

UNDER AFRICAN

# SKIES



A baby elephant (bottom left); sunset views of a native African candelabra tree (left); cool canopy living at Tarangire Treetops (above)



## Five-star lodges, wildebeest stampedes and breathtaking views – *Nigel Tisdall* takes off on a flying safari around northern Tanzania

Everyone knows that going on safari guarantees thrills – getting a close-up look at the grace of a gazelle, the delicate eyelashes of a giraffe or the savage focus of a hungry hyena. But uniquely, I’m discovering all of this – along with useful tips, such as never wear blue or black (they attract Tsetse flies) – from the sky.

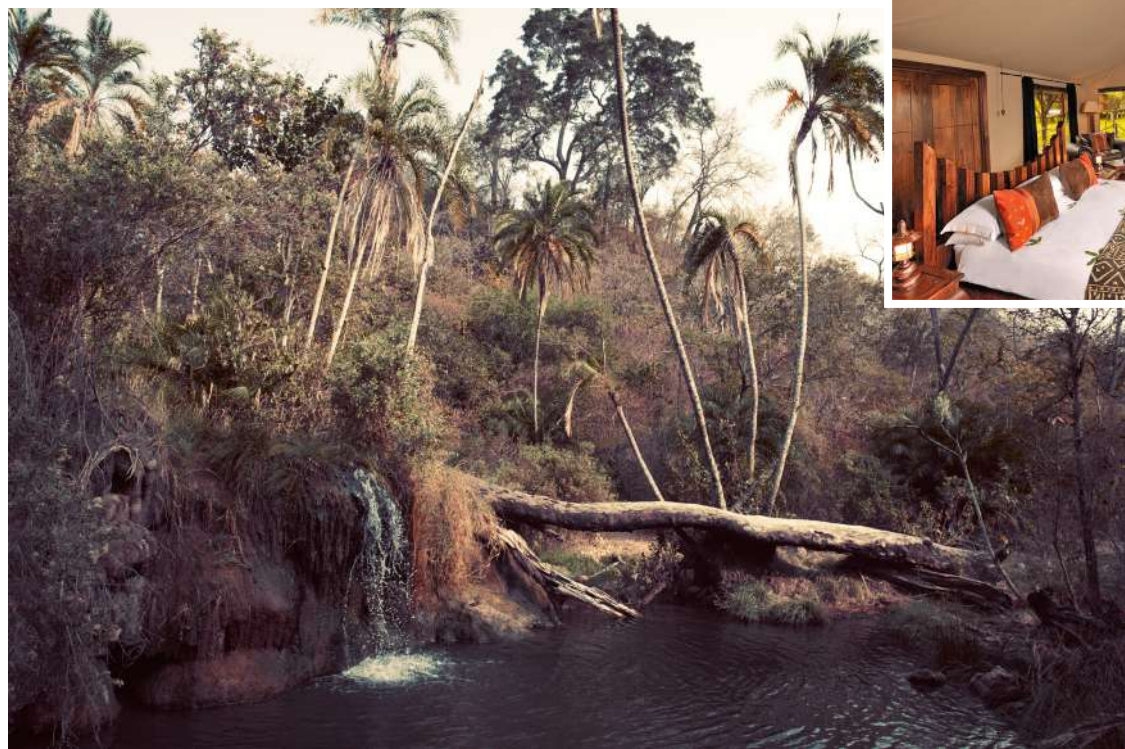
My wife Alice and I are on an all-inclusive, whistle-stop ‘SkySafari’ touring the savannah and highlands of northern Tanzania. Departing from Arusha year round, the trip aims to show you the wonders of the bush in just one week, but without scrimping on all the luxury and expert service one would wish for on a bucket-list holiday. You fly everywhere in a Grand Cessna Caravan plane that’s kitted out with nine business class-style leather seats, touching down in three different ecosystems for two nights each. Because you’re guaranteed a contrasting range of landscapes and wildlife, it’s ideal for safari first-timers.

One advantage of taking to the

skies is that you cut down on the long transfers between game drives – a common feature of overland safaris. Another is the joy of seeing east Africa from above (ask nicely and you can sit next to the pilot), gazing down at the ancient river valleys and wood-fenced stockades of the Maasai, criss-crossed with animal highways like the lines on your palms.

Our first flight is a 25-minute hop south west to Kuro, a rough airstrip in Tarangire National Park. Look, some zebras! And an ostrich! We’ve only just taken off, but the wows are coming thick and fast. And when we go to land, the pilot tilts the plane’s wings to reveal a herd of elephants feeding in the emerald-green swamps below. Tarangire is one of Tanzania’s less-visited parks, so it feels like we have the place to ourselves. Elephants are the big draw here – there are some 4,500 – along with the mighty, centuries-old baobab trees that look like wild-haired dancers at sunset.

Just outside the park is Tarangire ►



Clockwise from bottom left: a lioness gets up close and personal; equestrian pursuits at The Manor at Ngorongoro; riverbank plant life; safari-style glamping at the amazing Serengeti Migration Camp

### 'Elephants rub their bums against the trees and spray themselves with dust. Just another day at the jumbo beauty salon'



Treetops, the 20-room lodge where we're staying, with a small pool, super-smiley staff and chunky furniture made out of wood reclaimed from old dhows. The camp is unfenced, so you need a nightly escort to its lofty treehouses, which feel rustically romantic and are reached by a staircase with a trapdoor. The next morning, I wake up and tell Alice, 'I'm very sorry but there's an elephant in the room...' Well, actually it's right below us, breaking branches and chomping through the grass.

