

# Selous

## SENSATIONS

Southern areas of Tanzania's massive Selous Game Reserve have long been the preserve of big game hunters. However, a new photographic safari venture there is hoping to turn the tide and make conservation the name of the game.

We sent **Sue Watt** to investigate.



PHOTOGRAPH BY JIMMY KIMBLE

*Above:* Being the size of Switzerland, the Selous Game Reserve offers plenty of room to roam

*Opposite, top:* Hosting just one group at a time, the Selous Project offers guests the freedom and flexibility to move to fly-camps in remote areas

*Opposite, middle:* Cooling off in the shallows

*Opposite, bottom:* Heating up in the heart of the wilderness

**I**f the buffalo should charge, lie down as flat as you can and they'll probably miss you." Our guide Anton gave us this sobering advice as we stood just 50m from a 30-strong buffalo herd deep in the wilderness of the Selous Game Reserve. We were on foot with no vehicle or shelter nearby, and the word "probably" was slightly disconcerting.

The six of us, along with Anton and our expert tracker Abudiba, then stooped down and huddled together, before slowly making our way in one human mass ever closer to the buffalo, nothing but tall golden grasses lying between us and them. Suddenly a lone buffalo's head popped up unexpectedly on our flank, looking around intently.

"Stay absolutely still," hushed Anton. We all froze rigid – you do whatever your guide says in these situations. Reassured by the stillness, the buffalo returned to grazing, and we stood silently, cameras at the ready, not quite believing we were so close. Before we'd had time to press our shutters, the herd spooked, bolting away from us en masse. Without even a second to consider the possibility that it was something other than us that had created the stir, a shouted whisper of "My god, there's a lion!" rang through my ears. Turning quickly right, a sandy-coloured streak disappeared about 5m away, leaving behind a warm, freshly killed warthog, with its innards gorily exposed. Another normal day in the Selous then...

But the Selous is far from normal, even by African standards. The size of Switzerland, it is Africa's largest game reserve and one of its most truly wild. Named after Frederick Courteney Selous, an English soldier, hunter and conservationist who died here during the First World War, it is renowned for massive herds of elephant and buffalo that roam the plains. Home to packs of African wild dog, over 400 species of birds, and even rare black rhinos, its rivers and lakes are heaving with hippos and crocodiles.

Because the Selous is a game reserve rather than one of Tanzania's national parks, visitors have more freedom to explore the bush outside the confines of a safari vehicle and many of its lodges and camps offer boating safaris, hiking trips and fly camping. Yet it sees few tourists compared to the country's famous northern safari circuit, which includes the Serengeti, Ngorongoro Crater and Kilimanjaro. Those that do venture here stay predominantly around the beautiful Rufiji River or the nearby lakes in the Selous' north. Much of the more remote southern region, a 90-minute flight from Dar es Salaam in a tiny Cessna, is divided into private hunting concessions and has – up until recently – been the sole domain of trophy hunters.

But something exciting is happening down south that may eventually see the dominance of hunting replaced by low-impact tourism. In a classic case of hunters-turned-gamekeepers, two professional

hunters, Anton Turner and Ryan Wienand, have established southern Selous' first photographic safari venture – the Selous Project – in an exclusive 121,000ha former hunting concession called Lukula.

While the role that hunting plays in conservation has been endlessly debated, Wienand believes that "In terms of conservation, hunting simply doesn't work." In partnership with Great Plains Conservation, his new Selous Project venture with Turner has the survival of wildlife and local communities at its heart.

Established in 2006 by Colin Bell (former CEO of Wilderness Safaris) with Paul Harris, Mark Read and Derek and Beverly Joubert, Great Plains focuses on conservation tourism. Its aim is to balance conservation, communities and commerce in developing successful low-impact, low-volume projects that are both environmentally and financially sustainable.

The Selous Project is a perfect complement to Great Plains' existing African operations, including the Elephant Footprint programme in the Selinda Reserve, Botswana (another former hunting concession); a project to alleviate human-wildlife conflict in Ol Donyo Wuas, southern Kenya; a reforestation programme for Rwanda's mountain gorillas; and a tropical fishery project in the Seychelles.

