

Kenya game parks: The greatest show on earth

When instructed to find a way to Kenya from Singapore, my travel agent came up with a business class flight to Bangkok on Singapore Airlines followed by the longer, equatorial-hugging trip to Nairobi with Kenya Airlines. Business class was great; addressed by name; discovering that your feet actually do come with you on airline flights and having the choice of where the champagne is from. A gloating text message to my daughter quickly brought the retort that I would soon be in cattle class on Kenya Airlines. I only just managed to survive the illogical intricacies of the new Suvarnabhumi International Airport in Bangkok before I was given an exit seat on the pride of the Kenya Airways. I was rejoicing in the fact also that nobody was sitting next to me when a very large woman wearing a full-length gaudy dress appeared from nowhere and plonked down next to me after smiling disarmingly. It wasn't too bad as it was like sitting next to a soft mattress and gave me another surface to rest my head. The flight was without incident or highlight; the staff was relaxed and the food was edible. I was introduced to my first taste of Tusker beer. This is Kenya's beer and a good drop too. The company was founded by two brothers, but one unfortunately met his end when gored by a tusker. It was therefore a somewhat 'black' brand name, but just as well he wasn't zipped open by a warthog.

On arrival in the wee small hours at Jomo Kenyatta airport I was worried by how long it may take to get an entry visa. The answer was about 48 seconds.....as I was first in the line. My hosts for the first few days, Jane and Nigel Parmley, had arranged for a taxi to pick me up and I soon located a 'Jimmy's Cabs' vehicle and we were on our way to the Parmley residence, engaged in a friendly and animated conversation. I think I paid handsomely for the conversation but after about 20 minutes was in the residence of Jane and Nigel, a spacious home on the outskirts of Nairobi.



[The Parmley's house on the outskirts of Nairobi](#)

I was shown great hospitality in the next two days; lunch at the Club, a function at the Golf Club, walking the dogs and best of all.....a good dose of live rugby via satellite TV from South Africa. Kenya has two rainy seasons the 'Big rains' in April-May and the 'Little rains' in October – November. Nairobi is not much further off the equator than Singapore, but the 1600 metres elevation resulted in a beautiful temperate climate. Unfortunately it was an El Nino year and the 'Little Rains' were more like big brother. It rained most days and I told myself it would rain itself out, but it didn't. This had its upside and downside on our safari.....we avoided the pesky dust that wheedles its way into every orifice of photographic equipment and human body alike. Also, the heat on a cloudless day soon results in the animals, especially the big cats, finding shelter whereas they stay out for much longer on a cloudy day. On the downside, a lot of action, especially with the lion cubs, occurs in the evenings and slower shutter speeds necessary in cloudy conditions make action-capturing difficult.

Jane dropped me off at the Serena Hotel and after checking into the very comfortable room I went to meet my tour mates and catch up with Joe and Mary Ann McDonald. There were 13 of us in the tour group, the two McDonalds and 5 very skillful and well-informed drivers; Felix, Andrew, David, Patrick and Albanus. Joe ran down the basic etiquette for shooting on the trip and how regard for others in the vehicle was to be taken into account. We were all to become Tai Chi experts in our slow harmonious movements that caused no motion blur on the images of others in the vehicle. Mary Ann was in charge of allocating who was in each vehicle and did so twice a day for the rest of the trip.



[General shooting mode from the top of the Land Rover](#)

The vehicles were especially outfitted Land Rover Defenders that belonged to Origins Safaris, a company that seemed to get everything right. There were three rows of seats behind the

driver and a removable hatch above each shooter that, when taken off, enabled each of the three shooters to photograph out of their own space on the roof of the vehicle.

Patrick was our first driver and with Caroline, a veteran of over 30 trips to Africa and Ken, a retired Ophthalmologist and ace senior golfer, we made our way out of Nairobi before stopping several times for comfort purposes and to have lunch at a Treetops Restaurant and Trout farm. We were to get a glimpse of some wildlife when we saw the Giant Kingfisher that was perched above a pond of young trout and a flashing glimpse of a colourful Turaco.

The initial stages of the trip to Samburu took us through central Kenya with its fertile, rolling countryside that supported crops of pineapples, coffee and beans. Small crops of potatoes were planted on roadside plots by squatters eking out an existence from their meager crop. We passed by the shadows of Mount Kenya, a peak that was obviously once much grander before volcanic activity blew it largely away. Further along we descended into the Rift Valley, the cradle of civilization. Later the roads deteriorated and then become bone-jarringly bad. A lesser vehicle would soon become battered to unrecognizable sheet metal. Some roads looked more like moonscapes and you expected to see the Lunar Rover teetering along in the opposite direction. One feature of the small villages we passed through was the children in a variety of brightly coloured school uniforms and the preponderance of various Christian sects that spread the Gospel from shabby shacks or rusty sheds. The roads everywhere in Kenya have many pedestrians walking along the roadside. There are none of the buzzing mopeds that infest South Asian countries. Country folk can walk 10-20 Km to the shops and back to their villages.

