth.

As the wildebeest took to the Mara River with its strong currents, they were swiftly swept away and sometimes lodged between rocks. Limbs of the unfortunate were snapped off. Some rolled belly-up in the water, a sure sign of succumbing to the jaws of hidden crocodiles. The strong swimmers made it to the opposite bank only to be faced with an impossibly steep, slippery climb. Hooves-on-head, they were scrambling to get out and, in the process, drowned one another. Sadly, the injured survivors would be hyena prey by nightfall. Some survivors turned back towards the river – distressed mothers and young calves forming a lonely line, crying desperately for lost loved ones, a few even returning to the treacherous waters, perhaps confused or lost.

It was an emotional crossing as much as it was chaotic with at least a thousand casualties floating downriver where fat vultures waited patiently for their daily feast. My husband, our guide and I were the only witnesses that chilly morning to one of nature's most incredible spectacles on the planet. Our guide Peter said: "You are lucky to see that so close to the camp. There were at least 20,000 wildebeest crossing today."

THE STAGE IS SET

We were staying at the Singita Mara River Tented Camp located on a dramatic riverbend in the remote northern tip of the Serengeti in Tanzania. In addition to being on the doorstep of the Great Migration crossing points, its location

Clockwise from right:
Singita Faru Faru
Lodge suite bathroom;
sundowners after a game
drive; Singita Mara River
Tented Camp suite



also assures the privilege of private game viewing. Sometimes the crossings can be interrupted by other eager vehicles that intimidate the wildebeest with their presence, so your choice of camp within the Mara River area is crucial.

Our tent at the Singita Mara River Tented Camp was the epitome of glamping, complete with Wi-Fi, ensuite toilets, and an outdoor bathtub with a spectacular view of the river and the surrounding wilderness. Its chic interiors incorporated canvas, stone, raw leather and art by young African artists. Singita's philosophy of sustainable tourism with minimal impact on the environment meant incorporating a solar power system on this property with an emphasis on recycling and the use of natural materials wherever possible.

In the evenings, we sat around the bonfire with canapés and cocktails, comparing sightings. Nearby, our chef worked at the barbecue grill turning over the lobsters and steaks.

What was surprising was the variety of food available despite its relatively remote location. We retired to our tents with the knowledge that we were in safe hands protected by the many security guards watching over us.

After a two-night stay there, we took a propeller plane into Singita's private airstrip in Sasakwa within the Grumeti Reserve. The distance that took 15 minutes for us to traverse would take the herds months during their annual migration, sending more than a million of them from the plains of the southern Serengeti and Ngorongoro Conservation Area to Serengeti's Western Corridor, almost reaching Lake Victoria. The migration sweeps through the Grumeti Reserve around mid-year, and even though the massive herds had left in search of greener pasture by the time we arrived in August, we still saw plenty of resident wildebeest and zebras along with a high concentration of other wildlife.

Clockwise from right: Sunset over the Serengeti plains; a cheetah on the hunt; the latest international culinary trends are offered at Singita



Our first lodging, where we stayed just one night, was the Singita Faru Faru Lodge set within Singita's 142,000ha private concession on the renowned migratory route. A recent revamp of the camp gave it an edgy new look that was built upon its existing footprint. Set along a riverside slope, the property channels serene simplicity and laid-back luxury. Soft earthy colours and contemporary geometric African decor welcomed us as we entered the expansive lounge. With a cold beetroot and ginger concoction in hand, I marvelled at the new glass-enclosed dining areas and living areas that invited the outdoors inside. The lodge also boasts vast outdoor decks, an interactive kitchen, a cafe-style bar and a secluded gym.

We were then escorted to a shaded lunch spot beside a glittering pool overlooking a waterhole. What followed was a series of wonderful culinary moments involving a five-course menu with curious monkeys just out of arm's reach. Our safari siesta was spent in our tent, which was a retreat of ivory and nude shades. A canopy bed took centre stage, basking in natural light thanks to oversized windows, while an outdoor sitting area and shower offered the luxury of private dining and bathing.

