

## The Call of Africa

A rattling land cruiser offers a front-row seat to the world's mightiest natural travel wonder — The Great Migration

*by Kerry Banks*

The radio squawks and Mustafa grabs the hand mike and begins jabbering in Swahili. The rapid-fire exchange, punctuated by repeated “Rajahs,” the Africanized version of “Roger,” causes his face to break into a grin. “He says that if I follow him, I have to pay for the beers tonight,” chuckles Mustafa in his deep baritone. Our long-limbed Kenyan guide, who wears an olive baseball cap, black sunglasses and a belt buckle with a photo of Bob Marley smoking a monstrous spliff, hits the gas and we rattle forward over the rolling contours of the Masai Mara Game Reserve.

The radio palaver is promising. It means the other guide has found some compelling game – cats most likely. The quest to see Africa’s feline predators tops the must-see list for most people on safari, and our group of seven now banging across the grassland is no different. We soon spot the other land cruiser and the focus of interest – four cheetahs moving across the veldt. Mustafa manoeuvres the jeep to a point that intersects their path, and stops. Ignoring our presence, the cats glide silently through the russet-coloured grass, eyes scanning the horizon. Their sleek bodies pass within metres, so close we can see the “tear stripe” running from eye to cheek and the muscles rippling beneath their spotted coats. Shutters click. “Amazing!” someone whispers. We all nod and grin.

It is day six of our 13-day safari through Kenya and Tanzania, and the landscape has changed dramatically since we entered the Masai Mara. This is the Africa of the popular imagination: open plains dotted with flat-topped acacia trees, whistling thorn shrubs and termite mounds, all set beneath a vast blue canopy of frothy clouds. Named for its traditional inhabitants, the Maasai, and the Mara River that divides it, the reserve is famed for its superb variety of game. Our arrival has been timed to coincide with its Great Migration, one of the most incredible wonders of the natural world: a travelling circus of 1.5 million wildebeest, 500,000 gazelles, 300,000 zebras, 65,000 impalas and other species that pour into the park each July and August from the Serengeti in search of fresh grazing lands. My travelling companions include three Edmontonians: Don, a retired salesman, and his wife, Brenda, a university professor; her sister, Shelley, a receptionist; Ray and Marcy, who own a Calgary real estate company; and Anne, a 78-year-old halter-top-wearing grandmother from Oakville, Ontario, who, despite a vicious cough, plans to conclude this expedition by climbing Mount Kilimanjaro.

Personally, I’m having a hard time convincing myself that this is really happening. Since I was a child, Africa has been my dream destination, a yearning sparked by Tarzan movies and books on big-game hunters. The cascade of images flooding my brain during the past few days has induced a strange sort of delirium. I half expect Robert Redford and Meryl Streep to make an appearance. Today, I am getting the full hallucinatory dose. Everywhere I look there are buffalo and wildebeest – thousands scattered across the landscape, an endless series of brown smudges receding into the shimmering horizon.

The Mara herds are an awesome spectacle, but the entire week has been packed with visual treats, starting with a mountain lodge beneath craggy Mount Kenya, its rooms overlooking a large watering hole and salt lick that attract a mind-boggling parade of animals. The grounds are illuminated so guests can watch the action all night – a welcome option given one’s sleep is broken repeatedly by a surreal orchestra of trumpeting elephants, hooting hyenas and snorting bush pigs. At Samburu Nature Reserve, where our lodge bordered the coffee-coloured, crocodile-infested Uaso Nyiro River, we parked beside a huge lion lazily cleaning its paws, watched reticulated giraffes stretching their five-metre necks to graze on the treetops and snapped photos of the beisa oryx, an antelope with horns that curve backwards like scimitars. We whiled away a sun-drenched morning at a Samburu village, where schoolchildren dressed in crisp white shirts recited the alphabet for us in sing-song rhyme, and spent another gaping at the sight of a million flamingos ringing the shores of Lake Nakuru.

Even the travel between destinations has been rewarding, a series of small windows into the lives of ordinary Kenyans. Leaving the purple jacaranda trees and whirling black kites of Nairobi, we drove northward into a haze of dust and heat down a highway jammed with exhaust-spewing minibuses – emblazoned with names like “Uprising” and “The House of Pain” – that ferry 12 million commuters to work each day. We rolled through the country of the Kikuyu, the largest of Kenya’s 42 tribes, past groves of eucalyptus and red-hot poker trees, sugarcane fields, coffee plantations, boys tending herds of goats, and villagers in their Sunday finery heading to church. During the colonial era, this region was known as “the White Highlands” because only Europeans were allowed to lease its lands. The eviction of the Kikuyu from their tribal territory led to resentment, armed rebellion and, eventually, independence for Kenya in 1963.