Our friendly little group gets even closer to Africa when we go on a walking safari one evening, guarded by two spear-carrying Maasai guides and a ranger with a rifle. This is the perfect way to really feel and smell the terrain - if a little scary as we creep up on some elephants in a river bed who are busily rubbing their massive bums on the acacia trees and spraying themselves with dust as a form of sun and insect protection. Just another day at the jumbo beauty salon.



The next leg of our aerial adventure is a 20-minute flight north west to Lake Manyara, the gateway for visiting the World Heritage-listed Ngorongoro Crater. Ringed with steep walls, this 19km-wide caldera is a vast, natural safari park where over 25,000 large animals live. Almost all the A-listers are here - including black rhino - and while it does get congested at times with way too many vehicles gathered around a sighting, it's not to be missed because you're guaranteed to see so much. Prowling hyenas, zebra stallions fighting, busybody warthogs and copulating lions - it's hard to know where to look (or not).

Fortunately, the SkySafari allows some downtime too, as we soon discover at The Manor at Ngorongoro - a whitewashed Cape Dutch-style country house hotel set in a coffee plantation near Karatu. Its 20 suites come with a sun terrace and log fire, and when you return from a hard day's game drive, it's standard practice to find your roll-top bath filled with bubbles and rose petals. Dinner is an elegant, five-course affair and there's a spa with treatments, which includes an Intonga Amasatchi massage that uses different-sized sticks to stretch the muscles. There are some excellent stables, too, so while Alice heads off

for a ride through the coffee bushes, I settle for a guided mountain bike ride through the hot, steep and muddy hills - a fantastic (but killer) workout.

After seeing so much, it seems unbelievable that we still have the Serengeti National Park to come. Around the same size as Northern Ireland, this is the classic safari landscape - rolling green plains where giraffes, ostriches, gazelles and zebras roam in picturesque harmony. Our scenic flight here is the longest - a dreamy 40-minute cruise that passes over the Ngorongoro Crater, then heads north towards the Kenyan border, passing over endless vistas of flat, dry, eternal Africa. When we land on another rough strip at Lobo, there's the customary greeting of cold towels and chilled drinks before the next game drive begins.

As often happens on safari, you see the best things when you're not looking for them. In our case, it's a huge male lion looking very lordly and content - and just ten metres away - as we transfer from the airstrip. Two days later, on the way back from another game drive, we come across an offshoot of the great migration - an incredible, ceaseless swirl of 1.5 million wildebeest that circles around the Serengeti. They like to make their daily move early in the morning, and when we behold their long lines, purposefully marching forth through clouds of dust like a



A room with an incredible view at Tarangire Treetops (above); SkySafari's Grand Cessna Caravan plane - better than your average commute (left); a herd of zebras cross the Serengeti plains (below)

well-drilled army, there's an immense feeling of satisfaction.

The Serengeti is the gift that keeps on giving, bursting with intriguing sights like the topi - an antelope known as 'blue jeans' because of its denim-hued shorts - and the whistling acacia tree, so-called from the sound the wind makes as it passes through holes drilled by ants in its trunk. For our final stop, we're glamping at the Serengeti Migration Camp where the 20 tented suites come with double doors, towelling slippers and a decanter of sherry. That's one of the peculiar pleasures of a luxury safari - one minute you're jumping over columns of viciously biting red ants or listening to hyenas celebrating a kill, the next you're sunbathing by the panoramic pool and nibbling gourmet

canapés under the incredible stars.

Set beside the Grumeti River, with a pool of hippos offering a free concert of comedy tuba-meets-foghorn noises, this is an ideal spot to watch the bush moving into the night shift. As the sun sets, the hornbills flap off to their roosts and the baboons climb up to their tree branches, then the great frog chorus commences.

By now our small, international group has totally bonded, and we stage a farewell dinner under a huge sausage tree bedecked with hurricane lamps, accompanied by a blazing fire and plenty of wine. It's hard to believe that we've seen and done so much in the space of a week, and in such style, too. Like the lions we've seen sleeping contentedly on the rocks, we feel on top of the world. ■



**Book now** Kenya Airways ([kenya-airways.com](http://kenya-airways.com)) operates daily flights from London Heathrow to Nairobi by B787 Dreamliner; return flights including connections to Kilimanjaro cost from £641. Transfers to Arusha take 90 minutes. An eight-day Tanzania SkySafari with SkySafari ([skysafari.com](http://skysafari.com)) costs from £5,910 per person based on two sharing, including shared charter flights, transfers, park fees, accommodation, all meals, drinks and safari activities. The trip begins with a night at Arusha Coffee Lodge, followed by two at Tarangire Treetops, The Manor at Ngorongoro and Serengeti Migration Camp ([elewanacollection.com](http://elewanacollection.com)). Extensions to Zanzibar, plus a similar Kenya SkySafari, are also available. Malaria precautions are required. For more information, see *Kilimanjaro & Northern Tanzania* by Lizzie Williams (£8.99; Footprint Focus).