

Hunting with the Hadzabe.



There are over 130 different tribes in Tanzania, each with its own customs and traditions and its own language or dialect.

The Hadzabe are a small tribe, numbering less than one thousand, and indigenous to the Lake Eyasi area of Tanzania. They are ancient hunter-gatherers. They do not keep track of days, months, years, or even hours. Time is measured only through cycles of the sun and moon. Their existence has changed little in 10,000 years. But, they are gregarious and welcoming.

Today we are joining the Hadzabe tribe on their morning hunt. They do not raise cattle or grow food. The women forage for roots and berries while the young men, or warriors, hunt daily for food - small animals or birds. It is an honor to be allowed to share in this primal hunting ritual, vital to their existence.

We gingerly pick our way over a rough, narrow path to a large rocky outcropping. Here we are welcomed enthusiastically by several Hadzabe elders. The rocky embankment serves as the backdrop to their simple, primitive life. To one side, on a small grassy plain, the women and children gather around small rugged grass huts.

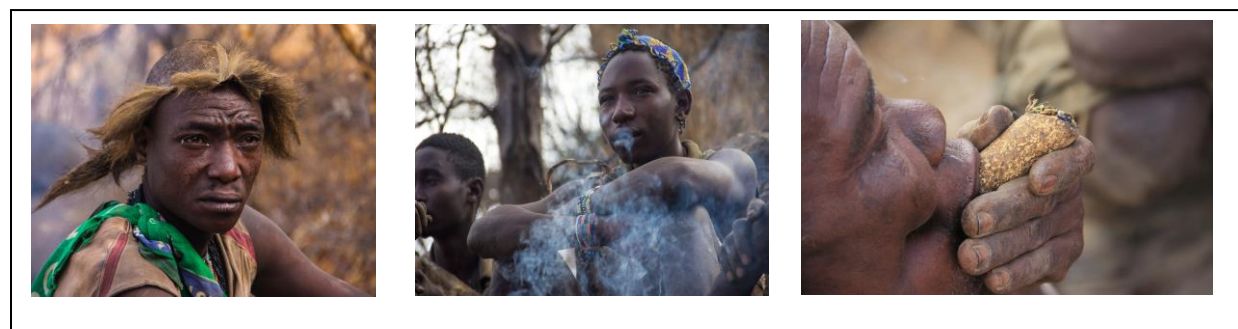
The rocky path turns and descends a short distance where the men are gathered in small groups, squatting around open fires. They are dressed in worn and tattered t-shirts and shorts. On their feet are the sandals we have seen among many of the locals, an ingenious creation utilizing strips of

durable rubber from used motorcycle tires for the soles. Their skin is leathery and weathered from their daily existence in this dry land with the relentless heat of the African sun.

I notice a small group of young warriors, standing slightly away from the group. Spread around them are bows, arrows, spears - the tools of the hunt. They carefully and diligently check their weapons, sharpening an arrow or spear, testing a bow. They are readying themselves for the hunt, I realize. They wear animal hide over their clothes, a remnant of a prior hunt. Our guide explains, this is the biggest change from their traditional existence - the wearing of clothing rather than just skins. "The churches bring clothing," he explains, "they do not want to see them with just animal skins."

Gathered around a nearby fire, smoke tendrils rising into the early morning light, is another group of men. They squat low, voices rising and falling in their strange dialect. They are a fascinating, rag-tag lot. One meanders over to join us, carrying two sticks – one, a flat piece with a small hole carved into it. The other, a sturdy round stick. He sets the flat piece on a large, rough-hewn knife on the ground then carefully places the end of the round stick in the hole. Holding it between his two palms he quickly and adeptly twirls the stick, rubbing his palms back and forth. In seconds we begin to see a slight puff of smoke rising and within seconds a flame bursts. He beams broadly at us, gesturing toward the glowing fire. We clap and cheer.

Around the fire is a wizened older man, teeth brown and sparse. He separates himself from the group and joins our small group of observers. In his hand, a joint as thick as a broomstick. The tip glows and smolders. He takes a slow pull on it, exhaling puffs of pungent smoke. He holds it out, offering it to our group. Our guide has alerted us in advance. This is marijuana and a natural part of their life. I have seen it passed around the fire from warrior to warrior and shudder at the thought of putting it in my mouth. Around the fire, the men continue to pass around joints. Tendrils of smoke rise around them.



Gradually the young warriors gather up their arrows and spears, grab their bows and head out for the hunt. The warriors follow deeper into the bush, listening for sounds of birds or animals. They call out, imitating bird calls, waiting for an echoing response. They dart in and out of the thorny bushes, throwing a stone here and there to see what they can flush out.

We follow, sticking to the path. Even so, the razor sharp thorns reach out, snagging our clothing and our hair, piercing our skin and even our shoes. The young warriors are undaunted, seeming immune to the peril.

There are four of them, they are a team. One rushes into the brush while the others watch, alert for any movement, at the ready with their spears and bows. A cheer, they stalk out of the bushes carrying a small bird on an arrow. "That won't feed too many people," I think as they remove the arrow and place the bird into the pouch they carry.

We keep our distance, watching but not intruding. This is serious to them, it is a matter of existence. For two hours we continue through the thorny bushes to a dry river bed. The scenery is vast, severe, yet beautiful.

All they have managed to catch is four small birds. They seem happy with their hunt but I can't help wonder how that will feed the families I have seen at the camp. We come to a small clearing near the riverbed where the four hunters stop. They grab the two sticks and quickly a small fire bursts. It is lunchtime, we are told. They spear a couple of the dead birds and roast them over the fire, nimbly removing the feathers and ripping morsels of meat from the carcass. Again they offer to share. Again I decline their generous offer.

As they ready themselves to return to their hunt, our guide beckons. We turn and head back to the camp while our brave warriors continue on their hunt. Hopefully, they have a bit more luck in the afternoon.



IF YOU GO:

Day Tours may be arranged to visit the Hadzabe tribe, either stand alone or as part of a larger tour or safari. For information or booking:

Topguides Safaris: victor@topguidessafaris.com

Planning to stay in the Lake Eyasi area: Lake Eyasi Safari Lodge. For information or booking: lakeeyasi.com or email: reservations@lakeeyasi.com