

# A FAMILY AFAR

A safari? Beats *Strictly*, according to GRACE CAIN's mother – who ventures to Tanzania with her daughter to fulfil a dream of seeing elephants in the wild

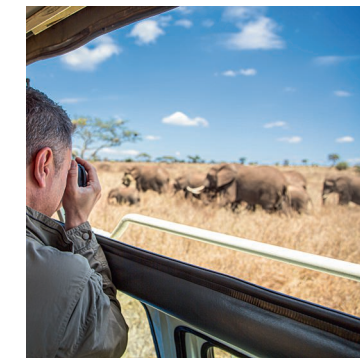


MY MUM HASN'T remembered that you have to put your liquids in a plastic bag when you go through airport security, and apparently that's totally my fault. It's a bit like all those times I don't telepathically know her Facebook password, or recall where she's left her phone.

It is a truth universally acknowledged that travelling with family is not always easy, and that's before you factor in the prospect of 5am wake-up calls and potentially life-threatening wildlife. To many of my friends, taking a sexagenarian on a Tanzanian safari had seemed an alien (and possibly ill-advised) idea; several people told me they were saving such a trip for their (hopefully) once-in-a-lifetime honeymoon. But Susan Cain has long harboured a dream to "see the elephants in the wild", and what Sue wants, Sue shall get.

After two flights and a three-hour drive (during which we are obliged to use the bush bathroom... I don't want to talk about it), we are both starting to regret our life decisions. We cling to the 4WD as it rattles around the rim of the vast Ngorongoro Crater, bumping past families of baboons in a race to beat the rapidly falling darkness. We lose. By the time we reach the gates of Sanctuary Ngorongoro Crater Camp, we can barely see the tusks of two watchful elephants glinting through the trees. But the camp itself is infinitely more enticing, with a family-style dinner and cocktails around a firepit. Here, we are allocated our 'tent', although that's quite a misleading term – no sweaty nylon here. These tents have heaters, electric blankets (despite our insistence that London is much colder than Ngorongoro, everyone seems perpetually concerned we might be chilly), sumptuous beds that envelop you whole and – praise be – hairdryers. When it comes to navigating multigenerational trips, the little conveniences mean a lot.

We are in Tent Three, with Reuben as our 'butler' – which feels like a strange and slightly uncomfortable way to describe someone whose responsibilities include keeping us alive: Reuben must accompany us everywhere after dark in case of any unexpected animal encounters, a precaution that – in the cosy setting of the bar – seems rather unnecessary. That is, until we are on our way to bed after the first evening's



hearty dinner – and Reuben suddenly flashes his torch against two big luminous eyes.

"It's a waterbuck," he says cheerfully, while Sue and I try to use each other as human shields. "Sometimes you might also hear zebras in the night," he adds. "They like to eat the soft grass under the tent." Worth knowing... but I am asleep within moments of crawling into my exceptionally comfy bed, secure in the knowledge that, somewhere beyond the warm haze of the camp, four Maasai warriors are patrolling the darkness.

Sue is a notorious morning-hater, but even she can't complain at Reuben's gentle 5am wake-up call featuring homemade biscuits, a pot of coffee and his earnest smile. (As time goes by, I start to wonder if Reuben ever sleeps. He has an uncanny yet reassuring ability to magically appear in less time than it takes to unzip a tent, and no request is ever too much trouble.) And the struggle of leaving the electric blankets is eased by the promise of an adventure on the Ngorongoro Crater floor with our expert guides, Dominic and Emmanuel – whom we bombard with questions that they field with more skill and good humour than any Attenborough documentary I've seen.

The Ngorongoro Crater (I am told) is not a crater but a caldera, formed millions of years ago when a volcano erupted and collapsed in on itself. Today, its fertile land is home to more than 35,000 animals. We rumble past some of them, gawping at groups of skittish gazelles and apathetic zebras. In the distance, buffalos stain the edges of the crater like tiny spots of ink. We hear the call of a cuckoo, and Emmanuel says the sound heralds rain. A skinny spotted serval cat strolls across the road in front of us, uninterested in our presence. At one point, Emmanuel points towards the lake, where a statuesque lion stands guard over his latest kill. We watch the vultures watch the hyenas watch the lion, while the water is peppered by an indifferent flamboyance of flamingos (Emmanuel is excellent at collective nouns, and this is my favourite).

We come across a group of warthogs sporting mullets to rival Joe Exotic's. "A lion's snack," says Emmanuel, indicating a single tuffet-topped

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baby. I assume this is (sort of) a joke until he tells us warthogs usually have up to six offspring, and this one is evidently the only survivor. "No more popcorn in that bowl," he chuckles.

