

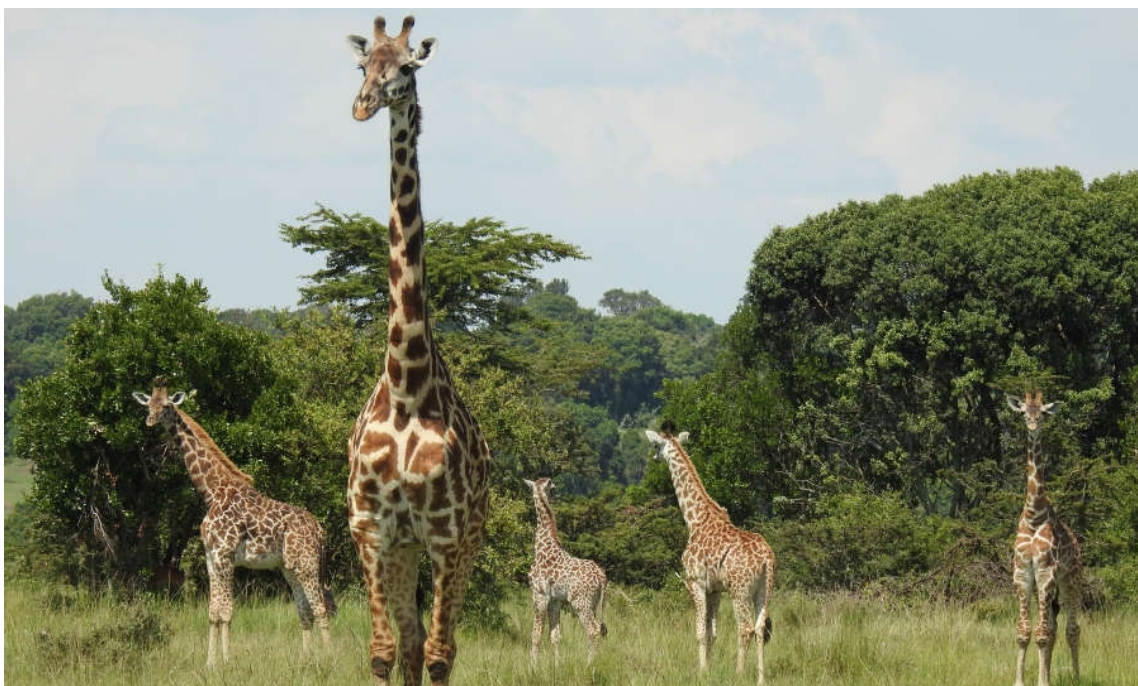
Kenya, Masai Mara Horseback Safari to see the Great Migration, 2011

KENYA 2011 Masai Mara – expect the unexpected My safari diary

Once you've caught the 'Africa bug', you're inevitably drawn back to the Dark Continent time and time again. This time, it was to be Kenya. Having gained some experience on horseback safaris in South Africa, Botswana and Namibia, I now wanted to venture into this East African country – for many, the very epitome of Africa, at least since the classic film **Out of Africa**, with the endless expanses of the Masai Mara, criss-crossed by millions of wild animals on their annual great migration from the Serengeti, with its wildlife-rich national parks and, last but not least, the majestic backdrop of snow-capped Kilimanjaro.

The horse-riding safaris in the Masai Mara are legendary amongst riders, and this was about to be confirmed on the most adventurous of all my riding adventures to date!

I flew from Frankfurt to Nairobi on the evening of 17 July, where I landed on 18 July at 12.45 pm, where I was met by my transfer driver right at the exit and taken straight to the Ngong Tree House, which I'd booked in advance for a highly recommended overnight stay. On the journey there, I was already immersed in typical African life – around Nairobi, this mainly means (for us) unbelievable traffic chaos, through which herds of cattle driven by colourful Maasai repeatedly make their way (across the four-lane motorway!). Breathing a sigh of relief, I reached an oasis of calm: Ngong Tree Houses. Set amidst extensive gardens with lush tropical vegetation, an inviting swimming pool and a stylish lodge that blends into the African bush, there are several highly original accommodation options: pretty wooden houses perched in the treetops.



