



## HEMINGWAY ON STEROIDS

*Photographs by the author*

“How do you arrange this?” one of my guests asked as we returned from the Mara River where we witnessed a zebra and a wildebeest being mauled by super-sized crocodiles during a crossing.

“You don’t,” I replied. “It happens when you have an expert guide and quite a bit of luck.”

On our way back to the camp we encountered another vehicle. Our guide, Ally Kea, and his counterpart from another camp had a brief exchange in Swahili before we moved on.

“Poor guy,” Ally said, “his guests are very unhappy. They have been going to the river three days in a row and never saw a crossing.”

For some unknown reason wildebeest and zebra might go to the edge of the river and turn around. That morning we witnessed the crossing and the killings within the time frame of one hour before the action stopped abruptly—too soon for the unfortunates who did not arrive at exactly the right time.

The next day we followed a lioness as she jumped off her observation post in a tree, stalked wildebeest for a half hour and eventually pulled down her prey in a muddy marsh. And on the final day of our three day stint at Serengeti Safari Camp we were treated to another unusual sight as a male lion killed a wildebeest and fell asleep next to its prey after a few nibbles.



When I approached friends to accompany my wife Ruth and me on a special safari that I dubbed “Hemingway on Steroids” I did not make any promises of sightings like these. This is hardly a zoo where the caretaker can say with certainty where the different animals are caged. On safari where animals roam freely over thousands of square miles it takes local knowledge and quite a bit of good fortune to get good sightings.



However, there was no hesitation on my part in promising the Hemingway-on-Steroids part as far

as accommodations were concerned. In each of our two tented destinations—Serengeti Safari Camp and Chada Katavi—twelve of us occupied all of six tents with a backup staff exceeding our number providing excellent service and good food. Last stop was Greystoke Mahale with six bandas on the shores of Lake Tanganyika.

Being familiar with our host, Nomad Tanzania, I had no doubt that all the arrangements would be top-notch. As we were twelve it meant that our transfers between camps, involving flights across Tanzania, were in reality by private charter as the Caravan can only accommodate that many passengers.

*One who did not make it*



*Mara Crossing*



After an overnight in the Arusha Coffee Lodge following the direct KLM flight from Amsterdam arriving at Kilimanjaro International Airport around 9 p.m., our party left early the next morning for Lobo Airstrip in the northern Serengeti region. The flight is about an hour and a half over interesting vistas including several volcanoes. Serengeti Safari Camp where we stayed for the next three days was placed in the middle of the migration route with the tents sufficiently spaced apart to provide privacy without being secluded. Comfortable beds and a separate bucket shower area and semi-flush toilet were provided.

Situated at the northern reaches of Serengeti, close to the Mara River and the Kenyan border, our camp took us far from the madding crowd in the southern and central plains where *homo sapiens* at times seem to outnumber migratory animals. During our three days stay we rarely encountered vehicles other than the three that transported our group.

Beyond the omnipresent wildebeest and zebra we encountered elephant and buffalo in large numbers as well as giraffe, cheetah and leopard. Hyena were around on the prowl but apparently (judging from their blood-stained necks) not hungry enough to organize a hunt of their own. August near the Mara is a time of plenty as was evidenced by many half-eaten carcasses scattered along the plains, left as easy pickings for vultures and other scavengers.



Before



After





Crocodiles make the most of these good times, devouring every bit of flesh that they can lay their teeth on. Once the migration across the Mara is over they will have to survive for up to a year on meager portions of fish or nothing at all simply by feeding off the fat stored in their tails.

to the road was a martial eagle with its prey—a baby warthog. Gross as some of the more timid members of our group might have found this, one could actually look beyond the fate of this unfortunate piglet at the awe-inspiring beauty of its predator.



*Martial Eagle with prey*

One of our most memorable encounters was reserved for the very last day as we approached Lobo Airstrip to embark on the three and a half hour journey by air to Katavi National Park. Crouching right next

**K**atavi has become a favorite of mine since my first encounter with this remote national park. Nomad operates one of only three small camps in the park. Katavi counts its visitors in hundreds per year and has the highest biomass (i.e. animals per square mile) in Tanzania and perhaps all of the continent.

