

Whether you are looking for culture, nature, adventure or some relaxing beach time, beautiful Tanzania has it all on offer

WORDS: MARINA KIM

FOUR SIDES of TANZANIA



It started with the challenging climb of Africa's highest point: Kilimanjaro. The formidable Tanzanian beauty of 5,895 metres – taller than Ben Nevis or Mont Blanc – does not give in easily to those attempting to climb it. It's been rumoured that even Abramovich, with all his access to the best equipment and training in the world, had to turn back down and didn't reach the top.

I had to assume Kilimanjaro was majestic as, unfortunately, when our charity group arrived at the bottom, we could not see it at all. Thick fog was covering the mountain, disguising the challenge ahead of us. Probably for the better, as it was not as daunting.

In 1848 the missionary Rebmann of Mombasa first reported the existence of Kilimanjaro. In 1861, the German officer Baron von der Decken and the young British geologist Richard Thornton made a first attempt to climb it, but 'got no farther than 8,200 feet' (2,500 meters). The German geology professor Hans Meyer succeeded in 1889 after three attempts and, thus, became the first European to conquer this mountain. Since then, it has become a popular destination for experienced adventurers, charity groups, like ours, and various celebrities, including Ronan Keating, Alesha Dixon, and Gary Barlow, who climbed it for Comic Relief.

The scenery on this dormant volcano changed dramatically as we ascended for a few days, with the rain forest followed by a breathtaking alpine desert (it felt like moon-walking), and then pretty moorland, culminating with an arctic summit with the most stunning views of the glacier.

However, more than 80 per cent of the ice cover on Kilimanjaro disappeared between 1912 to the present day. The shrinking of Kilimanjaro's ice fields is the part of the same chain of glacier retreat across the globe. If this trend continues, Kilimanjaro will become ice-free some time between 2022 and 2033.

The word 'glacier' indicates that it is indeed very cold at the top. The temperature drops from plus 30 degrees at the bottom to minus 20 at the top. Multiple layers of clothing were

essential for the summit night, as we set off to give a final push at midnight having had only two hours sleep beforehand.

We had porters but had to carry our own day bag with three litres of water – part of an obligatory daily liquid intake to cope with altitude – and other necessities. Even if climbers don't want a porter, it's polite to hire one as this job is the best source of income in the area. The mountain is crucial to the livelihood of the locals.

Climbing 'Kili' was an experience I will never forget. Being so close to nature and away from civilization, being surrounded by like-minded adventurers and sleeping rough in tents, I learned to live on very little, and enjoyed it. I started to wonder why I felt I needed so many things in London, when I could cope perfectly well with a pair of trousers, a pair of boots and a few jumpers.

Nature helps with this. The star-studded sky is so clear when you are high above the clouds, it seems as though you could almost touch them. I've never seen anything quite like it. The sun-eclipse at the summit was breathtaking, and, most importantly, that feeling of achievement when you know you pushed yourself hard to the limits and kept walking up is unforgettable.

One step truly felt like a hundred and had to be fought for. We had to walk incredibly slowly to fight the altitude sickness. 'Pole, Pole,' said the guides. It means 'slowly' in Swahili. On the last day of the summit, I learned that I was not exempt from the effects of the high altitude, too. Our climb was very quick – only four and a half days up, while other adventures take between seven and nine days for a gentler climb. But I submitted this proud mountain. It was an emotional experience, particularly when we reached the Uhuru peak; the highest point of the summit.

It was important to have a good kit, a good guide, and fun companions to keep morale high. Mutual support and good humour was fundamental. As our fellow adventurer Davidoff Jamieson said, 'Don't worry, guys! We'll be fine! Mountain goats do it all the time!' ➔

OPPOSITE, TOP AND MIDDLE-RIGHT, MELIÀ ZANZIBAR. ALL OTHER IMAGES, COURTESY OF FOUR SEASONS

→After the climb, I flew to Serengeti Park, transporting myself from sleeping in tents on the mountain to the plush beds and ultimate luxury of a lush five-star Four Seasons Serengeti hotel.

Tanzania, a land free of highways where animals roam freely in wild savannahs, is a mecca for game viewing. Four Seasons Serengeti is a safari lodge in Serengeti National Park, with 77 guest rooms, suites and villas. Thus, it's much bigger than traditional lodges, and has a spa and two restaurants. It's a place to watch nature in luxury, perfect for people who don't want to compromise on comfort even in the wilderness.

