

# On safari

Even the most jaded traveller would be hard pressed to hide one's amazement of the beauty of Africa, as **Judy Ecochard** discovers

Photographed by Jean-Louis Ecochard

SOME OF THE MOST MEMORABLE LANDSCAPES in East Africa beckon with unexpected delights—even for the most jaded wildlife purists. The unforgettable vistas of Kenya's golden savannah grasslands, lush forests and Tanzania's imposing Mt Kilimanjaro, magically captivate even "been-there, done-that" travellers of unscripted drama. So, ready for an adventure (and not wanting to be part of a crowd), my husband and I sign up for a custom 'remote' camping safari, with our own guide and vehicle. Never mind that I've never camped out in the open air in my life and am thoroughly bug-phobic. The only scary aspect about this trip is our booking agent's request for pre-payment-in cash.

Our fears ease up upon arrival at Kenya's Jomo Kenyatta International Airport, where we meet a welcoming Wild Trek representative (our Kenyan liaison, telephone 254 20 249-865) and are driven to the suburban Fairview Hotel (telephone 254 20 271-1321). The guarded perimeter (visible armed security is seemingly everywhere) encapsulates five acres of verdant landscaped grounds, spacious guest rooms, a sparkling pool and a new, well-equipped exercise facility, which is much needed after a long flight.

The next morning, with a Mt Kenyan coffee buzz and a satisfying buffet breakfast of exotic fresh fruits and grilled selections derived from English colonial gastronomy, we unite with a subcontracted safari outfit, Safari Seekers (telephone 254 20 652-315) for a jaunt to the famed elephant laden Amboseli National Park on the southern border.

Unfortunately, that's when we get a bit nervous. Even with the boxes full of the mostly fresh food (with accompanying cook to prepare it all) good to go, the reality is a subversively twisted version of those MasterCard ads: the busted shocks of our older-than-God safari van (bad), lack of vehicular satellite radio with a dedicated emergency frequency and the means by which the drivers share wildlife sightings (worse) and a guide lacking both binoculars and knowledge about Kenya's bird and animal species (priceless, *not!*).

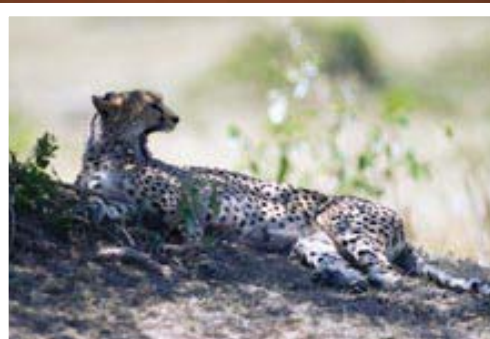
Yet, nothing could diminish our appreciation of the brilliant snow-capped

Mt Kilimanjaro and the jaw-dropping endless

night sky, dotted with gazillions of sparkling stars that greet our tent's "doorstep". In fact, the picturesque Masai-run camp site was a lot cozier than we expected (with cold water showers too!). Better yet was the peaceful setting, enlivened by twittering birdsongs, distant cowbells ringing and the occasional sounds of transient elephant and hyena calls.

And there is something to be said about sleeping *al fresco* that completely zonks one out, enabling us—two confirmed night owls—to easily get up at 6 A.M. for early morning game drives. Naturally, the sheer exhilaration of uncaged wildlife is enough to perk up anyone, well rested or not.

