

Amboseli Horseback Safari, Kenya 2011

Amboseli – Kilimanjaro Horseback Safari, KENYA 31 July–6 August 2011

After the impressive Masai Mara horseback safari, I spent two days ‘relaxing’ at the comfortable Nairobi Tented Camp, right in the heart of the famous Nairobi National Park (i.e. I was on the go the whole time – game drives, the elephant camp, excursions and so on – always true to the motto: don’t miss a thing!) and was now ready for my next big horseback adventure: Off to Kilimanjaro, off to Amboseli National Park, which is famous for its abundance of wildlife and its huge herds of elephants!

Early in the morning, Wilson Airport in Nairobi was already a hive of activity once again, and I was glad to spot the Air Kenya check-in desk straight away amidst the hustle and bustle. Once I’d taken my seat on the small plane alongside about 20 other passengers, we were told to get off again – the pilot said there was just a minor problem with the electrics, nothing serious with the engine or anything like that – we were so relieved

! After 15 minutes, we were all allowed back on board and off we went! After a 45-minute scenic flight, we landed in Amboseli National Park, surrounded by zebras and antelopes. Nicola was already waiting for us in the jeep and welcomed us with coffee, tea, bananas and freshly baked biscuits – delicious! And off we went on the drive to the camp, which would normally take an hour by the direct route, but was immediately turned into a proper game drive, because no sooner had we left the small airstrip behind us than we were already ‘surrounded’ by countless wild animals: large herds of white-bearded wildebeest crossed our ‘road’ (the dusty track ahead of us), loads of zebras were grazing by the ‘roadside’, and against this backdrop stood the mighty Kilimanjaro on the horizon – by now, at the very latest, it was clear to me: I really am in Black Africa! Amboseli National Park captivated us not only with its abundance of wildlife, but also with its striking contrasts: on one side of the track stretched deep, emerald-green swamps with lush vegetation and a rich variety of flora and fauna, whilst on the other side lay a vast, dry, dusty, desert-like landscape, with swirling dust tornadoes. I was also struck by the peaceful coexistence of so many different animal species – a bit like the Garden of Eden! A hippopotamus was grazing

For example, there was a peaceful coexistence between zebras, wildebeest and waterbucks, whilst a large herd of elephants passed by silently... A mighty, curious bull elephant, surrounded by white clouds of dust, came particularly close to our jeep and provided a fantastic photo opportunity against the white dome of Kilimanjaro!

At the camp, we were greeted with a refreshing welcome drink and, after a three-course lunch, we were able to swing into the saddle for the very first time at 4.30 pm. I was given a Boer horse, a handsome, medium-sized chestnut called Katchumbari, with powerful gaits that took me two days to get used to. South African Boer horses are descended from the Dutch settlers and are characterised by their robustness, tenacity and strong character – all excellent qualities for proper bush horses – so I immediately felt I was in good hands.

With fresh horses, we galloped straight into the golden evening sun. On the way, we came across a few gerenuk gazelles. When these graceful—

When these elegant even-toed ungulates stand on their hind legs, their long necks enable them to reach not only grass but also fresh leaves from trees at heights of up to 2 m, which gives them an advantage when foraging. This is why they are also known as giraffe gazelles. Armed with this knowledge and many other wonderful impressions, we return to our camp, where a campfire is already burning for us and cool drinks are waiting – all against the impressive backdrop of Kilimanjaro on the horizon – the very essence of a holiday!

A friendly wake-up call and a cup of fresh coffee brought to our bedside got us up at 6 am the next morning – typical Africa. We fortified ourselves with a light breakfast of fresh fruit, porridge and biscuits before swinging into the saddle at 7 am, ready to go on a game drive, as the best time to spot the animals is in the morning and evening hours, since they usually hide away in the bush during the midday heat. The ground was made of the finest clay and, due to the dry conditions, was now very dusty; at times, the rider ahead of me would already disappear into a huge cloud of dust – yet we made good progress on our sure-footed horses.

