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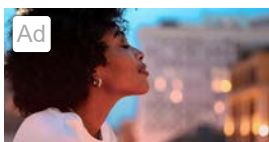
On safari in Tanzania, the country that tackled Covid with lemon, ginger and prayer

'I witnessed scenes I'd long forgotten: crowded market stalls; bars spilling with noisy revellers; friends greeting each other with hugs'

By Sarah Marshall

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Early in the pandemic, President John Magufuli made the controversial decision to ignore lockdowns, leading the country to be dubbed the Sweden of Africa.

Herd immunity, however, wasn't the core motivation; under an authoritarian government, where citizens are compelled to toe the line, it was more a case of following the herd.

Borders have remained open, there are no testing requirements for entry, and anyone is allowed in. It sounds like a melting pot for a Covid casserole, but extraordinarily, official figures suggest there have been only 509 cases and 21 deaths – although those statistics haven't been updated since May.

Surprisingly, for a country that believes the virus packed its bags months ago, there are still safety protocols in place: temperature checks, social distancing and masks were all required in Dar es Salaam airport when I arrived.

I found it reassuring to know that even though the pandemic wasn't ruling people's lives, a lack of safety measures hadn't put them at risk. Just like the virus, it seemed most Tanzanians had moved on.



John Magufuli refused to keep the country locked down | CREDIT: Getty

“We prayed it away,” insisted my local guide, David, as we drove from Kilimanjaro to Arusha. “Most people rely on chemicals and medicine, but there are far greater powers.”

Rather than ‘follow the science’, Tanzania’s 120-plus tribes turned to their own medical cabinets in the bush – burning incense, concocting remedies and brewing teas.

City-dwellers were also advised to adopt tried-and-tested homeopathic methods, sending sales of lemon and ginger through the roof.

“If we have flu, we don’t go to the doctor. We just go to the farm,” laughed David. “We don’t care too much about hygiene either; that helps with immunity too.”

In Arusha, I witnessed scenes I’d long forgotten in Europe: crowds squeezing through market stalls; bars spilling with noisy revellers; friends greeting each other with hugs in the street. No-one was wearing a mask.

“You’d feel shy if you went into a village with one on,” explained David.



Street art in Dar es Salaam. Few people wear masks, however | CREDIT: Getty

Tourists to Tanzania, however, exist in a parallel universe.

At Asilia's Sayari camp in the north of the Serengeti National Park, all members of staff wore face coverings. A hand sanitizer station was positioned at the entrance, meals were served individually to allow social distancing, and most guests were fortunate enough to have their own private vehicles. (Passenger numbers have been reduced to a maximum of four, and a lucky few get to game drive solo at no extra cost.)

Even the layout of the revamped camp fits the 'new safari normal': spread like an eagle's outstretched wings, tents extend two sides of a communal area featuring the world's first craft brewery in the bush. Yes, that's right, even if pubs are locked down at home – you can still get a pint on tap here.

Many of the seasonal mobile camps that would usually set up along the Mara river have chosen not to open this year, meaning the only crowds I encountered during my stay were dense clusters of wildebeest.

A family of wildebeest | CREDIT: Getty

When 3,000 of the indecisive gnus finally crashed down dusty banks and across the river, I was one of only 15 people within splashing distance. Twelve months ago, a thunder of hooves would have been eclipsed by the roaring of engines jostling for position. Now that wasn't the case.

“For a crossing like this, there would usually be around 70 vehicles,” shrugged young Maasai guide Moinga, clearly relieved he could concentrate on the wildlife rather than having to manoeuvre for a decent view.

Other animal encounters were also intimate on a scale I imagine only Attenborough's film crews get to experience; we solo scouted a tumble of kopjes to find lions perched on granite thrones, and redefined three's a crowd when tracking mating leopards for two days.

In the Central Serengeti, typically a log jam of self-drivers, guides were forced to use their own skills to pan the never-ending plains, rather than lazily relying on parked vehicles to locate animals. One morning, it was so quiet I even watched a pangolin cross the road.

While the absence of crowds is a boon for those who do travel, it's had a devastating impact on local people's lives. The fact I was the sole occupant at Elewana Pioneer Camp – a nostalgic, 12-tent property tucked into a rocky outcrop, where screeching hyrax huddle in crevices and overwhelming views stretch into a hazy horizon – would have obvious long-term implications.

Tourists have the wildlife to themselves right now | CREDIT: Getty

“It's been quiet this year,” sighed genteel manager Rodgers. “The company will need to look at retrenchment soon.”

Ever resourceful, many Tanzanians have set up ‘corona businesses’ as a substitute for lost income – side-lines in keeping chickens, growing vegetables or cultivating crops. This type of subsistence living has essentially kept people alive.

Not that death has been knocking on every door. Admittedly, I’d half expected to unveil dark tales of body-bags in streets and secret burials. But aside from rumours of an increase in the number of pneumonia cases, any mass conspiracy to cover up deaths has never transpired.

“We live in small communities,” one guide pointed out. “If people were dying or going into hospital, we’d know about it.”

Not everyone buys into the idea low infection rates are purely down to divine intervention, though. One plausible explanation lies in demographics. In a population where the median age is 17.7, there are few elderly people; those who manage to survive into their 60s rarely move far from rural homes.

But there’s also a major element of luck.

“Our government took a big risk,” one guide, who preferred to remain anonymous, told me. “This is a hand-to-mouth economy, so in many ways they had no choice; a lockdown would have resulted in widespread poverty.”

It appears the gamble has paid off. Tanzania’s economy could register one of the highest growth rates in the world for 2020, according to predictions by the IMF. Tourists are also slowly returning, with the East African country topping the list of African enquiries for operator Abercrombie & Kent. And, thanks to the responsible interventions of lodges and hotels, going on a safari there need not involve any extra Covid risk.

So far, Tanzania has miraculously escaped the grip of the pandemic – even if it’s been on a wing and 72 hours of prayer.

Many combine a safari in Tanzania with a trip to Zanzibar | CREDIT: Getty

Abercrombie & Kent (www.abercrombiekent.co.uk; 01242 386461) offers a 12-night Tanzania trip from £6,650pp based on two people sharing. Includes flights, transfers and accommodation on a full board basis when on safari. Based on low-season travel dates.

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