

The land of the Land Cruiser

On an 18-month, 50 000km journey from France to South Africa, **Patrick and Marie Gurney** cross the border into Tanzania.

The Swahili word *safari* simply means “journey”. Ours had been an epic one so far, and now we were in Tanzania, which occupied a prime spot on the itinerary.

Like most nature lovers, we’ve always drooled over the amazing wildlife photographs in all the glossy travel magazines. We needed to decide what we really wanted to see, and how to plan our route. Tanzania isn’t small. We couldn’t manage all of it, so we aimed for the big-ticket parks in the north of the country: Lake Manyara, Ngorongoro Conservancy, Tarangire and Serengeti, with a short stopover at Lake Natron.

Africa’s “Garden of Eden” promised a busy schedule of scenery and animals – we were ready!



BOARDWALK, LAKE MANYARA NATIONAL PARK



NGORONGORO CRATER



NGORONGORO CRATER PICNIC AREA



PATRICK, MARIE AND THEIR VISITORS



LAKE MANYARA NATIONAL PARK



MIGOMBANI CAMPSITE

Troopy tracks

The Namaga border post between Kenya and Tanzania was a breeze – customs officials weren't even interested in looking at the vehicle. We drove directly to Arusha airport (100 km) where we met Marie's cousin Aksel Kibarer and his family – they'd jetted in from France to join us on a short safari. They have two kids, Elio (7) and Thelma (10) – camping in the bush was a novel concept!

We hired them a Toyota Land Cruiser 70 series, also known as a Troopy, from Arusha Car Rental. It came equipped with two rooftop tents, a fridge and gas hob, plus some other camping kit. We overnighted in Arusha, checked all the gear and left for Lake Manyara National Park the next day. We opted to stay outside the park at Migombani Campsite, which cost US\$15 (R220) per person per night. The campsite was high on a hill overlooking Lake Manyara, and there was a massive pool next to an even more impressive baobab. We met the first group of many overlanding South Africans there.

Migombani caters specifically to overlanders and organized tour groups. The showers were fantastic and the food was good, but it was more the sense of space – the rolling green lawns and the amazing view. We loved it so much that we stayed three nights, taking day trips into Manyara and also using it as a base to visit nearby Ngorongoro.

Back to Lake Manyara. This unique 300 km² national park, with its central soda lake fed by hot springs, has lush forests of fig, mahogany and thorn trees. We saw most of it in one day, including the lake boardwalk, which gave us an up-close-and-personal look at

waterbirds and a few buffalo grazing along the shore. We saw all the usual suspects and we got lucky when we turned a corner and came upon a lioness in a tree! Manyara is famous for these so-called "tree-climbing lions".

We lunched on the side of the lake, watched by a curious gaggle of giraffe. Before we exited the park, we decided to take a trip to a hippo pool, where these enormous beasts emerged with hairdos of bright green hyacinth each time they came up for a breath.

Back at camp that evening, we discussed our trip to the Ngorongoro Crater the following day. The entrance fee for a foreign vehicle is exorbitant (US\$190; R2 800), so at 5.30 the next morning we all piled into the Troopy, which was locally registered and therefore only cost Tz30 000 (R200).

Cresting the rim of the crater is difficult to put into words. All thoughts of entrance fees melt away as you hastily pose for a selfie at what is one of Africa's most awesome viewpoints. The two-million-year-old caldera forms an unbroken, 600 m-high rim. Between 1899 and 1916, two Germans – the Siedentopf brothers – farmed inside the fertile crater. I read that they hunted wildebeest by the hundreds, canning the tongues for German connoisseurs.

In 1928 the crater was declared a reserve, and in 1959 it became an official conservation area. We saw lion, buffalo, elephant, loads of birds – and almost as many Land Cruisers. We picnicked at one of the two allocated spots, which we shared with more than 80 Land Cruisers and their clients! The queue for the toilets was something else...



THOMSON'S GAZELLE, NGORONGORO CRATER



TARANGIRE NATIONAL PARK

Tamarind snacks and tsetse flies

We were still looking for that real “wild” feeling, without bumping into a Land Cruiser every 10 minutes. In Tarangire National Park, we booked a “special campsite” called Korongo, which cost US\$50 (R740) per person per night, as opposed to US\$30 (R450) at a public campsite.

“Where is the toilet? Is this the right place?” Aksel’s children asked. You forget that overseas visitors expect more for the money they’re paying. But we were in the true wilderness at last. To take the edge off the French family’s anxiety about safety with all the wild animals around, we’d hired a park ranger for the first night. Children can move far and fast when you leave them alone for a few seconds; it’s better to be safe than sorry.

I had always wondered where baboons go at night. In Tarangire I found out. Tanzania has the most chilled-out olive baboons, not the pesky chacmas we have in South Africa. Our camping spot had been thoughtfully positioned next to a deep, dry riverbed, with tamarind trees along the edge. The baboons had made one large tree their home.

