

ESCAPE

WANDERLUST

SERENGETI Savvy

In a time when bucket-list trips feel out of reach, start planning an experiential Tanzania safari for the future, exploring all corners of the Serengeti and heeding our most current insider tips

By Paul Rubio



LOOK FORWARD TO ALL THAT'S NEW ON THE SERENGETI SAFARI CIRCUIT.

Remarkably, 2020 blessed us with some of the Serengeti's most stunning accommodations to date. Of note, the much-loved Singita Sabora Tented Camp (singita.com), a crown jewel of Singita Grumeti Reserve in the western Serengeti, re-debuted in November 2020 after a year-long closure, showing off a brand-new facility built from the ground up. Sabora Tented Camp 2.0 is a masterpiece of light-on-Earth, transitional indoor-outdoor space, with profound wellness elements woven into a minimalist, African-indebted aesthetic. Each of the nine canvas-topped tents reveals expansive open floor plans, framed by alternating glass and mesh screens, allowing the sights, sounds, and breezes of the savanna to remain present at all times. Rooms are strewn with custom leather furnishings, from nightstands to folding tables to hanging bathroom mirrors fastened to thick, handsome belts. A private meditation deck, outdoor shower, alfresco living area, and comfy daybed facilitate restorative days of yoga, reading, contemplation, and unapologetic relaxation in the heart of the Tanzanian bush.





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Up in the northern Serengeti, Asilia Africa's Sayari Camp (asiliaafrica.com) reopened following a comprehensive refurbishment. The pioneering property, best known for its role in fostering a conservation economy in a former poaching hot spot, sports a new look courtesy of celebrated designer Caline Williams-Wynn. The 15-tent camp pays homage to its setting: Kuria people of the northern Serengeti are depicted in original artworks, the color palette is inspired by the surrounding topography, and beaded Maasai soft goods adorn rooms. Situated near the Mara River, the location here is also tops; wildebeest and zebra abound during annual migrations—and apex predators tend to follow.

The Gran Meliá Arusha (melia.com) is another welcomed addition to the Serengeti safari circuit. Nestled between Kilimanjaro and Arusha airports, this comfort-rich, hypermodern hotel—rooftop bar included—gives safari-goers a world-class place to rest their heads in between their international arrival and next-day domestic departures.



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: THE REFRESHED LOUNGE AT SAYARI CAMP; AN EPIC DAYTIME LEOPARD SIGHTING AT SAYARI CAMP; OVERLOOKING THE TANZANIAN BUSH WITH SERENGETI BALLOON SAFARIS; SAFARI FROM THE POOL AT THE FOUR SEASONS SAFARI LODGE SERENGETI.

2 SAFARI IN THE WATER AND UP IN THE AIR.

While on safari, FOMO (fear of missing out) is unavoidable: Every trip in that Land Rover could yield another blockbuster wildlife sighting, so it's off to the vehicle you go! Yet oftentimes there's plenty of action right at the lodge, where it's entirely possible to safari from, say, the comfort of the swimming pool. At the Four Seasons Safari Lodge Serengeti (fourseasons.com/serengeti), for example, the infinity pool overlooks a sprawling watering hole frequented by elephants, giraffes, zebra, baboon, buffalo, and more. Enjoy surreal days watching *Planet Earth* unfold while half-submerged, cocktail in hand. Take things up a notch by selecting a "Terrace Suite Water Hole View" as your preferred accommodations and admire a similar view from the privacy of your own en-suite pool.

Don't miss the vantage point from up in the air, either, with Serengeti Balloon Safaris (balloonsafaris.com). The classic experience delivers incomparable drone-like panoramas of the East African bush and the wildlife that thrives therein. With four locations throughout the Serengeti—northern, western, central, and southern—the skies are always within reach from your lodge, and each locale promises its own magical sights.



