

THREE MONTHS IN KILOMBERO

UNFORGETTABLE EXPERIENCES AWAIT
A YOUNG HUNTING ENTHUSIAST
WORKING IN A TANZANIA
SAFARI CAMP.



BY
RORY WURFBAIN

It was a hot, sunny day in the Kilombero. Professional hunter Hiydar, his Swedish client, and I, a professional-hunter-in-training, were speeding along in a Go-Devil boat on one of the tributaries of the Rufiji River in southern Tanzania. We'd been out for more than an hour and hadn't seen much at all except thick, tall reeds stretching forever on both sides of the river. We knew game was abundant here—crocodile, puku, and other riverine species—but we hadn't seen much, and so far we'd seen no hippos, the one animal our client specifically wanted.

Suddenly Hiydar spotted something large and grayish-black in the reeds along the shore. It was a hippo! Immediately he ordered the driver to dock the boat farther upstream. Hastily we jumped out and made our way quietly onto the shore.

As I looked around, I started to get uneasy because I noticed how thick and high the reeds were. I couldn't see more than a few feet, and it was quiet. Really quiet. Surrounded as we were by the claustrophobic reeds, I felt a premonition that the enormous beast was lying in wait for us. I felt it keenly. My breath started coming faster and I thought: *Are we trapped?* I glanced over at Hiydar and calmed down, for I sensed that he, too, knew the hippo was waiting for us.

Hiydar beckoned his client closer to him and whispered, "Be ready. He may charge."

The client nodded once, and he and Hiydar loaded their .416s. Hiydar led the way, followed by the client, I came next, and the trackers brought up the rear. Cautiously, we pushed our way through the reeds. We put each foot down as carefully and as noiselessly as possible, but the six of us tiptoeing through the dry underbrush sounded to me as though a thousand were stampeding through a tiny kitchen full of tin pans.

After about ten minutes, we saw the hippo about six feet in front of us lying behind some reeds in a small pool of water. Before anyone could do anything, the beast jumped out of the pool and charged us.

With not a second to lose, Hiydar sidestepped the hippo and delivered a shot from his .416. The bullet landed perfectly between its brows, and it dropped dead immediately. Everything happened so quickly that the client hadn't had time to react, and I had no idea what to do. Honestly, the moment the hippo charged, my mind snapped closed. It wasn't fear—there was no time for that. I remember instinctively backing up. That's all I had time to do. We were that close to tragedy. Luckily for us, Hiydar is one of the best professionals around.

The hippo had fallen only two feet from where we stood. The memory of Hiydar's quick reaction and the giant beast falling nearly on top of us will remain with me forever.

Behind the Scenes on Safari

I have been an avid hunter all my life as well as an animal enthusiast. I have traveled and hunted in Zimbabwe and Namibia, but I always dreamed of going to Tanzania. I graduated from high school in June 2007 and set forth on an adventure of a lifetime—my gap year working abroad. As I reported in the April/May issue of this magazine, I started my adventure in Namibia, and now I was in the second stage of my gap year, which was to be spent with Michel Mantheakis of Miombo Safaris in Tanzania.

Miombo Safaris has many locations sprawled across the great country of Tanzania. Its seven concessions are in

Rungwa, Selous, Lukwika-Msanjesi, and the Kilombero, all game-rich areas. Michel and his crew of five professional hunters take clients who wish to hunt the Big Four as well as plains-game species. Their success rate over the last twenty-five years has been better than good.

When I arrived in Tanzania, I was told that my job description would be "professional-hunter-in-training." Life just doesn't get more "chill" than this! My tasks included mapping out new roads, doing maintenance work in the camps, assisting the professional hunters, working with the trackers to find animals, going on antipoaching patrols, driving to town to resupply the camps, and lending a hand wherever it was needed.

My favorite part of the job was mapping out new roads for a recently acquired hunting area in the Kilombero. Michel taught me how and where to map out new roads so his professional hunters would have access to the game, use less fuel, and have an easier time getting back to base camp.

