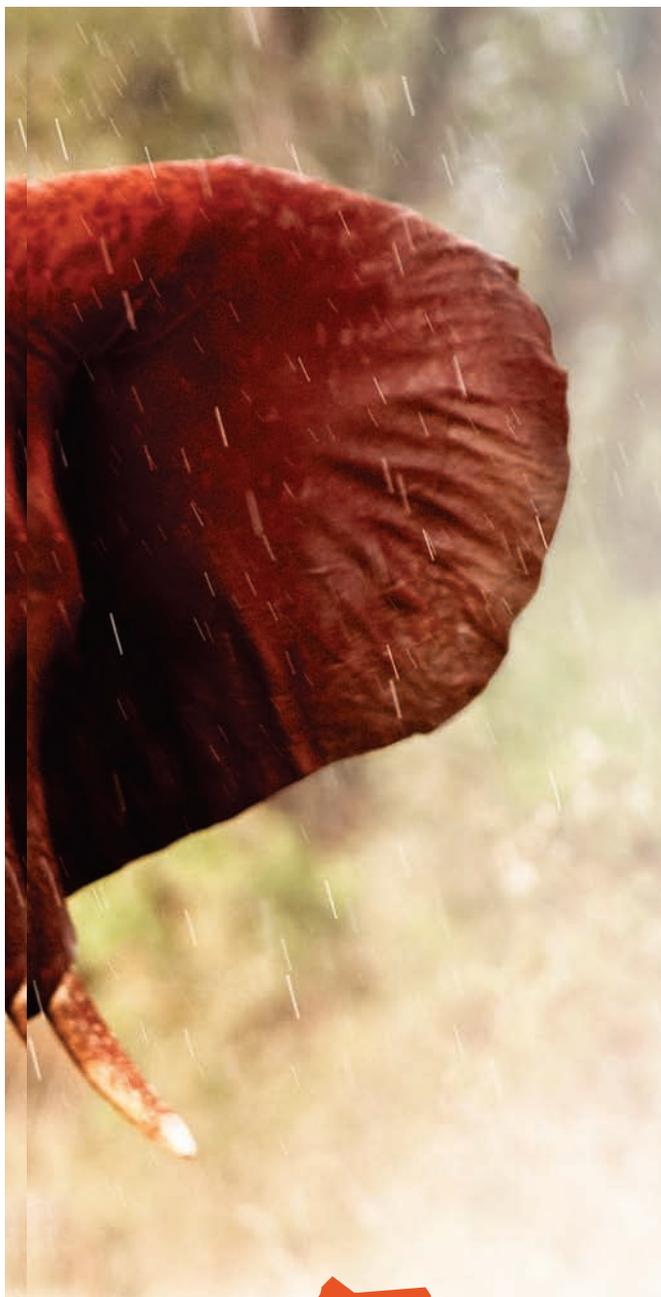




**Anthony Ham** is a regular contributor to *Travel Africa*. He lives in Spain's capital but spends much of his time travelling in Africa. He's currently authoring Lonely Planet's new *Kenya* guidebook.





**A**n adult giraffe, at a distance of perhaps fifty metres, freezes in mid-step, transfixed. A blacksmith's plover wheels away in alarm. The lioness had barely raised her head, but even such a small movement was enough to excite the attention of the plain. The giraffe inches forward, never taking his eyes from the lions sprawled beneath the acacia. Then he gallops away. For the briefest of moments, the eyes of the lioness shift from that distant faraway look that is peculiar to lions to a flash of interest: her eyes widen, her face tenses and for a fleeting moment she bears the look of the huntress. But as if unable to sustain such vigilance on a searing afternoon in southern Kenya, her head flops back down into the dust. The plain relaxes.

