

RUAHA NATIONAL PARK

In recent years, Ruaha National Park 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 50,000km²: 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 comparatively 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; cheetahs 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.

Keen 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.



The tented rooms at Mwangusi sit within spacious open bandas

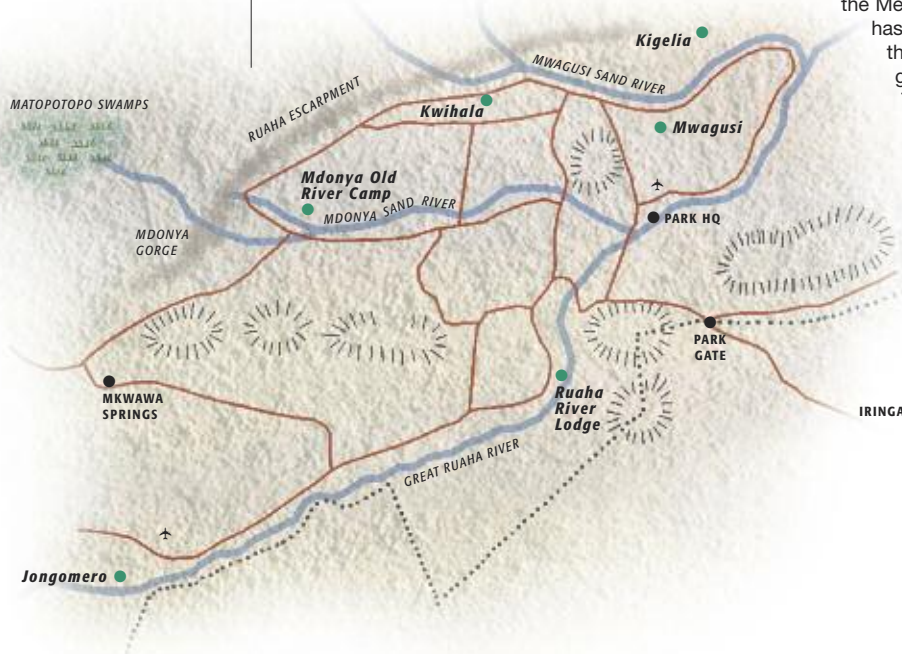
RUAHA RIVER LODGE

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 on game drives in open 4WD vehicles in the morning and afternoon. 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 right in the heart of Ruaha and offers very good-value access to this excellent national park.





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 cool 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 muffins, bread and pastries. This sets you up for the day, though old hands know to leave room for the excellent lunches, and dinner under the stars!

Activities focus on 4WD game drives, accompanied by both an excellent local guide and a driver. Mwagusi is also one of only three camps in Ruaha that we can currently recommend for walking safaris – although there is a small extra cost for this,

payable locally. Walks are led either by Chris Fox himself, or his head guide Riaan, accompanied by an armed scout, and last up to three hours. 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 two decades, so the game around Mwagusi is usually very relaxed with vehicles. With the personal feel of a small bushcamp and the ability to walk from here, Mwagusi certainly offers one of the best game experiences in Tanzania.



Crowned Crane

KWIHALA

Kwihala, meaning 'bush' in the local Wahehe language, is an impressive camp with spacious tents that are very private and airy, and make great use of natural colour. Kwihala oozes style – all of the plates, serving bowls, vases and even the sinks in its lovely bathrooms are of matching handmade earthenware embossed with the camp's signature baobab tree. Despite these small luxuries, Kwihala still remains very much part of the bush and subtle neutral tones work well with the environment; from a distance, its six cream tents seem to vanish into its surroundings.

There is a keen focus on guiding at Kwihala: a handful of experienced freelance guides manage and guide here, working in rotation throughout the seasons. Activities focus on 4WD safaris; walking safaris are planned for 2012.

As we go to press the camp is semi-permanent – the whole camp can be packed up and removed without a trace. However in June 2012 Kwihala is constructing four new tents on a permanent site about 500m away from its present location, among granite kopjes overlooking the Mwagusi River. These tents will form a smaller camp which is promised to be more substantial and luxurious – although we're assured that it will retain the style, simplicity and fantastic guiding for which the original is renowned.

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



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

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 other camps, it's surrounded by a wilderness of faidherbia woodland.

Jongomero is a stylish, comfortable camp and offers the most luxurious experiences in Ruaha. Its eight very spacious canvas tents are built on individual raised decks and shaded by cool thatch. They 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. We'd also recommend the guided walking safaris led by the head guide and camp manager, Molly. If you're in the park for six nights or more, then consider combining a stay here with time at Mwangusi or Kwihala.

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 12 Meru-style tents: 10 are normal twin/doubles, and two can be extended to sleep four. Each is traditional in design, decorated simply with feathers and bush treasures, and kitted out with locally made wooden furniture, comfortable beds, a private toilet and a solar-heated shower under the stars. Lighting at night is all by candles and lamps; the only electricity comes from a few solar panels and is used for charging batteries.

These days many camps aspire to lavish comforts, and some become divorced from the surrounding bush in the process. Mdonya Old River Camp aims for the opposite: it makes no apologies for being simple and offering just the safari basics. This approach results in more animals passing through camp than is usually the case, and visitors must remain even more alert when walking around (everyone is escorted around camp at night).

Mdonya appeals to a slightly less comfort-

conscious, more adventurous clientele, and its activities centre on full-day game drives, sometimes including trips to waterfalls. After a hard day's game-viewing, you'll return to tasty food, often with an Italian slant.

KIGELIA

A relatively new semi-permanent tented camp located on the edge of the Ifuguru sand river, **Kigelia Camp** takes its name from the sausage trees, *Kigelia africana*, between which it nestles. With only six tents, it's a small camp which aims to have a light environmental footprint, using solar-powered lights and wind-up torches.

When we first visited in 2010, we found a well-camouflaged camp with relaxed, natural interiors: gauze picture windows, chunky wooden furniture, neutral colours and African fabrics. The rooms are comfortable and practical, with flush toilets in the en-suite bathroom and outside hot bucket shower. Though Kigelia is in a good game area, its costs are high compared with some of the more established Ruaha camps which already have proven track records.



Elephants drinking from the Ruaha River

Fly-camping in Ruaha

In 2008, Jongomero started fly-camping trips and walking safaris in Ruaha. See page 177 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, with dinner cooked on an open fire.