"We've gone into partnership with Great Plains because we share the same ideals," Turner explained. "Our project is about taking a hunting area and establishing it into a viable photographic safari area that is a business in its own right, but also a business with more than one bottom line. It has a social and environmental awareness to it because we are all in the business of conservation – that's the ultimate test of this model."

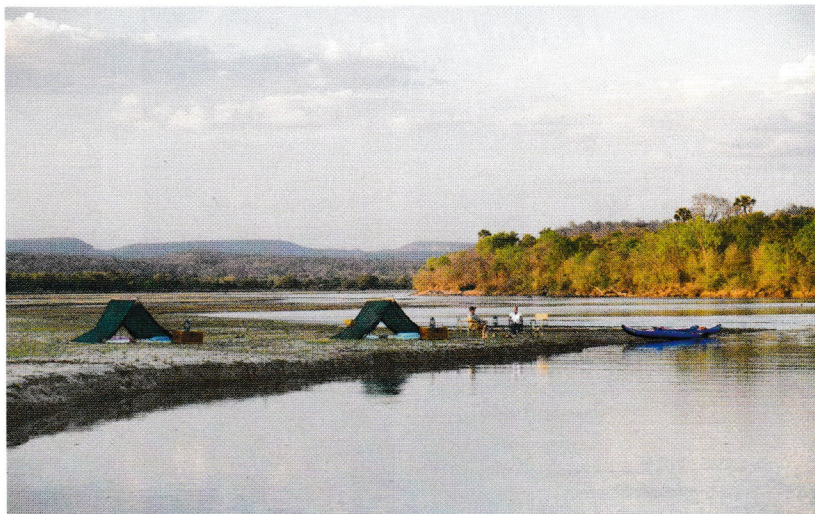
"The short term test is 'will it pay for itself year on year,' while the real test in the long term is 'is this area still viable for wildlife?' Elephant, buffalo, lion and wild dog – in 10 years time, will they still be here and is it still viable?"

Working with local communities who will benefit through employment and through the sale of products and foods, the project aims to introduce initiatives like the district's first mobile eye clinic. "Unless wildlife has an economic value for those who live next to it," Turner continues, "it will disappear eventually. People see a link between operations like this and the benefits it offers to their community and they then directly connect this to the wildlife around them."

A legacy of its hunting history, the wildlife in Lukula is still wary and it will take time for it to realise that its new breed of visitors shoot only with cameras. Yet the quantity of animals here makes little difference to the rich quality of the wilderness experience that is part and parcel of the Selous.

Turner's focus is primarily on tracking wildlife and experiencing the bush on foot, hence that unforgettably close encounter we had with the buffalo and lion. The following day, we stood just ten paces away from wild elephants.

In the mellow, dusky heat of that late afternoon, we'd driven across a vast plain where bush fires had rendered the earth black and sooty, and discovered elephants' footprints the size of dinner plates imprinted in the ash. Leaving our Land Cruiser behind, we followed Abudiba on foot. Seventy-two going on twenty two, >>



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SUE WATT

What seemed an almost imperceptible breeze to us would be strong enough to carry our unwelcome scent to elephants, and we had to ensure we stayed downwind to remain undetected



Abudiba is tall, slender and unfathomably fit with an encyclopaedic knowledge of life in the bush. His tools of the trade were his rifle (for protection only) and a woollen sock filled with ash. Tapping the sock gently, he watched traces of ash floating out, clearly revealing the wind direction. What seemed an almost imperceptible breeze to us would be strong enough to carry our unwelcome scent to elephants, and we had to ensure we stayed downwind to remain undetected.