Under the panoramic sweep of puffy white clouds, Amboseli (derived from the Masai word *empusel* or 'salty dust') strikingly lives up to its meaning. It's actually a wide horizontal 392 km<sup>2</sup> dry 'lake' dotted with short-lived columns of brown dirt tornadoes, swirling up to the sky. Around its parameters, giraffes seemingly pose—mid-chew—for photos, herds of docile female elephants meander in straight lines, trailed by their calves while the assorted zebras, ostriches, Cape buffalos and Thompson gazelles stand side by side, nibbling the grass. Perhaps most mesmerizing is the sunrise frolic of an adorable, wild serval cat whose spotted fur matches that of the so-called *lipp* cat that ridiculously bedeck some fashionistas' backs. And in a macabre scene repeatedly witnessed throughout our journeys, the bloody remnants of an animal, (in this instance, a male ostrich), is voraciously torn apart by a competing group of bright red bloody faced scavengers—the leftover meal courtesy of a satiated lion. Our sunset finish, however, is less violent with an easy 1150 m hike up Noomotio Hill (formed prehistorically at the same time as Mt Kilimanjaro) that provides breathtaking 360-degree views of everything, including rivers full of enormously muddy hippos enjoying the still invitingly full blue swamp waters.





from left to right: Mara Sunset , resting Cheetah, Elephants towing the line, resting Buffalo, Masai welcoming dance, male Ostrich, mother and baby Rhinos, greeting Giraffes.



Similar to Tanzania's 8,300 km<sup>2</sup> Ngorongoro Conservation Area (a later destination), Amboseli Park is sparsely populated by the nomadic Masai tribes, who move to ungrazed savannahs for their cattle (they drink the blood), sheep and goat. A mid-day visit inside one village's protective circular twig fence, joined by carloads of ebullient French tourists, offers a glimpse of 21st century capitalism mixed in with the tribal traditions. It's a bit touristy: our \$20 fee paid directly to the chief—and, a *slow* walk through the market-place. Nevertheless, the entertaining Masai welcome and hunting dances (with guests invited to jump right in) is followed by a surprisingly efficient fire-making demonstration using two sticks rubbed together over elephant dung. Seemingly, every beaded, bejewelled villager introduces him- or herself in English, while our razor sharp teenage guide, one of the chief's sons, speaks fluent Swahili and English. Leading us over to a dirt hut, he gladly answers our queries about traditional facial scarrings, the cattle "dowry" a man gives the wife's family, and where their sandals come from—Firestone (as in the remnants of tyres from the well known company).

Leaving the quiet Amboseli, our senses shift into overdrive on the way to Namanga, the bustling border town. This lively enclave is teeming with safari-bound tourists, wheeler-dealers cutting through immigration lines high-fiving military guards, and the passport-less, Masai women, bodies bejewelled, nonchalantly walking back and forth across the border, bargaining for sales.

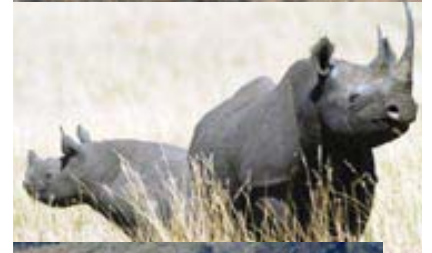
With passports stamped, we realize we hit the lottery jackpot with Roy's Safaris, our Tanzanian outfitter (telephone: 255 57 250-7940). The one-hour drive to its main office in Arusha goes by in a flash as Adam, our driver-guide for the next six days, regales us with background information about his country, including the cobbled together Tan (from Tanganyika), Zan (Zanzibar), Nia (country). Better yet, this college-educated native has a 512 Mbyte memory mind when it comes to African birds, plants and wildlife, happily stopping the open-roof Land Rover to spot two endangered gerenuks, standing on their hind legs, chomping on acacia trees or to sadly point out an illegal roadside sale of ostrich eggs.

Ironically, our trip briefing with one of Roy's gracious owners, Sange, includes an unexpected wardrobe change: he took one look at our dirty clothes and gives us clean T-shirts. Then we're off, outfitted with camping

## We zig-zag our way up 2,200 m to Ngorongoro's rim. Its crater's 265 km width qualifies as the eighth wonder of the world

gear, food, water and our cook, Soule, to the 2,600 km<sup>2</sup> Tarangire. While checking in at Park headquarters, Adam gets the scoop on a pair of mating lions, lounging about near a game drive track. Flying by kaleidoscopic wide open swaths of grazing animals intermixed with dense thickets of trees hiding curls of sleeping pythons and playful Vervet monkeys, we finally arrive by the napping duo. And the king and queen of the jungle drowsy in post-coital bliss ... simply mesmerizing.

