A number of years ago, 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 es Salaam, 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, greater and lesser kudu, 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 a superb park for predators: lion prides, often numbering up to 40, habitually doze in sandy riverbeds; cheetahs are regularly seen hunting on the more open plains; leopard are widespread, though characteristically more elusive; and it’s a stronghold for wild dog. Spotted hyena are more common here than their striped cousins.

Ruaha’s birdlife is extraordinary: over 570 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 small number of camps, and this, combined with excellent game viewing, makes it a very special place.

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.

See www.expertafrica.com for our trips in detail with prices in different currencies.
MDONYA OLD RIVER CAMP

Tucked under sycamore fig and acacia trees, near the Mdonya waterfalls of the Ruaha escarpment, **Mdonya Old River Camp** has been open for a decade. Its 12 traditional Meru-style tents include ten twins/doubles, and two that can be extended to sleep four. Each is simply adorned 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 is 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, so visitors must remain particularly 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.

MWAGUSI SAFARI CAMP

**Mwagusi** 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 which 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 four 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 by a head guide from the camp, accompanied by two armed rangers, 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.

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**The average male lion weighs around 180kg**

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

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**The tented rooms at Mwagusi sit within spacious open bandas**

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*Study the options: thousands of lodge pictures and videos at [www.expertafrica.com](http://www.expertafrica.com)*

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KWHALAH

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 specialist field guides manage and guide here, working in rotation through the seasons. Activities focus mainly on 4WD safaris, but walking and night drives are offered in the dry seasons.

JONGOMERO

Jongomero is situated under large acacias on the banks of the ephemeral Jongomero River. In the south-west 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 experience in Ruaha. Its eight very spacious canvas tents are built on individual raised decks and shaded by cool thatch. They have large windows and 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. If you’re in the park for six nights or more, then consider combining a stay here with time at Mwagusi or Kwihala.

KIGELIA CAMP

Kigelia Camp takes its name from the sausage trees, *Kigelia africana*, between which it nestles. As we went to press it had just been taken over by the same team who run the excellent Sand Rivers in the Selous (page 182) as well as many other camps in western and northern Tanzania. The camp will close from early January and undergo some renovations, and re-open in June under its new ownership. Currently, with only six tents, it’s a small camp which aims to have a light environmental footprint and to have a light environmental footprint. As we went to press it had just been taken over by the same team who run the excellent Sand Rivers in the Selous (page 182) as well as many other camps in western and northern Tanzania. The camp will close from early January and undergo some renovations, and re-open in June under its new ownership. Currently, 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. Kigelia blends well into its surroundings, with relaxed, natural interiors: gauze picture windows, wooden furniture, neutral colours and African fabrics. The rooms are comfortable, cosy and spacious, with a flush toilet in the en-suite bathroom and a hot bucket shower outside. Activities here focus on game drives in especially comfortable vehicles, with sofa-style seating, and blankets and hot-water bottles provided for chilly mornings. We’re told that the camp set-up and decor won’t change drastically, but that they will focus on upgrading the quality of the guiding and service. The changes in this camp look to be very exciting; ask us for the latest.

KICHAKA EXPEDITIONS

New in late 2013, Kichaka Expeditions is a small private mobile camp that aims to give guests a wild bush experience and the chance to explore some of the most remote areas of this park. This is the only place in southern Tanzania where you can wake up in one area, go on a walking safari, and go to bed in a totally different place. Game drives are also possible for those who want the option. Safaris are led by Andrew ‘Moli’ Molinaro, who has a reputation of being one of the best guides in Africa.

Just three simple tents are set up in each location, with a short-drop toilet and bucket shower, and as the camp is only booked on a private basis, it will be a unique and personal experience. We think combining Kichaka with one of the permanent camps in the main areas of the park would make for a fantastic experience – we’re really excited about this new operation.