On the way, we came across a herd of elephants, but they preferred to We were playing 'hide and seek' with a single, mighty bull elephant who showed little interest in our group of riders. We continued across a vast, open expanse at a flying gallop over deep red earth – on the horizon I saw my first mirage: there were actually mountains reflected in a huge, glittering lake! Yet there were neither mountains nor a lake, just the endless red earth of Africa stretching to the horizon. After about two hours, we took a short breather for both riders and horses, enjoying a little snack from our saddlebags: biscuits, eggs and apples, which we riders, of course, shared generously with our horses. Back at camp, we looked forward to a hot shower in our comfortable safari tents, a sumptuous lunch and the two-hour siesta that followed!

At tea time, we were revitalised with oven-warm banana cake and fresh coffee. The subsequent one-and-a-half-hour horse ride (or, alternatively, game drive) was a lovely way to round off this exciting day on safari. After a shower, we were treated to an excellent three-course meal worthy of a top-class restaurant: a festively laid table, pre-warmed plates and superb cuisine – every detail had been taken care of to ensure the guests were thoroughly pampered.

The following days brought strenuous rides (one day's stage covered 50 km), brisk gallops, small jumps and voluntary larger leaps over fallen trees, as well as an ever-changing landscape: vast, golden-brown savannah, metre-high elephant grass through which herds of elephants roamed in the distance, deep, lush green swamps with voracious hippos, endless plains – perfect for long gallops, interrupted only by solitary acacia trees, deep-red earth strewn with large, abandoned and bleached-white agate snail shells, and the picturesque hills of Chyulu Hills National Park at the end of the tour. During the week, we also visited a Maasai village and went on several game drives, during which we were able to take fantastic photos of large herds of buffalo and elephants at close quarters.

At midday, we usually stopped to rest under an inviting acacia tree, where colourful Maasai blankets had already been spread out for us, complete with soft cushions, and a delicious picnic buffet awaited us (along with fresh water and oats for the horses). The highlight, however, was not just the heavenly food and service, but above all the wildlife encounters on horseback: galloping alongside a herd of zebras, the large herd of buffalo galloping away ahead of us, the mighty elephants and numerous antelopes and gazelles, including the noble Grant's gazelles with their elegant, heart-shaped curved horns and the dainty Thomson's gazelles. Although we didn't spot any big cats such as lions or leopards during the week, such encounters are by no means out of the question – and that is not the only reason why this ride is only suitable for experienced, confident riders... Equally impressive was the ride through a vast thorn forest of so-called 'Whistling Thorn Acacias', which take their name from the high-pitched, shrill sounds produced when the wind whistles through their mighty thorns. The acacias also have an interesting symbiotic relationship with ants, which defend the tree against herbivorous insects and even against giraffes and elephants, for which they are rewarded with nectar and a protected habitat.

We spent the last few days in the Chyulu Hills, the youngest mountain range on Earth, with gently rolling, grass-covered volcanic hills. Before us lay the vast, open savannah, with good, firm ground, which we used, amongst other things, for a race against two giraffes – which brought tears to our eyes. Were they tears of joy or just the 'wind in our hair'? Probably both – in any case, it was an unforgettable experience to see these huge animals galloping alongside us as if in slow motion!

The Chyulu Hills were also home to large numbers of mighty eland and oryx antelopes, both of which are among the largest antelope species. The dense forests at the foot of the volcanic hills are also home to some of East Africa's oldest bull elephants, with enormous tusks, which have found refuge and protection here in this rugged, remote area, as have the rare black rhinos, which live amongst the jagged, almost inaccessible lava flows. During a visit to the luxurious Kenya Safari Lodge – where I would have loved to stay a few more days – we had the opportunity to observe some of these impressive giants at the waterhole in complete tranquillity.

But even the most wonderful ride must come to an end at some point. After a brisk final stretch, we reached the stables, which are situated about 10 minutes from the Kenya Safari Lodge, right in the middle of the bush. After unsaddling, showering, feeding and checking on the horses, we simply opened the stall doors and our horses were just so happy: They rolled around in the sand to their hearts' content, played happily and then disappeared into the African bush in a huge cloud of dust. There are no fences here – the horses were now enjoying a week of freedom until they set off on their next safari. Bye bye Africa and see you soon – Kwa Heri Kenya!

For information about the trip with PEGASUS equitour, visit <http://www.equitour.com/amb008.htm>, and for information about the Kenya Safari Lodge, visit <http://www.equitour.com/donsta.htm>.