About 30m ahead, two elephants, a mother and baby, were taking shade under an acacia tree. Sneaking closer, I became acutely aware of my footsteps crunching over burnt vegetation, the taste and smell of ash permeating everything and tickling my throat as I stifled a cough, tall grasses stroking my face as I crouched down. A bull elephant suddenly appeared to our left, ears forward and trunk half-cocked, sniffing the air inquisitively. We lined up behind a tree and he advanced towards us, approaching the same tree but seeming unaware of our presence, his poor vision obscuring our shapes. Transfixed, we stayed deadly still as he moved closer and closer.

Finally, with about ten paces left between us, Anton and Abudiba broke the silence, raising their arms and calling out "toka hapa" ("leave here" in Swahili), ensuring the bull knew we were there to avoid him panicking. Clearly understanding Swahili, he turned on his heels and obediently trotted away while I was left buzzing on a kind of sensory high, the consequence of getting so close to elephants in the open bush with no vehicle, no fences, not even a hide – just the elephant and us...

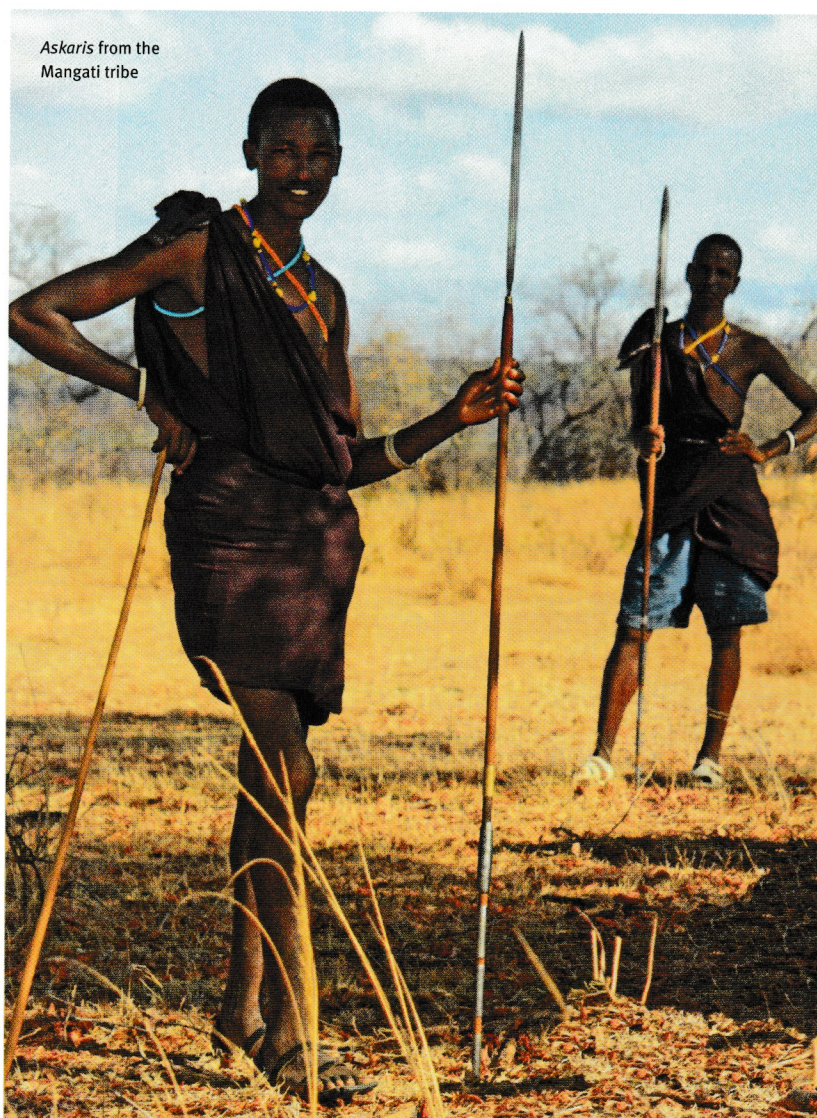
Later, we came across a breeding herd of 16 elephants with young babies and another matriarch with two young bulls nuzzling each other tenderly, encounters that bode well for Lukula's future and make our next encounter all the more poignant. Walking back to the Land Cruiser, we discovered the severed skull of a young elephant brutally hacked off by poachers to remove his tusks.