As we moved into northern Kenya the roadside vegetation became sparser. Northern Kenya is a country of sand-rivers known as *luggas*, of isolated mountains rising sheer from the plains, of long droughts and sudden torrential rainstorms. As we approached Samburu, which is a semi-desert park, camels grazed on the spiky bushes and more of the locals wore Muslim garb. We turned onto a dirt track past a security outpost and headed towards our first safari camp. Our progress was abruptly halted some 10 km short of our destination by an overly swollen river that swirled over the normal ford with menace. There were hasty riverside conferences and chin scratching and drivers rolled up trouser-legs and broke of saplings before walking gingerly into the middle of the

crossing to assess the stability and depth. A larger vehicle with backpackers sitting on top of luggage arrived on the scene. They had a greater problem as this oversized vehicle was inexplicably without four-wheel drive. Albanus was first to bite the bullet, he cleared his vehicle of passengers and ploughed through the swirling waters. The other four Land Rovers, with full loads, followed the same course. The backpackers gathered together and waded across the waters and their vehicle successfully followed, accompanied by sighs of relief and a brief round of applause.



[Crossing the swollen river](#)

As we approached our 'camp' we got a taste of the wildlife in the area: Impala, a Martial Eagle, Waterbuck, Gerenuks, Red-billed Hornbills, Elephants, Reticulated Giraffes and some Eastern Chanting Goshawks were sighted. The usual dry, semi-arid conditions in the Reserve had been transformed by the heavier-than-usual rains and verdant green vegetation was all about us. The rain had caused some problems in the camp a few weeks earlier when flood waters flowed through the lowest lying tents.

The Samburu Intrepids camp was situated alongside the Uaso Nyiro River, a small but capricious river that threatened the camp several times while we were there and either flowed quietly or with a turbid brown anger. The

interior of the tents had two single four-poster beds with full wrap-around mosquito nets. Inside the entrance, a small desk hosted a desk lamp and an adjacent power point for battery-charging or power for a lap-top computer. Behind the beds was another table and a wardrobe. A 'solid' bathroom was accessed by a wooden door and contained a double sink, a shower and a flush toilet, with a stone floor and walls surrounding the shower cubicle. The set-up was for two persons, who would have required some internal submarine-ethics of engagement but, as I was solo, it was perfect. The electricity supplied by portable generators was reliable and everything worked well.



The semi-desert Samburu Game Park had gone green.

The food was also excellent. Dining was in a common open-sided area with an adjacent kitchen. Dinner started with soup and then the choice from a buffet followed by a choice of three desserts, which also included tropical fruits for the weight conscious. At mealtimes each member of the group would have to reveal his/her highlight of the day and we would be assigned to vehicles for the following morning or afternoon game drive. A Samburu warrior stood by in full colorful regalia and body paint and was armed with a catapult and a pile of small stones to keep the monkeys away from the guests. On several nights a genet ghosted into the dining area and scavenged food from the guests. The genet looks rather cat-like; its pale yellow fur blotched with brown spots. It is in fact related to the mongoose. The restaurant staff was excellent and friendly. Most evenings, there seemed to be some celebration with a birthday or anniversary celebrated with great gusto; first the main light would be extinguished and the 20-strong kitchen staff and waiters would dance with inherent rhythm, conga-style behind a celebratory cake. Kitchen utensils were recruited as percussion instruments and the cardboard cylindrical cores of foil wrap or kitchen towels were fashioned into wind instruments. The happy group would then surround the 'victim', present the cake and sing

'Happy Birthday' and then somewhat disappointingly normal service would resume.

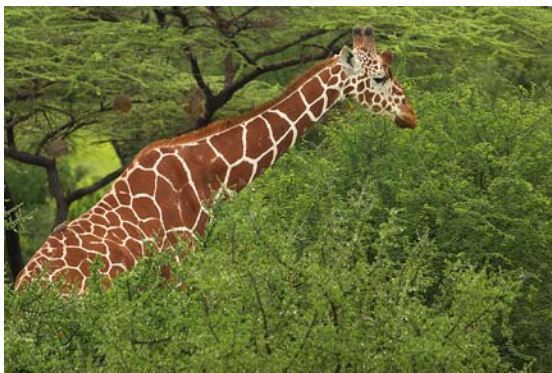
I was one of two 'African virgins' in the group and Joe Austin and I were assigned to the care of Mary Ann for the first morning shoot. She had endured a fairly sleepless night as the river was rising again and she and Joe were in the lowest-lying tent. The light was good and we weren't out long before we got the call that a leopard had been sighted resting in a tree. Sure enough my 'first' leopard lay astride a wide branch while his dead prey, an impala, was wedged in a fork lower in the tree. There were several other vehicles on the scene and they had got the prized, close positions with the light at their backs and close to the leopard. We managed some good back-lit shots and were able to get several nice angles before we got closer to the cat. The female leopard was salivating over the thought of a meal of Impala meat when it was disturbed by a group of Olive Baboons passing through the area. It descended the tree just behind our vehicle and disappeared into the undergrowth. We also photographed Baboons, Superb Starlings, Red-billed Hornbills, Lilac-breasted Rollers and a Grey-headed Kingfisher.