The next day (and every day that follows), manages to astonish us with Africa's bounty. Against the large hulking baobab trees that dot Tarangire's sweeping landscape, we spot packs of scurrying mongooses and tiny dik-

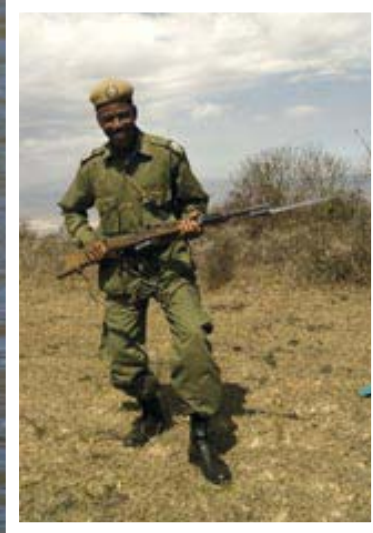
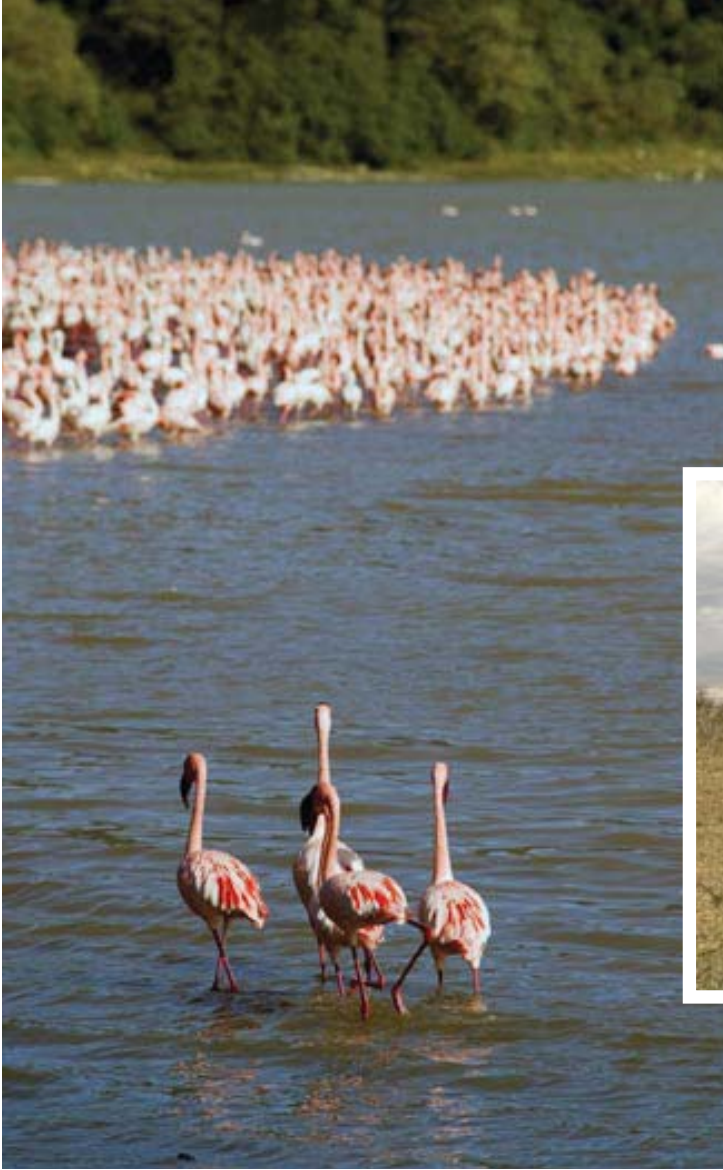


