

ON THE MASAI MARA SEPTEMBER 24 - 26, 2015

Kenya is the most wildlife rich country on the planet and our time in the Masai Mara (Masai land) is the big event of the Kenya portion of our trip. The Masai Mara and the Serengeti are one in the same game preserves, but spread out over two countries. The Masai Mara section in Kenya, stretches as far as the eye can see for 700 square miles then spills over to the Serengeti which is across the Masa River in Tanzania. The river forms part of the political border between the two countries, but the animals don't know it and move freely from one side to the other.



Sunrise on the Masai Mara

It is like nothing I have ever seen. First of all, the road to get here is the worst ever -- trust me on this. Bill, our guide said that the government gives money to the Masai to care for and improve the reserve but, unfortunately, much goes into their pocket. This is a shame as it is easy to see where the money could be used -- schools, hospitals, social services and, of course, roads.

Though it looks like a poor area, it is so culturally rich. The Masai are a confident, proud, elegant, self-assured people and one of the last nomadic tribes in Africa - but it is said that their way of life will probably be over in about 10 years. There is little space for nomads and their cattle anymore. Along this very bad road, we pass herds of cattle, always with a Masai caretaker. The animals are their wealth - they barter with cattle, pay dowries with cattle and they they use them for meat.

The big event here is animals -- millions of them. And the reason we are here at this time of the year is to see the great wildebeest migration. This is a classic National Geographic moment -- thousands of animals racing across the Mara River, trying not to be eaten by crocodiles or crushed by hippos.



The Lloyk Mara Camp, our home for three days, is beautiful. It has only 10 platform

tents and is set in a clump of trees. You cannot see it until you are almost there and signage to the camp is minimal. As we drive into the reserve we'd spot an occasional rock with the camp name and an arrow. Then nothing. We thought our luck changed when two Masai on a motorbike offer to lead us -- but they didn't know where the camp was either and lead us about an hour out of our way. We later find we were only 10 minutes from the camp when the motorbike-Masai sped us off in the wrong direction.



My "Out of Africa" moment

Our first full day starts with a Masai warrior arriving at my tent at 4:15am to make sure I am up. Its the day of our balloon ride! He also checks on the time I want to be escorted to the reception/dining area for coffee. We are not allowed to leave our tents without an escort when its dark. The reason -- wild animals. This encampment is not fenced and animals wander thru it. In fact, I see zebras from my porch pretty much every night!

Not used to sleeping in a tent (even a luxury one), the first night all I could hear was the wind shaking the tent flaps and zippers rubbing together (I had forgotten to zip closed the "door" to the bathroom). By the second night I am used to it and hear the yelps, growls and grunts of zebra, lion, hippo and birds.

Yes, this is Africa and it's better than Disneyworld!

At 5am we are picked up by a vehicle from Hot Air Safaris for an hour ride to the lift-off point. All is well until our 4WD hits some large rocks while traversing a ravine and the engine dies. After some attempts at repair, a back-up vehicle is called and soon we are on our way again for the 6:30 rendezvous. We just make it! The ride is wonderful and we see lots of animals and interesting terrain from the air.

What I enjoy most are our safaris thru the park -- we are not allowed to leave the vehicles so our drivers drive us every which way from nowhere to nowhere in search of lion, cheetah, giraffe, gazelle, topi, zebra, hippo, hyena, hyrax, jackal, kudu, warthog (a favorite), wildebeast, monkey, and birds such as eagle, ostrich, secretary bird (another favorite), and the very elusive leopard.



One high point of the day is seeing both lions and cheetahs. Isabel, who is a registered nurse, takes one look at a female cheetah resting in a clump of trees and tells us she is within a few days of having cubs. Sorry we will have to miss it.

This is probably the best picture I've taken in my whole life! Our car was about 15 feet from these lions. They had been having a tryst a few minutes before then she started to walk away. He was not happy and went after her.



But what we came to see is wildebeest crossing the Mara River.



Cars line both banks of the Mara River and lie in wait and wait.

That afternoon, our cars wait at the river bank - along with many others. Herds of wildebeest stretch as far as the eye can see. They seem ready, but hesitant. A few walk to the bank, look to the other side, take a drink, then return to the herd. Our first day we wait and wait -- no luck. Drivers have radios to listen each other. One driver says another herd is about to cross further down the river. Off we all go. Once there, it takes a bit to get into position. We wait. And wait some more.

Crocodiles also wait along the bank too. Wildebeest make a tasty lunch.



As it is getting close to dusk, we return to camp hoping for better luck the next day.

And we are lucky! A topi (like a small gazelle) swims across. Then come the wildebeest. The guides estimate from 5,000 to 10,000 crossed that morning. Many leap into the water (National Geographic moment here), and others just bunch together and swim across together. There might be safety in numbers as we don't see the crocodiles going after anything.



Finally, they cross! Notice the vulture in the foreground devouring an unlucky wildebeest that didn't survive.



I had to zoom out to get both banks in the photo -- but if you look close, you can see the line of wildebeest crossing.

Ada counts 24 cars watching the crossing that day.

Anything after seeing the crossing is anti-climatic. But we continue on our safari, enjoying the animals, the ride and just the privilege of being in Africa.

By the time we leave the Masai Mara, we have seen 85 species.