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TANZANIA



‘Sedating an elephant is a risky business’

Richard Madden
*assists scientists in
 hands-on conservation
 work on a very large
 scale in the Serengeti*

I hear the first crack of the rifle at almost exactly 9am. I know because I check the time on my watch. The downdraft of the chopper sends twigs and leaves skittering around our vehicle as the wop-wop of the blades beats in rapid time with my adrenalin-pumping heart. I can clearly see the rifle as the barrel disappears inside the cockpit.

Just 20 yards away, a herd of elephants, ears flapping and letting out the occasional ear-splitting trumpet, is retreating into the trees. Our group is armed with tool boxes containing a bewildering array of equipment – everything from gloves and syringes to spanners and a large saw.

After a few minutes, a bull separated



NOSE TO TAIL
 Elephants in the wild, above; Singita Serengeti House, left

from the rest of the herd begins to look drunk, staggers slightly, and lets out a long, low rumble. It then drops onto its back legs and slowly slumps onto its side. It's now that we all leap into action and surround the elephant. We have less than half an hour to complete our work and get out of here.

Thankfully, our intention is not to saw off the elephant's tusks, leaving behind a mutilated carcass. Our group of eight volunteers is making a hands-on contribution to a project that will almost certainly save the lives of many elephants over the next few years and also protect the livelihoods of farmers and communities on the edge of the Grumeti Reserve, a 350,000-acre protected area adjacent to Tanzania's Serengeti National Park.

It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity

Rates for Singita's collection of immersive conservation safaris, Safaris with a Purpose, start from £8,750 per person plus a contribution of £19,000 per person into the Grumeti Fund, based on a minimum of three guests travelling. This includes two nights at Singita Explore and two nights at Singita Serengeti House, full board, including wildlife fees and activities, as well as private guiding by conservation specialists. This price also includes return flights between Kilimanjaro and the Singita Grumeti private concession and return economy flights between London and Kilimanjaro; with Kenya Airways. For more information contact Wild Philanthropy (020 7096 6318; wildphilanthropy.com).



ALAMY



– but it doesn't come cheap. In addition to the cost of a luxury safari holiday, guests make a donation of nearly £20,000 to unleash their inner conservation worker. But for those who are able to make that sort of contribution, it is worth every penny. We are staying with Singita, which owns some of the most spectacular safari lodges in Africa, whose ethos is the long-term conservation of the

animals and ecosystems in which it operates. Singita has also pioneered the trend for wildlife holidays that directly involve clients in conservation.

Before I explain more, let's get back to work. Our primary purpose is to fit a collar around the huge neck of our elephant with a remote-download GPS unit attached. Its movement and that of its surrounding group will then be monitored by a Domain Awareness System, so any potential incursions into community lands can be averted. This will protect not only the farmer's crops, but also the elephants, which often fall victim to the farmers' understandable, but sometimes violent, retaliation. The ensuing mayhem often also results in the trampling of cattle, sheep and goats.

Sedating an animal this size is a risky business and, though we are working with some of the best conservation specialists in Africa, nothing can be taken for granted. Everything is meticulously planned, from the dosage of the tranquilliser to the exact positioning of the dart when it hits the elephant's rump, so that the elephant falls in the right way not to injure itself. "It's a fatal dose for humans," says Dr Ernest Mjingo, the head vet of the Tanzania Wildlife Research Institute (Tawiri), in a matter-of-fact tone. "You only have about 30 seconds if you nick yourself, so it's important to have the antidote close at hand."

We have all been given roles, which, over the course of the next few days, we rotate between us. The "trunk-master" gently wedges a stick into the end of the elephant's trunk to make sure its airways are kept open. The "ear-cooler" pours water over his massive ears to make sure the animal's natural cooling system continues to function. The "detectorist" runs a metal detector over the huge frame, searching for arrow heads or other metal debris from old wounds. The "paint sprayer" is on graffiti duty, painting numbers on the elephant's back so it can be easily identified and monitored from the air.

My job on this first morning is to hold open the elephant's jaws while the Grumeti Fund's head scientist, Dr Kristen Snyder, examines its molars. Elephants shed six sets over their 60-year lifespan and we judge this elephant to be around 27 years old. Each of our roles is a unique opportunity for close-up intimacy with these incredible creatures. As if in a dream, I hold open the elephant's jaws, smelling its veggie-breath and running my fingers over its teeth, watching the twitches of its eyelashes, feeling the underside of its feet and removing ticks from his ears.