Sometimes tracking animals is hard work, hiking for three hours to reach buffalo constantly on the move, or wading across a river to keep downwind of elephant. You have to grasp the opportunity or, as Anton put it, "You have to be alive to the bush." Fortunately, life at camp with its luxurious tents near the river's edge, delicious dinners and a well-stocked bar helped to energise you for the next adventure.

When fly-camping, nightlife introduces a whole new element to the bush. Stars illuminated our dining table and then became the bush equivalent to the disco ball as our four askaris from the Mangati tribe provided the cabaret, singing, jumping and dancing around the campfire. Sleep came easily that night, in mosquito-mesh tents that still allowed the starlight to peep through.

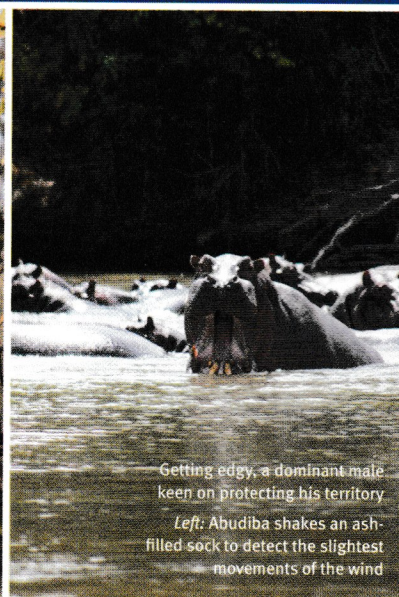
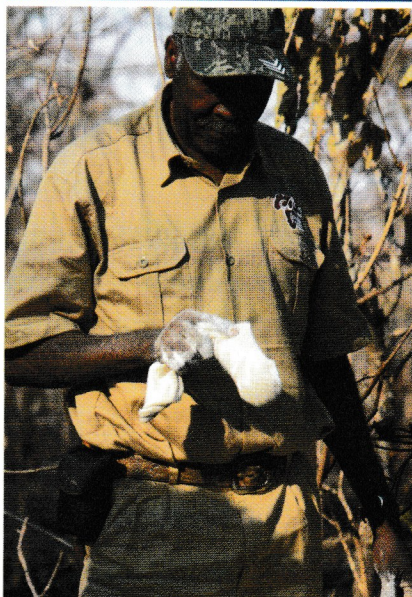
Dawn reacquainted us with the Selous' wild, beautiful terrain. Huge open plains and low miombo woodlands lead to steep hills and rocky outcrops. Borassus palms, baobabs and giant cactus-like candelabra euphorbia dot the hillsides and the shrill tune of cicadas greets every entry to its dense riparian forests. With three rivers meandering through Lukula's landscape – the Luwegu, Lukula and Chi – kayaking safaris are scenic and relaxing, and the waterside wildlife provides an enchanting backdrop.

Waterbuck with distinctive white target marks >>>



Askaris from the Mangati tribe

Turning quickly right, a sandy-coloured streak disappeared 5m away, leaving behind a warm, freshly killed warthog, with its innards gorily exposed



Getting edgy, a dominant male keen on protecting his territory  
Left: Abudiba shakes an ash-filled sock to detect the slightest movements of the wind

SUE WATTS (3)

around their backsides traipsed elegantly at the water's edge while twitchy impala danced away, fearful of predators. Warthogs rolled in mud or grazed lazily on their knees around waterholes. Niassa wildebeest, differentiated by white chevrons across their nose, darted nervously towards the Lukula River, and a pair of side-striped jackals skipped away near our camp on the banks of the Luwegu.