We all shared a late-afternoon snack together: Pringles chips and beer for the humans, and tamarind seed pods for the baboons. That evening, we put up the fairy lights and enjoyed a magical time with the sounds of chattering baboons and lions calling in the distance.

Our game drive the following morning took us past a small sign with an arrow pointing down a dirt track, which read: “The Greatest View”. We couldn’t resist, and whoever made the sign wasn’t joking. Down the track, we found Tarangire Safari Lodge and the breathtaking panorama that the lodge presides over. We met the son of the owners, Brenden Simonson, who was fixing a Landy in the parking lot.

“Help yourself to as much tea and coffee as you like,” he said.

We chatted for a while about how his family had come to own such a beautiful piece of Africa. He also showed us his father’s home-made “Swamp Crawler” – a crazy vehicle with a mixture of Land Rover, Unimog and Lexus parts. Apparently, a few years back, he used it to rescue Kingsley Holgate from the sticky Tarangire mud.

Camping next to the baboon lair was unique. Each evening they’d come home to demolish more tamarind pods and roost. Sleep didn’t come easy to us on our second night, however: There was an ongoing argument in the tree and the screaming continued until 1 am. The only thing that stopped me from lobbing a rock into the boughs was the high probability of further commotion, and no sleep until dawn.

Speaking of commotion, tsetse flies were out in full force during our visit, and Marie was their target. We were perplexed as to why they’d chosen her. After noticing numerous tsetse fly traps around the park (pieces of cloth strung between trees), we made a discovery – she was a walking fly trap due to the colour of her clothes! The flies seem to be attracted to dark colours like navy and black. Those of us wearing lighter shades were less affected.

Tarangire is one of Tanzania’s hidden jewels. Its vegetation is a remarkable mix of palms, baobabs, plains and swamps, and it teems with wildlife. The roads are excellent compared to the other more popular parks, which makes game viewing a treat. We even had a herd of 150 buffalo trample past our campsite one morning.

Then it was time to say goodbye to Aksel and his family who were off to Zanzibar for seven days. As they left, Aksel said: “I have new respect for the organisation and work it takes to be on the road.”



TARANGIRE NATIONAL PARK



TARANGIRE NATIONAL PARK

Algae-dyed flamingos

We had two options to get from Tarangire to the Serengeti: An expensive but shorter route through the Ngorongoro Conservation Area, which would have cost US\$140 (R2000) for us and the Hilux, or a cheaper but longer route via Lake Natron in the north. We’d read that Lake Natron was full of flamingos and seldom visited – so the decision was an easy one.

Our idea of soaking in the lake was crushed by a ranger. “No, no, leave the soaking to the flamingos!” he warned. “It’s dangerous!” Indeed, evaporation leaves behind “natron” (sodium carbonate decahydrate), which is highly alkaline (pH 9-12) and can harm human skin. Algae blooms give the lake a pinkish hue. This also explains the colour of the flamingos – they eat heaps of algae. Apparently, 75% of the world’s remaining lesser flamingos are born at Lake Natron. We were keen to witness this natural marvel.

A note at this stage: When an experienced Tanzanian ranger tells you that a road is “quite good, it’s only two and a half hours”, take his advice with a pinch of salt. The four-and-a-half-hour, 120 km journey took us through a scorching, rocky semi-desert with sporadic sections of fine, powdery dust. We had a tail wind blowing faster than we were travelling – opening a window for fresh air took expert timing. We got it wrong a few times, with horrendous results. Granted, the scenery was spectacular.

We were charged US\$35 (R514) per person entrance fee at Engaresero Gate to enter the general area around Lake Natron. We overnights at a community-run camp called Maasai Giraffe Eco Lodge, which was about a kilometre from the lake. To escape the wind, which was still belting through the valley, we grabbed our sleeping bags and slept in the Welcome Hut instead.

The next day brought more wind and the flamingos were in short supply. We could only view the lake from a distance anyway, because each time you step out of the community camp on an “activity”, it costs US\$20 (R300) per person. It was a little ridiculous, but this was Tanzania and everything has a fee. All in all, it was a tough but interesting detour.



EN ROUTE TO LAKE NATRON



MAASAI GIRAFFE ECO LODGE



LAKE NATRON



SERENGETI NATIONAL PARK



SERENGETI NATIONAL PARK



ROAD GRADER, SERENGETI NATIONAL PARK

The Serengeti's washboard roads

From Lake Natron, we drove for four hours to Klein's Gate on the north-eastern edge of Serengeti National Park. We paid our fees of US\$260 (R3 850) for us and the Hilux, for two nights of camping within the park.