In the afternoon, I visited the nearby Giraffe Centre, where the rare Rothschild giraffes are successfully bred and then released into various national parks across Kenya, returning them to their natural habitat. From a raised viewing platform, you not only have the rare opportunity to look one of the giraffes straight in the eye, but even to 'kiss' them! To do this, simply place one of the 'giraffe treats' between your lips and let the giraffes skilfully fish it out with their 45 cm long, purple tongues – a 'French kiss' par excellence!

Tuesday, 19 July

After a full English breakfast, we head to Wilson Airport. At first glance, this is one of the largest safari airports and seems like utter chaos, as countless airlines fly out into the bush from here. So, along with a few other clueless tourists, I found myself waiting for a flight at the edge of the tarmac. Luckily, I was already wearing my riding ankle boots, as these prompted Archy to ask me whether I was also heading to the Masai Mara for a horseback safari, which I confirmed with relief! He introduced me to his wife – the two of them had just got married, had practically just come from their wedding reception, and were setting off on their 'somewhat different' honeymoon... More riders joined our little group, so that by about 10 o'clock we were able to set off on our 45-minute scenic flight with eight people on board. It wasn't until the last five minutes before landing that the landscape gave way to unspoilt wilderness and suddenly it was teeming with wildlife! Zebras, wildebeest, eland antelopes and giraffes were grazing peacefully all around the airstrip, so I could only hope they wouldn't get too close to our plane! We then set off towards the camp in two jeeps, kicking off with an impressive game drive straight away! After just three minutes, we spotted a family of hyenas resting in the shade of a tree at close quarters; after 10 minutes, we marvelled at a massive herd of Cape buffalo, after just 20 minutes, our experienced Maasai guide Metti had already spotted lions behind a bush, lying on their backs with round bellies as they took a siesta; after 30 minutes, a large herd of elephants strolled leisurely past us, meaning we'd already seen three of the famous 'Big Five'! The area was teeming with wildebeest, zebras, topi and many more – in short, it was just like being at the zoo!

We arrived at the camp in high spirits, and it had another spectacular surprise in store, as it was situated right next to one of the Mara River's many hippo pools – meaning there were about 20 mighty hippos frolicking down in the river! During lunch, with plenty of fresh salad and vegetables, their snorting and puffing was ever-present!

At 4 pm we were expected for tea, and straight afterwards we set off on our first ride, during which we didn't go a single minute without spotting wildlife... At times, you didn't even know where to look first, as you also had to get to know your horse and keep a watchful eye on the ground. But my horse, Snaffles – a handsome grey, a cross between an English Thoroughbred and a Somali pony – proved to be very reliable, steady-nerved, sure-footed and eager to move forward. I couldn't have wished for a better companion for this riding safari! I trusted him completely right from the very first gallop.

After just a short while, we all felt extremely comfortable in the saddle; everyone was happy with their horse, and a glance round our lovely little group of eight riders revealed nothing but satisfied, beaming faces. A colourful mix, our group consisted of a Dutch family, the English Honey-

Moon couple, another Englishwoman, an American globetrotter and myself. Our guide, Jakob, is at home all over the world; with Austrian roots, he currently divides his time between Kenya and Argentina.

The sun, glowing red, was approaching the horizon when we came across the 'Great Migration': across the vast expanse of the flat savannah, covered in golden-yellow grass, an endless black stream of wildebeest was moving. No matter where you looked – to the right and left as far as the eye could see – there were only wildebeest, accompanied by the characteristic sound, a sort of 'moo', produced almost continuously by thousands of animals! This sight not only gave us goosebumps, but was simply breathtaking!

On the way, we also came across a herd of elephants with their calves, which let us get surprisingly close. A mighty eagle circled overhead, a shy jackal scurried off into the bushes, and two impala bucks were so engrossed in their fierce duel that they barely noticed us. Shortly after sunset, we were back at camp – where 'cool drinks and a hot fire' awaited us, along with a refreshing shower in one of the camp's two shower tents.