And then suddenly, our time is up. It

WILDLIFE TRIPS WITH A PURPOSE

BENGAL TIGERS, INDIA

Join the conservation effort to protect endangered Bengal tigers in India's Kanha National Park. You will take part in a camera survey expedition counting tiger populations, track their travel routes and the movement of their prey, and learn about anti-poaching initiatives. The Kanha-Pench forest corridor, one of the most important in India, connects smaller tiger



populations to larger ones. The six-night trip costs from £3,080 full-board excluding flights. True Luxury Travel (020 3137 1247; trueluxury.travel).

SPERM WHALES, THE AZORES

Help scientists study sperm whales and bottlenose dolphins as part of an ongoing study. Volunteers will help with photo-identification, behavioural observations, breeding patterns, acoustic recordings and location data as the animals migrate north. The data will help support the conservation and protection of the species and their environment. A six-day trip costs from £1,525 full-board including flights. Wildlife Worldwide (01962 302086; wildlifeworldwide.com).

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BIRDS, BATS AND MAMMALS, ANDORRAN PYRENEES

Help scientists study the effects of climate change and human activity on the local wildlife while trekking in the Andorran Pyrenees. You will identify key species in the ecosystem, weigh and measure small mammals, find the nest boxes of boreal owls, and detect alpine flora, survey snowbed vegetation and the growth of trees. A nine-day trip (May-September 2020) costs from £1,713 full-board excluding flights. Earthwatch (01865 318831; earthwatch.org).

LEATHERBACK TURTLES, COSTA RICA

Join a wildlife volunteering project on the Caribbean



coast of Costa Rica supporting the critically endangered leatherback sea turtle. Based at a research station by the beach, you will conduct beach patrols, guard and collect eggs, and count and measure both hatchlings and adult turtles. You will also be assisting with critical conservation and research activities to ensure the species' survival. The eight-day trip (May 4-11 2020) costs

from £1,525 full-board excluding flights. Biosphere Expeditions (01603 251760; biosphere-expeditions.org/volunteeringincostarica).

TSWALU FOUNDATION, KALAHARI DESERT, SOUTH AFRICA

Join conservation projects run by the Tswalu Foundation at Tarkuni and Motse lodges in the Kalahari Desert restoring the desert ecosystem, protecting biodiversity, and ensuring sustainability in partnership with local communities. The luxurious Tarkuni Lodge was formerly the private residence of the Oppenheimer family. Four nights costs from £5,100 including flights. The Luxury Safari Company (01666 880111; luxurysafaricompany.com).

feels like it's been five minutes, but 25 have passed in a flash. It will not be safe for the elephant to stay sedated much longer. The team are looking anxiously at their watches, the collar has been fitted, but one end of the canvas is still sticking out like the flap of an overlong belt. So that's what the saw is all about!

Soon we are all safely back in the vehicles – all, that is, apart from the two-man team on antidote duty. This usually takes less than two minutes to take effect, but the next day, a young female we have sedated fails to respond. After five minutes, our hearts are in our mouths. Suddenly, just as we are losing hope, its ears twitch, its legs move, and within 30 seconds it is standing on its feet again, shaking its head, flapping its ears and looking around for the rest of the herd. Our congratulatory glass of champagne back at camp that evening had never tasted so good.

Our first two nights were spent at Serengeti Explore, a tented camp that moves between six different locations depending on the movement of the game. This was followed by two nights



FALL GUY
Working on a sedated elephant, top; Dr Cunliffe arriving by helicopter, below

at Serengeti House, one of Singita's most luxurious private villas, often hired by honeymoon parties.

After dinner on our first night at the latter, we were given a presentation by Stephen Cunliffe, the Grumeti Fund's executive director, who explained the importance of the work they are doing. "More elephants in the western Serengeti are killed due to interactions with humans than by poaching," he told us, "but this is a two-way tragedy. As well as the elephants, human lives and livelihoods are at risk. Our job is to help both parties."

The problem has come about due to the migration routes of elephants

during the dry season. Famously, these animals have long memories and many of the matriarchs can recall migrating in the dry season through areas that are now farmed by the communities surrounding the park.

During our stay, we also visited the hi-tech Joint Operations Center, where the signals from the GPS collars are monitored. Within hours, staff were able to confirm that all the elephants we collared had rejoined their herds and were behaving normally. We also spent an exuberant evening in the bush with a group of dancers and villagers from the surrounding communities.

Despite the surface glamour, Cunliffe and his team have an incredibly demanding job and his message to us all was how important responsible tourism is to the long-term survival of wild animals in the African bush. It brings in much-needed funds to help control poaching and mitigate human/wildlife conflict, while also supporting and empowering local communities over the long term.

But, goodness me, that surface glamour! One evening, Cunliffe made his dramatic entrance landing in a chopper in front of Serengeti House before leaping out, rifle in hand, like a Bond of the Bush. He'd better watch out. My namesake, the actor Richard Madden, is in line for his job. I only wish it were me.