

ESCAPES



Lupita Island Lake Tanganyika, Tanzania

“**F**irst thing we have to talk about is the house rules,” says Tom Lithgow as we sit down to our lunch of quiche Lorraine, butternut squash with Feta, cucumber-mango salad, and pineapple-passion fruit tarts. “At Lupita Island, there are no rules.”

My companions and I are on Lithgow’s island to play. We’ve spent five happy days living simply on safari; now it’s time to live large. Lupita Island has private plunge pools, a spa, and three bars (lounge, poolside, and swim-up). Its one TV gets only sports. Its rainy-day game room has Ping-Pong, pool, darts, and shuffleboard. The Internet is poky by design—and there are hard chairs in the computer room to discourage work. The pool has seen plenty of 3 a.m. revelry. The toys range from vintage telescopes to scuba gear to a Robinson R44 helicopter, its doors removed for unimpeded views of the 704-foot Kalambo Falls, the second tallest in Africa.

But the accoutrements don’t fully explain the sense of abandon. All private island resorts encourage a certain carefree attitude, but this 130-acre island isn’t just remote; it’s in a place most people never even considered: Lake Tanganyika, the 420-mile-long body of water between Tanzania and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. It’s so far off the beaten path that the arrival of a chartered Cessna counts as a major event in the neighboring village, where teachers let kids leave class to watch our plane land and

carry our bags to the boat (for fun, not tips—if Lithgow has one rule, it’s not giving people handouts; they haven’t learned to view every tourist as Santa Claus).

Lupita Island is part of Tanzania by Firelight, the safari operation Lithgow and his wife, Belinda, started in 1989. Lithgow, a third-generation Tanzanian, ex-international rugby player, and lifelong safari hand (his father took John Glenn and Roy Rogers hunting), knows what he’s doing. He guides if you request his services—and you should, because he is an encyclopedia of animal behavior, provokes intellectual and mischievous dinner conversations, and fixes a fine gin and tonic.

Firelight’s safaris are luxe but low to the ground. Its two tented camps aren’t the poshest digs—forget about swimming pools—but they’re perfectly functional and environmentally sound. Mwangi Moto in the Serengeti is mobile, moving several times a year to follow the wildebeest migration, while Palahala in the virtually untouristed, hippo-rich Katavi National Park in western Tanzania is permanent but low impact. Both have cushy beds, flush toilets, and electric lights.

Most employees have been with the company for more than a decade, and the knowledgeable guides have the inside track on untraveled roads for game drives in the busy Serengeti. Although the “kitchens” are little more than campfires, the chefs make a chocolate cake for a birthday girl, New York bagels for a champagne breakfast picnic, and an astonishing variety of dishes at every meal.



Lupita Island’s 13 oversized cottages (above) are open to Lake Tanganyika. Right: Coffee delivery with a smile.

PHOTOGRAPHS: THIS PAGE: GARY HALL (SUITE); JULIEN CARPMEIL (WATERY); OPPOSITE: GARY HALL (DINING ROOM AND KALAMBO FALLS); JULIEN CARPMEIL (SCHOOLCHILDREN)

Lithgow began negotiating to buy Lupita Island in 2004, after a decade of camping on it. The name means “on the way to,” which is curious because once you’re here, you’re in no hurry to move on. He doesn’t position it as a stand-alone destination but as a coda to a safari—a thinking man’s mini-Zanzibar.

Lupita’s 13 cottages range from 1,800 to 2,400 square feet. Many meander around boulders or trees. They have hammocks where walls should be, plunge pools, and water-park bathrooms with rock-walled showers where water falls out of the stones—though after bush showers on safari, we would have been delighted by water running out of anything. The interiors were designed by Belinda, who sourced her treasures—salvaged

