

FLOATING ABOVE THE SERENGETI

A Sunrise Balloon Adventure

From the window of a safari vehicle, the Serengeti is breathtaking, yet it remains a view from the outside looking in. Only when you rise silently above the plains in a hot-air balloon does the landscape reveal its whole, living soul. Serengeti Balloon Safaris has been granting that privilege for more than three decades, turning a simple dawn flight into one of Africa's most unforgettable wildlife experiences.

The day began in the velvet dark of pre-dawn. Land Cruisers weave between lodges and tented camps, headlights cutting through cool air scented with wild sage and distant woodsmoke. On an open plain, the launch site glows orange long before the balloons themselves appear. Enormous envelopes lie collapsed on the grass like sleeping giants. Guests are invited to lie on their sides – an oddly exhilarating position – watching flames roar into the nylon until the fabric billows and the balloon stands upright against a sky still bright with stars.

With a final gentle shove from the ground crew, the ropes are released. There is no lurch, no engine noise, only the softest lift as the basket leaves the earth. Almost instantly, the world falls silent except for the occasional whisper of the burner overhead.

Then comes the moment everyone waits for. A thin line of rose-gold appears on the horizon, thickens, flares, and suddenly the sun clears the distant hills. The plains ignite. Shadows of scattered clouds drift like slow islands across waves of golden grass; flat-topped acacias stand in perfect silhouette; a meandering river flashes silver one moment, molten gold the next. From a thousand feet, the Great Migration resolves into countless individual wildebeest moving in ancient, purposeful rivers. Elephants look like grey boulders until one flaps an ear and the whole herd shifts. Giraffes drift between thorn trees like long-necked ghosts.

AT THE HELM

The pilots are extraordinary: calm, weather-beaten men and women who have flown these skies for thousands of hours. They steer not with rudders but with



altitude, rising or descending into invisible currents, skimming low enough for the basket's shadow to race across the backs of zebra, then climbing until the horizon curves and the vastness of the ecosystem becomes almost dizzying. All the while, they narrate quietly: the name of a distant rocky kopje, the reason those vultures are circling, the faint trail beneath that marks a migration route used for millennia.

Because the balloon travels with the wind rather than against it, the animals rarely bolt. A lioness leading her cubs across an open plain glances upward once and continues walking. A tower of giraffes stares eye-to-eye as you drift past at treetop height. Elephants rumble so close you can see dust on their eyelashes and hear the low thunder of their stomachs. At times, the basket hovers motionless while ostriches sprint below in perfect, comical formation. The silence allows every natural sound to reach you – the tear of grass, the bark of a zebra, the soft click of a giraffe's knees folding to drink.



Sharing the basket with strangers adds its own gentle magic. A retired couple from Scotland, a family from Tokyo, a photographer from Cape Town – within

minutes, backgrounds dissolve. Cameras click, but more often people simply stand in wordless wonder, occasionally turning to one another with the same delighted, disbelieving smile.

After roughly an hour, the pilot begins scanning for a landing site. The descent is as graceful as the ascent. The basket kisses the grass, sometimes with a short, exhilarating drag before settling. The instant the basket is steady, the crew materialise with folding tables, white linen, and chilled champagne. The pilot raises a glass, recites the traditional Balloonist's Prayer with varying degrees of theatrical flair, and the plains echo with laughter and applause.

A FITTING ENDING

Breakfast is served in the open or beneath a spreading acacia: tropical fruit, warm croissants still fragrant from the oven, eggs cooked to order, crisp bacon, and endless tea or coffee. Impala graze nearby; a curious giraffe peers over the





bushes; overhead, the deflated balloon lies like a bright fallen rainbow. Conversation flows easily – replaying favourite moments, swapping stories, promising to stay in touch.

Safety is meticulous, pilots are among the most experienced in Africa, and a portion of every fare supports anti-poaching patrols and local schools. Launch sites are rotated to protect the fragile grassland. When the tables are finally packed away, and guests climb back into the vehicles, the Serengeti looks different – familiar now, intimate, no longer just scenery but a place briefly and beautifully known from the sky.

That rare perspective, earned in the hush of dawn with champagne in hand and the sun rising in a blaze of gold, remains vivid long after you have returned to earth.

For more information and bookings, visit www.balloonsafaris.com. 

by *Ivor Jenkins*