That evening, the fantastic candlelit dinner exceeded even our wildest expectations: our two head chefs, Philipp and James, showed us that cooking is not just a job for them, but a passion! Freshly baked, still steaming sesame bread with melted warm garlic butter, sugar-sweet carrots, crisp broccoli, green asparagus (!), fresh mashed potato, tender beef fillet with a delicious sauce, and to top it all off, an unbeatable dessert: fresh strawberries with cream in a caramel basket – I didn't leave a single crumb on my plate! Accompanied by a carefully selected red wine and excellent service, you'd think you were in a posh restaurant rather than in the middle of the African bush – luckily, the hippos, with their background noise, reminded us where we were – in the heart of East Africa! Over a few more drinks and watching the shooting stars, we rounded off our eventful first day by the campfire...



Wednesday, 20 July

Wake-up call at 7 am – still a bit sleepy, I peered out of my tent to gaze at a beautiful sunrise over the river. Right on the banks of the Mara River, bathed in sunshine and with a view of the hippos, we were treated to a multi-course breakfast that we would enjoy every day from then on: a large fruit platter, muesli, various jams and wild honey, porridge, fruit juice, eggs cooked any way we liked, freshly baked and toasted bread, bacon, ham, sausages, beans, tomatoes...

The horses were already waiting for us, saddled and ready for the four-hour morning ride, during which we encountered a solitary bull elephant after just 20 minutes. To warm up, we had our first brisk gallops alongside large herds of wildebeest and practised jumping over tree trunks 30–60 cm high. My horse, Snaffels, proved to be an enthusiastic show jumper, so that even I began to really enjoy the jumping!

Riding along a small river, we passed a group of Maasai women drying their colourful washing in the bushes, whilst herds of sheep and cattle grazed nearby. Just before we reached our spot for a midday break in the deep riverbed, we startled a buffalo taking a mud bath – fortunately, at the sight of our large group of riders, it fled rather than attacking!

Metti was already waiting for us with the jeep and had conjured up a magnificent vegetable pizza over the fire! We were served refreshing drinks from the jeep's fridge and delicious sandwiches to go with it.

Well fortified, we were ready to set off on our big afternoon adventure: crossing the Mara River was on the agenda! At the river – whose brown ribbon flows through the arid landscape of the Serengeti and Masai Mara for 395 km as a lifeline, and which is the only river to carry water all year round – we held our breath at the sight of the mighty hippos right in the murky water of the ford and the two crocodiles swimming slowly away. Jakob assessed the situation thoroughly and drew his 'bullwhip', cracking it loudly several times so that the hippos snorted and dived beneath the surface. They now eyed us sceptically from a slightly greater distance – though still quite close, in my view – as we bravely plunged one by one into the brown waters. The water reached well above the horses' withers, and they waded, panting, through the sluggish current. With our hearts still pounding and infinitely grateful to our brave horses, we all arrived safely on the other bank and climbed up the steep embankment – we'd done it!

We continued through vast savannah, with umbrella acacias everywhere – Africa straight out of a picture book! The Masai Mara truly lived up to its name here! The name derives, on the one hand, from the Masai people who live here, and on the other, 'mara' means 'spotted' in the Masai language – because, viewed from above, the savannah with its many scattered trees really does look as if it's 'dotted'.

We had now reached the area known as the 'Mara Triangle', formed by the dead-straight border with Tanzania to the south, the rugged Oloololo

Escarpment in the north-west and the Mara River in the east – here the grass was considerably taller, as the Great Migration of wildlife had not yet passed through. As it is harder to spot not only holes in the ground but also predators in the tall grass, there was less game to be seen here – though more buffalo and elephants – and our ride was fairly leisurely in terms of pace.

The evening brought us another highlight – in the truest sense of the word, as we climbed high up onto the Oloololo Escarpment – this impressive cliff face forms a spur of the Great Rift Valley, the Great African Rift. At a brisk gallop, we followed a winding path uphill, past large herds of zebras, elephants and topi antelopes, and groups of ostriches scattering through the golden-yellow savannah grass – there was no photo stop here – just a flying gallop!

Well, we did have to rein in our horses briefly when we came across a massive buffalo by the side of the track, but it moved out of the way and cleared the path for us, so our horses were able to continue on happily until we reached the high plateau – below us lay the honey-yellow savannah with the green splashes of colour from the acacia trees in the evening sun – a spectacular sight!

