

With dusk falling on our safari game drive, we were utterly transfixed by the relentless roll call of exotic beasts parading across the parched landscape – a dazzle of zebras, a journey of giraffes, a darting jackal, some comedy mongooses, grumpy buffaloes and impalas galore. But our guide's insights added further wonder and humour to the experience.

Who knew that dik-dik were monogamous and paranoid? Or that hippos can run 30 per cent faster than Usain Bolt? And let's not forget that an elephant's penis apparently weighs more than an adult man.

If *Roget's Thesaurus* used pictures instead of words, there would surely be a photograph of Andrew Molinaire beneath the word "enthusiastic", such is this guide's infectious passion for his job. Blending his sublime skills as an encyclopaedic bush raconteur with a transparent adoration of all things natural, South African-born Andrew – or Moli as he is known to guests at the remote Jongomero camp in Ruaha National Park – is Tanzania's answer to Crocodile Dundee. A zoological ignoramus myself, my appreciation of the breathtaking visual spectacle unfolding in and around the eight-tented camp was amplified by Moli's accessible dissemination of the surrounding drama.

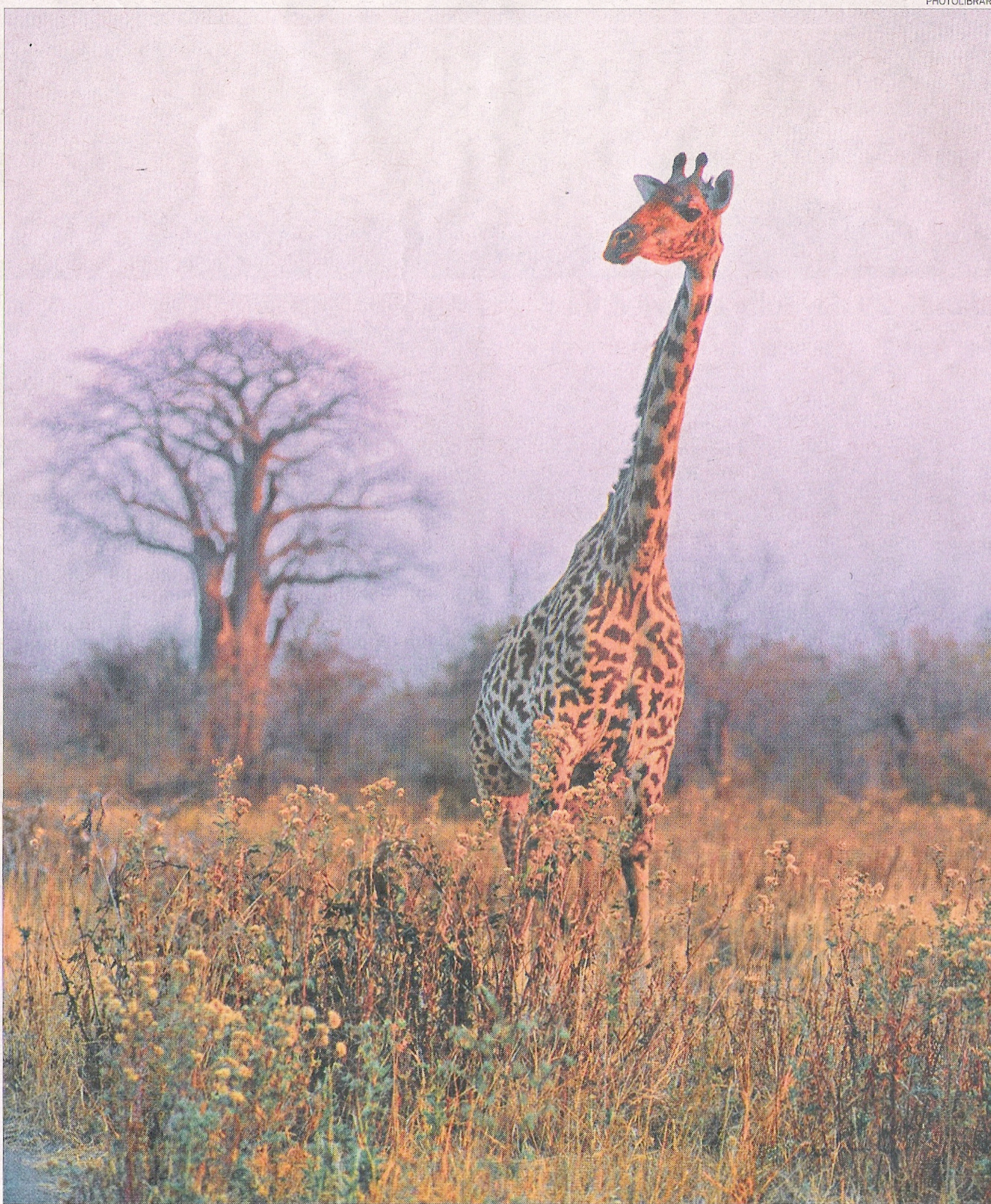
The danger of such superlative natural riches is a post game-corner of this beautiful country and perched unassumingly on the shores of the then dry Ruaha River, the camp effortlessly complements the surrounding terrain. Every effort has been made to ensure that the spacious canvas retreats – nestled beneath wooden A-frames and equipped with hand-crafted dark wood furniture and bijou en-suite bathrooms – are as eye-catching as the scenery.

