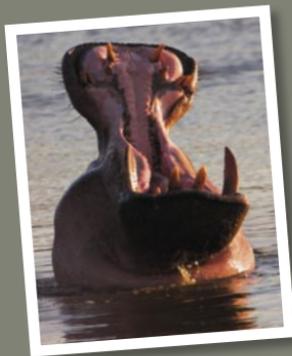


GOING PLACES #2

JOHN COONEY



ROUND, ROLY-POLY & DANGEROUS



“Hold onto your hat!” someone yelled, as the Range Rover took us down 2000 feet, through zig-zaggy bends, dusty potholes and early-morning mist onto the crater floor. I’d been looking forward to this moment for ages, and kept thinking: “Pinch me – I’m dreaming!” Here we were, in the largest zoo on earth: the Ngorongoro Crater. And awaiting us was an animal population so used to humans that you can almost “reach out and touch ...”

This remarkable place, a World Heritage Site, has been called the eighth wonder of the world – the largest intact volcanic caldera on the planet. And it encases one of the most picturesque settings I'd seen on our African safari.

We'd spent the night high up on the rim that surrounds the crater. And now, as the mist cleared, we found ourselves surrounded by forests and swamps, vast grasslands and dry salt-pans.

Back up the track a bit, we'd been stopped at one point by a young bull elephant who was in no hurry to move – he just stood in the middle of the road, sucking dust up his trunk and blowing it all over himself. Then, down on the flat, we spotted a lonely black-maned lion who appeared to have an urgent appointment somewhere off in the distance.

It was hard to know where to point my camera that glorious morning: hyenas ... warthogs ... buffalos ... baboons ... gazelles ... and the ever-present zebras and wildebeests – they just kept coming!

And you should have seen the birds: an ostrich having a bad-hair day ... a flamingo with her head in the sand (or mud) ... a saddle-billed stork ... a ground hornbill ... a crowned crane ... and a marabout stork with a big pink airbag, sunbathing on his backwards-bent legs. Talk about a feast for the eyes!

And then we spotted a rhino, grazing head-down in the grass ...

We'd got up-close-and personal to some of these two-to-three-tonne giants a few days earlier. With their battering-ram bodies, knobby knees, thick armour-plate skin, tiny swivelling ears, and twin nose-horns they look utterly prehistoric – and when



PHOTOS: JOHN COONEY

they glare at you with their beady little eyes, they look quite threatening. But the threat, sadly, goes the other way.

Rhinos once roamed Africa's hot grassy plains in large numbers – but they were almost wiped out by their only real enemy: humans. Big-game hunters shot them for trophies, and poachers slaughtered them for the black market.



Powdered rhino-horn has always fetched a fortune for its mythical powers as a medicine and an aphrodisiac. Despite the fact that rhino horn isn't real horn – it's made of hair and keratin, and is about as much use as a sex-aid as chewing your fingernails (which are made of the same stuff).

So, are these endangered monsters dangerous? Well, yes. They can charge you



PHOTO: JOHN COONEY

at 45 kph, poke large holes in you, and squash you to a watery pulp. And while their eyesight may be lousy, they can hear you loud-and-clear – and smell you long before you can smell them.

Which is why we kept a respectable distance – and kept our bodies and cameras inside the vehicle!

In a far-flung swampy corner of Ngorongoro we came upon some wallowing hippos – and these guys would easily win first prize in a sight-sound-smell contest. Especially smell.

'*Hippopotamus*' means 'river horse' – which is what Greeks called these round, roly-poly beasts. But ancient Egyptians knew better (after all, their stretch of the Nile used to be full of hippos) – they called them 'river pigs'.

We discovered why at another hippo-hole two stops back. It was late in the afternoon, and our guide parked the 4WD on

a hilly look-out. We climbed out, stood on the edge and looked down, speechless and breathless(!), on an unforgettable scene.

In the river below us were hundreds and hundreds of hippos. Except it wasn't a river. Okay, it used to be – but in the absence of rain it had stopped flowing, and instead had become a soupy, stinky hippo-toilet!

And the hippos obviously LOVED IT!

They were pushing and shoving, roaring and grunting – the noise was unreal. And the toxic pong ... well, use your imagination. (It still brings tears to my eyes just thinking about it.)

There were fat poppa-hippos fighting for space – bellowing loudly, bashing each other with sledge-hammer heads, and slashing at each other with massive wide-open jaws.

There were fat mamma-hippos doing backwards-flips and sideways-rolls in the soup – churning up the river-weeds and

PHOTO: JOHN COONEY



PHOTO: MICHAEL SHRAKE (DREAMSTIME.COM)



baring their blushing-pink bellies.

There were fat baby-hippos floating happily in all this gunge – little ears twitching and little red-rimmed eyes peering out just above the surface. (*Did you spot the baby hippo in the photo on page 60?*)

And, everywhere we looked, there were hippos pooping like only hippos can – twirling their stumpy tails like propellers and spraying hippo-poop all over their lucky neighbours!

According to African legend, hippos were one of the last animals created, and got thrown together from leftover parts. The poor hippo was embarrassed by its bloated, hairless body and clumsy, wobbly walk – so it asked the Creator if it could hide in the water by day and come out only at night to feed.

I can't vouch for the truth of that legend, but I can tell you that hippos are dangerous. Forget the jolly, goofy, lovable hippos you've seen in *Disney* movies. These four-tonne slobs are the bad guys of African wildlife. They're aggressive, unpredictable, unbelievably fast when they want to be – and they kill way more people with their razorblade teeth than all the lions, buffalos and crocodiles put together.

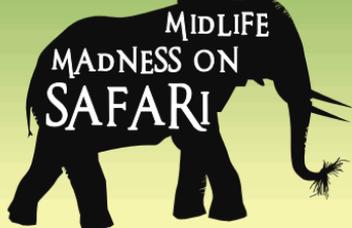
Which may explain why there's not a big demand for hippos as pets ...

We Kiwis were constantly being reminded that Africa is a multi-sensory experience. And as the sun went down that evening over Ngorongoro Crater we sat in the lounge at the lodge, swapping animal stories and marvelling all over again.

This ancient sunburnt land is home to untold weirdly wonderful inhabitants, and we'd again seen more than our share ...

I'M ALREADY VISUALISING THE DUCT TAPE OVER YOUR MOUTH.

JOHN & ROBYN COONEY HAVE BEEN ASKED TO LEAD A WILDLIFE SAFARI IN
East Africa (Kenya & Tanzania)



19 wild days – July 2008
daily game-viewing from open-top 4WDs
Masai Mara, Serengeti, Ngorongoro, Amboseli
(staying in exotic five-star luxury lodges)
– plus bonus stopover in Dubai –

phone 0800 277 477
or email roger.glynan@lionworld.co.nz

estimated all-up price \$13,495 – includes airfares, safaris, lodges, hotels, meals, sightseeing, tips, etc