The camp, at an altitude of 2,000 metres, was tucked away in the green forest, and the showers with hot water were already ready, as were the chilled drinks. To top it all off, there were freshly baked brownies and steaming coffee. As if that weren't enough, we were treated to appetisers by the campfire, not to mention dinner.

Tired but happy, we retired to our comfortable tents – bush-style comfort, of course, meaning a camp bed with bedding, towels, soap and a nail brush, a mirror, an outdoor washbasin, a torch, a solar lamp for inside and a storm lamp for outside, a small bedside table, and, for each tent, a bush toilet tent about 3–5 metres behind the tent.

Thursday, 21 July

Today, a particularly early wake-up call roused us from our slumber – we drove up the mountain to a cliff where we could enjoy the sunrise in all its splendour with a fragrant cup of coffee and biscuits, whilst numerous colourful hot-air balloons drifted across the Masai Mara like colourful pearls.

Back at camp, a lavishly laid table awaited us, along with freshly cleaned shoes (!). Today we were set to cover a brisk 45 km, with a good 4 hours in the morning and 2.5 hours in the afternoon. The ride took us further through the 'Mara Triangle', a very remote area teeming with wildlife – here we had the wilderness, with all its animals, entirely to ourselves!

First, we rode along the ridge of the Oloololo Escarpment, a completely different landscape which, with its silvery-green, tufted elephant grass, was in places reminiscent of the Argentine Pampas. Dotted amongst the landscape were herds of cows on lush green meadows, their cowbells tinkling – a sound that brought to mind the Alps back home! Lawn-like grass, reminiscent of a golf course, allowed us to have the odd race. A stony path led us back down into the plain through dense woodland and scrubland. As the path was very steep in places and quite slippery due to the loose scree, we led the horses, which also gave our legs a bit of a stretch.

At first, we couldn't believe that this path was also used by elephants, but then we saw the unmistakable piles along the way...

Once we reached the bottom, there were a few more lovely gallops through the savannah to our rest stop, which offered us – like a giant screen – a fantastic panorama, whilst the passing wildlife provided entertainment: Zebras were taking a dust bath and eyeing us curiously, giraffes were craning their necks in our direction, and elephants were passing by in the distance – to top off the 'show', we were treated to a delicious barbecue.

In the afternoon, we followed a track through the tall grass, which allowed us to ride at a brisker pace. We had a few encounters with elephants and numerous encounters with buffalo. With incredible power, our horses climbed back up the steep slope to camp after the long ride. For dinner, we enjoyed fish and chips and baked exotic fruits for dessert... Gradually, I found myself wishing I had such a gifted chef at home too...



Friday, 22 July

With the 7.30 am wake-up call, fresh coffee was brought to the tent today, which made me jump out of bed even more quickly. Today was another 'moving day', which meant packing up, as the camp was relocating. Fortunately, plenty of hard-working helpers took care of the luggage, the entire camp and all the equipment. A team of nearly 20 dedicated staff ensured we had everything we needed, including chefs and kitchen assistants, grooms and people who set up the camp and took care of all the daily chores, from fetching water to doing the laundry, as a daily laundry service is also included.

We rode down into the plain on horseback – at the foot of the mountains we found plenty of wildlife, including mighty elands, Africa's largest antelope, with a shoulder height of up to 1.90 m and weighing up to a tonne, which can also easily leap over 2 metres high!

We crossed a dry riverbed where a massive, over 200-year-old strangler fig tree grew – in the centre of which gaped a hole larger than a man, through which one could easily have ridden.

We then set off at a brisk gallop along a winding track through the savannah, when suddenly a herd of giraffes emerged from the bush, crossed our path and then galloped alongside us for a while!

And before we knew it, we were back at the Mara River, which we had to cross a second time, once again under the watchful eyes of a few hippos. The route then followed the steep bank, offering spectacular views down to the Mara River, which was teeming with hippos and massive Nile crocodiles.

At a full gallop, we reached the outskirts of the national park, which the Maasai are also permitted to use with their herds of cattle and sheep. Here, the grass was shorter again, allowing us to ride at a brisk pace. We rode past several sausage trees, whose elongated, sausage-like fruits gave them their name. The fruits are a favourite food of elephants and baboons, and the Maasai use them to make a soup to combat malaria.