Compare this with Serengeti, only about twice the size of Katavi, that attracts 150,000 *homo sapiens* every year and you get the picture. If you wish to observe animals in their natural habitat without being bothered by other humans, Katavi is the place to go. In August the area is at its driest and most of the animals migrate towards the shrinking Katuma River and Paradise Valley, fed by the waters of the Kapapa River.

During our four days at Nomad's Chada Katavi camp where we filled out the camp's six tents there was never any doubt in my mind that Hemingway would have approved. Elephants, hyenas and hippos were regular nocturnal visitors and one night Ruth and I had an elephant rather clumsily push over the





*The killing at Chada Katavi (Pictures: Mark Vibbert)*

pole supporting the front veranda as she reached for branches above our tent. All the while the slapping of her trunk on our tent sounded ominous even though it was without malice.

After I related this nocturnal experience over breakfast our camp manager, Mark Vibbert, followed with his own example of just how exciting life had become for him and his wife Kristin since they exchanged American urban life for Tanzania's outback.

Recently, he informed us, lions followed a hippo into the camp and pulled it down in the dining area, overturning and breaking furniture in the process. They proceeded to drag their prey from the killing area to a more convenient spot. The next morning dining for the guests had to be moved to another area while the lions feasted. When the lions left for a nearby waterhole Mark used a vehicle to tow the remaining carcass into the field. It was too heavy for several men to move.

"Shows you the strength of these cats," he observed matter-of-factly.

*With his permission I am reproducing a few of the pictures taken at the time. (Please note that no guest was put in any danger during this unusual occurrence. It is just by sheer coincidence that the hippo fled into the camp in its effort to escape from the lions).*

Katavi lived up to its reputation. Wildlife was plentiful and the activity around the Katuma River quite hectic. Every guest seemed to have had his or her own favorite sightings and some were somewhat repulsed by the sight of several hundred hippos jostling for position in a muddy and feces-filled waterhole. Strangely, there was ample space further along the same river where others resided in a cleaner environment. My only explanation: "Just like life back home. Good neighborhoods and bad ones."

Among the most memorable sightings at Katavi cited by our group was a stampede of some fifty

*Hippo and hamerkop*





*Buffalo herd at Paradise Valley*



*Good neighborhood in Katavi*



*Bad neighborhood*



*Stampede at Katuma River*

elephants from the Katuma riverbed past our vehicles. Not even our guides knew exactly what set them off but it certainly made for an unforgettable sight. Another was the sight of a lion and a leopard in the same tree. Pelicans in flight also made it to the top five. Unsightly and clumsy as they appear on the ground these birds happen to have ultimate grace when they fly in formation. The sight of more than a thousand buffalo in one herd got another special mention. Two of our female guests had giraffes at the top of their list. These ungainly creatures just seem to charm everyone with their gentle behavior. My personal favorite was a hippo (in a clean waterhole) with a hamerkop passenger that managed to stay aboard like an expert rodeo rider despite the hippo's bronco-like behavior.

**O**ur final stop was Mahale National Park about an hour's flight from Katavi. Nomad operates one of three small camps along the southeastern shore of

Lake Tanganyika. Against a backdrop of the heavily wooded Mahale mountains Greystoke with its six well appointed bandas is not quite Hemingway—rather Robinson Crusoe after he came into some unexpected inheritance.

Greystoke Mahale offers guests the opportunity to swim, snorkel or kayak in the world's second deepest and most pristine lake or to visit with the hippos further along the shore, but the main focus is on the chimpanzees. Only about sixty of the estimated one thousand chimpanzees roaming the rainforest along the slopes of the Mahale mountains are habituated. (i.e. tolerant of a human presence).

