

Thrill of walking on World War I battlefields

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Besides sleeping in a 'bird house,' you see spent cartridges and whiskey bottles

What are the odds of having a game park and a World War I site at the same place? Envisioned in the Taita Hills, the Taita Hills Wildlife Sanctuary is a 28,000-acre private conservancy teeming with game and also happens to be the theatre of the First World War in East Africa.

Adjacent to the Tsavo National Park, this situation is offering a rare experience that can aptly be dubbed 'World War I Safari.'

Having been to the National World War Museum and Memorial in Kansas City, Missouri; I couldn't resist an offer to visit it to learn some history while on safari.

The scars left by the fighting that raged between August 1914 and March 1916 are still visible today, and interestingly, are being healed by the sanctuary that is teeming with wildlife.

The sanctuary has two lodges; the Sarova It Lick Game Lodge and the Sarova Taita Hills Game Lodge.

We left Nairobi at about 8am for Voi town and then turned to the Mwatate Road and reached Salt Lick at about 5pm.

Game drive

What makes this facility enchanting is at the reception, dining area, as well as rooms overlook a waterhole, which draws the elephants to come drink the salty borehole water. This is perhaps the closest anyone can safely come close to the jumbos. You can most touch them.

The lodge has 96 rooms, all elevated on stilts and built across two levels. From atop the lodge, one gets a clear view of the vast savo plains.

The next day, we had a morning game drive around the expansive sanctuary, which offers an abundance of wildlife from lions, elephants, buffalos, giraffes, zebras, palas, gazelles, kudus, dik-diks, monkeys and ostrich. We missed out on the leopard as the park doesn't host any rhinoceros.

In the afternoon, we headed out in search of WWI sites within the sanctuary. A war safari would perhaps never have been a reality were it not for James Wilson, former manager at the Sarova Taita Hills Game Lodge.

James went on to author a book: *Memories of Tsavo: The East African Campaign of the Great War in British East Africa 1914-1916.*"

The book is a product of Wilson's experiences as an apprentice under the late Ian Alexander, a professional hunter and art guide.

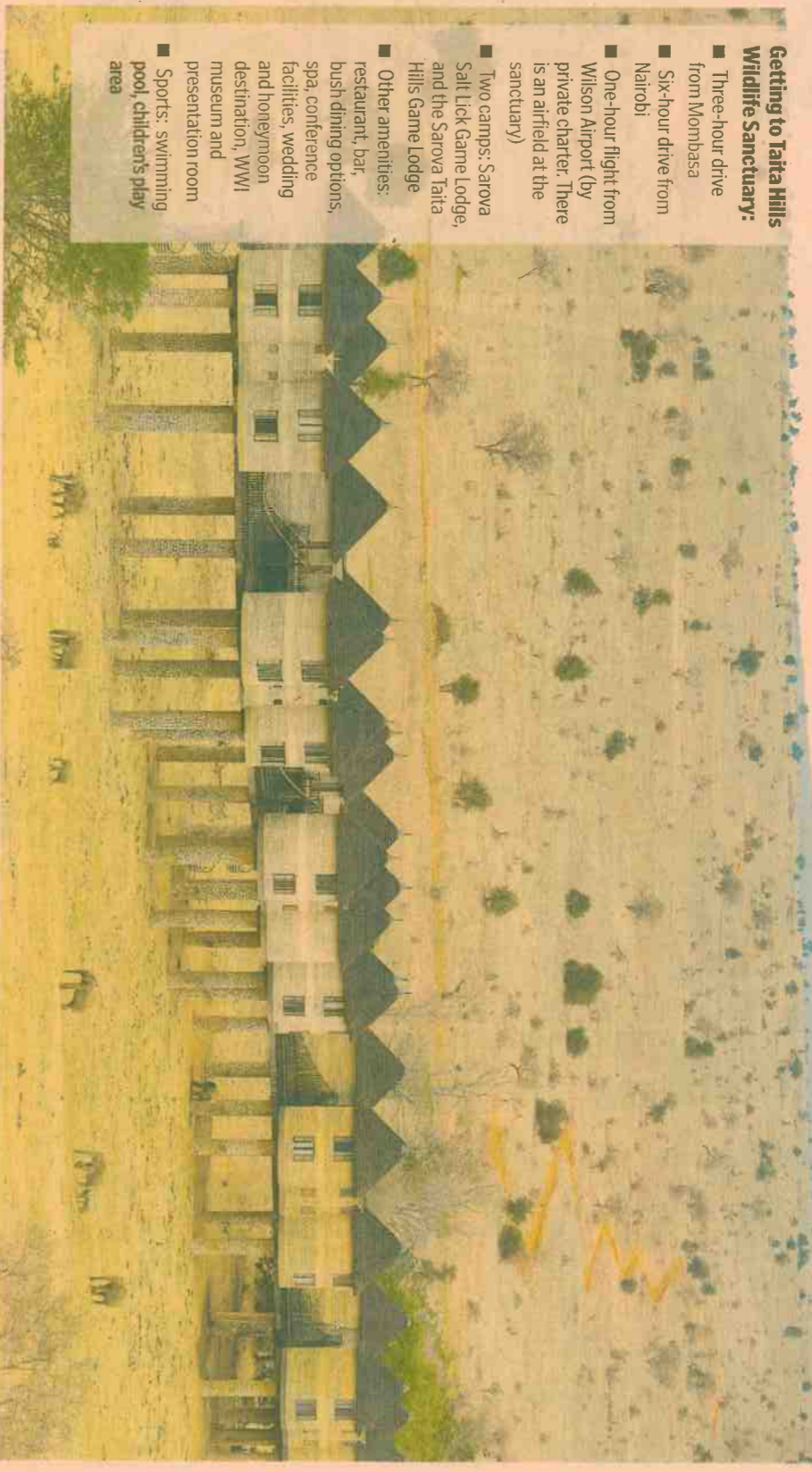
"While out with hunting parties, we would find quantities of spent cartridges, ammunition cases and shrapnel having embedded upon trenches and the remains of a war rock reverments," he says in the book's introduction.

