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## Tanzania: Selous Game Reserve



### Issue 27

It's bigger than Denmark, covers some 45,000km<sup>2</sup> of pristine wilderness and supports Africa's largest populations of buffalo, elephant, hippo, wild dog and crocodile. According to John Warburton-Lee, Selous Game Reserve in southern Tanzania is Africa **Flying over the Selous I looked down on mile upon mile of miombo woodland, open plains and riverine forest.** It was the beginning of October and the land appeared tinder dry. Most of the trees were leafless, the plains parched and riven by dusty game trails. We followed the meandering course of the broad Rufiji River, its surface stippled with pods of hippo wallowing in the shallows. From the air, 'sand rivers' spread outwards from the Rufiji like veins on a leaf. During seasonal floods these rejuvenated channels and the swamps and lakes they connect, create a wetland teeming with many of the Selous' 440 bird species.

Few visitors venture into the reserve in their own vehicles - the immense distances, remoteness and paucity of decent tracks put off all but the most determined. Most, like me, arrive by light aircraft to stay at one of the lodges in the northern sector of the park, which is reserved for photographic tourism.

I was returning to Sand Rivers, a beautiful lodge built by safari-guide Richard Bonham on the bank of the Rufiji, which I had first visited six years previously.

Within minutes of leaving camp on my first game drive, I encountered five wild dogs lying in the shade of a borassus palm. The Selous is one of the few places in Africa with a healthy sustainable population of these infamous 'painted wolves'. Elsewhere, their numbers have been decimated by canine distemper, habitat destruction, competition from other predators, and from being shot as pests by farmers. A recent census estimated that there are 1300 wild dogs in the Selous - up to half of the entire African population.

Driving on through a belt of mixed acacia thicket and doum palms we emerged beside Lake Makubi. A pair of elephants - a cow and a calf - were drinking on the near shore, while on the far side of the lake a bull giraffe walked warily down to the water's edge. Countless crocodiles lay basking in the sun, while spoonbills, yellow-billed storks, white-faced whistling ducks and black-winged stilts paced the shallows in search of food. Nearby, dead trees provided perfect vantage points for fish eagles and kingfishers. Grinding along the deep soft channels in the maze of sand rivers, we spotted herds of up to 40 giraffe; then, as evening fell and we turned back for the lodge, we rounded a corner to find four lionesses standing over a carcass. The year-old giraffe had been killed moments earlier; its neck was still pinned down by the powerful paws of one of the cats.

Over the next few days, we explored the reserve by vehicle, boat and on foot. As the dry season drew to a close, the Rufiji river was, more than at

any other time of the year, the heartbeat of the reserve. Motoring quietly upstream in the early morning we saw waterbuck, bushbuck and impala drinking tentatively as African skimmers flew past, inches above the water, scooping up fish fry in their bright orange beaks. A few hippos were still returning from their night's foraging for grass. The riverbank alternated between long sandy beaches, grassy terraces and water-smoothed rocks, all enclosed by dense thicket and riverine forest. We turned down a narrow side channel to find a pride of lions stretched out in the sun on a raised rock platform, their stomachs distended from gorging on a recent kill.

Continuing upstream, we entered Stiegler's Gorge where the Rufiji becomes squeezed between steep cliffs. Further on, forested slopes appeared as an autumnal mosaic of green and russet foliage through which the tall straight yellow-barked trunks of staculia trees stood proud. Trumpeter hornbills swooped from tree to tree, their wailing calls, like a baby in distress, clashing with the harsh shrieks of rock hyraxes.

An abandoned aerial cableway is the only visible evidence of a 1970s plan to dam the Rufiji and build a hydroelectric plant. Some 2000 migrant workers were brought into the park at a time when the Tanzanian government had banned hunting, and poaching gangs were operating openly, decimating wildlife stocks. The workers added to the toll. Of an estimated 3000 black rhino only a handful survived. Even today, they stay hidden in the most inaccessible thickets of the Selous.

Elephants were also hit hard, their numbers crashing from 110,000 animals in 1976 to less than 30,000 by 1989.

With help from organisations such as the Frankfurt Zoological Society, Worldwide Fund for Nature and African Wildlife Foundation, as well as German development funding, Tanzania's Wildlife Division turned the reserve around. The Selous has become one of the best-protected wildlife sanctuaries in Africa, with a force of over 400 rangers and support staff. Its size and diversity of habitat provides a viable protected range to support sustainable populations of all the key species. By 1998 elephant numbers had risen to 57,000 and, although there is still a dearth of mature elephants and few large tuskers, the population is steadily increasing.

### **Fact File**

#### **Highlights**

The largest population of wild dogs in Africa. Up to 4000 lion, plus leopard and cheetah. Over 110,000 buffalo.

#### **When to go**

The cool season, from late June to October, is best. January and February are also good when trees are in flower and the landscape is green. The rainy season is from November to May. From April to May much of the Selous is inaccessible and the camps are closed.

#### **Getting there**

By road, it is a hard 7-9 hour drive from Dar es Salaam. A 4x4 vehicle is essential in the reserve. Trains take 4-5 hours on the TAZARA railway from Dar to stations nearest the park gate. You need to arrange a pick-up in advance. By air it is 45-60 minutes from Dar to one of the Selous' bush strips. One-way tickets cost around £75.

#### **Where to stay**

Outside the reserve there is camping and lodge accommodation, starting from as little as £10 to pitch your own tent at Hidden Paradise Campsite near Mtemere Gate. Inside the reserve there are five private lodges, including the exclusive Sand Rivers which offers fully catered safaris with game drives, boat trips, guided walks and fly-camping from around £300

full-board per double.

#### Things to do

Game drives enable you to sample the full range of habitats. They provide the greatest game viewing opportunities and also the chance to visit the hot springs at Maji Moto and the grave of Frederick Courtney Selous (the British hunter and explorer was killed in 1917 by the forces of General von Lettow-Vorbeck). Birders should head for the lakes and swamp areas. Boat trips on the Rufiji offer stunning scenery and great game viewing. Guided walks and fly-camping give you the opportunity to experience the true wilderness of the Selous, up close and personal.

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