A female leopard rests in a tree after killing an impala

Our daily routine was fairly intense. We would have to be in the vehicles and ready to roll at 6.15 am. Before this occurred you would have to locate and secure your bean bags in your assigned vehicle and have your equipment in place and primed for shooting. One of the hotel staff could be booked to arrive at your tent at an assigned time with a cup of tea or coffee to ensure you were at least awake. I usually set an alarm for 5 am and had the coffee arrive at 5.30 am to ensure I was awake and alert. Breakfast was packed by the hotel staff for consumption in the field. Shooting was generally until 11.00 to 11.30 am with a pause for breakfast. The packed breakfast each person received could have fed all the persons in the vehicle and contended a small herd of elephants

and a den of hyenas. A nice buffet lunch was served at 12.30 back at the camp where we were assigned to vehicles again for the afternoon shoot. This shoot would move out at 3 pm, with the normal preparation, and we would return at around 6.30 pm when the sun had set. Back at the tent equipment would be cleaned, cards downloaded, a shower and back to the restaurant for dinner at 7.45 pm. Some speed in performing these tasks enabled a 30 minute chat-session with fellow shooters while nursing a cold Tusker before the dinner started. By the time you were back in your tent it was usually around 9.30 pm and after a few preparations for the morning you were sound asleep, often lulled into dreamland by rain drumming on the canvas tent. With 20 consecutive days of this routine, you had to have a certain degree of fitness and be adept at drawing your large lens from its 'holster' in the blink of an eye, in the mode of a Western gunslinger.



Lilac-breasted Roller (u). Reticulated Giraffe (l)

In the next two and a half days at Samburu we photographed elephants, giraffes, Oryx, Waterbucks, Dikdiks, Gerenuk, Red and Yellow barbets, Lilac-breasted Rollers, Pale Chanting Goshawk, Red- and Yellow-billed Hornbills, Von der Decken's Hornbills, Leopards, Cheetahs, Grevy's Zebra, Spotted Thick Knees, banded and dwarf mongoose, Unstriped Squirrels, African Hare, Vulturine guinea fowl and Sandgrouse and observed the varied displays of

Yellow-necked Spurfowl, White-bellied and Buff-crowned Bustards. The latter bustard has the most amazing display; it has a neck-stretching call which can be followed by an imitation of a short-range sky rocket. The bird fires itself into the air to a height of around 30-40 metres, it tumbles over and fall earthwards like it has been shot and only at the last moment does it flair its wings and land with some dignity. The Black-backed bustard had an acoustically humorous hiccup and burp display. One of the most interesting birds we observed was the pygmy falcon, a tiny shrike-like falcon that is cuteness personified. Elsewhere, monitor lizards lounged around termite mounds while turquoise and orange Agama lizards basked on warm rocks.



Dikdik male marking (u). Buff-crested Bustard (l).

On the 4th day, we traveled south from Samburu to the Lake Nakuru Game Reserve. It was raining as we left and moments after we passed out of the Samburu Game Reserve we saw 3 cheetahs sitting together virtually waving us off.....and the camera gear, other than 'point and shoot' cameras was packed. The rough roads took their toll on the shock absorbers of one of the vehicles. It was mobile but needed a replacement at the next large town. In a wise move, six additional shock absorbers were purchased. As we got higher it also

got colder and the more cold blooded in the party were forced to purchase Masai blankets to survive.

Lake Nakuru is famous for the flamingoes that congregate in great numbers at a particular time of the year. The water supplies that fed the lake had come under certain pressure with the result that there was a lot less water in the lake and the flamingoes had started to fly off. The flamingoes that remained mainly congregated far out into the lake so were not good subjects for photography. The park surrounds the lake and it seemed strange on first site as you looked down the barrel of your big lens and saw houses located within a nearby town in the background. We had only two nights at this park. The rooms were comfortable, motel style and the large communal dining room was like school days again. We had breakfast in the hotel as the sun needed to climb above a hill to provide enough light for photography and this delayed things by an hour. On the first full day we saw two leopards, White and Black Rhinos, Common zebra, Giraffes, Secretary birds, Olive Baboons, Buffalo, White Fronted Bee-eaters, a Long-crested eagle, Lilac-breasted Rollers and African Hoopoes.



White Rhino (u). African Buffalo with Oxpecker (l)

The next day we did a game drive in the morning before leaving the park and heading southwards to the Masai Mara. During this time Joe McD spotted a lone African Wild dog. These dogs with radar-dish ears were almost eliminated

several years ago by an outbreak of distemper that swept through Africa. It was good to know that there were some still around. We visited a souvenir shop deemed to be one of the best in the country before continuing to the Mara. The roads were abysmal, not just bad, but really terrible. Vehicles just drove further and further to the side of the road to avoid the massive bomb craters that riddled the 'road'. Sometimes a driver coming the other way figured our side was better than his side and you would have the potential for head-on collisions. The drastic state of the roads is directly related to political corruption. The small but expanding sections of good road are being funded by the European Community which only works because the money goes directly to the contractor who is supervised directly by European engineers and surveyors. Another sad sight was the state of some of the villages; not only were the roads really awful within the town boundaries but trash was everywhere. While antipathy was the likely prime culprit, the abundance of non-degradable plastic bags was also noteworthy.