Today's picnic awaited us in Leopard Gorge. The rocky valley was home to shady trees and numerous caves – ideal hiding places for leopards, although we were not to catch sight of these shy, nocturnal cats here; instead, we spotted a few hyenas and some adorable rock hyraxes. After a lunch that was, as always, delicious, we climbed back into the saddle, only to encounter a pride of lions on a bush-covered hill just five minutes later – six lion cubs, who eyed us curiously from a distance.

We then set off in a race with part of a large herd of wildebeest stretching as far as the eye could see, at times getting as close as a few metres to the animals. Such races are, however, short-lived so as not to disturb the wildebeest unnecessarily.

But there was another animal highlight: a lioness, full to bursting with a bulging belly, lay lazily at the foot of a hill, whilst in the bushes the cubs were still hissing and swishing their tails as they fought over the remains of their prey. As the lioness was very drowsy, we were able – with all due respect – to venture a little closer to her and snap a few photos! She had nothing more to offer us than a weary yawn, before rolling onto her back to stretch out all four limbs after the exhausting hunt and sumptuous meal...

Ten minutes later, we reached our camp for the next three nights, the 'Lions Camp' – it really does live up to its name! We quickly jumped off the

horses into a hot shower and then into the jeep to drive back to the lions and enjoy a sundowner with them...

Around the campfire that night, the sounds of wildebeest and the roar of lions in the distance provided a lively backdrop, accompanied by some exciting safari stories from our riding guide, Jakob.



Saturday, 23 July

Today we were offered the chance to stretch our legs a little with a morning walk through the bush, led by Metti – armed, in traditional style, with a bow and arrow – and Jakob, with a shotgun. So we roamed through the surrounding area and were able to discover quite different, exciting things from this perspective.

A delightful surprise was the bush breakfast, which was waiting for us in an idyllic spot by the stream. Back at camp, it was time to relax – whilst, barely 400 metres away, the Great Migration passed by, its sounds impossible to ignore... In the late afternoon, we set off on another ride, with brisk gallops across lush green, golf-course-like lawns and a few nice little jumps. We were also able to race alongside the wildebeest once again. As we galloped along, a breathtaking sight unfolded in the evening sun: two mighty bull elephants, with wildebeest, topi antelopes, zebras and buffalo galloping in front of them – everything that on other safaris would each be the highlight of the day, we experienced here virtually as we galloped past – it was enough to make any rider's heart race!

As evening fell, we received a tip-off that lions had killed an impala nearby – we were all quickly in the jeep and drove to the spot described, where we actually found the lions having their meal. It was an impressive experience to watch the big cats feeding at close quarters and to hear the bones cracking... The lioness had taught her four one-year-old cubs a successful lesson in hunting, and now, full and content, the cubs were playing and frolicking together – you almost wanted to stroke them... But then their hunting instinct seemed to flare up once more, albeit more out of playfulness than hunger, and dramatic scenes unfolded in the darkness: In our two jeeps, we stayed level with the pride as it split up; wild animals bolted in a frantic flight, dust swirled up, it began to pour with rain and thunder, thunder rumbled, and the pitch-black night was lit only by flickering flashes of lightning and our flickering searchlights. Amidst all the commotion, there was no successful hunt this time, and the lions, with their bellies full, didn't show much enthusiasm either. Nevertheless, we were deeply impressed by the experience!

Back at camp, we were treated to a delicious dinner – no impala – in the cosy dining tent, whilst it was pouring with rain outside. It turned out to be a lively and boozey evening with drinking games in good company...



Sunday, 24 July

Somehow, the wake-up call seemed particularly early today... But after an extra coffee, I swung myself fit and ready into the saddle, ready for new African adventures! And they weren't long in coming! Less than 10 minutes from the camp, a magnificent leopard leapt out of the bushes on the lower riverbank, paused

briefly and gazed at us with its amber-coloured eyes, before disappearing back into the bushes – what a sight in the soft golden morning sun!