Our next accommodation in the Grumeti Reserve turned out to be the ultimate private safari retreat – the brand-new Hillside Suite at the Singita Sasakwa Lodge with its own private road access. Perched at the edge of a cliff overlooking the endless plains of the Serengeti, it boasts one of the most dramatic and enviable views in all of East Africa. Upon entry, my mind raced with images of romantic candlelit dinners on the outdoor deck, plunging into the infinity pool straight out of bed, tucking into the delicacies stocked in the signature bar-deli, rejuvenating massages in the comfort of the suite, lying on the sunloungers at night, and contemplating the starlit skies. Suddenly, our three-night stay seemed rather short.

The floor-to-ceiling glass-clad duplex was full of creature comforts, bespoke objects, handcrafted furniture and had all the trimmings of a pampering space. Our own field guide and butler ensured many a private meal and rendered us completely lazy. What I enjoyed most here was the luxury of absolute silence and being at eye level with the birds that took to the African skies. When we did wander to the main Sasakwa Lodge, we discovered the grandeur of a stately Edwardian Manor House evoking a charming old-world elegance. Wrap-around verandas, Persian carpets, parquet floors, French doors and vintage collectibles made it a completely different style to the modern space of our suite.

The next few days in the Grumeti were spent on twice-daily game drives discovering the abundant wildlife in the

area. As seasoned safari-goers we wanted to see more than just the Big Five, and our guide, who was also an expert driver, delivered. We had found ourselves in the middle of a stampede of zebras and wildebeest as we tried to keep up with a cheetah chasing its prey at 100km/h. We sped along with wild dogs as they hunted at dusk and returned to their den before the rain struck. We witnessed a sly hyena chase a doomed baby gazelle while its mother tried her best to protect it, only to have 10 more hyenas join the hunt. At sunset, we watched the sky evolve in myriad hues as we sipped cocktails and tucked into canapés in the bush.

THE SAVIOUR OF SERENGETI

Singita is an eco-safari brand with conservation at its heart. Its goal is to preserve and protect the land and wildlife in the African wilderness while creating economic independence in the local communities. It has been doing so for the past 25 years, working in partnership with non-profit trusts and funds to implement strategic conservation projects in six regions across Africa.

Singita's entire 142,000 acres of private land within the Grumeti Reserve is monitored by the Grumeti Fund, a non-profit organisation whose mission is to restore and rehabilitate the lands. It combines manpower with technology and focused strategy to ensure the protection of wildlife in the ecosystem by stopping poachers before they kill.

The fund also works on conservation projects, including the reintroduction of locally extinct animal species. There are anti-poaching teams and law enforcement personnel to reduce bush-meat poaching and elephant poaching for ivory. It has established 12 permanent scout patrol camps consisting mostly of former poachers, as well as a network of high-vantage Observation Posts that are manned 24/7. Furthermore, a state-of-the-art digital radio network and accompanying law enforcement database ensure Grumeti Fund's limited resources are deployed well.

The organisation has also launched a community outreach programme that aims to achieve higher levels of education among the youth, increase income-generation opportunities, and promote a peaceful coexistence between wildlife and humans.

In order to better understand local ecological systems, and to measure the effectiveness of the community and conservation work, it invests significantly in research and monitoring programmes, and is working towards a closer relationship with all relevant government, conservation and local community stakeholders within the Serengeti ecosystem.



ONWARDS INTO KENYA

Following the path of The Great Migration, we crossed over into the heart of Kenya's Masai Mara National Reserve. To our delight, our guide Elisha confirmed what our travel consultants at A2A Safaris had assured us prior to our trip – that we had arrived during one of the best months to see the Mara teeming with wildlife and our lodging at Governors' Il Moran Camp was closely situated to some of the best migration crossing points.

