



Game congregating on Katavi's vast open plains during the dry season

KATAVI NATIONAL PARK

Katavi is exceedingly remote. Its isolation has helped it to remain untouched, but has also meant that it's either exceedingly difficult (by road) or expensive (by air) to visit. Getting there takes four or five hours by plane from Arusha, but the result is that whilst the Serengeti National Park sees around 120,000 visitors per annum, Katavi typically has just a few hundred.

For those who do make the effort, Tanzania's third-largest national park won't disappoint. Two enormous plains of knee-high golden grass – Chada and Katasunga – dominate the park, surrounded by varied woodland. Katavi is at its best in the dry season when the plains fill with thousands of zebra, topi and impala. Hartebeest, giraffe and Defassa waterbuck are also very common, and there's a large population of resident elephants and some impressive herds of buffalo.

It's a great park for watching lion-buffalo interactions; spotted

hyaena are frequently seen and leopard appear on the woodland fringes, but are more elusive. Wild dog do live here, but tend to stick to the escarpment and are rarely seen on the plains. During the dry season, the Katuma and Kapapa rivers are the only water for miles. As the game files down to drink, hundreds of hippo congregate in the tiniest waterhole and enormous crocodiles sit out the heat in riverbank mud-holes.

Katavi hosts large flocks of open-billed storks, saddlebills, spoonbills, crested cranes and pink-backed pelicans. Raptors are plentiful, and the woodlands are home to species as diverse as African golden orioles, paradise fly-catchers and pennant-winged nightjars.

Katavi is a name to conjure with; it's one of the best parks in Africa. Many safari operations would love to start camps here, but the logistics and costs are difficult, so at time of writing, there are only a few small, permanent safari camps in the park sharing this 4,500km² of wilderness.

CHADA KATAVI

Chada Katavi occupies a lovely woodland spot on the edge of Chada Plain. Six large safari tents are widely separated for privacy within the open acacia woodland. These have big gauze windows that can be opened up to the breeze. Inside each, large beds, subtle natural fabrics, palm matting and a writing desk make for a stylish safari interior; outside, canvas chairs on the veranda remind you that Chada isn't about excessive luxury. The private tented bathroom is slightly separate, a few paces from your tent, and includes a long-drop toilet and a bucket shower (hot water available on request).

The camp has a tented library and lounge, and also a separate bar and dining area – the venue for informal meals, after which guests gravitate to the nearby campfire for drinks. Chada is well organised, friendly and

Fly-camping in Katavi

With such a big park, it's possible to travel long distances exploring many areas and still not see any other vehicles. To help reach the more distant corners of the park, the camp's team can arrange one-night fly-camping trips (see page 100 for comments). These are often combined with walking safaris to help you to appreciate the sheer scale and remoteness of this park. Staff will go ahead to set up the camp, which consists of small mosquito-net dome tents with comfy mattresses, proper quilts and pillows, a (hot) bucket shower and a long-drop toilet. You'll return from your drive or walk to a cold drink, a roaring fire and a first-class dinner under the stars in one of Africa's most remote locations. Fly-camping should be arranged in advance and commands a supplement of about £110 per person sharing per night.

very personal. It's also very wild; the camp feels as if it is part of the bush, not insulated from it. As you'd expect, game activities are the focus here. Chada's knowledgeable guides will lead you on 4WD game drives which may take a whole day to explore a section of the park, accompanied by a picnic lunch. Katavi has plenty of open country, including the fringes of its great plains, making it particularly good for walking safaris, which are always accompanied by an armed game scout.

KATAVI WILDERNESS CAMP

Situated on the edge of the huge Katasunga Plains, very close to the park's main airstrip, Katavi Wilderness Camp is owned and run by the same team as Ruaha River Lodge (page 106), and currently has just three large walk-in tents, built on low wooden platforms, with en-suite facilities and large, shady verandas.



Minor threat display between two young male lions





Mahale Mountain Camp on the shores of Lake Tanganyika

MAHALE MOUNTAINS NATIONAL PARK

Perhaps the best guidebook to Tanzania (the Bradt guide!) describes the Mahale Mountains National Park as “quite simply one of the most beautiful parks anywhere in Africa”. The lakeshore here is a beach of the finest powder-white sand, behind which rises a range of imposing mountains, clad in verdant tropical vegetation. Big electric blue butterflies flit above the streams and the forest is alive with sound. It’s not only beautiful, but it also harbours Tanzania’s densest population of primates: blue, red-tailed and vervet monkeys, yellow baboons and red colobus are never far away – and then of course, there are the chimpanzees.