One morning, we waded across the river to a sandbank near where a pod of hippos were wallowing. Their cartoon-like eyes, ears and nostrils – 25 pairs of each – bobbed just above the waterline, leaving the rest of their enormous physique cooling in the water. Occasionally, the dominant male would splutter and splash, flicking water with his tail or yawning, warning signs to remind us this was his territory. A younger male then emerged from upstream, clearly a bigger threat than we were. Facing each other amid loud bellowing and splashing, they opened their cavernous mouths and flashed huge yellowing teeth the colour of nicotine-stained fingers. A few bites and head-butts later, the younger one eventually gave in gracefully and waddled away.

Paradoxically, although the Selous itself may be wild and remote, it allows its visitors chances like these to get unusually close to wildlife. Walking, tracking, kayaking, fly camping – all bring a deeper connection to the bush. Senses run on overdrive, you smell, see, hear and touch things that would be out of bounds on most safaris. On our last night, sipping cold white wine back at camp, my friend John reflected on a long day's tracking: "We've seen three of the Big Five today – elephant, buffalo and lion – and we were on foot for all of them. How amazing is that?!" I couldn't agree more. 🐾

Sue Watt travelled with *The Selous Project* ([www.selousproject.com](http://www.selousproject.com)), *Kenya Airways* ([www.kenya-airways.com](http://www.kenya-airways.com)), *Southern Sun Hotel* ([www.southernsun.com](http://www.southernsun.com)) and *Kilimanjaro Hotel Kempinski* ([www.kempinski-daressalaam.com](http://www.kempinski-daressalaam.com)).

## PLAN YOUR TRIP

### Getting there

**Kenya Airways** ([www.kenya-airways.com](http://www.kenya-airways.com)) has daily flights from Heathrow to Dar es Salaam via Nairobi. **British Airways** ([www.ba.com](http://www.ba.com)) flies from Heathrow to Dar es Salaam three times a week.

### When to visit

The best time to visit is from July to mid-November. Avoid the rainy season between March and May.

### Visas

Most visitors need visas. Single-entry visas can be acquired for US\$50 at most points of entry, including Dar es Salaam airport. UK passport holders can also purchase single- or multiple-entry visas from the Tanzania High Commission in London ([www.tanzania-online.gov.uk](http://www.tanzania-online.gov.uk)).

### Books

Bradt's *Zambia* by Chris McIntyre (4th edition, 2008) is the best guidebook dedicated to Zambia.

### Find out more

**The Selous Project** ([www.selousproject.com](http://www.selousproject.com))

**Great Plains Conservation**

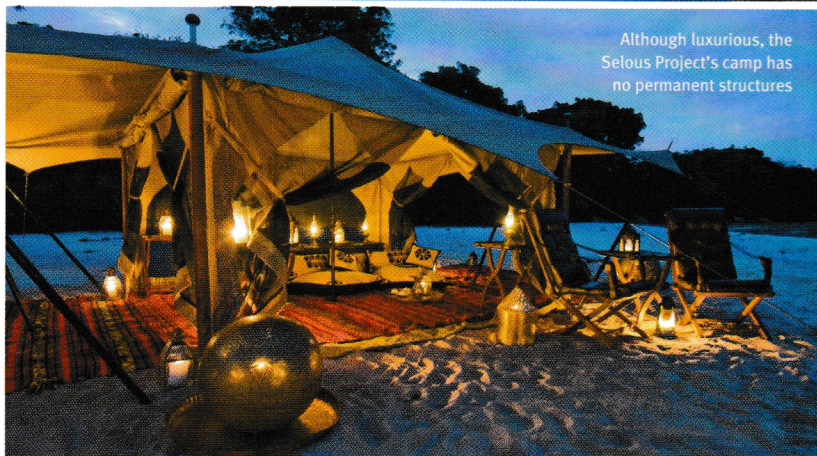
([www.greatplainsconservation.com](http://www.greatplainsconservation.com))

**Tanzania Tourist Board** ([www.tanzaniatouristboard.com](http://www.tanzaniatouristboard.com))



With three rivers meandering through Lukula's landscape, kayaks are a perfect vehicle for peaceful explorations

SUE WATT



Although luxurious, the Selous Project's camp has no permanent structures

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Anton Turner examines his playground, the 121,00ha Lukula concession