dik antelopes, colourfully feathered birds in all sizes and scores of éland antelopes, Grant gazelles, impalas and other migrating plains animals stopping for thirst-quenching drinks at the Tarangire River. By sunset, we would return to our remote camp site deep inside the park, where a portable tent with an overhead bucket of hot water and nozzle nearly washes away all of the dust. Delicious three-course dinners eaten under a large Terminalia tree remain memorable, even today, and Adam thoroughly entertains us with Tanzanian tidbits and Swahili lessons. And mercifully, there's not one biting bug buzzing around, not with the autumn dry season offering up comfortable temperatures and refreshing winds. We sleep under the incredible starry heavens, the silence broken with the occasional lion's roar—to awake to sunrise greetings of cracking tree limbs munched on by visiting elephants, giraffes and zebras.

Our next destination requires fresh provisions and thus a stop in Karatu, a town near the famed Lake Manyara, where the tall-tree-dwelling blue monkeys live in the cool green forests surrounding the waters. While waiting, we talk politics with a well-informed group of English-speaking teenagers, who still rave about President Clinton's African stopover. Adequately replenished, we finally zig-zag our way up 2,200 m through the volcanic Rift Valley escarpment to Ngorongoro's rim. Following a quick gear drop-off at the windy isolated camp site overlooking the caldera, we actually click on seatbelts for the extremely bumpy dusty descent to the crater's floor.

And honestly, nothing prepares us for the scope of this unique ecosystem. Its 265 km width qualifies as the eighth wonder of the world. We are positively giddy when a hunting female cheetah slowly crosses our path, poshly ignoring a duo of stately black mane lions. It was also our first glimpse of the heavily poached black rhinoceros, now serenely eating by a watery oasis. Our game drive includes a bloody reminder of the cycle of life and death. In a slow death dance—a large Secretary bird, (the largest raptor bird in the world who hunts prey while walking, then *tap-tap-tap*—as on a keyboard with its long clawed limbs, mostly to kill snakes or insects) performs death's curtain call for a baby rabbit, in the most astonishing of ways. The Secretary bird "taps" repeatedly and then surprisingly rips apart the baby rabbit before gulping down half the carcass in its beak, less the furry tail stubbornly sticking to the side of its mouth. This was definitely not a runway look.

That night, our foursome increases to five with the addition of an armed Park Ranger, Siegfried, who packs a G3 automatic rifle, and a celebrated



history of shooting a poacher in the line of duty. (Apparently, shoot to kill applies in Kenya as well.) Even so, I had to rethink my midnight need to “mark my territory” as I see the hulking silhouette of a hyena with its head down cross a few metres in front of the tent’s entrance. Later, at dawn, Siegfried informs me that it was in fact a lion strolling along, that hyenas don’t lower their head—and I vow to severely limit all nocturnal liquid consumption.

Siegfried’s a great tour guide, leading us on a sunny afternoon walk through golden and intentionally charred steppe lands and on the next day’s hike to the Empakai Crater’s alkaline lake (for the glorious pink flamingos). And always, Soule and Adam manage to assemble and pack up the camping gear, with meals served in a timely fashion, reflecting their professionalism and possibly Germany’s colonial punctuality.

Certainly our experience at the lovely native-owned (Mt) Meru View Lodge is a slice of life from the occupied past. After a game drive in Arusha National Park’s fragrant green forest past the fresh water Momella Lake (with its rare birds and endangered black and white Colobus monkeys), we’re ravenous for hot showers and food. At the dinner meal the waitress sweetly asks, “Want a beer?” practically every five minutes. At first, we are amusingly puzzled but a glance at the only other occupied table says it all. It’s covered with empty litre-glass bottles of the local beer. Even with other rounds being poured, again and again, the German revellers aren’t remotely drunk!

