

Trip Report

TANZANIA'S LEGENDARY GAME RESERVE

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STUNNING SELOUS

A brief but highly productive visit to a UNESCO World Heritage Site, one of Africa's most hauntingly beautiful - and largest - wildlife sanctuaries



African Elephant *Loxodonta africana*

The Selous Game Reserve is one of the largest faunal reserves in the world, located in the south of Tanzania. It was named after Englishman Sir Frederick Selous, a famous big game hunter and early conservationist, who died at Beho Beho in this territory in 1917 while fighting against the Germans during World War I.



Channel View

The Selous Game Reserve was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1982 due to the diversity of its wildlife and undisturbed nature.

TEXT AND PHOTOS
BY SCOTT BENNETT

There's just something about Africa. Ever since my first visit, it has forged an indelible imprint on my psyche. It has that special something; a feeling of timeless wilderness and raw beauty that is difficult to encapsulate into mere words. Having just finished a few underwater photo assignments in Tanzania, I was eager for a safari. Having previously experienced the northern safari circuit, I was eager to try somewhere new. Situated in the southern part of the country, the Selous Game Reserve proved to be just the ticket.

Bigger than Wales and four times the size of the Serengeti, the Selous is the largest game reserve in all of Africa. Covering approximately 50,000 km², it boasts panoply of habitats, from lakes and hot springs to acacia woodlands, riverine forest and open grassland, all boasting an incredible array of wildlife. Compared to the northern parks, it receives a fraction of the visitors due to its more remote location and fewer accommodation options. Tourism is confined to the region north of the Ruaha and Rufiji rivers, which comprises 12% of the park's total area.

My accommodation was the Lake Manze Adventure Camp, a relatively new camp operated by Coastal Aviation. My 4-day trip was booked online at the last minute and coincided with the arrival of the rainy season. While most people visit during the

height of the dry when game is crowded around the diminishing water supplies, the rainy season offers its own unique rewards. Although game is more widely dispersed, the landscape is verdant and birdlife abundant. Best of all, the crowds are absent, ensuring that a safari experience doesn't entail a squadron of vehicles parked around a hapless lion. With just under two weeks to go before closing for the rainy season, I would have the camp virtually to myself.

From Dar es Salaam's domestic terminal, the flight was under an hour, including stops at the park's other two airstrips. Dar's urban sprawl quickly gave way to endless miombo woodland, with an occasional road the only sign of human habitation. Making our final descent, wildlife was already apparent. Hippos frolicked in cola-brown water while zebra, giraffe and impala bolted for the safety of the trees. The lonely airstrip buzzed with activity, with several vehicles and a crowd of people waiting for the return flight. Patiently waiting to meet me was guide Victor and driver Ally, who promptly loaded my gear into the open-sided safari vehicle. I discovered the drive to camp would take an hour. It certainly didn't take long to find some photo subjects. As the Selous is a Game Reserve, off road driving is allowed, unlike in Tanzania's national parks. When Victor spotted some giraffe, zebra, waterbuck

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**Aerial View**

The Selous Game Reserve covers a total area of 54,600 km² (21,100 sq mi) and has additional buffer zones. Within the reserve no permanent human habitation or permanent structures are permitted. All human entry and exit is carefully controlled by the Wildlife Division of the Tanzanian Ministry of Natural Resources and Tourism.



Fighting Hippos *Hippopotamus amphibius*

Some of the typical species of the bush (elephants, hippos, African Wild Dog, Cape buffalo, crocodiles) can be found here in larger numbers than in any other African game reserve or National Park. However the reserve is large, and densities of animals are lower than in the more regularly visited northern tourist circuit of Tanzania.