These habituated creatures have been followed around since the sixties by a Japanese research team and only more recently exposed to other visitors. They make their bed in a different tree every night and there is no telling where they would go next. That is why our hosts would not guarantee an encounter even though

*Pelicans at Katavi*

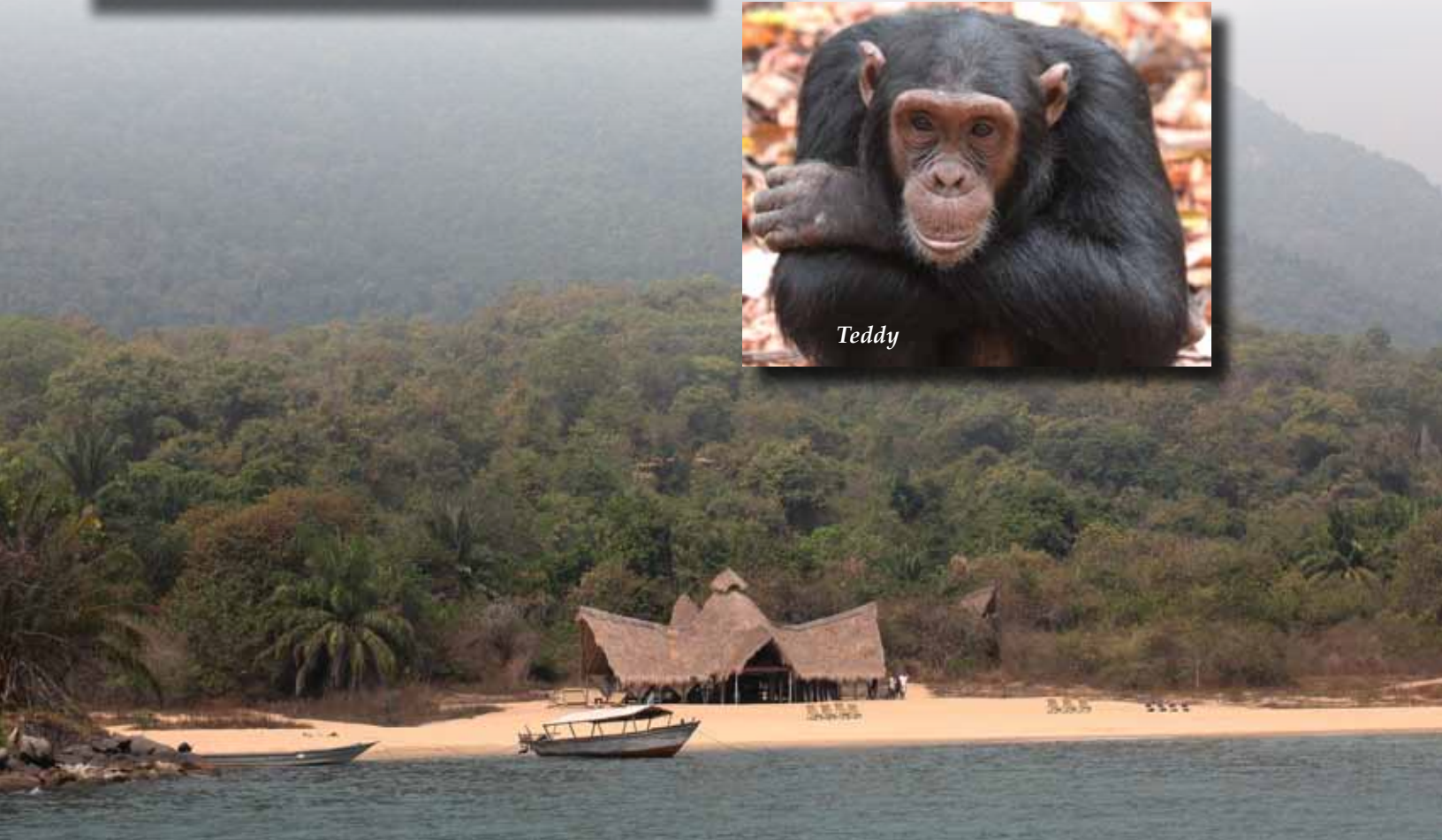
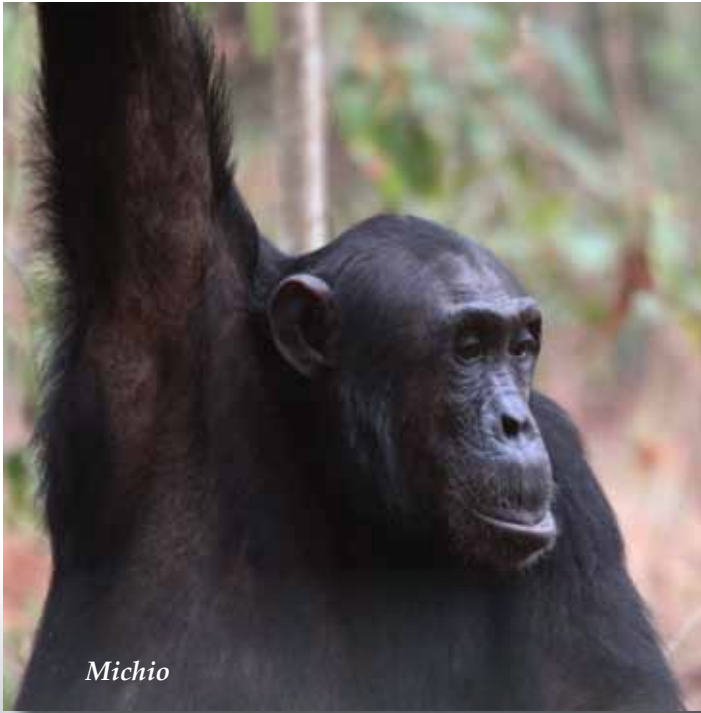