As we approached the Masai Mara the Masai settlements were getting more and more evident. The land at times looked barren and the vegetation was stunted. Much of this was caused by overgrazing by the Masai domestic animals. Masai wealth is measured by the number of goats and cattle and there is simply too many. We were escorted through the entrance by an extremely colourful rainbow against a very black skyand the cameras were still packed!!!!!! We were scheduled to stay at 3 locations in the Mara, the first was Keekorok Lodge.

Keekorok Lodge was a recently refurbished hotel-like establishment. Dining rooms, administration and bars were in a central building and rooms were in several lines of attached units within the 'front garden'. The front garden was not fenced and grazing animals and predators alike were free to wander about. At night you were offered a Masai Warrior armed with a spear to escort you to your room. The first night I returned to my room unescorted but a quick sweep of the flashlight picked up many pairs of green eyes at the periphery of the lawn. Lions, buffalo and hyenas were heard in the night and one of our party reported a lion moving around noisily outside their bathroom window. One guest reported seeing a Cheetah pursuing a Thomson's gazelle through the grounds before downing it meters from a guest's room. Some interesting bird species could be observed in the trees around the lodge during our midday break. The sunbirds and a Violet-backed starling showed flashes of brilliant, iridescent

plumage as they moved through shafts of sunlight. There is also a boardwalk at the back of the hotel dining room that leads to a hippo pool where guests can look down at the wildlife while sipping a cool Tusker.

Our first taste of shooting on the Masai Mara was very good. Activity seemed to be slow at first light but increased around 7-8 am. We sighted several more leopards, many lions, usually lustily consuming the early morning kill, Topi, Eland, Zebra and some remnants of the Wildebeest migration. We came across a female cheetah who instructed her 5 cubs to hunker down in a thicket while she went hunting. She patiently stalked some Thomson's gazelles but was never close enough to unleash her explosive burst of speed. A female cheetah with cubs lives her life on the edge. She is a solo Mother with no social security and many problems. She has to protect her offspring and she has to sustain herself and keep 100% fit and injury-free to run down her prey. She hunts by stealth and guile, she has a limited choice of small animals that she can outrun and she must get close enough to release her high-speed dash. But like an alcohol-powered dragster, it can only be sustained for short distances and the prey can run nearly as fast. If successful she must sequester her kill from lions and hyenas and even consume it before they come on the scene. Any muscular or bone damage to her high performance limbs is likely to be fatal to her and her cubs.



[A female cheetah searches for prey](#)

The hunting strategy of lions is entirely different. The pride, based on related females, can virtually kill anything they choose. Well conceived team strategy, guile and brute force can provide food in abundance when the grazers are in the vicinity. The problem is that the grazers are not always around in high numbers. They will bring down giraffe, ostriches, any of the grazers.... including Masai cattle.... and even kill pesky hyenas if they push their luck too far around a kill.

One of the most delightful sights that we observed around lion prides was playtime with the older cubs. Like mischievous children, they play tricks on each other, practice stalking and choking and have games of hide and seek with gymnastic romps around the bushes. One of the most endearing events in this playtime was when the mothers joined in with the same gusto as the youngsters while demonstrating tolerance and love.



[Lion cubs engaged in a fun-fight](#)

Three of our safari group, Steve, Joe (Austin) and I, had booked for a balloon ride for our second morning at Keekorok. We had to assemble before dawn and were blessed with perfect conditions. We were given brief instructions by the pilot, an Englishman with a Bristol accent. Baskets come in various sizes, depending on the number of passengers. Ours consisted of 7 compartments. The pilot occupied the entire central compartment and the outer compartments were divided into three with two to three passengers in each. At takeoff and landing you sit on a small seat and hold onto two rope loops while in a brace position. Take-off usually takes place with the basket on its side in which case the passengers are in the brace position on their backs. The basket can also land on its side after hitting solid ground so you essentially land and take-off in the same position. We landed softly in a vertical position. The flight was brilliant....we hugged the ground for a distance before gaining altitude. We flew over various predators and grazers with the highlight occurring when we dropped low over a pride of lions. All the big cats gazed wide-eyed at the yellow and red object passing overhead. Only the large male appeared to be intimidated by the roar of the ignited gas jets. We had a good view of the luggas and the random network of animal tracks etched into the grasslands. The rest of our group had decided to photograph in the area we flew over. At one point we were able to have a conversation with Mary

Ann from above. The time flew and as we headed for the Tanzanian border the pilot brought the balloon down. Incursions into Tanzanian territory resulted in confiscation of the balloon and a month's holiday with free meals....but in a small room. The ground crew had been kept informed and was waiting for us. Not only was the balloon soon deflated and on the trailer but we were enjoying a very nice champagne-lubricated breakfast. We did a sort-of game drive on the way back to our lodge but it was hot and sunny and the animals were sheltering. After the high of the flight you just did not seem to care if you chanced on the shot of a lifetime at ground level.



