

A wild ride: An 11-day trip to Tanzania

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By Karen Walker

A 2011 visit to a safari camp in South Africa introduced me and my husband, Mike Halvorsen, to the fascinating experience of spotting wildlife and witnessing the drama of their lives in their natural habitats. We were eager to try a longer safari, so we asked our friends Rod and Jeannine Bertsch to join us for an 11-day trip to Tanzania last November.

We usually prefer independent travel, but for this trip, we booked through Access2Tanzania, a U.S. company that offers customized itineraries. The four of us had the same guide and vehicle for the entire trip, with the freedom to make changes in activities and times. The flexibility also allowed us to choose dates with the lowest airfares.

Two flights and 19 hours after takeoff from Chicago, we met our guide at Kilimanjaro Airport and checked into the Bay Leaf Hotel in nearby Arusha. A short drive the next day revealed a dazzling, unclouded view of Mount Kilimanjaro and took us to Moshi, where we bought groceries for the Chaga village family that hosted us for a traditional lunch of banana soup and banana stew.

In the afternoon, we climbed the mountain — only the first 1 percent, but that was strenuous enough to make us appreciate the flatlands of central Illinois. The guided hike included a stop at a jungle hut to try banana beer.

The rest of the trip featured game drives in Tarangire, Lake Manyara, the Ngorongoro Crater and the Serengeti.

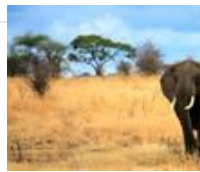
Our bungalow at Tarangire Lodge was on a bluff overlooking the reserve and riverbed. Impalas and dik diks grazed outside our door, and an elephant peered in our window one day, shortly after being chased away from the lodge swimming pool.

Tarangire is known for its giant baobab trees and the largest population of elephants in East Africa. We saw dozens on our morning and afternoon drives, plus giraffes, baboons, zebras, warthogs, jackals, waterbucks and cape buffalo. The most



Photo by: Provided by Karen Walker

Two giraffes strike a pose at Lake Manyara.



memorable sightings were a cheetah and a pair of mating lions. The cats were a fair distance away in tall grass, but binoculars provided a good view.

Our next stop was Lemala Tented Camp at Lake Manyara, where a Maasai warrior escorted us to the lakeshore for sundowner drinks and a stunning sunset. Our tent had wood floors, en-suite bathroom and all the amenities of a fine hotel. I thought our host was joking when he said we had a talking shower, but when the water ran out midway through my shower, a voice on the other side of the canvas immediately said, "More? Hotter? Cooler?" A few minutes later, I had another five minutes of hot water.

Lake Manyara is a haven for hippos, flamingos and more than 400 other bird species. Its lush jungle is home to giraffes, elephants and blue and vervet monkeys. We didn't see any of the park's famous tree-climbing lions, but we enjoyed watching some of the world's largest troops of baboons. The babies are very playful, and the adults have strong, aggressive personalities.

Every game drive was a treasure hunt, with all of us searching the landscape and being surprised by every discovery. By now, we'd seen at least 100 elephants, but every new sighting offered more insight into their behavior and the dynamics of the herds.

At dinner, we swapped stories of the day's adventures with fellow travelers and turned in early, eager for 6 a.m. to come so we could start another drive.

So far, each day had been more exciting than the one before, and that would continue as we headed northwest to Tanzania's most storied wildlife destinations.

Next Sunday: Safaris in the Ngorongoro Crater and Serengeti.

Karen Walker is a professional bridge player/teacher/journalist. She recently retired from Parkland College, where she taught English. She and her husband live in Champaign.