



The sandy riverbeds of Ruaha are a favourite place for lions to rest

## RUAHA NATIONAL PARK

Ruaha National Park hit the headlines in early 2007 when it increased hugely in size to incorporate the nearby Usanga Game Reserve, and protect a vital wetland area. It's now Tanzania's largest national park, and part of a series of conjoined wildlife areas which together cover 50,000km<sup>2</sup>: that's larger than the Serengeti! Its dramatic scenery includes rolling hills, large open plains, groves of skeletal baobabs and, along its southern border, the wide Great Ruaha River. Despite these claims to fame, Ruaha still has only a handful of camps and, being far from Dar, it receives relatively few visitors.

In some ways Ruaha's ecosystems represent a transition zone between the miombo woodlands common in Zambia, and the more open savannah biomes typical of northern Tanzania and Kenya. This is evident in the park's vegetation and its prolific game. It includes species which are widespread to the south – like buffalo,

zebra, Defassa waterbuck, impala, giraffe, Lichtenstein's hartebeest, roan and sable antelope – together with Grant's gazelle, typical of the north's open plains.

Ruaha is reputed to have the largest elephant population of any Tanzanian national park. It's also an excellent park for predators: lion prides are frequently large and habitually doze in sandy riverbeds; cheetah are often seen hunting on the more open plains; leopard are widespread, though characteristically more elusive; and it's a major stronghold for wild dog. Spotted hyena are more common here than their striped cousins.

Ruaha's birdlife is extraordinary: over 520 species have been sighted in the park. Along the rivers expect to find goliath herons, saddle-billed storks, white-headed plovers and the white-backed night heron. There are six species of both vultures and hornbills, and raptors abound.

Even birdwatchers visit from mid-November to March, when a variety of waders appear along the riverbanks, together with flocks of white and Abdim's storks.

The sooty falcon arrives from the Sahara and the rare Eleonora's falcon from the Mediterranean.

Ruaha has only a few camps, though this is gradually changing. Talk to us and we can advise you from recent personal experience.

## RUAHA RIVER LODGE

**Ruaha River Lodge** is owned by the Fox family and is laid-back and unpretentious: a peaceful spot where you can comfortably put your feet up. The lodge stands beside a small set of rapids in the Great Ruaha River. Hippos and large crocodiles wait nearby in calmer pools and the wilderness stretches beyond.

Ruaha River Lodge is split into two camps which are separate from each other: one with 12 bandas beside the river, and the other with 14 higher up the hill. All are made of stone and thatch, and each has a veranda, a sitting area and an en-suite bathroom. Copious hot water in the shower doesn't seem to deter the odd resident frog!

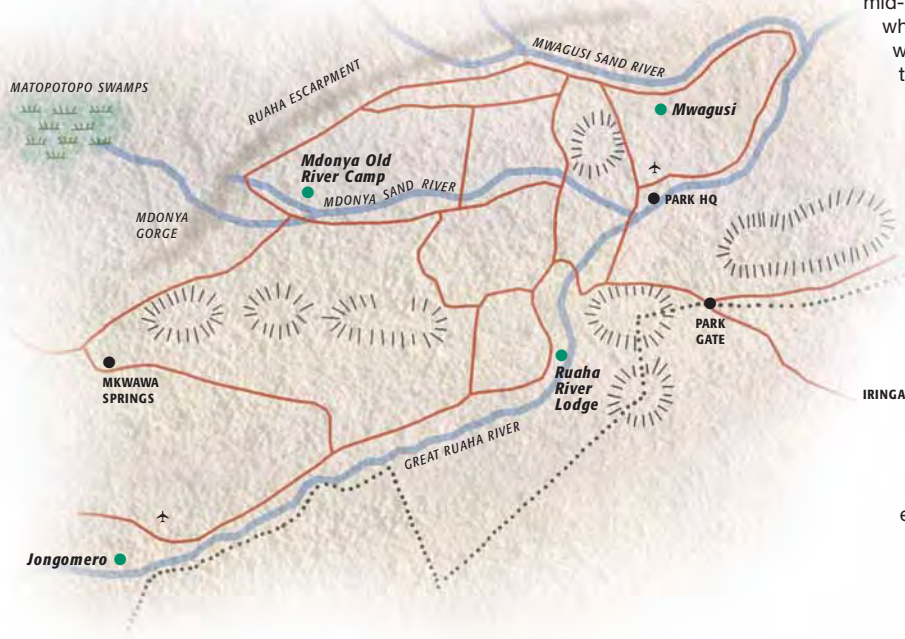
The lodge's riverside dining room has partially open sides; it hosts wholesome buffet dinners after which you can relax with drinks around the campfire.

The lodge's safari activities focus mainly on game drives in open 4WD vehicles, morning and afternoon, although early-morning walks are also possible. If you're here for more than a few days, then it may be possible to head off on an all-day safari with a picnic lunch, although many will spend time just watching the riverside wildlife from the lodge itself.