Right behind us lay Lion's Hill and the lions, whom we saw only yawning wearily. Above us, a flock of vultures circled, having taken flight from their roosting tree, which had died over time from all the droppings and now stretched its bare, dead branches towards the morning sky. Next, we headed, quite literally, 'into the lion's den' – Jakob led us up the steep, stony Lion's Hill to see the remains of the prey at the top – the sight gave me a slight shiver. Let's get out of here quickly! On the high plateau, we were treated to some lively, spirited gallops with herds of wildebeest.

We returned to camp ravenous, where a sumptuous breakfast awaited us in glorious sunshine. And afterwards, it was time for some shopping! Much to the delight of the female riders, a group of Maasai women had laid out their wares in front of our camp, creating a colourful market. We enthusiastically tried on colourful necklaces, earrings and bracelets made of beads in the bold colours typical of the Maasai; small carvings were also on offer. Dressed in African style and adorned with at least as much jewellery as the proud Maasai – both men and women, incidentally – we set off by jeep on a game drive in the Maasai Mara National Park – which has a hefty entrance fee – for our two vehicles and 11 people, this came to 800 USD! It's worth mentioning in passing that a horse counts as a car for the purposes of the fee (even though it tends to carry fewer people), which slowly gave us an idea of how the tour price is calculated, quite apart from the enormous organisational effort involved and all the comforts provided in the middle of the wilderness...

In the heart of the Mara Triangle, we were able to let our gaze wander towards Tanzania, to the Serengeti, from where 2.5 million wildebeest and 1.5 million zebras migrate north every year after their young are born, constantly following the rain and fresh grass and, with this Great Migration, creating one of the most spectacular natural spectacles on Earth. Between July and September, they migrate through the Masai Mara, where they gradually disperse, before gathering again in October and making their way back south in a vast arc; it is estimated that only one in three of the calves born in May makes it back to the Serengeti.

And we now found ourselves amidst this immense, black torrent of undulating animal bodies – wildebeest as far as the eye could see!

Topi antelopes towered above it all, standing in their typical positions on termite mounds; huge swarms of migrating termites passed us by in a thick black cloud; zebras dozed in the midday heat, each resting its head trustingly on the back of the one beside it; warthogs wallowed happily in mudpools, Thomson's and Grant's gazelles leapt gracefully away – actually, the world seemed quite alright to me. Until we suddenly reached the green ribbon of the Mara River, which presented a sight that was anything but idyllic: littered with hundreds of washed-up wildebeest carcasses that hadn't managed to cross the river. The whole river was full of them – and plenty of massive crocodiles and hippos right in the middle, as well as thousands of vultures and marabou storks circling above the river or feasting on the carrion. Not only the sight but also the

stench that went with it was indescribable... We'd actually planned to have our picnic here, but luckily we opted for a different rest stop, far away from the river, which was littered with carcasses for several kilometres. Apparently, the wildebeests aren't particularly adept at crossing the river – instead of looking for a shallow, more suitable ford, they often take the high, steep banks. What's more, the herds always gather before the crossing, sometimes for days on end, until there are thousands of animals, and none of them wants to take the first step; but once the first animal dares to plunge down into the water, there's no stopping them, and the great shoving and jostling begins – the inevitable accidents that occur are far more dangerous for the wildebeest than the voracious Nile crocodiles lurking in the river. Malicious tongues claim that the wildebeest's low intelligence is the reason why there are so many of them... The zebras seem to have a bit better a handle on things. Experienced animals lead the herds every year through well-known, safe fords, so that there are far fewer casualties to mourn.

As well as succulent lamb chops, which Metti sizzled for us over the fire, our picnic spot offered a magnificent panorama – vast yellow savannah, dotted with countless black specks – absolutely stunning!

In between, we tried our hand at learning a little Swahili, Kenya's official language alongside English. There's no doubt that the people of Kenya are extremely gifted when it comes to languages – everyone speaks at least 3–5 languages, which is partly due to the diversity of the more than 45 different tribes. When learning Swahili, as a European you first think of Disney's **The Lion King**, because, for example, Simba means 'lion', Pumbaa means 'warthog' and **hakuna matata** means 'no problem'. **Farasi** means 'horse', **Asante** means 'thank you' and **Karibu sana** means 'please' or 'welcome'.