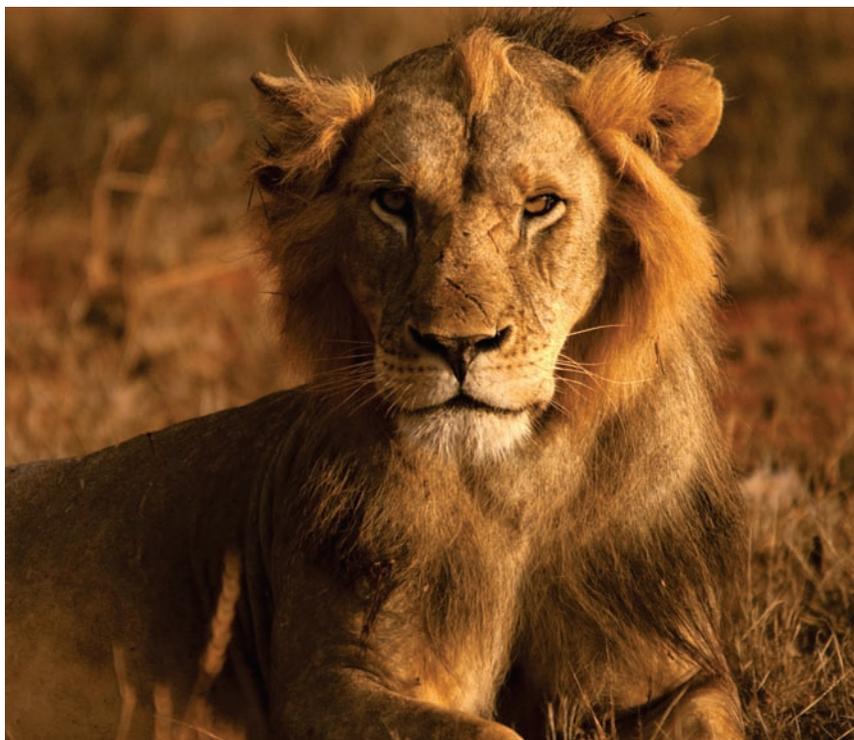
Here in the foothills of the Ngulia Hills, where a jagged ridgeline rises six hundred metres above the valley floor in the heart of Tsavo, there is a primordial sense of being in one of Kenya's wildest places. This is a place where it remains possible to glimpse the old Africa, a place where the eternal dance of predator and prey is still enacted away from most prying eyes. And as such, unlike in some other East African parks, kills here are attended by more lions than minivans.

Part of Tsavo's appeal lies in its sheer scale. Actually consisting of two national parks – Tsavo West and Tsavo East – which sit on either side of the Nairobi-Mombasa highway, Tsavo is one of the largest tracts of protected wilderness in Africa. To put it in perspective, Tsavo East alone is Kenya's largest national park.

For days I drive through its wilderness, watching small 4WD convoys come and go, staying long after they leave and listening to the silences that follow in their wake. "You have been here so long that you should take a wife," says one dishevelled staff member at the Ngulia Safari Lodge. The lodge is a rundown monstrosity of 1970s development, and yet therein lies some of its charm – it's a throwback to the old days. It also has a splendid location that affords you views down two valleys. ▷

# Tsavouring Tsavo

While researching the latest *Kenya* guidebook for Lonely Planet, **Anthony Ham** took some extra time to settle into Tsavo. Here he talks of his experiences and the twin parks' past and present.



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**Above:** An example of the notoriously shaggy and incomplete manes of Tsavo's lions

**Main image:** The twin Tsavos' stretch is wide, easily making them Kenya's largest protected area

▷ At night, I stand on my balcony and shine a torch out into the darkness: a circle of eyes lies just beyond the circle of light. Before each dawn, I leave the lodge and drive out along Ngulia or Rhino Valley, taking up residence alongside the remnant puddles of the Mukui River, watching saddle-billed storks while waiting hours for big cats. Everywhere I look there are signs of lion and leopard – in the footprints among untrammelled morning tracks, in the furtive approach of impala to water, and in the great horizontal branches of fever and fig trees that seem made for the tree climbing cats. Elephants always scatter at my first approach, a learned defence against the poachers of the past, and shy dik-dik imagine themselves unseen in the undergrowth, always in pairs – Kenyans say that when one dies, the other passes soon after of a broken heart. One day I come upon a leopard eating a dik-dik – I spend the afternoon mourning for its mate.

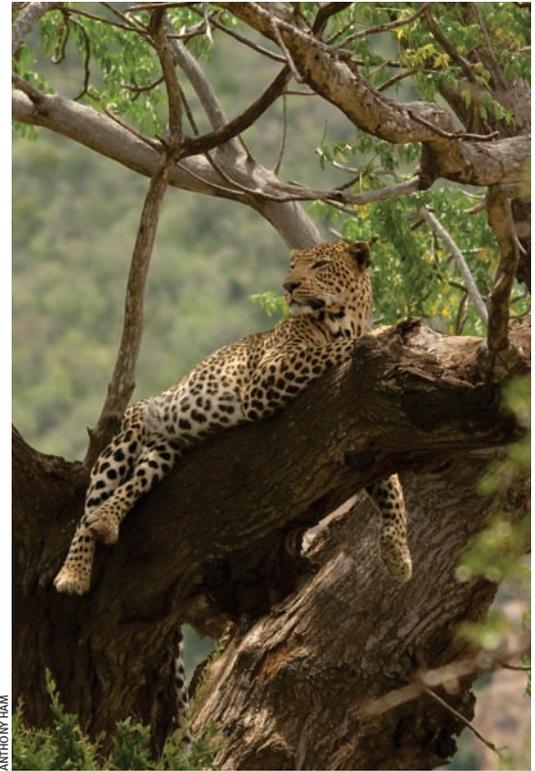
I take all of these small wonders of nature as beacons of hope, and a growing awareness dawns that

*Her eyes widen, her face tenses and for a fleeting moment she bears the look of the huntress*

From the ridgeline upon which Ngulia Safari Lodge sits, Tsavo plunges away towards the rising sun, and, from above, the vast expanse of savannah has the aspect of an abyss. But this is no abyss – it is the Ngulia Rhino Sanctuary, another symbol of Tsavo's renewal. Despite black rhinos being notoriously slow breeders, the sanctuary has been a success, and as such it has recently been expanded. Another sign of its health was the recent release of 15 of its 65 black rhinos into the park. Vigilance is still required within the sanctuary though, and it is surrounded by an electric fence and patrolled by soldiers toting machine guns. One day, I spy two men in the undergrowth high above the waterhole of Mukui. Poachers, I wonder? Anti-poaching rangers, the Kenya Wildlife Service assures me. The black rhino, who prefer the night and dense foliage, were harder to spot.