Bright and early the next day, (caffeine drinks being our beverage of choice), Adam drops us off at Mt Kilimanjaro Airport where our Precision Air (telephone 255 27 250-6903) flight to Nairobi imprecisely leaves ten minutes early. Back in Kenya, we’re met by another Wild Trek guide and driver and pass a few hours between connections in the wealthy suburb of Karen. Most famous for its interesting Karen Blixen Museum (the former house of *Out of Africa*’s Danish baroness whose Hollywood-ized life’s story was filmed here; telephone 254 2 882-779), we got a kick out of feeding the soon-to-be relocated and released, rare Rothschild giraffes at the breeding Giraffe Centre (telephone: 254 2 890-952) where the spotted

animals’ slimy grey tongues oozing buckets of long saliva strands totally grosses us out, but in a good way.

Moving on to the small Wilson Airport, our SafariLink’s Cessna Caravan one-prop plane (telephone 254 20 600-777), is delayed by 45 minutes. However the actual take-off is speedy minus the usual airline formalities. Instead, our pilot loads the luggage, cheerily requests we buckle our seat belts and passes around refreshments from a plastic container labelled ‘Sweets’.

Flying south over complex sweeps of volcanic hills and dry lands dotted with Masai dwellings, our plane initially touches down in Sauna Springs. Four passengers disembark: two to gather luggage and leave, two to throw up and worryingly hop back on. The flight’s next leg takes us to the northern Mara, an 865 km<sup>2</sup> national park, famous for its ages-old circular mass migration of millions of wildebeests and zebras (followed by the predators who love them) across the rich grasslands and crocodile-infested Mara River that flows into Tanzania’s Serengeti. Thankfully Francis, our new Safari Seekers’ guide, thoroughly knows the Mara (and its inhabitants) and his new vehicle is radio-equipped and well padded. (Roy’s Safari’s Sange kindly pleaded our case with Wild Trek, explaining, ‘These are not the kind of people happy with “Oh, there’s a lion.”’)

Upon landing, we immediately leave the airstrip (and a metal shack structure brightly painted ‘Duty Free’) for a game drive, and experience the rude intrusion of tourist hordes we’ve been trying to avoid all along. Maybe it’s because this section of the wide-open park contains so many lodges and camp sites, but the number of safari vehicles is startling. In fact, when we come across a visibly pregnant lion strolling across the grasslands, there’s a mini-van pileup, with cars illegally driving off-track, all angling for the best view. Ugh!

Another shocker was the amount of garbage littering the permanent Masai towns outside the Mara’s guarded gates. These no longer nomadic inhabitants are now working in tourists’ facilities, tire repair shops or if young enough, attending mandatory schools. The scourge of modern times—abandoned plastic water bottles—line the bumpy roads all the way to the Safari Seekers’ group site, which in and of itself was a bit of a let-down compared to secluded camp grounds we have previously visited. The semi-permanent tents, annoyingly close together, are mostly unoccupied. Fortunately other guests include two easy-going Australians, two Israeli friends and a Swiss couple who liven up evening group meals.

At the crack of dawn, we’re up—even without the morning coffee so



FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: Pink flamingos at Empakaj Centre, Siegfried. Resting Lions, migrating pack of Wildebeest. Sipping zebras. The park with a view of Mt Kilimanjaro. Vervet monkey family. Shy tree-dwelling hydrax. Marabou stork. Mara sunset.



necessary to our Starbucked bodies. Thankfully, Francis escapes the crowds, taking back-tracks where the Mara's golden sunlight warms us. Within minutes he swiftly drives over the hills trailing a hyena chasing a frantic calf amongst the dusty stampede caused by other equally panicked wildebeests. Then in a brutal scene right out of Kipling's *The Jungle Book*, the tired hunted now turns to confront the hunter, but to no avail. With the hyena disabling it with two bone-breaking bites to its back legs, all was lost for the wildebeest calf. The ravenous hyena starts gnawing away at the hind-quarters and torso, its face saturated with fresh red blood—while the calf is still cruelly alive, its mouth gapping, eyes glazed with shock, and front legs kicking. Finally, after what seemed like eternity (but was probably 40 minutes), the engorged hyena victoriously trots away, a meaty leg bone in its mouth—and the menacing vultures swarm in for bloody entrails. Francis softly sums it up: 'This is Nature. This is the way it is.'