From the highlands we angled northwest across the equator past red-clay shanty towns with oddly named establishments such as the Gender-Equality Bar and Hot-Pot Hotel, and through the bustling market town of Isiolo, where six months earlier Mustafa saw a man being stung to death by killer bees. Every few hours, we made “a convenience stop.” By design, the public toilets are always located at the back of curio emporiums, which means running a gauntlet of sales clerks. Better deals are often found outside. Near Nanyuki, one of the potato farmers sitting on a shop porch wanted to swap his leather bush hat for my Salvador Dalí cap. I refused to trade, but the interaction led to a conversation about Canada, during which Don terrified the gaggle of Kenyans now gathered around us with tales about sub-zero Albertan winters, causing one wide-eyed man to state: “This is very dangerous weather. What happens to the children?” At each roadside attraction, the natives swarmed our jeep, thrusting jewellery and carvings through the windows. It was always a full-bore hard sell, and if we failed to bite they would ask for something: a pin, a pen, a coin. One youth asked me – the only smoker in the group – for a cigarette, pantomiming the puffing and exhaling. “Cancer. Cancer. Share the cancer,” he urged, smiling broadly.

By the time we reach the heart of Masai Mara, we have already seen all of Africa’s “Big Five”: elephant, rhino, buffalo, lion and leopard, so named because they are considered the most dangerous animals to hunt. But for today’s safari-goers, the reverse is true. The more dangerous the beast, the easier it is to approach. Unlike the skittish impala, dik-dik and warthog, none of the Big Five appear bothered by our Land Rover and its load of gawking tourists. The animals’ indifference to scrutiny is just one of the safari’s surprising aspects. I had imagined, for example, that we would face hordes of humungous bugs, but the trip has been virtually insect-free. The mosquitoes are tiny by Canadian

standards and far fewer in number. And I have yet to see a single spider, perhaps because of the geckoes lurking on every wall. Even the flies are slow-witted amateurs in comparison with Canada's voracious backwoods varieties.

Another of my assumptions – that herd animals live in a state of mortal terror, perpetually on the alert for predators – is far from accurate. At Nakuru, we watched two zebras chase a leopard up a tree. Similarly, here we learn that an ostrich can run faster than a greyhound and has a kick that can kill a lion. In fact, the cheetahs may have the toughest time of it – hunting only in daylight, they rarely finish a kill. As soon as they tuck in, the vultures show up, who in turn alert the hyenas, who drive the cats off.

Still, there is carnage. The migration involves river crossings, otherwise known as the crocodiles' buffet. Wildebeest, not known for their intelligence, sometimes try to cross at suicidal places, plunging over cliffs and drowning by the hundreds beneath walls of mud. On one stretch of the Mara River, we see dozens of their carcasses strewn on the rocks, surrounded by stuffed crocodiles. The stench of death is overpowering.

Overall, however, the lives of Africa's animals seem easier than those of its human residents. While driving between reserves we pass a procession of men on bicycles carrying huge stacks of firewood and charcoal. The villagers travel 20 kilometres to market to sell their wares for a couple of dollars, knowing that if they don't find a buyer they'll have to return home with the same load. The average wage in Kenya and Tanzania is about \$2 a day. There is high unemployment and – as in most of Africa – a high incidence of disease, including AIDS, which afflicts as much as 10 per cent of the population in both of these countries' urban centres.

We gain a keener sense of the harsh existence here when we tour a Maasai village. Easily recognizable by their scarlet robes, spears and mutilated ears, the cattle-herding Maasai are one of only two Kenyan tribes still clinging to a traditional lifestyle. Many were evicted from their lands when the Masai Mara was created in 1974, and the tribe is still prevented from using the reserve for grazing, water or firewood. Though the Maasai receive a small share of revenues from tourist gate-entry fees, very little money trickles down to individual members. Instead they earn cash by charging tourists to enter their villages and take their pictures.

Kipas Manie, the 55-year-old chief of the village we visit, tells us that 165 people live in this boma, a collection of huts built from sticks and cow-dung cement arranged inside a circular wall of thorn bushes. The tribe is self-sufficient, living on the meat and milk of its herds. (Periodically they bleed the cows, draining off their blood with a hollow stick that punctures the jugular vein, and drink it mixed with milk.) They grow no crops and eat few vegetables. Electricity and running water do not exist – streams or shallow wells provide drinking water. The interior of each hut is dark, smoky and bereft of comforts. There is no furniture; the beds are hides laid out on the floor; the kitchen is a tiny fire pit. No one uses mechanical transportation. "When I go to visit my relatives in Tanzania," says the chief, "it is a nine-day walk."