Shortly after take-off (u). The lion pride looks up (l)

The second location we were based in was the Serena Lodge. This settlement is strategically placed on a hill that has a spectacular panoramic view from most rooms. The design of the settlement mimics a native encampment and blends well into the environment. The rooms are luxurious, and no doubt expensive, with plenty of power outlets. We stayed there two nights and, again, the food and service was excellent. The rains continued during our stay at the Serena and the clay-based roads became treacherous and difficult to navigate. On our way to the Serena we came across a vehicle stuck ingloriously in mud at a rakish angle to the main road surface. The male driver was standing forlornly surveying the

predicament while his blonde female partner sat primly in the front seat trying to look regal while under duress. It turned out it was a rental vehicle and the driver did not know how to engage the vehicle in four wheel drive. The drivers from our group managed to push the vehicle back onto the road and were not thanked for their efforts. There was an upside to the event....just to see the look on the face of the decorated blond when her ineffective partner was evicted from the drivers seat to be replaced by the 2 meter tall Albanus, who navigated the vehicle with great skill out of the muddy prison. There were worse sections of road further along and it was noted that our misinformed and thankless couple had a very late arrival at the Serena Lodge. They were more fortunate than some other travelers on the same road. If the travelers do not have radio contact and become stuck later in the afternoon, they spend a fairly cool night in their stranded vehicle surrounded by hungry predators and possibly nursing a bursting bladder.



Inside my Serena Lodge room (u). View out the front (l)

Our vehicle also got into some difficulties while shooting a female cheetah and her 5 cubs in the rain with Mary Ann and Ellen, with Felix at the helm. Soft mud on one side of the vehicle caused us to lurch over to a near 45 degree angle, with capsizing being a very distinct possibility. Inside it was like the interior of a submarine under a depth-charge attack....the radio was working overtime:

Felix was getting opposing instructions from some of the other drivers and Joe was yelling loudly with some safety advice. The first thing was to secure equipment so that heavy lenses or cameras were not whistling around the cab, then it was a case of getting in a body-protecting brace position. In the end, Felix acted on his own instincts and we emerged from the predicament safely..... although with adrenaline surging....another reason for wearing dark-colored underwear on safaris.

From our base at the Serena Lodge, we shot Crowned cranes, European Cranes, Hyena, lions on various kills, lions mating, Marabou storks, Kori Bustards on the ground and flying, Topi with young and several ground birds, such as the two species of long-claws, the yellow throated and rosy-breasted. One of the highlights of a drive was seeing an adult and juvenile Serval. These small spotted cats are usually nocturnal and not commonly seen. The adult was eating termites on a mound and then joined the juvenile in greeting rituals.



[Serval adult and offspring greet each other](#)

Another sighting that was full of tension and apprehension was seeing a lioness on the move with 2 small cubs in the direction of a small pride. The drivers assumed that the female, who had raised the cubs solo up to that point, was going to introduce them to the pride. The timing has to be right for this because harm can befall the morsel-sized cubs if the mood of the males is not good. The female sniffed the air for a while and aborted the mission seemingly waiting for another day for the introductions.

Although they are regarded as the 'baddies' on the game plains, vultures can provide some good photographic opportunities. The long sweeping descent of the common White-backed Vultures homing in on a kill enables some good

flight shots. Other species of vulture that gathered around kills were the visiting Egyptian Vultures and the comedian of the carrion-eaters, the Nubian Vulture.



[A Nubian Vulture strutting towards a kill](#)

While photographing out of the Serena Lodge we came on several groups of elephants escorting some very young calves. One juvenile was hilarious to watch. Baby was trying to get to suckle from its mother but Mom was seemingly trying to coach some techniques of foraging with the trunk. Junior seemed to get his trunk spiraled up like an uncontrollable rubber band. He would then act like he was becoming faint with a lack of nutrients until he received a parental knee in the backside.



[A lesson in the use of the trunk](#)

Junior giraffes were also trying to suckle. One we photographed still had the remnants of the umbilical cord appended and was trying its best for a drink. Mom appeared to be reluctant and most times he attached she walked off. The Masai giraffes on the Mara have distinctly different markings from the reticulated species that trim the trees in the Samburu reserve.

Our last location on the Mara at the Intrepids camp was also to be the longest we had been in one place on the trip. On the way to the camp we crossed the Mara River on one of the few

bridges in the park and observed hippos and fat Mara crocodiles resting on the river bank. This was the one of the main crossing points during the migration and it appeared that the half dozen crocs that lined the bank had eaten half of the river crossers. The accommodation tents at Intrepids were essentially the same design as the company's tents we stayed in at Samburu. Mary Ann stated that camping, albeit rather luxuriously, was the essence of being on safari. The camp was on the banks of the Talek River where hippos grunted and splashed in the muddy waters.



[Hippos splashing in the Talek River](#)

The various wildlife was excluded from the camp by an electric fence, the voracity of which was somewhat challenged when a baby vervet monkey was seen to chew the wires. Several Dikdiks were also cunning enough to live on the inside of the fence while potential predators patrolled the opposing side. Tents were never locked as they were accessed by camp staff and we were told to firmly zip the external flaps and place a mat over the base to prevent monkeys getting into the interior. That advice also seemed to be superfluous when several Black-faced vervet monkeys were seen to flick aside the mat, unzip two layers and emerge with booty all within 60 seconds. The evening sounds included the distant roar of lions, the occasional calls of hyenas and the closer wail of bush babies in nearby trees. The rains continued while we at the Intrepids and the river and some of its tributaries rose to the point that we were confined to a relatively small triangle of the upper Mara. This did not seem to matter too much as there was plenty to see and photograph in our area.

