

escape africa

My Jumbo Christmas

In the bleak midwinter; **CARLA MCKAY** gave the festive frenzy a miss and went in search of African animal magic instead...

THIS time last year, my plan was clear: avoid Christmas in the UK and the whole tedious run-up to it. No partridges in a pear tree for me; a leopard in a baobab tree was more what I had in mind.

And so it was that, with only ten shopping days until Christmas, I found myself in the Tanzanian bush, on foot, within a few metres of a bull elephant which badly needed to get past me to drink at the river.

A safari virgin I had been advised by James Balfour, who runs The Tides Lodge near Pangani and knows Tanzania well, to head for the little-known Selous Game Reserve in the south of the country, rather than the more commercial Serengeti.

'Put it this way,' he said. 'In the Serengeti, you'll get crowds of people in Jeeps circling one animal. In the Selous, you'll be in the only vehicle watching crowds of animals.

It's a no-brainer.'

And so it turned out. Selous is Africa's biggest wildlife sanctuary: it's the size of Switzerland and home to an estimated 750,000 mammals, including the world's largest population of elephant, African hunting dog, crocodile, buffalo and hippo.

With visitors still numbering fewer than 5,000 a year, it's also an authentic wilderness experience.

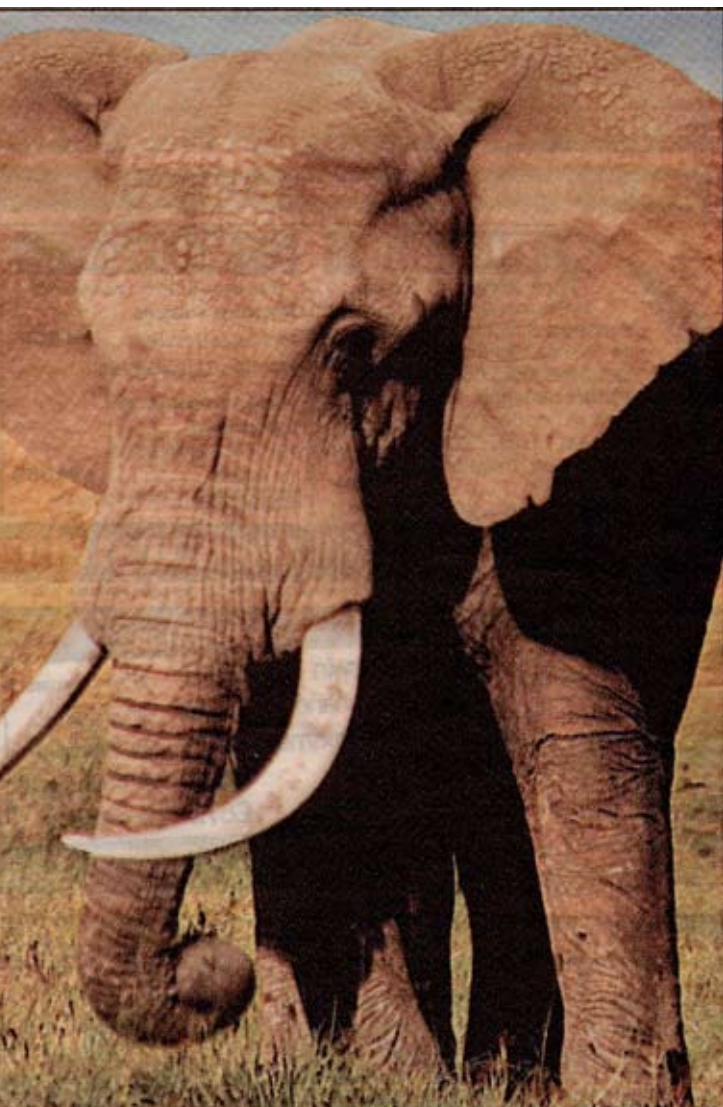
Safari lodges in the reserve come at a price. I stayed at one of the more modest ones, the unpretentious, relatively large Rufiji River Camp, where accommodation is in 20 large tents under thatched roofs attractively perched on a high bank overlooking the mighty Rufiji river.

It was extremely hot, especially in the tents, which were more like steam baths, though mosquito-free at that time of year.

The food was pretty indifferent expat fare – flavourless hot soup at lunch and pasta at dinner – and while the place is Italian-owned, the emphasis is on the game and the excellence of the camp guides rather than life's little luxuries.