Although quite large, Ruaha River Lodge stands in the heart of Ruaha and offers very good-value access to this excellent national park.



The bandas at Mwagusi are spacious and open





Elephants often lift their trunks to sniff the air

## MWAGUSI CAMP

**Mwagusi Camp** is tucked away in a picturesque spot on the banks of the seasonal Mwagusi River. It's a secluded location, where small pools in the riverbed attract numerous birds and animals. It is owned and run by Chris Fox, who is passionate about Ruaha, its animals and its conservation.

Mwagusi's 13 comfortable tents each have double or twin beds. The tented section forms the bedroom and is set within a large reed-and-thatch banda, which also houses a spacious en-suite bathroom – with flush toilet, basin and a hot shower. There's a shaded veranda, complete with big, soft armchairs. From here you can watch yellow-collared lovebirds, sunbirds and a host of other iridescent birds flitting about in the trees above.

The food at Mwagusi is very good with particularly outstanding breakfasts: fresh cinnamon rolls are baked each morning, along with scones, bread and croissants. This sets you up for the day, though old hands know to leave room for the excellent lunches and dinners!

Activities focus on 4WD game drives, usually accompanied by both a guide and a tracker. A large area of the park lies to the north of the camp, where you'll seldom see any other vehicles. Mwagusi's guides are knowledgeable, enthusiastic and willing to go to great lengths to find the more exciting game. The camp's been here for well over a decade, so the game around Mwagusi is usually very relaxed with vehicles. With the personal feel of a small bushcamp, the camp certainly offers one of the best game experiences in Tanzania.



Black-backed jackals are versatile scavengers - active day and night

## KWIHALA CAMP

**Kwihala Camp**, formerly known as 'Exclusive Mobile Camping', is a semi-permanent camp that moves between two locations within Ruaha National Park. Kwihala oozes style – all of the plates, serving bowls, vases and even the sinks in the bathroom are of matching handmade earthenware embossed with the camp's signature baobab tree. Despite this, Kwihala still remains very much part of the bush; from a distance, its six cream tents seem to vanish into its surroundings.

We first visited Kwihala in 2007 and were impressed by its spacious tents which are very private and airy, with great use of natural colour and lovely bathrooms. There is a keen focus on good guiding here, with experienced and knowledgeable guides taking guests out on activities. Having been operating in Ruaha for a few years now, the camp has settled in and offers a high-quality operation with a touch of adventure.

## JONGOMERO CAMP

**Jongomero Camp** is situated under large acacias on the banks of the ephemeral Jongomero River. In the southwest corner of the park and away from the other camps, it's surrounded by a wilderness of *Faidherbia* woodland.

Jongomero has eight very spacious canvas rooms, all built on individual raised decks and shaded by cool thatch. These have large windows and cool verandas overlooking the river, as well as en-suite bathrooms with flush toilets, twin basins and hot showers. Much of the camp's high-quality furniture is made from reclaimed dhow wood, so is full of character.

Jongomero's activities mix the usual game drives with all-day game expeditions around the park, normally with tasty picnic lunches. This stylish, comfortable camp was built from scratch in 2001, and now offers the most luxurious experience in Ruaha. If you're in the park for six nights or more, then consider combining a stay here with time at Mwagusi.



A typical Meru-style tent, here at Mdonya Old River Camp

## MDONYA OLD RIVER CAMP

Tucked under sycamore fig and acacia trees, near the Mdonya waterfalls of Ruaha escarpment, **Mdonya Old River Camp** opened in 2003 with 11 Meru-style tents: eight twin/double, and three which can be extended to sleep four people. Each is traditional in design and decorated simply with feathers and bush treasures, locally made wooden furniture, comfortable beds and a private toilet, and a shower under the stars.

These days many camps aspire to lavish comforts, and become divorced from the surrounding bush in the process. Mdonya Old River Camp aims in the opposite direction: it makes no apologies for being a fairly simple camp, offering all the safari basics. This approach has several results: the game really does come through the camp, visitors feel more connected to their surroundings, and you need to remain even more alert to those whose environment you are sharing. Lighting at night is all by candles and lamps; there is no useable electricity here apart from a solar panel used for charging batteries; and you will always be escorted around the camp at night. As a result, Mdonya tends to appeal to a slightly younger, less comfort-conscious clientele.

The activities here centre on full-day game drives, trips to the waterfalls and walking safaris. And after a hard day's game-viewing, you'll return to tasty food, often with an Italian slant.

### Fly-camping in Ruaha

Last year, in 2008, Jongomero started fly-camping trips and walking safaris in Ruaha. See page 100 for information on fly-camping, but basically a private fly-camp means sleeping in a simple camp with small dome tents, long-drop toilet and bucket shower in the middle of the bush, and dinner cooked on an open fire.

Stop Press: As this brochure goes to press, we have heard that Mdonya Old River camp is planning to operate a fly-camp from June 2009.