In the next 5 days we photographed a number of prides of lions fun-fighting and eating fresh kills, we witnessed the ambush of two Wildebeest making their way to cross the Talek River, we photographed Ground hornbills foraging for food and juggling snails in their oversized bills

and saw several more leopards protecting kills or avoiding lions.

Our vehicle was in a prime position while we were following a female cheetah stalking some Thomson's gazelles. She was just about to get serious with her chase when a baby gazelle, that she had not seen, broke cover just in front of her. The chase was on frenetic but short. The Thomson's tried valiantly to escape and survived one attempt when it recovered from an attempted leg-trip but it succumbed to the second tackle and was soon gripped fatally by the throat.

We also photographed a family of hyenas at their den, a cheetah looking for prey from the top of a termite mound and saw several mixed-species river crossings.



[A female Cheetah runs down a Thomson's gazelle](#)

The main Wildebeest crossings of the Talek and Mara River occurred one to two months earlier. The giant herd of grazers circulates in the greater Masai Mara, Serengeti and Ngorongoro

Crater interconnecting game reserves. They essentially act as a massive lawn mowing system that has to stay on the move to survive. At one point they drop their babies on the run and cross obstacles, like rivers, in a mindless procession. There were, however, a number of stragglers and sometimes in the evening you could see large lines of Wildebeest merging together to cross the river *en masse*.



A Topi leaps in to Talek River (u). Wildebeest cross (l)

One evening in the rain and gathering gloom, one group crossed the Talek River after having aborted several attempts in the hours before. Photography was difficult in the murky conditions and prime vantage points were in short supply. On another day, in good light conditions, we observed a mixed-species crossing. Wildebeest, zebra and Topi lined up downstream on the Talek River. Again, there were several false starts and different individuals went down to the waters edge to seemingly assess the situation. Further back in the line male zebras kicked and head-butted each other. All of a sudden one brave (or foolhardy) animal took the plunge and it was all systems go. The animals seemed to cross in groups with their own species; the Wildebeest seemed frenetic and guided by some hidden hypnotic force, the zebras were fairly controlled and found the best place to cross and shepherded their young. In contrast the Topis seemed to find anything that resembled a cliff and jumped off into the water with the maximum splash. There appeared to be no casualties but while driving along the banks of the swollen river or watching the seething waters rush

past the Lodge we saw at least a dozen dead animals drifting hurriedly downstream. While waiting for the animals to make up their minds to cross we photographed the colourful Little Bee-eaters that darted after insects along the edge of the river and rested on branches to consume their chitinous meals.



A Little Bee-eater with a bee

We observed and photographed the lion cubs at play most evenings. There were also two pairs of smaller cubs in the vicinity. The mothers of both pairs were very attentive and suckled them under bushes and never went far away from them. On one occasion, one of the females was frightened by the sight of approaching Masai warriors and crossed the swollen river to 'escape'. We sighted her and a companion female preparing to cross back to the cubs. Unlike domestic cats and tigers, lions do not like swimming and this distraught mother was expressing her displeasure. After reconnoitering a few launching places she protested once more and slid gracefully into the rough brown waters. She crossed effortlessly and was soon calling for her offspring on the right side of the river.



The Lioness prepares to swim across the Talek River

We witnessed several interactions between lions and warthogs. When the grazers move out of reach of the pride, warthogs possibly represent one of the best indigenous sources of

meat. On one occasion we arrived on a scene where three lionesses had just captured a female warthog while another one whisked a still-kicking piglet around in its mouth. The scene at the kill was chaotic and on two occasions one of the females tried to make a break with the carcass only to be hauled back by the pursuers. On another occasion, we heard several lionesses fighting and snarling over something. The something was a warthog piglet which, while alive, had been pulled apart like a Christmas cracker. One female cat ran off with the front half and the other departed more sedately with the back legs sticking from its mouth.



Lioness with the Warthog piglet hindquarters

We also waited with baited breath while another lioness very patiently stalked a warthog family. Every step was so slow and deliberate. The toes even probed the ground before the weight was transferred.....in the end it was to no avail because the cat was detected and an indignant warthog family trotted briskly away with their tails haughtily upright like warning flags on the back of a bicycle. On another drive we had noted a Black-maned male lion walking very deliberately in the direction of a female. A mating looked like a possibility but the male sailed past the female without even a look in her direction. It waded into some longer grass and picked up a large warthog carcass.



Lion carrying the Warthog carcass

The lion then proceeded to carry the carcass for 600-700 hundred meters to an isolated but tight circle of trees where the prized protein source could be easily defended from vultures, hyenas and other lions. It was an amazing show of strength even if there were several pauses along the way.