It is ideally suited to families with children, as it felt much safer there than in traditional lodges. There is also an amazing Discovery Centre for children and adults where you are taught about 'the big migration', can watch documentaries and explore the museum.

Once we learned everything about 'the big migration' in theory, we tried it out in practice. The safari game-drivers were real experts, able to spot a coalition of cheetahs or a leopard sleeping on a tree from a kilometre away. They knew all about the birds that are abundant in the area. We were lucky with our game drive and even saw the wildlife at its most ferocious, when a graceful lioness successfully hunted a speedy Thomson's gazelle.

One of the biggest draws for the hotel is its location right beside two water-holes frequented by a variety of game. Elephants are not the only visitors but they dominated the scene every day. On one occasion, we saw about 30 of them drinking and bathing in the water-hole with their little ones. Even the hardest cynics will be moved by their adorable family idyll.

The hotel has a beautiful spa, which offers traditional treatments from a variety of massages to facials, and two restaurants open until late. It wasn't a problem walking back to our suite at night even after a few cocktails. A traditionally dressed Maasai warrior was always there to accompany us, especially when the shadows of the night were too scary to bear.

Game and bird watching in Serengeti was fun, but the time had come for swimming and sunbathing. Who says you can't have it all? With the intention to pamper myself to the full, I headed to Zanzibar, a Tanzanian island just off the coast of the mainland.

Zanzibar is famous for its white beaches and beautiful ocean. I stayed at a spacious Meliá Zanzibar Hotel, on the north-east coast of the island, which boasted its own private beach. Accommodation on this 40-acre estate ranges from romantic rooms and suites to private villas with a garden and pool. The room I stayed in was decent but more of a four-star luxury than a five-star, however, the beds were wonderfully comfortable and a bath covered daily with rose petals was pure joy.

The Anantara Spa has all the traditional massages, and even their own Reiki master to set your energy right – a must-have for tired city-souls. I found Reiki as relaxing for the soul as the massage was for the body.

The true value of Meliá is that it is a real food feast. With four bars and five restaurants with cuisine that ranged from top-quality Indian to traditional maritime, it was impossible to be bored of the selections. My favourite was a selection of seafood at Aqua restaurant, and a succulent burger in the private beach restaurant that could match if not surpass its Mayfair equivalents by far. Perhaps, the setting played its role too.

Apart from Meliá's own restaurants, I wasn't particularly impressed with the other places to eat on offer, including north of Zanzibar and Stonetown, or even mainland Tanzania.

Meliá's all-inclusive tariff helped avoiding tedious waiting around for the bill. Instead, we spent time stuffing ourselves with delectable morsels to the point of oblivion from one restaurant to another. Would I go back? Yes, if only to try that wonderful lobster or chicken jalfrezi again.

With body and soul pampered, my mind craved for culture. Tanzania doesn't fail here either. Zanzibar's capital, the UNESCO-

protected Stone Town, is the epitome of shabby chic and represents a unique mixture of Indian, Arab, Persian, and European elements. We booked a walking tour to learn about the history behind the beautiful façades.

The exteriors are no longer polished but the architecture is stunning, and the deteriorating exterior of the buildings makes it feel more ancient than it is.

The town has a rich history as a former capital of the Zanzibar Sultanate, and a centre of the spice trade in the 19th-century. It retained its importance during the period of the British protectorate.

We were asked to be respectful to the local, strict Muslim culture and not wear outrageous outfits, so a wardrobe of long skirts and tops with covered shoulders ensured we had an appropriate dress code.

I could have travelled to four different countries if I wanted a cultural trip, an adventure trip, a nature-watching experience or some beach-time. I came to

Tanzania and had it all. The experience was so overwhelming, mind-altering and soul-cleansing that I will never be the same again. ☑

'The town has a rich history as a former capital of the Zanzibar Sultanate and a centre of the spice trade'

NEED TO KNOW

Meliá Zanzibar

124 rooms and suites

Room rates start from £150 p/n ex VAT

For reservations: melia.zanzibar@melia.com

(melia.com)

Four Seasons Serengeti

60 rooms, 12 suites, 5 villas. Lodge rates start from £722 per night (fourseasons.com/serengeti)

Serengeti National Park fee is

\$60 per person per day

