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# AFRICAN STORYBOOK

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## The ultimate predator experience?

The outstanding wildlife spectacle in all of Africa. It's a mighty claim, yes, but after traveling most safari regions of the subcontinent I don't believe I've seen anything to compare. The area in question is a roughly two kilometre stretch of seasonal river in the far west of Tanzania - four hours in a Cessna from Dar Es Salaam.

The river is called the Katuma, and it flows through the Katavi National Park. As the vulture flies, it's not far from Lake Tanganyika. That said, it's sufficiently distant to create a stir amongst the wildlife that depend on it to slake their thirst. For come September and October every year, the last pools in the river have all but dried up, and long trains of zebra, buffalo and wildebeest can be seen snaking their way across arid savannah plains. With dust clouds left behind by their hooves, they're hoping for just a few more sips to tide them over the dry season.

The stress on the animals is immense. They are not the only ones in need of a drink. The resident hippos, crocodiles and elephants are looking for the same thing. But there simply isn't enough, with dustbowl dongas replacing the water that flows in the wet months.

For the lions, hyenas and vultures it's a time of plenty, with the riverbank the equivalent of the long table at a medieval feast. Pure medieval carnival, it's packed with blood, gore and no small entertainment.

With tents looking out to the plains, and the Katuma about 100 metres around the corner, the nearest lodging is positioned rather well to take advantage of all this.

It's called Katavi Wilderness Camp, and watching the sunset over a beer some time back with Manie - the South African manager at the time - we noted thunderheads building up over the far distant lake.



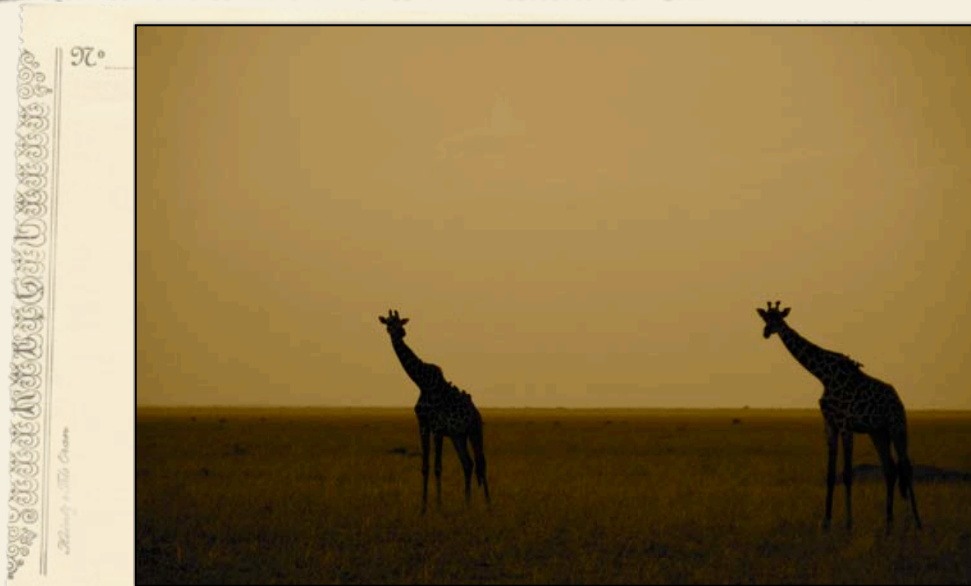
Every nine minutes...for the best part of a day



A Cessna Caravan. Good way to get there.



*...the riverbank the equivalent of the long table at a medieval feast. Pure medieval carnival, it's packed with blood, gore and no small entertainment.*



*Late afternoon heat and dust. When giraffes beware of prowling lion prides.*

For the animals out there on the plain, and for a lonely Manie tired of the heat, it was a cruel hint of moisture. But I was just passing through, and while heavy-laden drops of rain pounding a parched earth would've been a welcome experience, I was content with watching the drama unfold.

The 'most of any species' is a claim associated with Katavi, and our first morning game-drive revealed a fair bit. Over a thousand hippos were wedged shoulder to butt in the mud, grunting and swishing tails. On each bank of the riverbed lions were mating, snarling while going about the business of promoting their gene pool.

In one of the many dongas that characterized the riverbed, the carcasses of a buffalo and a crocodile lay next to each other, evidence of mortal combat - while in the forest thicket set back from the river a pair of hooded vultures presided over a hippo carcass.

All we had to do was park and watch. Occasionally looking left, right and behind.

Around the next bend was a squabble of Cape vultures fighting for the prize of removing a buffalo's eye from its socket. But the next sight was a first for us: not ten metres from two giraffe - legs spread wide and bending low to drink - roughly 40 crocodiles were packed immobile in the mud around the narrow entrance to a cave in the exposed riverbank, lying over and atop each other, mud caking their reptilian heads.

Manie said it's a form of hibernation. Apparently this is how they conserve energy while the food-stock is low.

Back at the camp, in front of one of the tents was evidence of yet more violence, which had presumably been perpetrated while we were out. Hyenas had brought down a hippo in the last minutes of darkness, and were squabbling over the carcass with the inevitable hierarchy of vultures in attendance.

There were four of us at dinner in the tent that evening, and we all marvelled at how the chef

managed to produce any flair in such a remote location, with refrigeration more of a gas-driven notion than a reliable reality.

So saturated were we with the blood and gore that the challenge of catering offered a refreshing change in topic. We'd all seen the same creatures - all four of us, with not another game vehicle in sight.

Primordial, ruthless Africa. As exciting and exclusive as it gets.