It still rained a lot at night and we had a few late starts because of poor light but as mentioned it had its upsides and was appreciated by some species. After one rain shower we noticed reasonably large-sized fish moving up rivulets of water some distance from the main river. These turned out to be Walking Catfish. None of the drivers had ever seen these fish on the move although they had seen large birds plucking them out of small ponds and wondered how they had got there. It appeared the river was exactly the right height for these salmon-sized fish to make their way out to breeding ponds or fish brothels. The rain had created a series of larger ponds that were connected by rivulets that fed into the main river. The catfish swam, wiggled and walked to a larger terminal pond where frenzied sexual encounters seemed to take place. Thereafter some of the fish made their way back towards the river. The 'walking' consisted of poking several of 4 ventral fins into the moist soil and wiggling the body like a snake to gain forward momentum. The front pair of fins appeared to have vestigial fingers contained within.



A Walking catfish moving across the wet surface

For the remainder of our drives on the Upper Mara, we photographed hippos splashing in the river, a family of Black-backed Jackals, an ostrich pair escorting a clutch of chicks, a Tawny eagle posing on a thorn-bush, more lion cubs playing and some moody landscapes.



Black-backed Jackal pair.

The female ostrich was very aggressive in shielding her brood and would approach any vehicle she deemed too close with wings spread like a flasher in a raincoat. Having photographed them in South East Asia I have a soft spot for hornbills. In Samburu some species seemed as common as Mynahs in Singapore. In the upper Mara we saw a male Black and White Casqued male hornbill feeding a female and then flying off to a nearby tree to refuel on berries. This species was quite different from what I have seen before, being thick-set but with a huge casque. There was even action higher up when a large flock of European storks came drifting overhead while riding the thermal currents. There were two to three hundred of these large birds and were angled in the currents like iron filings around a magnetic field.



How to wake up your sleeping sister

Not far from our lodge was a Masai Village. It was outside the domain of the Mara 'park' but they still illegally grazed their sheep, goats and cows within the confines of the reserve. I did not want to go too deeply into the politics of the administration of the Masai Mara but it appeared that there were two bodies that administered the wildlife gem but neither of them did it very well. There were plans afoot for one better controlled body to take over the whole park. In essence, the roads were not good and a high

percentage of the tourist dollars were siphoned off into the wrong pockets. Rules have to be applied and incursions into the park by anyone unauthorized must be stopped. I have admired the Masai from afar for a number of years. We have a well-photographed coffee-table book at home and have seen shots of their magnificent leaping dances and their lion-hunting rights-of-passage rituals. The Masai warriors we saw were certainly very photogenic with their finely carved features, their jewelry and the painted brown bodies. We briefly visited a village to pass a message onto someone who was to be given a ride to Nairobi. The mud and dung huts were surrounded by the thorn bush fence on which washing was strewn to dry. There was mud everywhere and it was hard to imagine how you could keep any standard of hygiene or basic cleanliness. Soon after my visit to Kenya I read the book 'The White Masai' by Corrine Hofman that details the infatuation of a young Swiss tourist with a Masai warrior and how she dumped her then current boyfriend and pursued her warrior, marrying him, running a business together, having a child and then leaving him to return to Switzerland. The object of her desires was in fact a Samburu (who split from the Masai several hundred years previously) who live a similar life to the Masai. It is hard to criticize from afar but it is difficult to imagine why anyone with Miss Hofman's background would subject herself to such alien conditions and one may well question her original motives for such a pursuit. However, the book gave a good account of life in a Masai (Samburu) village with their social structures and beliefs.



Male Black and White Casqued Hornbill

I had not taken a great deal of notice of our exit plans from the Mara but was overjoyed to hear we were flying to Nairobi in a small plane.....anything to avoid those moon craters. The drivers, however, had to get the vehicles and

our gear back to the capital and all five vehicles left in convoy early in the morning. The flight back was uneventful even if we were seemingly flying in a small drainage pipe with one engine. It took one and a half planes to get the party to Nairobi and while we waited for the others to arrive we watched a large party of schoolchildren from different schools about to embark on a tour of the airport. I have never seen such well behaved kids; they stood there wide-eyed and not one bit of surreptitious nudging could be detected.



[Our transport from the Upper Mara to Nairobi](#)

Some of our party was going on to Rwanda to photograph the Gorillas while others, including me, were heading out that evening on planes. We were assigned day rooms at the Serena Hotel and had our final meal together before weaving through the Friday night traffic to the airport.

A question that photographers will ask is what gear you need for such a safari. You need good and reliable gear but you also need back-up systems for gear failure. I had a battery charger, a card and my computer fail on me. You need therefore to have enough storage and viewing capability without bugging the heck out of someone else as there is little time to view and download. I had an Epson P4000 that was invaluable when the laptop went on the blink. Safely carrying your equipment and transporting your equipment in the field are two completely different things. Joe McDonald has designed a bag that is specifically designed for transport in the vehicles and for quick removal when game is sighted. These are custom made by John Stanford at JohnStanford@VertexPhoto.com. You need at least 2 camera bodies, one that is attached to a 500 or 600 mm lens in the Stanford bag and another that has a medium zoom lens fixed on it that waits in a read-to-shoot mode on one of the seats protected by a spare beanbag. You need plenty of cards and if the action is hot you need at least a 4Gig card in your camera. One or two wide angle

lenses can be kept in a spare camera bag for landscapes. When shooting landscapes you have plenty of time to change lenses. I had an EOS1D2 as my main action camera and an EOS5D usually attached to a 100-400mm zoom lens. This combination worked well. You need at least 4 medium sized beanbags for the roof of the vehicle and perhaps a spare. A molar beanbag is useful for lower angle shooting from the window ledge. The outer covering of beanbags weighs nothing and the beans are supplied by the drivers at the start and recovered at the end of the trip. As well as sun protection on the drive you need a waterproof jacket for you, your cameras and lenses, and a towel is handy.