The work was not hard, but it was time-consuming. I had to be meticulous. First, I had to evaluate the area to get an idea of the terrain. Once I understood the terrain, I would go out with my GPS and plot potential roads into the system. I would then come back to base camp and plot the new points onto a map. It was quite challenging because I had no one to supervise me, and I had to rely on myself in order to get the task done. If I didn't budget my time, I would not have gotten the work done.

When I arrived, Michel told me about the diversity of his concessions and the big-game species that inhabit them. These include elephant, leopard, lion, Cape buffalo, greater kudu, sable, hippo, crocodile, impala, zebra, puku, eland, bushpig, baboon, and much more.

Some camps are situated in savannas, some in semi-dense forests, and others near rivers and mountains. I stayed in two camps in the Kilombero. One was located on the banks of a river with dense forest all around it, and another was situated in an open savanna by a river.

The employees of the safari company came from different tribal backgrounds. One group is the Chagga, a tribe from the north near Masailand. Another group is the Masai. The Masai generally work as trackers. They are well-built, tall people while the Chagga are average size. The Masai have much narrower and darker faces compared to the Chagga who have more rounded faces and lighter skin. The Masai have the reputation of being the most feared, fierce, and fearless warlike tribe in all of East Africa (present day Kenya and Tanzania).

Some of the camp staff understood English while others did not. Although I could not speak their common language, Swahili, I took the time with the camp manager to learn some useful words and phrases. After a while, it became much easier for me to communicate with the workers.

Migrating Elephants

During my stay in the Kilombero I had the pleasure of witnessing many wonderful things. One day I was return-

ing to base camp with a couple of clients after a successful day of hunting buffalo. The clients had arrived the day before, and they had already been fortunate enough to bag a decent bull. It had been a fantastic day, but what we were about to witness was nothing short of extraordinary. As we were making our way through a long stretch of savanna, we saw in the distance an extremely large herd of elephants migrating through the valley.

At first we drove slowly alongside this amazing parade, keeping pace with them while watching, awestruck, their energy and power in motion. We drove up a hill to get



As a professional-hunter-in-training in one of Tanzania's premier hunting concessions, the author had the opportunity to help out on hunts for buffalo, hippo, and other dangerous species.



The author had the opportunity to work closely with the staff at Miombo Safaris, learning the myriad skills that go into making a safari company run smoothly.



The author, left, with client Morrie Edelman and some of the Miombo staff with Edelman's nice bohor reedbuck.



a better view. What I saw was something I will never forget. More than one hundred elephants were walking in a perfect line, screaming and making gurgling noises while keeping up the pace of their long march. I've never seen anything like it. Bulls, cows, and youngsters of various ages filled the savanna as they migrated to their destination. There must have been at least forty good bulls in the herd, some with very decent tusks.

Hydar told us that these elephants were migrating from the south, close to the Ruvuma River (a major river that separates Tanzania and Mozambique) on their way north. We stood there for a long time taking pictures, talking, and watching the elephants make their way across the savanna. Soon the herd had moved on to a point where we could no longer see them. There is a reason why a herd of elephants is also called a parade, for when moving together as one their majesty is unforgettable.

Attacked by a Lioness

I had completed my tasks for the day, and since there were no clients in

camp, I decided to take a ride through the countryside to look for poachers. I grabbed a couple of the staff, and we rode off toward a large lake. As we got closer to the lake, we spotted pukus grazing. I was looking around to see if I could discover anything out of the ordinary when something golden yellow caught my eye. Focusing on the color, I saw three very small lion cubs playing near the lake on the edge of the savanna.

As we drove closer to the cubs, they stopped playing and looked at us curiously. We weren't ten yards away when I started to wonder, So, if there are babies, where is the mother? As I turned around to look, I saw a lioness hurtling straight at us with death in her eyes. What a magnificent sight! She didn't start with a burst of speed, but, rather, she gradually paced herself into a full charge.

At that point I stopped looking, turned to the driver, and yelled at him to floor it. We busted out of there like there was no tomorrow, and it's a good thing we did because the lioness just kept on coming. If ever there was a cat with deadly intent, she was

it. When we had finally outpaced her, we all looked back over our shoulders at the savanna and breathed a huge sigh of relief.