expert trackers try to stay close to the community and remain in constant radio contact with the camp. During the rainy season the chimpanzees find enough food high up the mountain slopes, making it very difficult to reach them.

August is a dry month when they are bound to come closer to the camp as the food supplies diminish at higher altitudes. Still, during our first attempt both

of our parties had to hike up the slopes for about three hours before they encountered the chimpanzees. (A maximum of six guests are allowed per party together with a guide and a park ranger). However, on the second day we encountered the chimps hardly two minutes from the shore.

The rules of engagement are clearly spelled out beforehand. Wear surgical masks to avoid transmitting diseases to the chimpanzees and vice versa. Do not go closer than ten meters. If the chimpanzees should wish to make contact that is their prerogative. No flash photography. No rapid movement and finger pointing. One hour per encounter. No more.



Everyone soon realized why Pimu (Pim for short) is the alpha male. His display of dominance as he noisily rushed up and down breaking branches while straining his vocal cords and our ears to the utmost, not only had his followers cower respectfully but impressed us as well. Still, I came away thinking of Michio as the Macho Man. He just looked the part. And who will forget little Teddy who decided to squat close by and stare us down.

Chimpanzees in the wild just happen to remind us why they should be given protected space in their own world instead of becoming captives in our society. They can do what comes naturally and even if they sometimes act like humans, they are not—despite the fact that they share more than 98 percent of the human DNA.

**I**s the Hemingway experience for everyone?

It all depends on personal preferences. If you insist on all the creature comforts that you enjoy at home plus five star luxury I would suggest other destinations and venues. There are plenty of safari lodges on my list of approved destinations that offer the kind of luxury that rakes in *Condé Nast* and *Travel and Leisure* awards for best small hotels in the world.

If, on the other hand, you wish to experience wildlife up close in a comfortable tent with a soft bed and hot-water bucket showers and semi-flush toilets Hemingway is the way. One of my female guests

### *Lunch on the Serengeti plains*

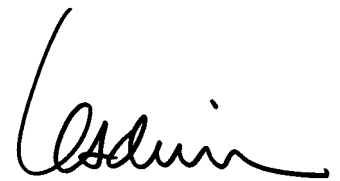
rather jokingly listed unzipping the partition between her bedroom and bathroom every time she needed to go there as the biggest negative. I could not resist to remind her that this is what men have to do most of their life.

I happened to have been privileged to lead a great group of compatible friends on this trip. Having twelve to fill out every camp and every plane ride certainly added to the unique experience. But it is not vital to go in groups. Anyone who feels like breaking away from the hustle and bustle of our electronic gadget-laden society and get closer to nature, should try this.

In his foreword to *African Game Trails*, written in 1910 after a safari in East Africa, former US President Teddy Roosevelt declared:

“There are no words that can tell the hidden spirit of the wilderness, that can reveal its mystery, its melancholy, and its charm.”

Truly spoken, as I once again discovered when I tried to do justice to this recent safari experience in a written report.



Les de Villiers  
[les@theultimatesafari.com](mailto:les@theultimatesafari.com)