[Female Cheetah with one of her five cubs \(u\)](#)
[Lioness bringing down a Wildebeest \(m\)](#)
[Mating Lions \(l\)](#)

I had waited to go on this trip for a number of decades. As a young boy I had enjoyed a film on the wildlife in the Serengeti and was hooked on the natural world. My favorite movie still remains 'Out of Africa', which detailed the life of a pampered but resolute European female in the early days of colonial Nairobi. The trip could be regarded as relatively expensive but it was extremely well managed and I am totally convinced that you get your 'bang for your bucks'. It is undoubtedly the best photographic experience I have had. The success of such trips comes from two things: local knowledge and good personal preparation. The McDonalds have been to these parks several times a year for the last 19 years. The guides are not only good drivers but have an extensive knowledge of the birds and animals. All photographers on the trip have similar gear and aspirations. The Kenyan suppliers, Origin Safaris are 'on-the-ball' and pay attention to detail. When on a drive the 5 vehicles are in radio contact and when one sights a potentially good shot sequence coming up, the others are alerted.

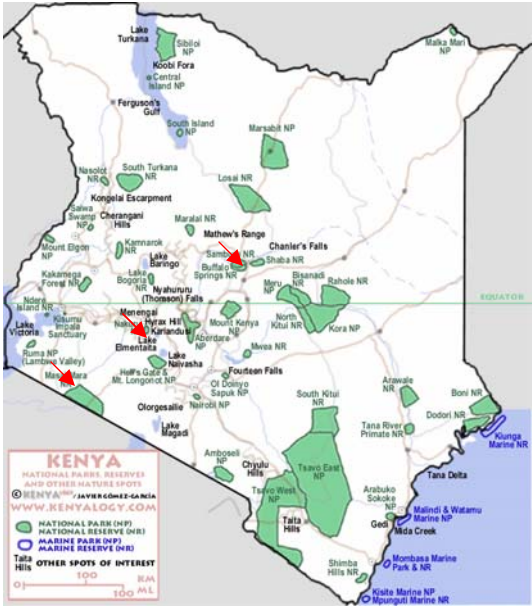
It is also very easy to see why people fall under a spell in respect to Africa and its wildlife. I have not mentioned some of the species we saw that managed to elude my lens; Klipspringer gazelles, White-bellied Go Away birds, Malachite Kingfishers, Bataleu eagles, Shikra, Open-billed storks, African Fish eagles, Nubian woodpeckers and many species of weaver birds. In the greater region there are over 1400 species of birds. We did not come close to scratching the surface of the local bird photography as the major action was often bigger and elsewhere. All considered, game parks in Kenya, in photographic terms, have to be 'The greatest show on earth' .



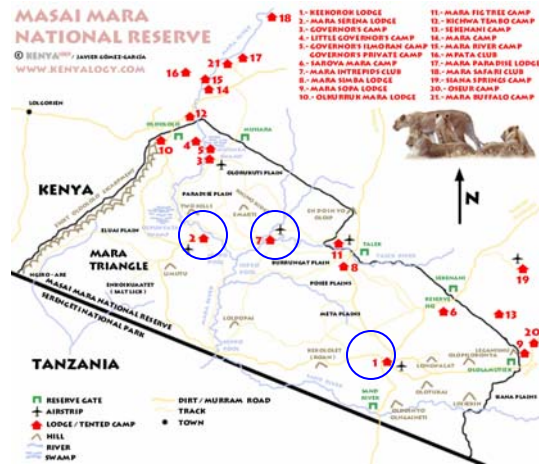
A young Masai giraffe.



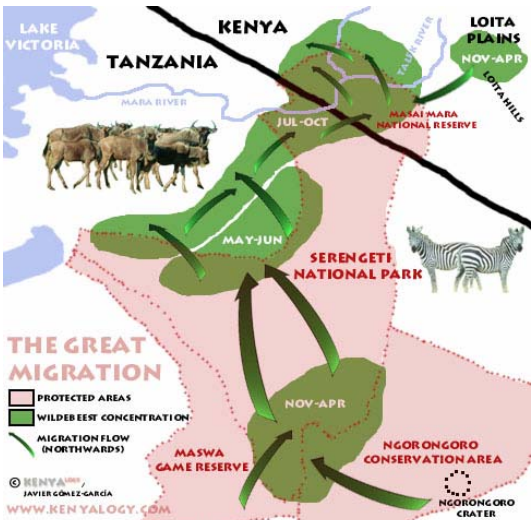
A male Grant's gazelle stamps a warning.
 Bat-eared fox kits outside their den.
 Moody clouds above the Masai Mara.



National Parks in Kenya. Arrows indicate where we stayed



The Masai Mara Reserve showing the three Locations of our camps.



The times and places of the Great Migration



The end of our balloon ride