Palmyra Palm *Borassus aethiopum*

The area was first designated a protected area in 1896 by the German Governor Hermann von Wissmann and finally became a hunting reserve in 1905.

and greater kudu way off in a clearing, we set out after them cross-country. Shortly afterwards, the road was blocked by a convention of marabou storks. A large bird with a vaguely sinister appearance, the marabou boasts a wingspan of at least 3.5m, one of the largest of any land bird. A frequent scavenger, it eats mainly carrion, but will also take fish, frogs, eggs, small mammals and reptiles. With over twenty birds to choose from, it made photography a challenge. A sign soon proclaimed the turnoff to the camp. Enroute, we stopped alongside the lake itself. Like ghostly sentinels, dead trees rose from the placid waters, their tangle of spreading branches bare against the clear blue sky. A shrill cry announced the presence of an African fish eagle perched atop one of the highest branches. A small crocodile deftly snapped up a fish as sacred ibis, blacksmith plovers and yellow-billed storks patrolled the shallows. An African pied kingfisher, Africa's largest, hovered high above the water like a miniature helicopter before plummeting to the surface to spear an unwary fish. All this and I hadn't even unpacked my bags yet!

Arriving at the camp, I was warmly greeted by resort manager Sarah Gigli. Hailing from Italy, she was the sole woman in a staff of fifty. Manze's communal area consists of an expansive thatched roof spreading above a sand floor, with armchairs and sofas to observe the animals come and go. Although initially dismayed to discover the tents lacked electricity, I was relieved to

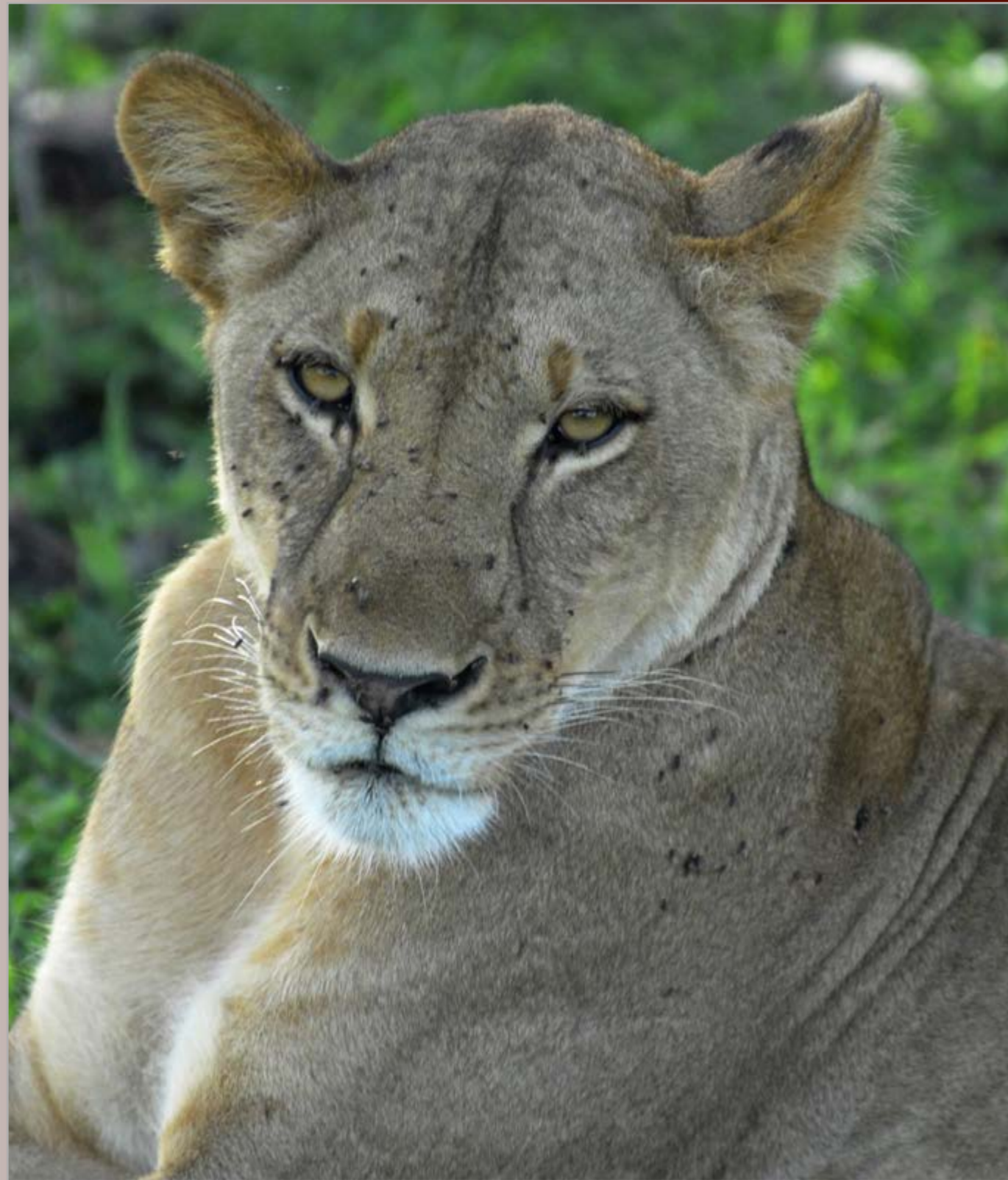
discover an extensive bank of outlets at the bar for charging camera batteries and my laptop. During my briefing, a loud trumpeting caused my eyes to widen, much to Sarah's amusement. "Was that an elephant?" I queried, with a smidgeon of nervousness creeping into my voice. "Yes, they come through the camp all the time" she responded nonchalantly. At that moment, civilization seemed very distant indeed! With the sun creeping towards the horizon, Sarah informed me an escort back to my tent was required. Waiting dutifully at the path was one of the resort's staff of Masai. Colourfully garbed in striking crimson robes, his weaponry consisted of a slender wooden staff with a conspicuous lack of sharp points. I didn't want to contemplate how he would deal with a rampaging elephant. Then again, with generations of experience dealing with Africa's megafauna, I knew I was in good hands. My accommodation was a Meru-style canvas tent complete with windows, washroom, outdoor shower and a covered verandah. Candles and kerosene lamps provided lighting. Simple yet comfortable, I felt like I'd been transported back to the safari days of old. All I was missing was the pith helmet! With just over an hour before being collected for dinner, I stretched for a snooze. I had barely drifted off when a colossal trumpeting propelled me into mid-air. Senses on high alert, I waited for a repeat. Fumbling for my torch, I looked to the tent flap, where I half-expected to see an elephant's face peering through the mesh.