Some of the WWI collections are now housed in a little museum located at the Sarova Taita Hills Game Lodge. They include spent cartridges, whiskey bottles and shrapnel. Some of the artefacts at this hotel include a 1914 Princess Mary Gift Fund box,

IF YOU GO

Getting to Taita Hills Wildlife Sanctuary:

- Three-hour drive from Mombasa
- Six-hour drive from Nairobi
- One-hour flight from Wilson Airport (by private charter. There is an airfield at the sanctuary)
- Two camps: Sarova Salt Lick Game Lodge, and the Sarova Taita Hills Game Lodge
- Other amenities: restaurant, bar, bush dining options, spa, conference facilities, wedding and honeymoon destination, WWI museum and presentation room
- Sports: swimming pool, children's play area



which was sent as a Christmas present to those serving the Empire that year.

The boxes contained a variety of items such as tobacco and chocolate, and was donated to Sarova Taita Hills Game Lodge by a visiting tourist who recounted that their family member had served in East Africa during WWI.

There is also a HMS Pegasus plaque from the British carrier which was sank during the Battle of Zanzibar with the German Königsberg battleship. A tourist visiting the hotel once offered Sh20 million to buy the HMS Pegasus artefact, but Sarova declined the offer.

Taita Taveta County was the site that pitted the Germans, who then controlled Tanganyika, against British forces who ruled Kenya, Uganda and Somaliland.

Let's take a look at some of the WWI battlefields within the sanctuary:



Sarova Taita Hills Game Lodge.
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Mile 27 along the Voi - Taveta rail line

This was a major target for the German forces, known as Schutztruppe. They wanted to blow up this bridge located 27 miles from Voi as a strategy to cut supplies for the British troops. However, they never managed to bring down the bridge as the British guarded it jealously. But the Germans managed to frequently

disrupt operations on this line.

Mashoti Fort

Built by the Loyal North Lancashire regiment in late 1915, the Mashoti Fort consists of trenches and typical regulation design British fort laid out according to the 'book.' Situated in a ridge, the fort is eroded today but clearly visible and easily accessible. The name 'Mashoti' is believed to be a corruption of "more shots" as was ordered by the commander.

Tsavo Railway Station

Famous as the 'Man Eaters of Tsavo Railway Station,' it was built in late 1898. It is located next to Mile 27 Bridge, a target that the Germans were continually trying to reach in an effort to blow it up. It was however, too heavily defended

Mahoo Hill

Located outside the sanctuary, this is a Church Missionary Society mission post established in 1890 just outside Taveta. It was occupied by the Germans and subsequently fortified by them and became their eastern command military headquarters.

Maktou

A dusty sleepy little village today, half way between Voi and Taveta but in early 1916 it accommodated over 20,000 British Empire troops and claims the first airfield in East Africa.

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