Unlike the occasionally lacklustre bush tucker that can devalue a less assiduous camp, the cuisine here is Michelin-standard, and tastes all the sweeter when consumed by candlelight to the accompaniment of a nocturnal safari soundtrack.

Jongomero is only one third of the Tanzanian story curated by the Selous Safari Company. Part two unfolds 90 minutes due east by bone-shaking light aircraft, courtesy of Coastal Aviation, at the 13-tent Selous Safari Camp, located a leisurely crocodile crawl from the fertile banks of Lake Nzerakera.

With a more clubby atmosphere than Jongomero, it has a central open-air restaurant-cum-bar separating the two clusters of sumptuously appointed tents. The food here is equally spectacular and our welcome lunch of fishcakes with sweetcorn and lime, followed by passion fruit and mango mousse, was enlivened by a parade of thirsty giraffes grabbing a lunchtime drink from the lake.

Seekers of the Big Five won't find the full complement of A-list game here, as the endangered rhino is not indigenous to Tanzania. But, marshalled by the wisdom of



PHOTOLIBRARY

Ahead of the game

Venturing off the beaten track doesn't have to mean compromising on luxury, as **Nick McGrath** discovers on this three-destination tour of Tanzania



Highlights: clockwise from top, meet the locals in Ruaha National Park; Ras Kutani and Selous Safari Camp accommodation

veteran walking guide Musa, we set off early the following morning to seek out the Little Five: elephant shrew, rhino beetle, leopard tortoise, buffalo weaver and the cunningly predatory ant lion.

Several hours later, emboldened by our new-found ability to differentiate between the subtly diverse defecations of various beasts (giraffes – Maltesers; dik-dik – M&M's; hippos – sprayed fudge brownies), we took the late afternoon "sundowner" lake safari, complemented by the prerequisite bush cocktails and canapés.

Punctuated only by the occasional throaty hippo chuckle and the stealthy omnipresence of evil-eyed crocodiles, the voyage by boat was serenity personified, and the lake provided the perfect vantage point from which to soak up sights of the surrounding bird life (African spoonbills and pygmy kingfishers), rehydrating four-legged creatures (gibbons, zebras, antelopes, elephants, wildebeest and giraffes) and, of course, the stunning African sunset.

My holiday greed usually manifests itself through food and alcohol, but in Tanzania the avarice was purely animal-oriented. Remarkable though the pageant of species had already been, the craving for a big-cat sighting was irresistible. Fortunately Before us was the incredible sight, accompanied by the menacing sound, of a pride of seven ravenous lions feasting on the rapidly disappearing carcass of a wildebeest.

Then, raising the bar still further en route to the private plane waiting to fly us to the laid-back beach resort of Ras Kutani for the final act of our adventure, we caught a fleeting glimpse of a leopard slaloming through the camouflaging bush.

For travellers overwhelmed by new and unforgettable safari experiences, the sleepy but oh-so pampering charm of Ras Kutani, on the shore of the Indian Ocean, was a daydream come true. Very much a barefoot paradise, its white-walled suites had a Moorish feel perfectly in tune with the fresh seafood plucked from the sea by local fishermen and served by seriously accommodating staff.

Here, the wildlife was more low-key – except for the troupe of excitable monkeys that used my room's tented roof as a dawn trampoline. But as an antidote to the intensity of the other two camps, the place was – much like the entire Selous Safari Company operation – perfectly pitched.

Abercrombie & Kent offers a 12-night bespoke safari and beach experience in Tanzania, including three nights at Jongomero, three at Selous Safari Camp and three at Ras Kutani. From £4,898pp for departures from June 1 until July 15, 2011, including flights, game-viewing drives in open-sided four-wheel-drive vehicles and park entrance fees. (0845 618 2142; www.abercrombiekent.co.uk)