

Travel

Tanzania | A new organisation offers wealthy travellers a different take on the safari, with the focus not on luxury and wildlife-spotting but on protecting remote areas and communities. By *Sophy Roberts*

To get to Tongweland in the remote reaches of western Tanzania means flying almost two hours from Arusha, the country’s main safari hub, to Tabora, a tumbleweed town on the old Arab slave-trading route linking Congo to Zanzibar. We sit under a frangipani as the plane is refuelled, before flying on to an airstrip on Lake Tanganyika’s palm-fringed eastern shore.

We land in the green feet of the Mahale Mountains, a region famous for its eastern long-haired chimpanzees, and walk to the end of the runway to get picked up by a dhow. At Katumbi village, a few miles away, we swim in the turquoise lake with Congo’s shadow etched on the water’s far side. Local women watch as they do their washing and hang it out to dry on reeds. We eat chicken stew in the front room of Hamisi Saadi Katensi, a local chief.

Using a missionary vehicle hired from Kigoma, a day’s travel to the north, we struggle on over broken bridges. We get stuck in Africa’s red earth. We pass beaches carpeted in silver freshwater sardines, or *dagaa*, laid out to dry. After four hours, the track peters out amid the *miombo* woodland. When we come to a halt, it is the furthest a car has ever got; to press on deeper, we can walk. (By the end of the year, however, visitors will be able to use Swiss-made, bush-toughened mountain bikes.)

There is not much wildlife I can see – unlike in open savannah, it is hard to spot animals among the trees – but it is staggering what I can hear when the engines are turned off: Livingstone’s turaco, which makes a strange gobbling noise in the canopy, and crowned hornbills. An antelope darts into the undergrowth. Then comes the chorus of insects, which gets louder at nightfall when we arrive at our camp – Mlofweni ranger post, which sits on the western fringe of Ntakata forest, a 45,000-hectare swath of village-owned reserve in the heart of Tongweland. The region is named after the Watongwe tribe, or Tongwe people, whose territory stretches from the Ugalla River in the east to Lake Tanganyika to the west, the Malagarasi River in the north and, to the south, the Mfipa escarpment shouldering Katavi National Park.

I have come to Tongweland on the back of a tip-off from Will Jones, founder of a new organisation called Wild Philanthropy Travel, which officially launched in October. The company matchmakes philanthropists with African conservation projects that would otherwise struggle for an income.



The anti-safari

“Ntakata needs protection because of a small slither of humanity clinging on to the last vestiges of a rare forest culture,” says Jones: “This is also one of few forests outside the Congo where elephants and chimps share the same space.” Rob Brett, a senior technical specialist in the Africa programme at Flora and Fauna International, a global conservation NGO, says: “The forest is a conservation Shangri-La, whose importance is reinforced by the values that the Tongwe people place on it.”

Both Wild Philanthropy Travel and Flora and Fauna International have partnered with the Tongwe Trust, an organisation designed to protect the land for the local community, to whom the forest is sacred. It pays for a squad of 18 Tongwe rangers, who don’t carry fire-arms but patrol using pedal-bikes on paths trodden by wildlife. The rangers’ role is to prevent the forest being encroached upon by cattle-herders and settled by Burundian refugees, who have seeped into Tanzania during waves

of genocide. The rangers survive on a monthly wage of a hundred dollars. They rely on herbal remedies from the forest, and for dinner they gather mushrooms, cooked over a small fire. They have a shared belief in Tongwe pantheism – guardian spirits, or *migabo*, which reside in the forest’s deepest parts, where we spend the next two days wandering the veins of a lost world.

We travel as light as we can using roll mats, pop-up tents and hammocks. All but one of our meals consist of beans and rice. We wash in a river pool fed by a noisy stream. It feels like the anti-safari – there are no game drives, cut crystal or white-hunter tales around the fires. But it is also appropriate to where we are.

Our main guide, Roland Purcell – a concoction of Scottish, Irish and Australian blood who was born in Iran – resists luxury flourishes; his affinity for a frontier existence is the reason he knows this forest well. A charismatic star of the safari business – 10 years ago, he commanded guiding rates of \$1,000 a day – Purcell now works without a fee for the Tongwe Trust, which he built up over a period of 20 years. “You’ve got to put markers down now,” says Purcell, “otherwise it will happen – every single bit of Ntakata will get chewed.”

Purcell’s association with the area runs deep. In 1987, while working with Rwanda’s mountain gorillas, he ven-



From top: Sophy Roberts follows Will Jones of Wild Philanthropy through the Ntakata forest; one of the Tongwe Trust rangers on patrol; a habituated chimpanzee sits with Roberts and Jones near Greystoke Mahale; the beach at Greystoke Mahale — Jimmy Greenwood

‘The issue is how to touch this forest lightly, generating income without contaminating its heart’

tured down Lake Tanganyika looking for chimpanzees. He found a beach – “The closest thing I have ever known to paradise on this planet,” he says. A year later, he opened a camp, Greystoke Mahale, which was the first attempt to bring tourism to western Tanzania. Visitors trickled in to see the park’s “M-group” chimpanzees, the animals already habituated by Japanese researchers since 1965.