Hopeful of witnessing a river crossing, we spend our last afternoon on the Mara shadowing the wildebeest as they march single file across the grassland. Called "the clowns of the savannah" because they appear to have been assembled from spare parts – the head of a buffalo, the mane of a horse, the legs of an antelope – these awkward, top-heavy creatures are prone to unpredictable behaviour, springing like jack-in-the-

boxes or suddenly sprinting off for no apparent reason. Suppressing our laughter, we wait among the grunting, white-bearded clowns as shafts of sunlight pierce the clouds like dozens of golden Maasai spears. The scene looks ripe for drama, but the wildebeest never cross. Driving back to our lodge, we stop near the gates to watch the sunset. Dusks are often spectacular in East Africa, and this one is truly breathtaking: a boiling orange ball sinking through a violet curtain of distant rain. We snap photos and shake our heads. "That," says Don, "was the Armageddon of sunsets."

We enter Tanzania's Serengeti National Park with a new driver, Charles, of Leopard Tours. A member of the Chagga tribe, one of more than 120 ethnic groups in the country, he has a soft, high-pitched voice, a relaxed demeanour and an intimate knowledge of the land and its flora and fauna. The park, he tells us, encompasses 14,763 square kilometres and is home to more than two million large mammals. The Serengeti's name comes from a Maasai word meaning "endless plains," an apt moniker for this table-flat terrain, broken only by solitary acacias that sprout from the horizon like spindly parasols, and massive piles of boulders called kopjes. The grass has been eaten to the nub by the herds on their northerly passage. Driving over the barren expanse, past bleached bones and skulls, we worry there will be no wildlife to see.

Within 10 minutes we come upon a lioness standing guard over a recently killed zebra, its belly ripped open. "They eat the softest parts first: the intestines, the pancreas and the liver," explains Charles, adding that lions can pack away 35 kilograms of meat in a single sitting, and that the female typically does the hunting, though the males eat first and consume the largest share. An hour later, while crossing the Seronera River, we see crocodiles tearing chunks out of a dead baby hippo – "a rare sight," says Charles. "Mother hippos usually keep careful watch over the young." The crocs roll and thrash, the glistening, grey carcass bobbing in their wake. Motoring south, we then witness another rare sight: the mating dance of a male ostrich, which involves extending his wings and rolling them rhythmically, a motion he maintains as he climbs atop the female.

The road winds past grazing topis, a mahogany-skinned antelope with blue patches on its flanks and lyre-shaped horns; high-stepping secretary birds, so-named because the crest of long black feathers at the back of its head was thought to resemble the quill pens that 19th-century bank clerks stuck in their wigs; and a leopard perched high in a sausage tree. Nearing our lodge, many of the trees sport tsetse-fly traps – swathes of black and blue cloth laced with insecticides. The blood-sucking flies, which are attracted to these two colours (and which happen to comprise 90 per cent of my wardrobe), carry a parasite that causes deadly diseases in humans and domestic livestock. But its impact is not all negative. The presence of the tsetse has deterred large-scale ranching in much of East Africa – thus preserving the habitat for native game animals. If not for the tsetse, many of the area's national parks would simply not exist.

This is beneficial not only for the environment and species diversity, but also for the Tanzanian and Kenyan economies. The national parks are the pillar of Kenya's tourism industry, for example, attracting more than a million international visitors annually to their wildlife safaris and nature-based activities. Tanzania, a country twice the size of California, has even greater tourism potential than Kenya, with a quarter of its land devoted to conservation areas, though the industry here is less developed. Despite being 10 times the expanse of the Masai Mara, the Serengeti receives only 90,000 visitors a year, compared to the 300,000 that flock to the Mara. For Charles, however,

there are enough to keep him on the road 150 days a year, in a job that represents his life's ambition.

