

AFRICA

# Walking with wildebeest in the Serengeti

Sue Watt joins an on-foot safari and gets an intimate view of the migration



Wildebeest in the Serengeti National Park in Tanzania  
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**L**ying by the new swimming pool at Namiri Plains, G&T in hand, I'm catching up on the local gossip. It's five years since I was last here and much has changed. Bob

Marley has died, his best mate Ziggy is now an elusive, battle-scarred old man and Courtney has totally disappeared. Namiri means “big cat” in Swahili, an apt name for a camp in one of the best places to see cheetahs and lions in east Africa. This remote corner of the eastern Serengeti was closed to the public for big cat research until 2014, when the pioneering safari operator Asilia Africa opened the first camp here.

Then, I'd often seen Courtney the cheetah, lithe and long-legged, stalking an unlucky Thomson's gazelle (aka a tommie). The seemingly indomitable males Bob and Ziggy were two of the 57 lions I saw in three days here. Named after the reggae singer and his son because of their dreadlock-like manes, they even survived attacks from a gang of four lions known as “the Killers”.

Namiri, which reopened in September, has been redesigned and there's now a new cast of feline stars. Take the Zebra Plains pride, which I see lying on the kopjes (granite outcrops): two lionesses, four tiny cubs and three older cubs, all with tubby tummies, dozing, tugging at mum's tail or clambering over their siblings on the rocks. Patena Lukeine, my guide, who has followed this pride for six years, tells me all their previous cubs were lost to greedy hyenas or to male lions killing the youngsters to mate with their mothers.



For now, all is well. “They’ve got full bellies, all their babies are here and they’re looking out over their beautiful plains. What more could they want?” Patena asks. It’s a blissful scene and, unusually for the Serengeti, we have it to ourselves.

It’s a far cry from Seronera Airstrip, the Serengeti hub, where I landed that morning before the 90-minute drive to Namiri. There, about 20 vehicles jostled for space to watch lions mating. It felt like a predator peep show.

Compare that with the entirely private viewing I have, an hour from Seronera, of my first cheetah, panting heavily in the golden grasses of a huge plain near Kibumbu Kopjes. At her feet lies a freshly killed tommie, its blood still glistening red. Her cub, its fur in Mohican spikes down its spine, jumps over the grasses to share the feast.

I've returned to the Serengeti to spend a few days at the updated Namiri Plains, then spend a few more off-grid in the enigmatically named Wilderness Zone, where I'll have the chance to walk with wildebeests during their great migration.



Namiri Plains

I barely recognise Namiri Plains when we arrive. An hour from its nearest neighbours, it's in the same spot as before, beside the reed-fringed Ngare Nanyuki River. Yet Namiri itself has transformed from a minimalist, unfussy camp to one of the most desirable places to stay in the Serengeti.

The ten huge rooms are a delectable mix of stone, wood and cream-coloured canvas. Each one has sliding doors all along one side, leading to outdoor decking, loungers, an alfresco bath and views of the river and its wildlife. At night, buffalo chomp at the grasses by my bedroom and lions roar and chase prey: one beleaguered animal bumps into my decking in the dark. For all

the contemporary style and comforts of my room, these sounds remind me I'm still deep in the bush.

The lounge and dining area are similarly light and spacious, with a cocktail bar themed around fossils. A spa, pool and library complete Namiri's new look. The friendly team and fabulous food of the camp remain unchanged.

Sometimes the plains around Namiri look empty, but Patena is not fooled. Next morning, as we're driving, he suddenly stops and reverses. He points way ahead to three cheetahs lying down. Two of them sit upright in perfect synchrony, looking like a pair of china statues. A third is doing some Pilates-esque stretching.

The plains around Gol Kopjes seem to go on for ever in bands of beige, gold and green. Here, hyenas wash their bloodstained mouths and paws in a waterhole. Hundreds of zebras graze on the grasses along with tommies and Grant's gazelles. The Gol Pride, two lionesses and seven cubs, are resting under a thorny acacia, but one boisterous boy decides to climb the tree and promptly gets stuck. He reverses clumsily, slips and eventually sidesteps gingerly down the bough.



The bar at Namiri Plains

Then we meet a cheetah called Keziah, her five cubs sleeping all around her. She's a "super-mum" because she has kept them all alive, and has even adopted an orphaned cub, which is unusual behaviour for cheetahs. Later that evening I hear that Keziah is a favourite of Dennis Minja, a researcher for the Serengeti Cheetah Project, which Asilia Africa supports. Giving a presentation to the guests at Namiri, he tells us that 95 per cent of cheetah cubs die, killed by predators or bush fires.