“Year by year, I started to get close to the Watongwe,” says Purcell. “I also became part of a safari industry I didn’t altogether like. I couldn’t abide the repetition, how it tended to take more than it gave back.” In 2003, he merged his lodges into the safari company Nomad Tanzania and moved to Ireland, where he lives between an estate in Meath, a cottage in Donegal and a flat above the Lilliput Press in Stoneybatter, Dublin.

It is Purcell’s story at Mahale that accounts for his cautious approach to Ntakata’s development. “I’m interested in exploring narrow-gauge conservation – patrols that can be done with bikes, not guns,” says Purcell. “I want to create a similar model for narrow-gauge tourism. The issue is how to touch this forest lightly, generating income while not contaminating its heart.” I press him for details. “Roll mats and bikes for now,” he says, “but next year, tree nests, with hammock-style tents strung up above the forest floor.”

On our longest walk, Tongwe trackers lead us on to a whaleback ridge. Mountains roll into the distance, their clefts forested in green. We weave through matchstick trees charred by lightning strikes until we fall into the emerald bowl below. The deeper we penetrate, the darker the tree-cover becomes as we descend towards a spring. In the valley’s inner crease, the water is clean enough for us to drink. Trunks are strung with corkscrew necklaces of vines. Palms burst up like giant shuttlecocks. The haunting pant-hoots of chimpanzees bounce off valley walls. “If I can hear them, I am in their world,” says Purcell. “That has always been enough for me.”

To know what he means, I pull back to be alone. Despite the wild animals skulking somewhere in bamboo, including leopard, this forest somehow enchants more than it incites fear. I feel it where the canopy opens up to reveal new growth splattered with bright limes and crimson pom-pom-headed flowers. I sense it in the sinewy embrace of root systems, which stretch across the floor until one tree is entwined with another, knitting the forest together in a web of flying buttresses and burnished bark. Bit by bit, the living power of these holy groves starts to emerge.

Assumed to have originated in the Congo basin, the Watongwe used to dwell only in the forests. Then, in 1974, Tanzania’s land-reform policies pushed them out into *ujamaa* villages, where there was access to social services and education. When the Mahale Mountains National Park was gazetted in 1985, encompassing 1,650 sq km, some Watongwe were moved out to make way for the park. Yet they have always regarded themselves as guardians of a

forest threaded with benign spirits as much as its canopy is laced with sun.

Unlike the Congolese, who eat chimps as bushmeat, the Watongwe coexist peacefully among animals they consider their distant relations. Tribal law prohibits the cutting of large trees. Forest medicine is passed down through shamans. The forest also holds sacrificial sites within its folds – trees splashed with the blood of goats and chickens. On the death of a chief, each clan’s medicine man will decapitate the leader, boil the head for a month or more, then place the skull in a pot of honey, which is sepulchred in a forest cave where it won’t be disturbed. When the chief’s wife dies, her right arm is cut off, mummified over a fire and laid over the pot.

This gory image returns to me in the low light of dusk when I’m washing in the river. Something moves in the forest behind. I think of my conversations with Ngungwe, a Tongwe blacksmith based at the ranger post – “They call me GPS because I’ve never got lost in the forest,” he says – and Said Katensi, co-ordinator of the Tongwe Trust. There was nothing macabre in their storytelling when they talked about their beliefs. But then I hear the chimps again, or the last echo of their fretful calls. If earlier in the day I felt like I had entered some kind of Eden, I’m now the outsider in a primal world. My fear is exposed.

Perhaps this is the power of a journey that moves so lightly there is little to interfere with the intensity of one’s response. I realise this later, after I leave Ntakata to stay at Greystoke Mahale. The lodge is among the most elegant I’ve seen in Africa, comprising cottages built of dhow wood at the confluence of forest and white sand. From here we hike to find the habituated chimps in the National Park using pre-cut “observation paths”. We are allowed one hour in their company. We have to wear face masks to prevent the transmission of human disease. As the chimps pick and preen, camera shutters whirr. In a group of six tourists vying to get a shot, the connection with wildness isn’t there.

Had I not been to Ntakata first, this would have been the highlight of my trip to Tanzania: for everyone else staying at Greystoke Mahale, the habituated chimps are the reason to travel this far. But when one of the dominant male chimps pushes past me on the path, I want to skulk back into the undergrowth. He throws me a look of cold disdain as if to imply he is bored of my company and wishes none of us were there.

i / DETAILS

Sophy Roberts travelled as a guest of Wild Philanthropy Travel (wildphilanthropy.com). It offers a Western Tanzania safari from \$15,950 per person, which includes two nights at Mahale Greystoke (nomadtanzania.com) and two nights fly-camping and mountain-biking in Ntakata forest, followed by a seven-night safari through Katavi and Ruaha National Parks. This includes domestic but not international flights. Twenty per cent of the fee (\$3,190) goes to the Tongwe Trust (tongwetrust.com). For more information on The Tongwe Trust, see partner NGO, Flora and Fauna International (fauna-flora.org)



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