

GONE EXPLORING

Acting Editor Rachelle Mackintosh heads to East Africa for a glamping adventure with a luxe twist

PHOTOGRAPHY BY RACHELLE MACKINTOSH



The most FAQ I hear in the lead-up to my East Africa adventure: “What about Ebola?” I’m a worrier, but the virus isn’t even on my radar – the West African outbreak’s closer to Europe than where I’m headed in Tanzania and Kenya. (FYI: at 30,221,532km², Africa is more than three times the size of Oz). What I *am* worried about: little planes. I’m visiting three remote glampsites on this trip – and getting between them means short flights on 14-seater Cessnas. But first, a big plane. My long-haul lands in Nairobi, Kenya’s capital, and I spend the night at The Emakoko, a plush lodge in the heart of Nairobi National Park. It’s just seven kilometres from the CBD but the park’s chockers with wildlife, and I fall asleep to the groans of distant lions – not a bad bush welcome.

HOT
STUFF



Sunrise over the Namiri Plains Camp in Tanzania's Serengeti National Park; glamping in Mara Plains Camp in Kenya's Maasai Mara (below)



Tarangire National Park selfie



A Serengeti sunset; Giraffes roam in Tarangire (right)

The next morning I grab my lady cojones for the hour-long flight to Kenya's Maasai Mara Nature Reserve, where I'll stay at Mara Plains Camp. The camp lies inside the 121km² Olare Motorogi Conservancy (an exclusive area not open to the general public) and takes glamping to a whole new level. For starters, each tent has polished floorboards, a claw-foot bath, wifi and a deck overlooking wild scenery (views of grassy plains filled with gazelles, wildebeests, zebras and topis – ie, dreamy).

I snoop around inside and find a yoga mat, skipping rope and Thera-Band; handy, because in lion country you can't just "pop out for a run". So, after a quick sweat session on the deck, I refuel with a tasty quinoa salad (meals are included and are deliciously clean), then head off on a game drive.

The Maasai Mara has one of the world's largest lion populations and three healthy prides live within the conservancy. Guide Dan Kaisaine and I only drive a few minutes before finding a big posse of snoozing ladies. We also see an endangered black rhino,

hyenas, a leopard and a handful of cheetahs – yep, it's Instagram heaven here. If you're keen to try some serious photography, the camp will loan you a fully kitted out Canon DSLR and burn your pics to CD before you leave.

Another bonus: Mara Plains Camp is owned by Great Plains Conservation*, which works closely with local Maasai communities to conserve the environment and support wildlife. The whole camp is cement-free so it can be dismantled without leaving any trace on the land = feelgood all round.

The next morning I get up well

before dawn for a hot-air balloon ride across the Maasai Mara. Drifting along in the silence, I spot wildebeests, elephants and zebras, the earth below appearing spongy in the rising sunlight. It's a soothing experience that buries my fear of flying for good.

HELLO, KITTY

Two painless charter flights and a border crossing later, I arrive at Namiri Plains Camp in Tanzania's Serengeti National Park. It's bush heaven. The camp has no permanent structures and the guest tents, staff quarters and main mess areas are spread

across a vast plain dotted with acacias. And while my posh tent comes with its own flush toilet, hot shower and queen-size bed, I know I'm far from Sydney when I'm told I can't go outside after dark without a Maasai guard (always a walkie-talkie click away). There's no fence around the camp, so animals pass through all the time. During my stay I see giraffes, gazelles and buffaloes right near my tent. Wild, right?

Namiri's off-the-gridness is clear when my guide, Blessed Mpfu, and I get bogged about 80 metres away from a pair of lions. We've no choice but to dig/jack the 4WD out and, though it's over quickly – and the lions are too snoozy/scared to come check us out – it's a massive rush. Serengeti looiife!

As we drive on, Blessed points out everything from swimming hyenas to feasting cheetahs, and more lions than my memory card can handle. The Serengeti's teeming with animals, especially during migration season when up to 1.2 million wildebeest, 750,000 zebras, and thousands of antelopes pass through, hungry

big cats hot on their hooves. But one of the biggest surprises of a stay at Namiri is just how calming the bush can be for a shouty mind. With such wild landscapes, gigantic skies and an ark of creatures going about their daily biz, it's impossible to feel stressed here – it's easier to just kick back and "be" in the moment. It's liberating, healing.

HOOFING IT

Ready to stretch my legs, I head to Oliver's Camp, which is famous for its walking safaris. The 10-tent glampsite lies on the edge of Tanzania's Tarangire National Park, a 2850km² reserve known for its elephants (around 5000 live here), birds, baobabs and plentiful residents like lions, cheetahs, buffaloes and leopards.

Hiking here's safer than you'd think. Before we head off, my guide, Milton Mpuche, explains the rules: keep the noise down, walk in a single file, and do exactly what he says if an animal appears. Easy. As a safety precaution, an armed park ranger joins us (though Milton says they've never had to fire their

guns, thankfully). Our two-and-a-half-hour walk meanders across flat, easy terrain. Though not physically challenging, it's an excellent way to see the scenery, with Milton pointing out animal tracks, birds and interesting plants along the way. We also get close to waterbucks, warthogs, dik-dik antelopes and giraffes (fun fact: the giraffes here are the Maasai subspecies, so their print has cool fuzzy edges).

Oliver's also offers longer walks, including full days and overnights to a remote fly camp – definitely on the list for my next visit. Afterwards, guide Joshua Thadeo and I head out on a drive and find countless friendly eles, a herd of buffaloes (which, weirdly, smells like a giant leather handbag) and one very angry leopard, who snarls until we get her message to bounce.

Preparing to leave Oliver's for my reluctant journey back to Australia, I hop into my tent's outdoor shower one last time. I'm just getting a good lather going when a herd of eles strolls into view – the perfect end to the wildest of glamping trips. **WH**

CHOOSE YOUR OWN ADVENTURE

Travelling between East African camps can be tricky without professional help. I enlisted The Classic Safari Company to build my itinerary and book all internal flights, accommodation and transfers (see classicsafaricompany.com.au). FYI: on the charter flights you're only allowed 15kg (including carry-on), but as the three camps I visited offered free laundry services, there's no need to pack your whole walk-in.

WITH THANKS TO THE CLASSIC SAFARI COMPANY: PHONE 1300 130 218. EMAIL INFO@CLASSICSAFARICOMPANY.COM.AU. ADDITIONAL PHOTOGRAPHY: KENT MATTHEWS; ISTOCKPHOTO. *FOR DETAILS SEE GREATPLAINSCONSERVATION.COM