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Nile Crocodile *Crocodylus niloticus*

Most of the Selous Reserve - one of the largest remaining wilderness areas in Africa today - remains set aside for game hunting through a number of privately leased hunting concessions, but a section of the northern Park along the Rufiji River has been designated a photographic zone and is a popular tourist destination.



Lioness *Panthera leo*

Lions live for 10–14 years in the wild, while in captivity they can live longer than 20 years. They inhabit savanna and grassland, but they may take to bush and forest.

I was soon grateful for my escort as my guide's torch beam illuminated the ghostly silhouette of an elephant lumbering across the path. Near the reception area, we made a slight deviation. Sitting at the base of a tree, a large puff adder sat motionless, waiting for prey to come within striking distance. Apparently, it had already been there for two days. Before dinner, Sarah asked what activities I'd like to do during my stay. On offer was a walking safari, game drives and a choice of boat cruises. Although fun, I have found walking safaris not to be particularly conducive to photography. Instead, I opted for a boat cruise in the morning followed by an afternoon game drive. After a delicious dinner under the stars, I ventured back to my tent to prepare camera gear for the next morning.

Sunrise was heralded by a cacophony of white-browed sparrow weavers residing in the tree beside my tent. A jumbled medley of birdsong soon punctuated the morning air, with ring-necked dove, red-billed hornbill and go-away birds contributing to the chorus. Stepping outside, I stopped dead in my tracks. A short distance away, a buffalo stared menacingly. Needless to say, I didn't venture past the verandah until my Masai escort showed up.

After a coffee, I boarded the truck by 7:00. A short drive brought us to a channel leading to Lake Manze. In a continent where the pendulum swings tempestuously between wet and dry, the area's permanent water supply is a welcome relief to the local

wildlife. Although we would concentrate on the channels, we started with a short detour into Lake Manze itself. The early morning light was glorious. Ahead, a flotilla of bobbing heads indicated the presence of hippos. Piled atop one another, snorting and squabbling, there's just something about hippos that I find inherently amusing. Their comical appearance belies the reality however, as they kill more people in Africa every year than all other animals combined. Fortunately, the first pod possessed a benign temperament and we were able to approach reasonably close.