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CHEETAH SIGHTINGS ABOUND AT NAMIRI PLAINS AND THE TENTS ARE MOST INVITING (BELOW RIGHT AND BOTTOM LEFT).

3 MEET THE CATS OF THE UNTOUCHED EASTERN SERENGETI.

From 1994 to 2014, much of the eastern Serengeti—and its iconic short-grass plains—remained off limits to tourism as part of a concerted effort to protect dwindling numbers of big cats (namely cheetah) and provide a safe haven for repopulation efforts. Once the region was reintegrated into the National Park circuit, eco-conscious operator Asilia Africa (asiliaafrica.com) planted roots in this prime predator real estate. Fast-forward to present day, and Asilia's tented camp, Namiri Plains, stands as the superlative place within the Serengeti to see African cats, big and small.

A recent visit to Namiri Plains lived up to the hype. I counted a minimum of six cheetah encounters daily, with one jumping right into our vehicle. I marveled at interactions among lion cubs, including the progeny of famed lions Bob and Ziggy, known for their size, strength, and massive black and blond manes, respectively. I witnessed rare daylight sightings of caracals and servals, even catching a glimpse of two melanistic serval kittens.

The camp itself also impressed as one of the Serengeti's best. Transformed in 2019 from its humbler origins, Namiri Plains is now a collection of 10 solar-powered tents and tricked-out common areas, all crafted from ancient sedimentary rock, resulting in a fabulous, fossil-chic vibe. With outdoor salas in each tent and prolific design-forward spaces along the Ngare Nanyuki riverbed, there are ample swoon-worthy spots for reflecting on the day's adrenaline-filled, feline-forward adventures.



BELOW FROM LEFT: HOMINID SKULLS ON DISPLAY AND A CULTURE-FILLED DINNER AT BOMA GRILL AT THE FOUR SEASONS SAFARI LODGE SERENGETI.



4 SEEK OUT THE ARTS AND CULTURE IN THE BUSH.

While wildlife will always be the main draw of a Serengeti safari, many properties are going the extra mile to showcase the region's artistic and cultural assets. Case in point: the aforementioned Four Seasons Safari Lodge Serengeti, home to the likes of an artist-in-residence program, an inspiring Discovery Center, and Boma Grill, a restaurant that celebrates Maasai culture through performance and Tanzanian culture through cuisine. During the year, eight up-and-coming artists complete residencies between two weeks and two months long, painting new works and interacting with guests daily in a studio near the main bar. The Discovery Center is part museum, part lecture theater, with artifacts from across Tanzania, including hominid fossils from Olduvai Gorge, and documentaries screened twice nightly. At Boma Grill, immerse in the authentic song and dance of the Maasai while sampling typical Tanzanian mainland dishes such as savory banana soup and seafood-centric cuisine from Zanzibar like coconut prawn curry.

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FROM LEFT: THE ELUSIVE SERVAL AT NAMIRI PLAINS; THE LUXURIOUS YET UNDERSTATED ACCOMMODATIONS AT SINGITA SABORA TENTED CAMP.



5 WEIGH THE RISKS VERSUS THE REWARDS OF TRAVELING NOW.

Tanzania and its safari lodges are currently open to international visitors and have been since May 2020. With tourism at recent lows, a lack of human presence (and those pesky vehicles that accompany it) have permitted an unparalleled regeneration within Serengeti National Park and its peripheral reserves. Now, the animal sightings rank arguably the best in recent decades. As one who has ventured on 23 safaris in as many years, my expedition last Novem-

ber topped them all. Coveted action sequences typically reserved for television specials, such as leopards mating in daylight, back-to-back cheetah kills, and face-offs between giraffes and lions, are currently happening in real time, all the time. Suffice to say, those who feel comfortable traveling to the Serengeti now will witness what few get to see: Nature completely ruling Africa's heartland. Nevertheless, if late 2021 or 2022 feels more logical and responsible, an epic safari still awaits—the Serengeti never disappoints. <<

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