

SELOUS GAME RESERVE

Written by Administrator

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The pristine reserve, a World Heritage Site since 1982, comprises an area of 55,000 sq. km, covering about six per cent of Tanzania's land surface. Larger than Switzerland, it is the world's largest game reserve and second only to the Serengeti in its concentration of wildlife. It is also the sanctuary of the biggest elephant herd in the world, about 32,000 elephants live in the reserve - 70 per cent of those in Tanzania. The reserve is difficult to describe without the use of superlatives.

Named after British hunter and writer Frederick Courteney Selous who was killed during the First World War in the Beho Beho region (of the reserve), the reserve is part of the 75,000 square kilometre Selous ecosystem, which includes Mikumi National Park, the Kilombero Game Controlled Areas and sparsely populated areas towards Kilwa and Dar es Salaam. It encompasses a wide variety of habitats, including open grasslands, acacia and miombo woodlands and extensive riverine forests. The reserve contains some of Africa's largest and most important populations of buffalo and hunting dogs. There are also populations of black rhino in isolated areas. The swamps form an important habitat for wetland plants, reptiles and resident and migratory birds. The tourist sector of the Selous Game Reserve, which is located north of the Rufiji rivers, contains all the forms of vegetation found in the ecosystem, including savanna with its mbugas, patches of sticky black cotton soil that form a perilous trap to motorists during the rainy season. Tall borassus palms grow alongside the river, dying off when the water level drops, leaving eerie looking collections of what look like giant cigars. The river supports an abundance of wildlife including elephants, hippos, crocodiles and plains game, not to mention a spectacular variety, and number, of bird species.

The rapid increase in poaching for ivory and rhino horn in the 1980s led to a catastrophic decline in Tanzania's elephant and rhino populations, and the Government approached the international community for assistance to conserve its wildlife. The Selous Conservation Programme (SCP) began in 1988, as part of Tanzania's and Germany's bilateral cooperation agreement. Its objectives are to safeguard the existence and ecological integrity of the reserve as a conservation area, and to significantly reduce conflicts between the reserve and the local population by encouraging a programme of sustainable wildlife utilisation by local villages. Wild

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animals can kill people and livestock, and damage crops in the villages near the reserve, explains Dr. Ludwig Siege, coordinator of the SCP, and despite legal restrictions on hunting, a scarcity of meat leads people to hunt wild animals illegally for food, "and this leads to conflict with wildlife authorities".

Yet in order to be successful, he adds, conservation has to be practised "with" and "through" the people, and not against them. An example of such cooperation is a research project underway to develop non-lethal means of deterring elephants from damaging crops, which includes the use of flares and rockets.

Only low volume/high price tourism is encouraged in Selous Game Reserve, states the SCP project brief, in order to avoid high volume 'package' tourism. The Tanzanian Government recognises that its wildlife sanctuaries need to be protected, and this means restricting visitor numbers and development. Management and conservation plans have been drawn up by experts from the ODA, WWF and the Frankfurt Zoological Institute, to name but a few, for all parks and reserves. The maintenance of relatively high entrance fees - visitors must pay US\$20 on entering national parks is "a valuable mechanism to controlling visitor inflows", says Tanzania Tourist Board chairman Hatim Karimjee, "and must continue to be reviewed upwards as demand increases". It is not inconceivable, he adds, that within the next five years some smaller parks may have to limit visitor numbers.

The reserve can be reached from Dar-es-Salaam by road, air-charter and rail. The best time to go is in the cool season, between the end of June and the end of October. The parks' lodges and campsites are closed from April to June.

Exploring the park on foot (in the company of an armed guide) is allowed, and walking safaris are conducted from all the camps in the reserve. Boat trips up the Rufiji River are also available.

Available accommodation in lodges and luxury tented camps based in the park's extreme northern end. There are no budget facilities or camp sites. Visitor facilities include five tented camps: -