

Guy
Kelly



Game night

Get up close and (very) personal with the Tanzania locals

‘BY THE WAY, if you hear something padding around your tent, it’s fine,’ said Gilbert. ‘It’s probably just hyenas.’

I never thought I would sleep anywhere hoping that ‘just’ hyenas would pop by for a nightcap, but at Kwihala Camp in Ruaha National Park, Tanzania, guests stay among the animals – and it’s all the better for it.

A protected area the size of Wales, Ruaha is home to 10 per cent of the world’s lion population and some 15,000 elephants, plus leopards, giraffes and other creatures great and small. Many could be seen just on the short drive from the dirt airstrip to Kwihala, and whenever we met a herd, we would sit and wait – it is their park, after all. Giraffes, who always look as if they believe they’re invisible so long as they stay still, froze awkwardly. Elephants couldn’t have cared less. Baboons mooned at us.

In the dry season, Ruaha is a smattering of yellows, golds and browns, seasoned with the odd acacia. Even the baobabs look dead, though they aren’t. But what the park lacks in greens and

rivers, it gains in expanse: we could see for miles across the savannah.

Kwihala itself is tiny, with room enough for just 14 guests, all housed in basic but immaculately finished tents, either side of a main restaurant/bar marquee. It is intimate, but the staff – who all gathered to welcome me with a Swahili song and never lost that level of smiling, personable hospitality – ensure everybody’s stay is their own. The only thing to do (other than enjoy the excellent, non-stop food and drink so much that you’d never be able to out-run anything) is game-viewing. Night drives, day drives and walking safaris – that’s what you’re there for.

Walking means an early start and a chance to break a sweat, scampering among the bushes and learning about the plants and animals from outside



the safety of a Land Rover. On a night drive, however, when you might track hunting lions or subtly pursue a leopard, you could end up grateful for a vehicle. My guide, Gilbert, was certainly thankful: he’d only just closed the door of the Land Rover after a round of fine gin-on-the-bonnet sundowners, when Mr T – a famous alpha-male lion in the park – brushed past the exhaust pipe with purring insouciance. I think I know the Swahili for ‘f—k, that was close’ now.

On that final night, as I prepared to bed down, a rustle and some paw-steps tottered around on the other side of the canvas. I switched off the light; it was probably just hyenas.

KWIHALA CAMP

From \$2,300 per person sharing, includes return internal flights, three nights full-board accommodation at Kwihala Camp, game drives, night drives, guided walks and transfers (asiliafrica.com)