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ANTHONY HAW



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Not all of the conflicts between humans and wildlife in Tsavo were so one-sided in the 20th century, nor were they all detrimental to parks' reputation – one epic series of clashes has long added to the Tsavo's allure. The ancestors of the lions that I encountered here famously slowed the march of the British Empire. The renowned man-eaters of Tsavo, two male lions, killed an astonishing 135 workers who were constructing the Kenya-Uganda railway. The unfortunate victims, most of them from the Indian subcontinent, were dragged from their tents over the course of a year until Engineer Lt Col John Henry Patterson finally shot dead both bloodthirsty cats. To this day, the lions of Tsavo have a reputation for ferocity that no other lions of Kenya can match.

Despite being the most feared of Tsavo's predators, the lion has found itself in need of the parks' protection. Kenya's lion numbers have plummeted in recent decades, and have probably dipped, alarmingly, below 2000. A third of these – perhaps 675 – are believed to have found refuge in ▷

**Top left:** On the march back: Tsavo's elephant numbers have risen to 12,500, making it the largest population in Kenya

**Top right:** Tsavo's lions may be legendary, but its leopards are at peace with their place in the park

**Left:** Dusted in red, two elephants traverse through the scrub

**Left bottom:** It's said that when one dik-dik dies its life-partner's days are numbered

This is a place where it remains possible to glimpse the old Africa, a place where the eternal dance of predator and prey is still enacted away from most prying eyes

Here in the foothills of the Ngulia Hills, there is a primordial sense of being in one of Kenya's wildest places

ANTHONY HAM

## Plan your trip

### Getting There

Kenya Airways ([www.kenya-airways.com](http://www.kenya-airways.com)) and British Airways ([www.ba.com](http://www.ba.com)) fly directly from London to Nairobi. The twin national parks of Tsavo West and Tsavo East are midway between Nairobi and Mombasa, which is approximately a 250km journey from either by road. There are several airstrips for chartered flights.

### When to Visit

Avoid the rainy season, which runs from March to May. January, February and June through September are great months to visit Tsavo.

### Visas

Most visitors require a visa to visit Kenya. Single-entry tourist visas are available upon entry (by road or air) for US\$50. Multiple-entry visas cost US\$100. The costs vary at Kenyan

embassies and consulates – the fees for single-/multiple-entry tourist visas at the Kenya High Commission in London are £30/£60 respectively.

### Books & DVDs

Lonely Planet *Kenya* (8th ed, June 2012) by Anthony Ham et al is a great accompaniment to any trip.

### Find out more

Kenya Wildlife Service ([www.kws.org](http://www.kws.org))  
Kenya Tourist Board ([www.magicalkenya.com](http://www.magicalkenya.com))

### Author tip

In Tsavo East, the area between Aruba Dam and Satao Camp is prime cheetah territory, more so than anywhere else in the park. And if you want lions and crocs to yourself, head north across the plains to the Galana riverbank.



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**Inset:** The Ngulia Rhino Sanctuary is a symbol of Tsavo's renewal

▷ Tsavo, and lion biologists count the twin parks as one of a handful of remaining wilderness areas in Africa considered sufficiently large to host viable populations of lions. Laurence Frank, Kenya's leading lion biologist, ranks Tsavo as one of only two safe areas for lions in Kenya: "Lions in central Tsavo may be pretty safe because it is so large," he tells me, "but lions are almost certainly being killed all along the boundaries." A lion census to be conducted here in early 2013 will shed greater light on the state of the population. But Tsavo's lions appear, on the surface at least, to be in rude health.

Most people on safari spend ten minutes watching lions before moving on, according to Craig Packer, the eminent lion biologist of the Serengeti. But I watch the lions of Tsavo for hours – first the pride whose territory centres on the Aruba Dam, later its neighbours on the fringes of the Kanderi Swamp. I'm captivated by the Tsavo males, with their fearsome history and notoriously shaggy, incomplete manes, and the bearded lionesses who lead their bands of sub-adults with the calm authority of a species that, here at least, has no enemies. In Tsavo lions still sleep without fear. And upon waking they can still hold an entire landscape in their thrall.

As I watch these lions I come to understand Tsavo's enduring legacy: the privilege of observing truly wild animals in a truly wild landscape. 🦁