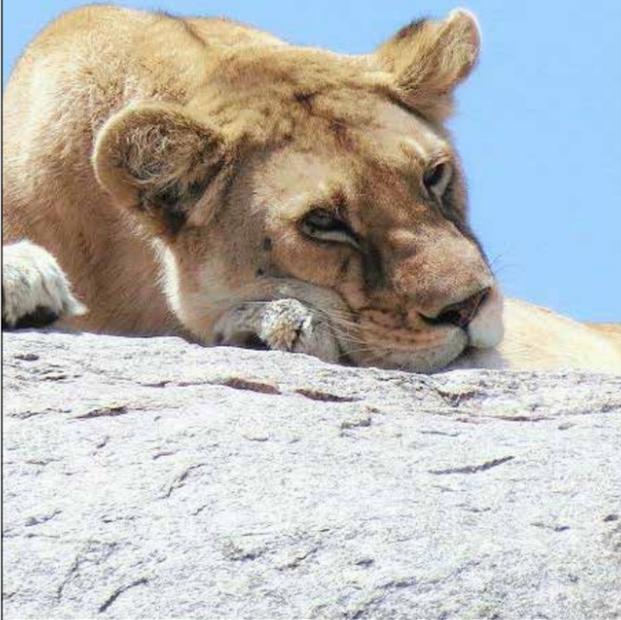


A lion rests on a rock.

Wildebeest grazing in Serengeti.
PICTURES: MARISKA GRIFFIN

NOBEL Prize winner Ernest Hemingway described Tanzania as “the loveliest I had seen in Africa”. And I’m not one to argue with Hemingway, he is after all one of America’s most- renowned novelists. Bring *Green Hills of Africa* and *The Snows of Kilimanjaro* as your literary travel companions when you follow his adventures through Tanzania’s northern safari circuit.

I’m convinced that had he, like us, visited in the late autumn months of April and May to become one with the Great Migration, he never would have left.

Our eight-day migration begins from Arusha. As we follow the sun’s trajectory, Kilimanjaro’s cloudy outline disappears from the rear view mirror by the time we arrive at Lake Manyara National Park.

The red sand road carves its way through the verdant jungle-like groundwater forest, past fig and mahogany trees and towering baobabs. A troop of baboons and blue monkeys rustle the dense canopy letting in sequins of sunshine. The forest resembles stage curtains that lead out onto the theatre stage of the grassy floodplains, where each animal plays their part.

But the birds are not merely extras with cameo appearances, as within a few hours we spot 96 of the park’s 400-odd species, including pink-feathered Lesser flamingos, White pelicans, Secretary birds, Martial eagles, Little bee-eaters and Lilac-breasted rollers.

Lake Manyara is a shimmering mirror that covers 200km² and makes up two-thirds of the park. I only get a real sense of its expanse from the elevated lookout points, where we eat a packed picnic lunch. Behind us the purple and blue Great Rift Valley rise into the clouds.

At sundown, at the four-star Lake Manyara Serena Safari Lodge on the cliffs of the forested escarpment, I drink a double gin and tonic in true Hemingway

Serengeti – where the land moves on forever

IGA MOTYLSKA finds herself amidst nearly two million animals during nature’s greatest land migration



Plains seem to be endless in Serengeti.

fashion, which he would surely raise his glass to.

The next day, as we approach the lip of the 610m deep Ngorongoro Crater within the Ngorongoro Conservation Area, Joseph, our guide, explains that a volcanic explosion three million years ago blew up a mountain the size of Kilimanjaro to create the world’s largest inactive, intact and unfilled volcanic crater, covering 260km². Like clasped hands the 19km-long crater cups Lake Makat, which is the life source for around 25 000 animals and the Maasai’s livestock.

This is the only place in Tanzania where people – around 40 000 Maasai, who have been living in this region since the 1800s – are allowed to live among wildlife. They are subsistence farmers and rear livestock, so each day you will see them, with a stick in hand, wrapped

in red and blue shuka, walking their animals into the crater.

By sundown, you’ll hear the cow bells making their way up the steep slope to their traditional villages. The Maasai no longer kill lions as part of a boy’s rite of passage into adulthood, since Ngorongoro gained Unesco Natural World Heritage Site status and became a designated conservation area. Yet the ceremony continues regardless and you’ll see their white painted faces alongside the road to signify they are soon to become men.

It’s here that we see the only black rhino of our trip. He’s grazing in a carpet of yellow and purple blossoms among grunting wildebeest, mud-caked dagga boys and elephant bulls living out their final days. Hyenas laze about in the muddy pools that have collected in the ditches along the dirt road.

The birders are ticking off some of the 500 species found in the region from Crowned cranes with their hatchlings to ostriches and Kori bustards.

Beyond the crater animals are starting to move across the symbolic border of rocks and stones into the Serengeti. Its name derives from the Maasai word Siringitu meaning “the place where the land moves on forever.”

And indeed these plains seem to be endless as each day we discover new roads through its 30 000km² expanse. The landscape and vegetation seem to change abruptly like a theatre set to accompany each act: the horizon undulates with scattered granite kopjes, termite mounds stay cool beneath the shade of acacias, wooded hills become acacia woodland and then riverine forests.

Golden-maned lions are sleeping alongside the dirt road, as we cross the border. A few raise their heads to investigate the sounds of our engine, clicking cameras and gasps; they flick flies away with their ears, swat the grass with their tails and continue napping. They’ve been feasting. It’s the time of plenty.

Close to two million wildebeest, zebras, Thompson’s gazelles and eland are but a few hundred metres away. The wildebeest start to gather here in February for the mineral-rich soil and grass from the volcanic eruptions, before they give birth.

By the time they have eaten the grass to its roots and the land dries up, the calves are strong enough to undertake the annual 2 000km loop following the rains: from the southern parts of the Serengeti along the Grumeti River, to the north western plains and onwards to Kenya’s Maasai Mara through the crocodile-infested Mara River before heading back down again. Hundreds of thousands will not make it to the Maasai Mara, fewer still will make it back. And so life and death chase each other through these Serengeti grasslands.

But even if you visit during the low season, outside of the Great Migration, you too will find lions draped over tree branches; tail swishing leopards; male hippos in a playful lockjaw; camouflaged crocodiles; herds of elephants walking around your vehicle; buffaloes splashing about in mud pools, galloping giraffes; jackals; and tree-climbing hyraxes. And perhaps you too will see four cheetah sightings in a day.

Don’t stay in the Serengeti for too long, as no future safari will be able to match the expectations set by this, Africa’s most famous.

● Iga Motylska visited Tanzania’s northern safari circuit as part of a Serengeti Wildebeest Migration Safari with Explore Plus Travel and Tours. More info: www.exploreplus.co.za and +27(0)12 808 3308.



Grazing during the great trek.



Hippos in a playful lockjaw.



Elephants take a stroll.