The Il Moran is the premier accommodation within the Governors' Camp Collection of four luxury camps in the Masai Mara. It shares the same prime location with the main Governors' Camp, which was established in 1972 and built on a campsite deemed so magical that a century ago, it was reserved exclusively for the colonial governors of Kenya.

Small and intimate, the Il Moran features 10 tents hidden by ancient trees deep in the forest, and its interiors are a contrast of beaded chandeliers, dark wood, tan leather and colourful couches. Meals are served on the



Clockwise from above: The Marsh Pride takes down its prey; the cosy lounge at Governors' Il Moran Camp; Loldia House was built by WWII Italian prisoners of war

raised wooden deck of the dining tent, where I found myself mesmerised by close-up animal portraits hanging on its walls.

It was a good sign of things to come when we had to cut across giraffe and elephant tracks when walking towards our tent located on the winding banks of the Mara River. It opened to reveal what was really a luxurious hotel suite constructed out of canvas. A gigantic carved king bed with a plump sofa at its foot lay on a carpeted floor. An equally large ensuite bathroom was concealed behind a canvas wall and showcased a standing bathtub set against polished wood panels. It wasn't long before I found myself

settled into the hammock that hung on our veranda to enjoy the antics of snorting hippos on the riverbank.

The difference between a regular game drive and an exquisite experience is an instinctive guide. During one session, Elisha spotted a lone wildebeest and cleverly positioned our vehicle in anticipation of what was to come. Mere moments later, we saw the resident Marsh Pride lionesses pounce, bringing the poor creature to the ground and tearing at its flesh before it even drew its last breath. I regretted falling asleep so quickly that night when my husband informed me the next morning that I missed the most deafening lion's roar.

Witnessing the impact of the climate crisis even in this spectacular wilderness is a sobering reminder of nature's fragile beauty – which even we, as tourists, have a duty to protect



Flamingos taking to the sky on our approach

A COUNTRY RETREAT

After days of an action-packed safari, we set forth for another Governors' Camp collection property, Loldia House, in the Kenyan countryside. You know it is a hidden gem when it takes a 20-minute drive from the gate through a private game park, past a farm and private airstrip, to arrive at the door of a beautiful colonial house set on the shores of Lake Naivasha.

I stretched my legs with a stroll in the pretty manicured gardens and expansive lawn of the 2,630ha property. Nearby, a pair of cocoon chairs swung from a tree branch. Under the canopy of an ancient tree with branches that stretched to the sky were dining tables, chairs, and a large wooden wagon restored and repurposed as a breakfast buffet table. Birds in formation soared above us while nervous gazelles grazed at a safe distance.

Built during WWII by Italian prisoners of war, Loldia House is an original Kenyan home that offered us a peek into the heritage of the early settlers and their gracious way of life. Our room was furnished with a four-poster bed and antique furniture. The cosy living room was the place we gathered for drinks before heading to the magnificent bottle-green dining room decorated with pretty pink upholstery and staffed by smartly dressed butlers who served dinner from silver platters.

During our stay we went on a night game drive to spot hippos, antelopes, hares and the ever-elusive aardvark. In the morning, we explored the Great Rift Valley by boat and admired the bountiful birdlife around us. We saw fish eagles hunt, cormorants sprint on the water surface before taking flight and pelicans huddled together, seemingly unafraid of our approach.

The main attraction of the area are the flamingos of Lake Nakuru. During our visit, however, the water levels of the lake were too high due to climate change. That destroyed the food source of these Lesser Flamingos, forcing many of them to migrate. Witnessing the impact of the climate crisis even in this spectacular wilderness is a sobering reminder of nature's fragile beauty – which even we, as tourists, have a duty to protect. ■

For more information on Singita's luxury safari lodges and its collaboration with the Grumeti Fund, visit singita.com and grumetifund.org respectively. To plan a bespoke African safari holiday, check out a2asafaris.com.