The myriad of channels proved to be a bird photographer's delight. Numerous yellow-billed storks flanked the waters' edge, along with open-billed storks, African jacana's, goliath herons, Egyptian geese and white-faced whistling ducks. Crafty hunters, black egrets spread their wings over the water, generating shade to lure unsuspecting fish right to their feet. Reeds fringing the shore were home to Africa golden weavers, whose basket-shaped nests dangled precariously above the waterline. Jewel-like malachite kingfishers were everywhere and were exceedingly tolerant. More than once, we actually got closer than my lens' closest focusing distance and had to back up! Motoring around a bend in the channel, we happened upon a lone buffalo foraging at the water's edge. Gently drifting right up to the enormous beast, it glared at us, eyes imbued with brooding malevolence. Daintily perched atop its head, a cattle egret completed the picture. Before long, it

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African Elephant *Loxodonta africana*
 Habitats found in the Selous Game Reserve include grassland, typical *Acacia* savanna, wetlands and extensive Miombo woodlands.



Black Egret *Egretta ardesiaca*
 Walking safaris are permitted in the Selous, and boat trips on the Rufiji - offering excellent photographic opportunities - are a popular activity.



Lion cub *Panthera leo*

The lion is a vulnerable species, with a major population decline in its African range of 30–50% per two decades during the second half of the 20th century. Although the cause of the decline is not fully understood, habitat loss and conflicts with humans are the greatest causes of concern.

was time to head back to the camp, where a delicious full breakfast was waiting. Even in the dining area, wildlife was never far away. Sparrow weavers hopped about my feet while a crested barbet waited patiently for errant crumb atop a nearby chair. I stopped to see if the puff adder was still there. It hadn't budged, so I quickly returned to my tent to grab my tripod and get a few shots. After uploading my photos and a change of memory cards, it was time for the afternoon game drive. Despite being on the cusp of the green season, wildlife was abundant and easy to spot. Impalas were virtually everywhere. Giraffe were equally plentiful; so much so that I soon stopped taking photos of them unless they were in exceptional light or striking a unique pose. To cap off a stunning drive, we were rewarded with a pride of lions, including a male, five females and a bevy of restless cubs. Stopping within a few metres of them, I spent a very pleasant half hour photographing to my heart's content. During the entire drive, I don't think I saw more than one other vehicle.

The ensuing two days yielded a never-ending array of photo ops. On an early morning drive, a young male elephant, clearly miffed by our presence, decided to show us to show us who was boss. With ears flapping like giant leathery umbrellas, he charged, halting a scant few metres from our front bumper. I turned to my guide Emanuel. "Is it wise for us to be this close?" I queried, my voice quavering with alarm. "He's just trying to scare us" was the

Spotted Hyena *Crocuta crocuta*

A highly successful animal, being the most common large carnivore in Africa.



nonchalant response. I couldn't help but think that he was succeeding! After a minute of bluster, the belligerent teenager retreated and resumed feeding. As the heat subsided by late afternoon, hippos started moving ashore. One large bull, flanks criss-crossed with a bevy of scars, lunged towards a female with a calf resulting in an open-mouthed standoff. Fortunately, no damage was done and the quarrelsome male melted into the dense vegetation.

There was still one bird I was eager to see. Despite having observed both little and white-fronted bee-eaters, one colourful relative had thus far remained elusive: the carmine bee-eater. Motoring across the lake to an island of vegetation, we came across not one, but an entire garrulous colony! With nothing to rest my lens on, I was forced to shoot at a higher ISO to compensate for the rapidly waning light. Thank goodness for the VR function!

Alas, my visit flew by all too quickly and my final morning drive had arrived. We would do a game drive enroute to the airstrip, stopping for a full-on bush breakfast. Ironically, carmine bee-eaters now seemed to be everywhere. Out on the savannah, they were easy to spot, perching on the upward spreading limbs of fallen trees. Stopping to observe one specimen, it swooped off, only to return moments later with a bee firmly clasped in its slender bill. Focusing on its preferred perch, I was able to get a number of

images as the bird made several forays, returning to exactly the same spot. Strikingly attired lilac-breasted rollers also proved cooperative, as we were able to come right up to them as they perched on roadside shrubs.