The next day we head to Olduvai Gorge, one of the world's most important archaeological sites. Here, in 1960, Louis and Mary Leakey found fossilized remains of the earliest human beings. The rugged, parched terrain, unchanged for millennia, certainly looks primordial enough to be the cradle of mankind. After touring the site's small but informative museum and gazing at a cast of hominid footprints dating back 3.5 million years, we travel 130 km along a dirt track through desolate scrubland to Ngorongoro Crater, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Ngorongoro was once a huge volcano, which collapsed inward millions of years ago, leaving a 610-metre-deep, 18-km-wide chasm. Today it is considered Africa's Garden of Eden, its grassy plains, shallow brackish lakes, swamps and forest providing a haven for 30,000 animals. The reserve is stunningly beautiful and the landscape dreamlike: Driving through, herds of zebra, buffalo and wildebeest part before us like waves breaking off the prow of a boat. Time loses its tyranny as we sit inside the green-walled amphitheatre, watching one of the planet's last surviving black rhinos amble across the plain. "You should come in June," says Charles. "The crater floor is covered in yellow flowers."

A scary climb up a narrow, twisting road takes us to the mist-wreathed crater rim and our hotel, where a Maasai dance troupe is entertaining. When this area was first incorporated into Serengeti National Park in 1951, about 12,000 Maasai lived in the crater. A deal was struck that turned Ngorongoro into a conservation area rather than a national park, allowing the tribe to continue watering its livestock on the crater floor in exchange for moving out and receiving a cut of the profits from tourism. Today, with their population growing and water and grazing lands limited in the surrounding area, the Maasai are claiming rights over the crater and demanding a larger slice of the action.

Our last two stops – Lake Manyara and Tarangire – are smaller reserves, often missed by tourists on the stampede to Ngorongoro and the Serengeti, but both have their charms. Lake Manyara is encircled by a forest that stays green through the dry season thanks to springs seeping from the walls of the Great Rift Valley. Lined with yellow-barked fever trees, the forest exudes the flowery fragrance of wild tobacco. The park is home to numerous elephants, and it is here that we have our closest animal encounter. A large bull begins striding toward our jeep, prompting Charles to hiss at two of the women. "Be quiet, or he will charge!" They stop talking, but the five-tonne colossus keeps coming. When he reaches the cruiser, he pauses and looks in, then continues plodding past. No one breathes. The crunching sound of his feet fills our ears. After the bull leaves, Anne asks, "What could he do to us?"

"He could turn the car upside down," says Charles.

That evening, Marcy shows us a photo she took of the elephant as he passed her window. The entire frame is filled with a huge eyeball, surrounded by crinkled brown skin. "And that wasn't on zoom," she says.

Our final stop, Tarangire National Park, contains nine different vegetation zones, each supporting distinct wildlife species, including tree-climbing lions, pythons and vervet monkeys. But it is the park's otherworldly landscape that leaves the most lasting impression, in particular its enchanted forest of thick-trunked baobab trees, some thousands of years old. The species' Medusa head of gnarled branches resembles

roots, an oddity explained by African folklore. When the gods gave every animal a tree, the hyena, having arrived late, received the baobab. He was so disgusted, he spitefully planted it upside down.

I spend my last night on safari here, drinking Tusker beer, listening to the “jug-o-rum” croaking of bullfrogs and watching shooting stars lance across the sky. Few childhood fantasies live up to their promise when we finally experience them as adults. Africa has proved the rare exception. Though it is not just the animals I’ve found transfixing, but the entire setting. There is something deeply primal about being out on the African savannah. It is exotic, yet hauntingly familiar, as if forgotten threads of the Dark Continent exist in all of us.

For this guided African safari, the author travelled from Vancouver, B.C., to Nairobi, Kenya, via Amsterdam, Holland. Base Trek Holidays tours start at \$815, excluding airfare and other expenses. For more details, contact CAA Saskatchewan. 1-800-564-6222; [www.caask.ca](http://www.caask.ca)

### **Shoot to Save?**

Banned in Kenya in 1997, sport hunting is still offered in 23 African countries — including Tanzania. There, the thriving business sees more than 130 hunting concessions, covering 200,000 square kilometres, leased to outfitters licensed to conduct tourist hunting.

The idea repels animal advocates, but a growing number of people believe that Kenya should follow Tanzania’s example and allow hunting. A million tourists a year currently spend more than \$580 million to see and photograph lions, elephants, gazelle and other wildlife on Kenya’s savannahs, but the revenue still isn’t enough to protect animal populations that have declined by 50 per cent in the last 30 years, largely due to poaching and destruction of habitat for agriculture. Only eight per cent of land in Kenya is set aside for wildlife. The rest is privately or communally owned, and studies show that most of the country’s wild animals live on such lands. Proponents claim that sport hunting would preserve wildlife populations by encouraging improved species management and earning big money that could be ploughed back into conservation.  
—K.B.