As with our prior outings, the next five days provide haunting glimpses of wildlife, pitiless or otherwise. A family of three black rhinos cautiously ambles by our vehicle while in the background, the impressively horned topi antelopes stand sentry, scanning the horizon. In the Mara River, African crocodile and hippos sleep dangerously close, to each while tributary banks of foliage hide groups of resting lions, hyenas and waterbucks. And every day we see literally thousands upon thousands of zebras, wildebeests and the non-migrating hartebeests under the now overcast skies, itself a harbinger of future rains.

Our last morning in the Mara is filled with regrets. Sure, by now we're craving a cozy meal at our favourite NYC bistro, AOC Bedford (1 212-414-4764) or potent Sushi Samba caprianhas (1 212 691-7885), but there is something about being on an African safari that seduces even hard-core urbanites. Magically, a pair of usually fleeing reedbucks wait patiently on the side of the road as we snap away, followed by a lone female lion seemingly waving goodbye. And, as if out of nowhere, Francis sharply turns the vehicle around, heading off on a half-hour high-speed 'chase' that can only mean one thing: a radio crackle about an elusive leopard, the last of the "big five" that we haven't seen.

As we pull up to a small gorge in the landscape, it feels like the beginning of World War III. There are over a dozen open-roof safari vehicles packed with tourists from many different countries, all desperately shouting at this one lucky car to 'get out of the way' because it's their turn to get a glimpse of the prized cat. Sensing the impending chaos, Francis manoeuvres our vehicle along the banks of the gorge to get away from this hard metal clump of "animals". And as luck would have it, the male leopard slinks by and crosses directly in front of us, its green eyes flashing annoyance at this incredibly rude interruption.

By late afternoon, we are experiencing Nairobi's gas-fumed rush hour. Wild Trek takes us from Wilson Airport to the business-like Jacaranda Hotel (254 20 444-8713) instead of the tranquil Fairview, which is now 'overbooked'. A successful hunt for clean clothes allows us to treat ourselves to a delicious multi-course feast. But we barely sleep until the hotel's disco music blaring away under our windows is turned down-three complaint calls later. Perhaps this is a different "call of the wild"? Yet, this reintroduction to the modern civilization cannot take away our safari "glow". We're already planning a return adventure. •

### Sun sense

Equatorial locations mandate frequent applications of a broad-spectrum sunblock. I used the fail-proof La Roche Posay Anthelios crème SPF 60+ and Dr Hauschka's Sunscreen Stick SPF30 for exposed skin and lips and Lenore Greyl's styling crème Eclat Naturel for my sun-stressed locks. Soap-free Nickel Super Clean body scrub thoroughly cleansed in limited water supplies while absorbable Re Vive Vitamin C booster and Odile Lecoïn's OR Je Rêve fabulously healed my overexposed skin enough to get me carded back home for the first time in a decade!

### Additionally

To partially avoid the karmic fate of a safari fashion version of the movie *Groundhog Day*, I spiced up my ubiquitous (but limited) beige wardrobe with a plush functional Loro Piana cashmere wrap for cool evenings. Milly's vibrantly printed swimsuit did double-duty in the hotel pools and as foundation for my one presentable (and packable) outfit: a Ports 1961 lightweight silk skirt, topped off with an always crisp, Brooks Brothers no-iron tailored dress shirt.

### Info

- [www.wildtreksafaris.com](http://www.wildtreksafaris.com)
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