The Serengeti is best known for the great migration, when two million wildebeest and 800,000 zebras follow the rains and traverse the plains in their search for fresh pastures. They are easily seen from Namiri for about four months of the year, around March and April, then November and December, as they pound their cyclical route around the southern Serengeti, over to the Western Corridor and Grumeti River, on north to Kenya's Masai Mara, then east to the grassy plains.

In early November the increasingly erratic rains haven't yet reached Namiri, so the wildebeest haven't either. However, there are plenty of them in the Serengeti's exclusive central wilderness zone, my next stop, where I join the walking-safari specialist Wayo Africa. We'll spend three days walking with the wildebeest, with no one else around for miles.

There are no signposts as we turn on to a dirt track that takes us to the wilderness zone, one of the few areas in the national park where walking is allowed.

"You'd think it would be easy to see wildebeest in the Serengeti, but they're unpredictable," my guide Prim Mlay tells me. "They just follow the rains and they can change their minds any time. They move up to 45km a day, so it's impossible to plan."



Alfresco dining

Wildebeest weren't at the front of the queue when beauty and grace were handed out. Tanzanian legend has it that God created them using leftover bits of other animals. Individually, they do look weird, with long faces, thick necks, sloping shoulders and puny hips. Yet they have a certain beauty when they're en masse, their hides a glossy palette of grey, mink, black and brown.

Only three operators have access to this wilderness zone and they liaise to ensure their paths never cross. My guide Jean du Plessis, the founder of Wayo Africa, explained that, to date, his company is the only one allowed to walk in the Northern and Southern Wilderness Zones, so they can follow the migration year-round. Du Plessis gained his access having trained the park's rangers on anti-poaching strategies.

My camp for the night is a world away from Namiri, but has everything I need.

My dome tent has just enough room for a double bed and my bags. Beyond that is my bathroom tent with a compost loo, bucket shower and basin. But it has its own charms: a spectacular setting with views to the northern Serengeti. Our dinner — an African line-up of beans, beef stew, curried

plantains and rice — is served by the campfire under a starlit sky.

In the morning Prim gives a safety briefing with our armed ranger Atheman. “When we encounter animals, we need to show respect, not fear,” he says. “If you run, you show fear and they’ll attack. If you stay still, you’re saying, ‘I respect you.’”

Over the next two days, on walks lasting anything from a couple of hours to a full day, we see thousands of wildebeest — although they’re usually too far away to follow. Sometimes they form an orderly single file like an army of giant ants, trudging after the leader. Sometimes they hang around in smaller herds, joining the crowds when they feel like it. Sometimes they’re nowhere to be seen, as if two million beasts can just disappear.

Yet there’s always something to look at: old buffaloes run away when they see us; topis, those beautiful antelopes, stand deadly still; warthogs trot off indignantly.

The lion sees us before we see her. She gives us a warning, a low, rumbling growl. “Just stand still,” Prim tells us. So we wait, 60ft away. I’m frozen to the spot, my heart pounding. Then she relaxes. “Lions are good like that,” Prim says.



Hot air balloons over the Serengeti National Park

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Finally, we see wildebeest and zebra ahead. As we get closer, some stand and stare, some move towards us for a better view. All are curious, with the wildebeest grunting as if they're consulting each other — these things on two legs are an unfamiliar sight. The zebras bolt and the rest follow, storming away to a soundtrack of baritone braying and thundering hooves. "When one runs, they all run," Prim says.

As they quieten down, we nudge closer until we're within 90ft, constantly swiping flies and with the pungent smell of dung filling our nostrils. I've seen wildebeest many times frantically crossing the Mara River, desperation in their eyes as they try to escape the crocs with their evil grins, always surrounded by convoys of Land Cruisers. But I've never seen them like this, relatively calm and close-up, on foot in the wilderness with no one else around. Jean was right: it's special.

### NEED TO KNOW

Sue Watt was a guest of Expert Africa, which has eight nights' full board from £7,849pp, including all flights and transfers, time at Wayo's Central Serengeti Wilderness Camp and Namiri Plains, a balloon flight with Serengeti Balloon Safaris and all park and conservation fees ([expertafrica.com](http://expertafrica.com))

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