Although I was exhausted, I spent the first night wide-awake and rigid with fear. Earlier in the day I'd excitedly noticed vast elephant droppings just outside my tent. How cool was that?

Later, I saw it differently. All night the bush around me resounded with terrifying snorts, y o w l s ,



Pictures: ALAMY/GETTY IMAGES

Call of the wild: Coming within almost touching distance of elephants and hippos (left) was unforgettable for Carla McKay

of wildebeest, haartbeest, reedbucks and giraffe, as well as one solitary zebra, the sole survivor of a large herd killed for their skins by poachers.

A trip down the Wami river, flanked by mangrove forests, was very rewarding for the twitchers among us who exclaimed over lilac-breasted rollers, fish eagles, exotic bee-eaters, giant kingfishers and glorious flocks of orange and electric blue starlings.

The place to stay here is the beautiful Saadani Safari Lodge, where you will be made welcome by its ebullient South African manager, Coenraad. With its beachfront cottages, swimming pool and treehouse overlooking a water-hole in which warthogs and monkeys gambol, it makes for an appealing and unusual destination.

While here, it is worth doing a guided walk to the historic village of Saadani, less than a mile away, formerly an important slave-trading centre. A missionary,

writing in 1877, mentioned seeing slave caravans passing through Saadani daily, each carrying hundreds of children in chains bound for Oman.

Now the grinning children delight in following around foreign visitors and clamour to hold your hand and have their pictures taken.

After all this frantic activity, it was such a relief to reach the Tides Lodge, which consists of seven spacious and luxurious bandas (cottages) on the stunning, palm-fringed stretch of coast south of Pangani.

All there is to do is relax and enjoy the first-class food, much of it fresh from the sea.

A British couple, James and Alex Balfour, have owned the place for the past two years, and together with their team of friendly, experienced staff, have made this a welcoming, special place to be (at astonishingly reasonable rates).

Apart from a sprinkling of international travellers in the know, it attracts many veteran expats who drive down or use the lodge's airstrip (there are several

grunts and shrieks. All I could think was that only a flimsy canvas tent flap separated me from a horrific end in the jaws of some rampaging predator.

As a red-eyed dawn broke, there was a new crescendo of noise. A herd of elephants seemed to be crashing around on the roof of the tent.

SUDDENLY, long tails whipped against the plastic windows, and peering out, it became clear a whole troop of mischievous monkeys had come to deliver my 5am wake-up call.

It came as further relief at breakfast to learn that most of the night's noise had emanated from mating hippos who were safely in the river below. In any case, a dozen Masai warriors with spears patrolled the camp at night to deter any four-legged visitors.

Three days later, I was an old hand. I had been on several game drives in the camps comfortable, open Land Rovers with wonderful, knowledgeable guides.

I had seen more game at thrillingly close quarters than I could have dared to hope for, including a lioness tearing apart a baby buffalo while her mate, a grizzled old lion, charged at the shrieking ranks of vultures fighting over the nearby body of its mother. We were in the thick of the action, but, thankfully, attracted no unwelcome attention.

On other trips through the dry, scrubby bush (the Selous has suffered drought for the past three years), we were able to park within yards of several other prides of lions panting

impassively under tamarind trees, come close to several groups of elephant, all with babies, usually close to the water-holes and see large numbers of giraffe, baboon, antelope and even a very rare pack of African hunting dogs.

I had also been on a couple of boat trips down the river, which was choked with basking hippos and crocodiles, and spotted dozens of stunning birds.

Most heart-stopping of all was a walking safari in dense forest with my trusted guide, Musa, reassuringly armed with a rifle, during which we encountered not only the bull elephant, but also a growling lioness and cubs within easy springing distance of us.

The guides will teach you as much as you want to learn, not only about the animals and their habits, but also how to recognize their tracks and discern all sorts of other information from their droppings. I can now distinguish a male giraffe dropping from that of a female, and recognise the tracks of a civet cat.

Hundreds of miles to the north, but a short hop away in a small aircraft, I tried another type of safari experience at the Saadani Game Reserve, East Africa's only coastal wildlife refuge. It is on the mainland more or less opposite the island of Zanzibar, where the beach meets the bush.

This 200-square-mile reserve, with its unique ecosystem of coastal plains, low hills and the Wami river, is home to 30 species of large mammal and attractively under-exploited.

The game here is shy – until recently, this was a hunting ground – but we saw large herds

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