The first night we stayed at Lobo Public Campsite, which is in the Lobo Valley and considered to have the best big-cat viewing in the park. We duly saw a pride of lions. We shared the campsite with a group of 30+ Italians and three large buffalo. That evening, I was amazed by the nonchalant attitude of the driver-guide of the Italians, as he allowed his clients to shine high-powered torches at the buffalo and pose for selfies from 20 m away. Not something I would do...

We had been forewarned that Seronera Public Campsite in the south-east of the park was big and busy, and the roads around there were terrible. We looked at our map and decided to exit via the Ndabaka Gate in the west instead, where there's a smaller public campsite. Ndabaka is close to Lake Victoria – from there we planned to head to Rwanda.

Getting to Ndabaka before dark meant a mammoth eight-hour, 220 km drive on poor roads. It took us much longer than expected and we ran out of daylight. I don't condone illegal wild camping in a national park, but we were stuck and we had to make a plan. We eventually found a disused road that led to what seemed to be a sand-collection point next to a riverbed. We parked the Hilux out of view, ate sandwiches for dinner and crept quietly up to our rooftop tent to sleep.

The following morning, driving out, we heard a knocking sound coming from the rear of the Hilux. The infamous corrugated roads of the Serengeti had lived up to their reputation: We'd broken a roof-rack bracket. We strapped it down in an attempt to support the remaining three brackets by minimizing movement.

With five minutes to spare on our entrance permit, we exited the Serengeti and were happy to be back on tar. (You're charged per 24-hour period you spend in the park; if you overstay, you have to pay another full-day rate.) The roads might be terrible but the Serengeti is still worth visiting. We were only there for two nights; in hindsight we should rather have stayed for five, which would have meant we didn't have to rush.

We camped at Fukufuku Campsite, 20 minutes from Ndabaka Gate – a super, clean little spot. That night, at about 2.30 am, we were woken by torchlight and shouting. In Tanzania (much like Kenya) all the parks are unfenced, and the community has a system of herding wayward animals back into the park. This time it was a huge herd of elephants.

Tanzania is wild and expensive, but there's so much to see. It's a place where you can buy freshly cut sugar cane cubes and little bags of the most delicious roasted peanuts, right from your vehicle window. It's a place where the day starts with warm vetkoek and coffee. It's a place where people wave and smile at you as you drive by.

But it's also a place where you can break roof racks and suspension!

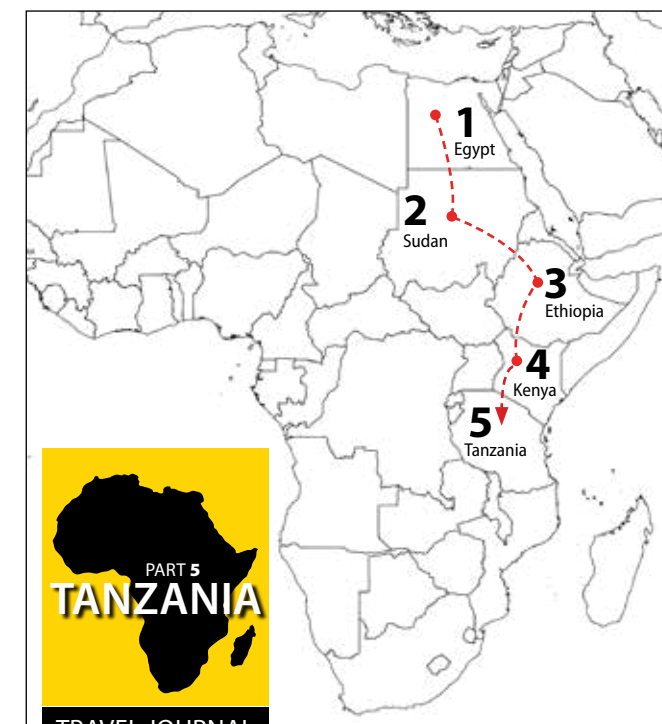
From Fukufuku, we drove towards the lakeside city of Mwanza and took a ferry across Lake Victoria to the Rusumo border post with Rwanda. Another country beckoned!



FERRY AT MWANZA



FERRY ACROSS LAKE VICTORIA



PATRICK & MARIE GURNEY

Marie hails from Valence in France and that's where the Gurneys set off from on 3 June 2018, with the aim of driving all the way back to their home in Johannesburg over the course of 18 months.

By the time they reached Tanzania, they'd been on the road for 14 months, having driven through France, Switzerland, Italy, Croatia, Slovenia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Greece, Turkey,

Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia and Kenya.

MORE INFO

E-mail them if you have questions about their trip info@skultcha.com, or visit skultcha.com. You can also follow them on Facebook (Skultcha) or on Instagram (@skulcha) – note the different spelling.

Next month: Patrick and Marie explore Rwanda (Part 6).

See issue #158 for Part 1 about their travels through Egypt, #159 for Part 2 (Sudan), #160 for Part 3 (Ethiopia) and #161 for Part 4 (Kenya).