Mafia Island

Tanzania has three major islands off its coast: Pemba, Zanzibar, and Mafia. Mafia Island is part of the Tanzanian Spice Islands, together with Unguja and Pemba. Like Zanzibar, Mafia Island attracts tourists, but these people are mainly of an adventurous sort—scuba divers, fishermen, and people wanting to find a remote site for relaxing. There are many small, uninhabited islands off the coast of Tanzania as well, especially around Mafia Island. I had the chance to take a look at Mafia Island as well as camp out on one of the uninhabited islands with Michel, Akram (Michel's business partner), and some of the staff. For relaxing on a beach after hunting in Tanzania, these islands are not to be missed.

We took a charter plane from a small airport in Dar es Salaam to Kilindoni, Mafia Island's biggest city. From there, we stayed in town for a couple of hours before hiring a charter boat to take us around to have a look at some of the islands. After a few hours, we found one small island that was exactly what we were looking for. We went ashore, explored a little, unpacked, and ate lunch. Michel asked me to take the GPS, walk all around the island, and map the coordinates. It's so small that it won't appear on any standard map.

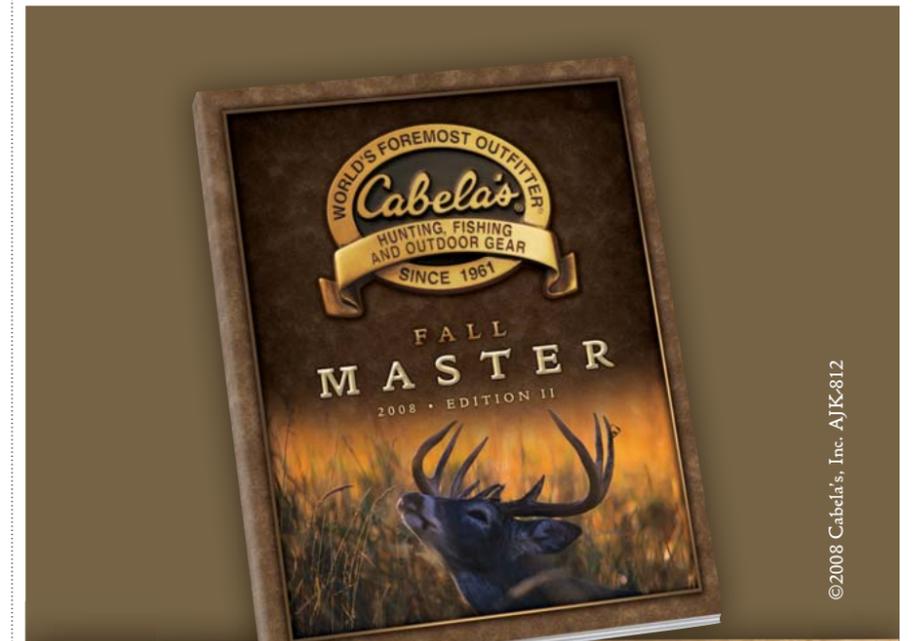
This gave me the chance to explore the island. It was like a picture from a postcard with its clear, turquoise blue sea and pristine white sand. Large palm groves and impressive baobab, mango, and cashew trees dominate the island, with mangroves stretching fifty feet high. I was fascinated by the small, exotic, reddish orange crabs I saw in the clear blue water. They would sit by the shore and not move, but when I got too close, they would make a run for the ocean by sprinting sideways. It was amusing to watch the tide sweep them back on shore, where the whole funny

process would be repeated. That evening we topped off a wonderful day by eating some of those delicious crabs from the Indian Ocean.

I remember looking up at the beautiful Southern Cross that night and thinking how good life can be. It was the last night of my stay in Tanzania, and it had been a thrilling three months. I thought about my new friends and especially the generosity of Michel Mantheakis, and I

realized that this truly had been the adventure of a lifetime. Now, with the blazing campfire, the hush of the ocean, and the twinkling stars overhead as a setting, I looked around one last time, knowing that I had, indeed, been blessed. 

For information on Miombo Safaris, go to www.mimbosafaris.com, or contact Michel Mantheakis: info@mimbosafaris.com.



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The stunning beaches on Tanzania's Mafia Island and the smaller surrounding islands are ideal destinations for relaxing after a safari.