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The Serengeti National Park

The Serengeti National Park is broadly divided into three distinct areas, the Seronera Valley and Seronera River, the Western Corridor and the Northern 'Lobo' area that extends northwards to join the Maasai Mara. There is always plenty of resident and migratory wildlife action, and endless photo opportunities for the snap-happy.

The Migration

During the months of the great Migration, all that can be seen to each distant horizon is wildebeest after wildebeest after wildebeest. These are joined by herds of gazelle and zebra, who share a curious symbiotic relationship with the wildebeest, as zebra have a natural sense for the presence of danger, and seek safety in a crowd of grazers that are slower and more stupid than themselves. You are more likely to come across bloody death scenes while the migration is around, as all predators from cats to crows make the most of the easy pickings. A common indication of a kill is rapid hyena action, or vultures circling like dark specks of ash in a single area of the sky, then swooping to land. The migrating herds follow a broad pattern of movement and behaviour through the months of the year, but the exact speed and location of the migration is as unpredictable as the weather, as they move in accordance with the rainfall, or promise of it. They cannot be relied upon to be in any one place at a set time, and thus holiday plans cannot always be tailored to coincide with the migrating hordes, but mobile camping safaris are often altered to fit the pace of that year, and driving safaris can generally find the action. The following is a rough guide:

Between January and February the migrating herds are based across the plains on the borders of the Serengeti and Ngorongoro Conservation Area, west of Olduvai Gorge. These months are the calving season, with most zebra foals born in January, and the majority of wildebeest calves born in February. In March the herds spread out across the short grass plains of the Serengeti, crossing the boundaries around the Naabi Hill gate and expanding wider as offspring increase the numbers. Through April and May they remain in the southwest, slowly shifting into the central plains on the Serengeti side of Naabi Hill Gate to the west of Seronera. In June to early July the herds move through Seronera regions and on up into the Western Corridor. Through August they continue northwards, until they reach the Maasai Mara in Kenya and remain there for the duration of September and October. During November the herds spill back down the North Eastern strip, until they return to plains area just outside the Serengeti Naabi Hill Gate in December.

The Seronera Valley

The most popular entrance to the Serengeti is the southern Naabi Hill Gate, which opens onto the Seronera Valley, a vibrant wildlife area at the heart of the Serengeti. The Seronera is characterised by mainly wide open grassy plains patched together within a network of rivers that ensure year-round water supplies and keep this region incredibly rich in wildlife. This region in particular is studded with distinctive rock kopjies (pronounced 'copies', from the Dutch meaning 'little head'), sporadic collections of huge granite rocks, weathered through the ages to form distinctive softened shapes rising out of the plains; a haven of shade and water for all animals through the dry season. The kopjies also make excellent navigational features: Simba, Gol, Barafu, Maasai, Loliondo and Moro kopjies are the most prominent and best known. There are Maasai rock paintings up to a couple of hundred years old still visible at Moro Kopjies, just about accessible through the surrounding bush during the dry season, (the path gets wildly overgrown after the rains), and only ever to be attempted after a thorough search for resident lion. The Seronera Valley has resident herds of buffalo, topi, hartebeest and impala, waterbuck, reedbuck and dikdik, numerous giraffe, warthog, and a rich pageant of birdlife of all colours and sizes. The large prides of lion here are so renowned that they enticed the first safari game-hunting expeditions here a century ago, and these rolling southern plains down to the Naabi Gate are the area in Tanzania in which you are most likely to encounter cheetah. The lines of sausage trees along the Seronera riverbanks provide the perfect environment for languid leopards to camouflage themselves on sun-dappled branches, and lion roam at large throughout.

Balloon safari

Serengeti Park rules and regulations are desperately strict, as they have to be in order to preserve this magnificent wilderness, though it does limit opportunities for taking much energetic exercise. Zooming around in the bush searching for wildlife action is adrenaline-inducing and tiring enough in itself, but for that real heart-stopping edge of extra excitement the only answer is a balloon safari. These are only operated in the Seronera region by Serengeti Balloon Safaris, the company has a desk at the major hotels in the Seronera Area, although your tour operator should be able to assist you in arranging bookings. Balloon safaris take place in the early morning, and all the hotels and operators will ensure that you are picked up and transported to the launch pad during some dark hour before the dawn. Take a warm jumper for the occasion. The balloon is assembled in the gathering dawn, and passengers embark into a horizontal basket that is then gently puffed vertical as the vast bubble overhead inflates. This is a fantastic way to get an entirely different perspective on the plains below, giving you a true sense of the vast spaces below and providing fabulous photographic opportunities. A balloon trip is especially good if the migration is in the Seronera region: otherwise the game-viewing potential is slim. The trip is followed by a sumptuous champagne breakfast in the shade of a spreading acacia with great views all around. Breakfast is a lavish and jolly affair, spread along a long and sociable table with much merriment and warmth as the sun finds its heat. However great the lure of floating over the Serengeti in a hot air balloon, when you consider the price this is certainly a treat. The price changes marginally with the seasons, but generally allow around \$400 per person for the whole trip.

The Western Corridor

To the west of the Seronera the Serengeti branches out along the westerly reaches of the Grumeti River, in an area called the Western Corridor. This area is more wooded than the Seronera, and although it still has a good population of resident game it is harder to spot them in the bush. It is worth taking a guide who knows the area. This region is particularly worth visiting in June and July, when the migration moves northwards from the Seronera and must face up to the often fatal challenge of jumping across the crocodile-infested Grumeti River. Many of these resident crocs rely entirely on this spring-time annual feast, and spend the subsequent months of the year in an idle, yellow-toothed, mud-covered wait.

The Northern Serengeti and Lobo area

The landscape changes as you head north from Seronera. Beyond the Orangi River the land opens out into wide open Togoro plains, clear and sunbaked and seemingly perfect cheetah terrain, although they are rarely spotted here. The route continues like this for about three hours, until you reach the hills and huge worn-smooth rock kopjies of the Lobo area, haunt of at least two extended lion prides. Further north is the Mara River, which marks the border between the Serengeti and the Maasai Mara in Kenya. Although a passable road leads across, the border crossing is closed to tourists.