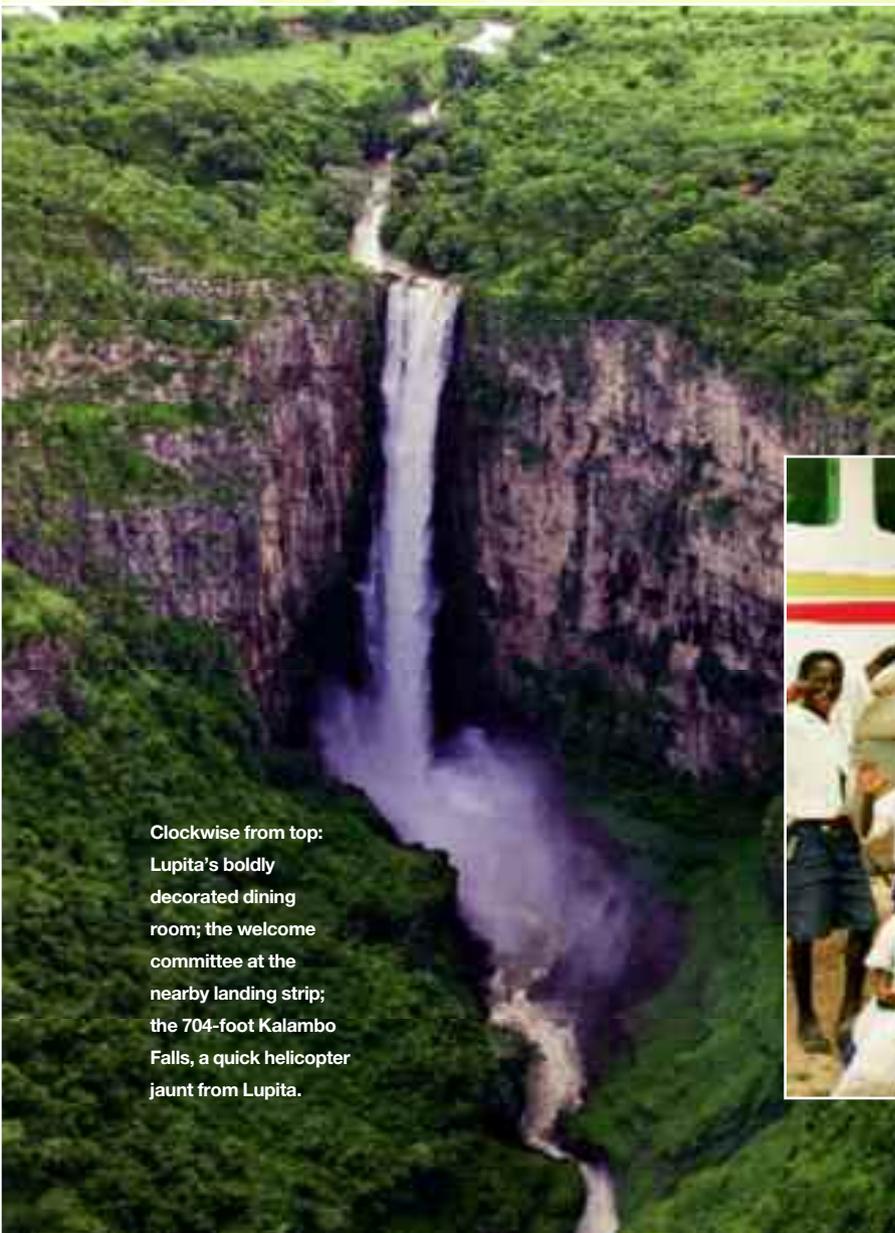


dhows, massive carved doors—all over Africa. Construction took three years and countless man-hours, as machines were barely used. The thatch for the roofs alone required more than 40,000 trips up the steep hill to the rooms.

While there’s no shortage of enjoyment here—delectable four-course meals, dotting attention from an ever-smiling staff of about 35—a highlight for many guests is visiting a village on a neighboring island. Our group brings the gift of a volleyball, which is excitedly received; guests can donate to a fund that purchases school uniforms, building materials, and the occasional treat. The village chief’s second wife proudly invites us into her tidy home, children clamor for us to show them their photographs in our camera displays, and when I remove my hat, a thicket of hands reaches out to touch my red hair.

From there, we motor over to a boulder-strewn beach that rivals the Seychelles, where a spread of arugula salad; grilled shrimp, chicken, and beef; stuffed potatoes; and tomato-avocado salad awaits. Snorkeling gear and water skis are laid out for postprandial sports. Nearly a mile deep and with a surface area of almost 13,000 square miles, freshwater Tanganyika feels like an ocean, complete with reefs and waves, except that you can open your eyes underwater and don’t emerge feeling like salt-crusted cod. We sip cocktails and splash in the surf, savoring our private playground with no rules. —ANN ABEL

➔ \$1,100–\$3,035. 255-78-4266558 or 255-78-4278639, firelightexpeditions.com



Clockwise from top: Lupita’s boldly decorated dining room; the welcome committee at the nearby landing strip; the 704-foot Kalambo Falls, a quick helicopter jaunt from Lupita.