

GOING PLACES #2

JOHN COONEY



WE'RE GOING ON A LION HUNT!

PHOTO: PETER TYLER



It is 5:45am when the wake-up call comes. "It's on your side," I mumble. And as my sleepy wife scrambles in the darkness to grab the phone, she nearly strangles herself in the mosquito net that shrouds our bed. We lie there for a few minutes longer, struggling to get our bearings. Then, suddenly, it registers: we're in the Masai Mara, the most densely populated wildlife reserve in Africa. And we're about to head off for an early morning game-drive ...

Our long-dreamed-of safari, begun just a few days earlier, was already proving “better than advertised”. Arriving in Kenya, we’d packed bags and bodies into Land Rovers and bounced westward – across the equator, across the Great Rift Valley, and along some of the roughest, pot-holiest, bone-jarringest roads in the world.

On the way, we’d seen what we’d flown halfway around the world to see: animals-animals-animals ... up-close, in their natural environment, and often in full flight!

We’d gone eyeball-to-eyeball with a tribe of noisy elephants, wallowing and bellowing at a muddy waterhole. We’d got down-and-dirty with a zillion fuchsia-pink flamingos, feeding in the shallows of an alkaline lake. We’d parked within spitting distance of several gigantic, prehistoric, armour-plated rhinos – talk about luck!

But the best was yet ahead. According to Frank, our fun-loving Kenyan safari guide, Africa’s Great Cats lay waiting for us further west, on the vast savannas that stretched beyond the horizon ...

It’s hard to explain how totally unlike a zoo these game-parks are. What you can’t see in a photo or on a TV screen is the foreverness of those landscapes, the endless yellow grasslands, the countless thorny acacia trees, the baked/cracked dust-pans that you need an hour just to drive across, the clumps of vivid green that signpost a stream or waterhole or swamp.

And what you can’t smell, feel, taste or hear are the rich scents that flood the air, the dry wind that buffets your face, the dust that invades your mouth and nose, and the birdcalls-grunts-rumbles-shrieks-grows that suddenly break the silence.

The animals own this land. It supports

them in a complex cycle of sunshine and rain, life and death. And here we were, surrounded by all this vastness – sometimes holding our breath, sometimes speechless, frequently awestruck, constantly amazed at what we’d just witnessed.

I kid you not: there were moments that felt almost sacred ...

Masai Mara Regional Park – along with its famous neighbour, the Serengeti (over the border in Tanzania) – is centre-stage for the most dramatic wildlife show on earth: the legendary migration, from July to November each year, of untold herds of wildebeest and zebras.

These herds are, of course, closely followed by hungry predators – lions, leopards, hyenas and jackals. And the lodge where we’d just spent the night was smack in the middle of all this drama.



Even ignoring the swarming masses of wildebeest and zebras (and, trust me, they’re impossible to ignore), these grassy plains are littered with buffalos and hyenas, antelopes and gazelles, topi and impala, plus wandering families of elephants and giraffes. And its rivers (we’d seen one the previous evening) are full of crocodiles and hippos.



PHOTO: NOEL MAGNUSSON

However, what kept our cameras clicking more than anything else were the carnivores that lurked behind every bush and hillock. You'll have trouble believing this, but during our early-morning game-drive we watched, spellbound, as

- a beautiful full-grown leopard slid gracefully down the large tree up which he'd been snoozing, and (with a warning snarl) loped off into the undergrowth
- four cute young cheetahs romped playfully around our vehicles while their mum, quite unconcerned, checked the landscape for their next hot meal
- several magnificent lions (first, females with cubs and, later, a bachelor party of adolescent males) brought down a number of unlucky wildebeests.

All of this (like I say) close-up, for real, and right there in front of us!

We're going on a lion hunt
We're going to catch a big one.
What a beautiful day.

We're not scared ...

I'd often sung this silly song with the little guys in my family, but I'd never been on a real lion-hunt before. I'd never seen how lions-on-the-prowl can creep, superbly camouflaged, through long grass. I'd never seen a herd of wildebeest run panic-stricken in every direction when the lions begin their charge. I'd never watched these natural predators single out their prey, sprint alongside, leap on its back, lock their jaws around its throat, and bring it crashing to the ground.

And I'd never known how quickly the silence returns, the dust settles, the panicked herd stop bellowing and start grazing again, and the victorious lions begin to feed.



We lost track of time that morning, hanging out the open roofs of our Land Rovers with cameras glued to our faces. One wary lioness, needing some privacy I assume, dragged her catch into nearby bushes – never once taking her yellow eyes off us. Another healthy female, pooped after all this chasing around, seemed happy just to lie down and relax, watching us watching her cubs as they played roly-poly on the wildebeest she'd just killed – pulling its tongue and playing tug-of-war with its ears and tail.

Yes, I know. Scenes just like this have been happening for thousands of years, a thousand times a day, all over the sunburnt

PHOTO: NOEL MAGNUSSON



African continent. But that incredible/powerful/awful display put on by those big cats one warm Wednesday in August was put on just for us, I'm sure.

Heart-stopping, I reckon! And I'll never forget it, as long as I live ...

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MY MIND NOT ONLY WANDERS, SOMETIMES IT LEAVES COMPLETELY.