There is a slightly frantic moment when we all try to get a satisfactory picture of a group of half-hidden elephants, but our guides tell us not to worry – we'll see plenty at our next port of call. By the time we arrive at Tarangire National Park it is early evening, and the sun is beginning to melt across the sky like butter. The elephants slowly emerge from behind a fat baobab tree, lumbering gracefully past the 4WD, some so close I could reach out and brush my fingertips along their ears. Sue cries because she has achieved her elephant dream (though it would be more heartwarming if she didn't also cry at Sunday evening TV dramas).

The warmest welcomes come with the offer of a cocktail – and a legal waiver declaring that the host is not responsible for your demise at the jaws of lions, leopards, cheetahs, your own stupidity, et cetera. Our arrival at Sanctuary Swala Camp is serenaded by angry noises in the night. "It's a lion!" smiles a member of the team as he hands me a cool glass of lychee juice from a tray. Fortunately, tall Maasai warriors are on hand to escort us between the dining area and our new tent, which is just as luxurious as the last. This one has an outdoor shower, which adds to the overall feeling that Sanctuary Swala is (forgive me) at one with nature – except you can also enjoy leisurely three-course meals that crawl languidly through the evening and then explode in late-night festivities. "This is better than *Strictly!*!" Sue tells me one night, as the staff join us in dancing around the table. High praise indeed.

Sweet-faced vervet monkeys and their babies come up to our table at breakfast, only to be >



*This page, from top: Tarangire National Park is famous for its large elephant herds and dry-season mini-wildlife migration, during which some 250,000 animals enter the park; secluded luxury is the ethos at the exceptionally private Sanctuary Swala. Opposite page, from top: Baby elephants enjoy a tug-of-war in mum's shadow; a guide prepares an open-air lunch during a game drive*



*This page: A lioness basks in the midday sun as safari-goers look on, while (below) a majestic fully grown lion surveys his kingdom. Opposite page: A zebra takes a momentary pause from its savannah meanderings*

abruptly shooed away by the staff. “These are very, very naughty monkeys,” says one waiter, shaking his head gravely, as Sue looks sympathetically at a would-be food thief. From the communal veranda, we watch elephants, giraffes and other Tarangire residents on their stately procession to the nearby lake. It makes for a relaxing start to the day. Slightly less relaxing? Having to chase a lizard out of the tent while your mother shrieks like a banshee.

In theory, you could never leave the comfort of your private veranda and simply allow Tarangire to move around you. But then you’d miss out on the chance to enjoy a walking safari led by the endless source of wisdom that is Sanctuary Swala’s head ranger, Joseph. Did you know an aardvark can eat tens of thousands of termites in a night, then excrete up to five kilos? Neither did I until I met Joseph; and now I have a mental image that can never be erased.

As we pick our way between the tall termite mounds, Joseph helps me to see the landscape in new ways. He calls wildebeest “the clowns of

the bush”, describing them as the leftovers of creation. “The mane of a lion, the skinny legs of a cow, the big bushy eyebrows and the flat nose,” he laughs affectionately. Joseph carries a rifle but hopes he will never use it. “If I ever have to shoot an animal, it will be because of something I’ve done wrong. This is their area, not mine. The moment I retire without killing an animal is the moment I will be happy.”

He also tells us the watering hole we watch over breakfast is a relatively new addition to the landscape – it appeared one particularly rainy season. As we walk along the bank, I seem to have fairies hovering around my boots, carrying the early morning light on their wings. “Groundlings,” smiles Joseph. “And some are lacewings.” Later that day, we take to the water in canoes, paddling through the arch of a perfectly timed rainbow and along the shoreline where animals come to drink. From the corner of one eye, I notice something heavy flop from one of the trees that poke up out of the water. It’s probably for the best that I don’t learn pythons can swim until much later.

Arguably, though, the most memorable way to experience Tarangire is from the sky. Ever tried to persuade a 63-year-old woman with a fear of heights to clamber into a hot-air balloon? I have. Coaxing Sue to actually stand up and look out over the park takes some doing. But the anxiety is quickly replaced by the awe of seeing it all from above: zebras scampering across the dry grass, startled by the sporadic roars of the balloon; lolloping giraffes, all necks and legs, striding past chunky buffalo and skinny impala; elephants and lonely ostriches; wildebeest drinking from the Tarangire river, the thin backbone of this vast park.

As we sit alone on our veranda on the final afternoon at Sanctuary Swala, a solitary elephant plods slowly towards us and begins to make a meal of the tree just metres away. We hear the crunch of every leaf between his teeth, and I have a strange feeling that I’m inside a memory. We watch him in companionable silence until he wanders away, and Sue starts crying again. And this time, I do too. □

*Abercrombie & Kent offers a variety of luxury trips to Tanzania. Visit A&K on the Lower Ground Floor at Harrods, go to [abercrombiekent.co.uk](http://abercrombiekent.co.uk) or call +44 (0)20 7173 6440*



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