Covering about 1,600km² of the mountains, this park is home to around a thousand chimpanzees. Most significantly, one group – the Mimikire clan – has been habituated by researchers since 1965. Currently led by an impressive alpha male, Alofu, the M-group, as it is more commonly known, has around 56 members. They go where they want and when they want but are relaxed near people, so it’s possible to track and observe them from close quarters. For the good of the chimps’ health, all their human visitors are required to wear surgical masks – which will be provided for you.

The hike to reach them can vary from a leisurely wander of 20 minutes to a more strenuous hike lasting up to three hours. Towards the end of the dry season (August to October), the forest paths are at their easiest to walk and the chimps are usually at their closest to the shore. Walking boots, long trousers and a small backpack (for cameras and binoculars) are always wise.

Sightings are not guaranteed, but it’s normal to see them on most days; you’d be exceedingly unlucky to stay here for several days and not find them. More usually, you’ll be able to sit and watch them foraging, grooming, tussling, bickering and taking care of their young. Sitting in the forest, watching chimpanzees getting on with their daily lives, is an unforgettable animal encounter.

GREYSTOKE MAHALE

Greystoke Mahale is a superb little camp with very stylish thatched bandas. Each is slightly raised on decking and set back into the vegetation, peeking out onto an idyllic white beach. Inside each are sumptuous beds under mosquito netting and lovely wooden furniture. Thoughtful touches are provided such as kikois for the beach, bowls to wash the sand from your feet, bath and beach towels and comfortable loungers to enjoy the view. Each chic, double-storey wooden banda has a raised viewing deck with day beds, and links into a private bathroom where there’s a flush toilet and a hot shower.

In the centre of the beach is the camp’s landmark, double-storey dining and lounge area. Off to one side, amongst the vegetation and rocks, is a separate sunset bar.

Tracking chimps from Greystoke Mahale is very professional; you’re always accompanied by one of the camp’s expert guides and a scout from the park. Crucially, your guide is someone who knows all of these chimps individually, by name, and can



Young chimp using a carefully chosen twig to fish for termites

explain their behaviour with reference to what’s happened to that particular chimp in the past. This raises your whole experience beyond simply watching wildlife, and into the realm of understanding individuals and their social conduct. This makes it, for us, one of the most riveting wildlife spectacles in Africa.

After a morning trying to understand the chimps, spend a lazy afternoon kayaking on Lake Tanganyika, or sailing on a beautiful old dhow, fishing and drinking as the sun sets. With a great team, superb food and an idyllic location, Greystoke is a very special camp indeed.

GOMBE STREAM NATIONAL PARK

As the result of Jane Goodall’s research, Gombe Stream has long been renowned for its chimps. Gombe is much closer to Kigoma (the local town with a small airport) than Mahale and hence it’s easier to reach. You’ll usually spend a night in Kigoma, perhaps at the Hilltop Hotel, and then travel with your own guide by boat from Kigoma to Gombe.

Gombe Stream is much smaller (only 52km²) and less dramatic than Mahale, but otherwise its environment is similar: a sandy beach with a backdrop of vegetated mountains. There are three groups of chimps here. One of these, the large Kasekela community, is habituated in the same way as M-group in Mahale.

Gombe Stream Tented Camp is close to the park headquarters. This has large Meru-style tents on low wooden platforms, all clustered in a patch of forest beside the shore. You’ll visit the chimps accompanied by travellers staying at the (exceedingly basic) resthouse nearby.

Whilst Gombe offers a more economic way of seeing chimps in the wild than Mahale, it lacks the atmosphere and, crucially, the expert guiding of Greystoke. It’s best visited as a two- or three-night side-trip from Kigoma, which is reached by air from Dar es Salaam.

Getting to Mahale and Katavi

The least costly way to get to Katavi and Mahale is by using twice-weekly scheduled flights, operating on Mondays and Thursdays, which link these parks with Arusha, in northern Tanzania. However, the relatively high cost of even these flights helps to make these parks two of Tanzania’s most expensive destinations!

In the last few years there have also been flights routing Dar–Selous–Ruaha to Katavi/Mahale, and back. These, too, run on Mondays and Thursdays. Sadly, the costs for these are similar to the costs of chartering – certainly no lower than the scheduled flights from Arusha.