My stay at Selous, albeit brief, was simply incredible. Although the mammal photography was superb, it was the birds that I especially enjoyed. In the Selous, full frame images could be easily produced without hauling around a monster lens. Yet, despite seeing so much, I barely scratched the surface of what the park had to offer.

When travelling in Africa, wildlife photographers wielding a mountain of gear had better brace themselves. Due to the small planes being utilized on the domestic routes, local airlines are exceptionally stringent when it comes to baggage weight. As both you and your baggage will be weighed at check-in, bring only what you absolutely need. To help minimize gear, zoom lenses are a good bet. My gear consisted of a pair of Nikon D200 bodies with an 80-400mmVR and 17-70mm lenses, a wireless flash and a polarizer. As the vast majority of shooting is done in a boat or vehicle, tripods are pretty much impractical. A beanbag is a much better option. On a final note, try to wear as many of your clothes as possible on your departure day. You may broil, but it's definitely worth it. Finally, keep a pair of cameras at the ready at all times. Always expect the unexpected!



White-faced Whistling Duck *Dendrocygna viduata*

A highly gregarious species, with flocks of a thousand or more birds.



Northern Carmine Bee-eater *Merops nubicus*

Carmine Bee-eaters nest in large colonies in cliffs, usually near river banks, where they use their bills to dig long horizontal nesting tunnels, often eight feet or more in length. The main hunting strategy of bee-eater is to keep watch for flying insects from a perch, and then snatch them out of the air using their beaks, before returning to the perch.



Goliath Heron *Ardea goliath*
The world's largest heron. The height is 120–152 cm (47–60 in), the wingspan is 185–230 cm (73–91 in) and the weight is 4–5 kg (8.8–11 lbs).



Northern Carmine Bee-eater *Merops nubicus*
The Bee-eaters' diet is made up primarily of bees and other flying insects, such as grasshoppers and locusts.



African or Cape Buffalo *Syncerus caffer*

This species is not closely related to the wild Asian water buffalo, and its ancestry remains unclear. The African buffalo is not the ancestor of domestic cattle, and is only distantly related to other larger bovines. Owing to its unpredictable nature, which makes it highly dangerous to humans, the African buffalo has never been domesticated.



African Fish Eagle *Haliaeetus vocifer*
A large species that is found throughout sub-Saharan Africa wherever large bodies of open water occur.



Lilac-breasted Roller *Coracias caudatus*
Widely distributed in sub-Saharan Africa and the southern Arabian Peninsula, preferring open woodland and savanna.



African or Cape Buffalo with egret *Syncerus caffer*
One of the most successful grazers in Africa. It lives in swamps and floodplains, as well as mopane grasslands and forests of the major mountains of Africa.



Yellow-billed Stork *Mycteria ibis*
A large wading bird in the stork family *Ciconiidae*. It occurs in Africa south of the Sahara and in Madagascar.

Lioness *Panthera leo*

Sleeping mainly during the day, lions are primarily nocturnal or crepuscular.

**Selous' Zebra** *Equus quagga selousi*

A severely endangered species mostly found in Mozambique.

**Puff Adder** *Bitis arietans*

A very common, highly cryptic and extremely dangerous species.

**Nile Crocodile with prey** *Crocodylus niloticus*

An opportunist hunter which will prey on fish, reptiles, birds and mammals.



Hippopotamus *Hippopotamus amphibius*

Hippos are some of the largest quadrupeds and they can easily outrun a human, having been clocked at 30 km/h (19 mph) over short distances. Hippos - among the most aggressive creatures in the world and, as such, among the most dangerous animals in Africa - are threatened by habitat loss and poaching for meat and ivory.

Camp tent interior

There are several high end lodges and camps in the Selous Game Reserve, mainly situated along the river and lake systems.



Hippopotamus *Hippopotamus amphibius*
Hippos are semiaquatic, inhabiting rivers, lakes and mangrove swamps, where territorial bulls preside over a stretch of river and groups of five to 30 females and young. During the day, they remain cool by staying in the water.



Bush breakfast

Rather difficult road access means most visitors arrive by small aircraft from Dar es Salaam, though train access is also possible.