As we continued our journey through the open, flat savannah, we were mainly on the lookout today for cheetahs, for whom this is the ideal habitat. Other tourists had already been somewhat more successful, and we joined the cluster of vehicles that must have spotted something special – and indeed, we were able to observe a cheetah mother with three cubs aged around one year old, though unfortunately not quite with the same exclusivity we'd become accustomed to on the horseback safari. Nevertheless, it was lovely to watch the animals playing. On the way back to camp, we stopped off once more at Lion's Hill, which had by now become a familiar sight to us, where we were able to watch a lioness doing her business – that's not something you see every day either. On the other side of the hill, a lioness was lying in wait for dusk and seemed to be in the mood for a hunt. With a spring in her step, she made her way towards the setting sun and the herds of wildebeest, cleverly using our jeep as cover. Our excitement grew, but so did that of the wildebeest – they'd already caught wind of the situation and were now stamping their hooves and letting out warning calls instead of their usual soothing 'moos'. So, for the time being, the lioness was out of luck. Instead, we savoured the fiery red evening sky, against which the sun slowly sank like a huge, glowing ball of fire against a backdrop of countless black wildebeest, giving way to yet another African night. What an exciting day and a magnificent finale!

Back at camp, it was time for a shower beneath the sparkling starry sky; the pleasantly hot water carried a faint, smoky scent of campfire, with the croaking sound of the tiny but all the more boisterous

reed frogs, the chirping of crickets, the sound of wildebeest and the distant roar of lions – just a shower, yet at the same time a feast for all the senses! Just like the dinner that followed at the 1,000-star restaurant! Instead of in the marquee, our festive table was set up by the campfire today, and we were able to enjoy the delicious three-course meal with a view of the Southern Cross. It's probably verging on coercion for me to list the menu, but it was simply too exquisite to keep to myself: foie gras, tender roast beef with sweet pumpkin and beans, and for dessert, a fruit casserole with vanilla sauce.

On the way back to the tent that night, my heart skipped a beat – did that just sound like a lion in the bushes!? After a brave stalking mission together with Eva, it turned out that the 'lion' was living in tent no. 5 – where Bruce was snoring away in perfect peace. Phew, I was rather relieved and could go to bed with peace of mind!



Monday, 25 July

Another 'moving day' and our longest day's ride at 50 km. At first we rode through lush green countryside along the river, then the landscape changed dramatically, becoming increasingly arid, before ending in a steppe-like, barren expanse dotted with scattered succulents and massive cactus trees, as well as bright yellow-orange Senegal acacias. A vast, endless steppe with short, tough, brown grass stretched as far as the eye could see – suddenly I felt as though I were in Mongolia... The terrain was, of course, perfect for long, fast gallops!

We reached our lunch camp at a brisk pace, where it wasn't just the horses who were delighted to have something to eat! In the pleasant, green copse, tall trees provided welcome shade for horse and rider alike, whilst a cool breeze soothed our heated spirits. After the picnic, a good book for a siesta – oh, if only the holiday could go on like this forever!

Back in the saddle, we were quite astonished when, just a few metres from our rest stop, we spotted a large herd of over 20 giraffes in what appeared to be 'dead scrub'. Our lead horse, Jonny Walker, had nothing better to do than cheekily trot over to them and chase them about a bit – with us right in the middle of it all!

Shortly afterwards, we came across two stately bull elephants with huge tusks, who came towards us standing tall, trumpeting and flapping their ears – Jakob said it was just play – and so we ‘played’ with them for a while, though I did feel a great deal of respect and my heart was racing a little.

Still very impressed by this encounter, we reached our final camp, Olare Lamun, in the evening sun.

Tuesday, 26 July

All around the horses, lots of cute monkeys – so-called southern green monkeys – were hopping and darting about, trying to snatch a bit of the horses’ feed. The golden morning light glinted through the branches of the deep-green acacia forest. The yellow-green ‘yellow fever’ acacias, wild lianas and dense scrub created a real jungle atmosphere on our ride along the stream bed, which was deeply carved into the soft clay soil. Settlers had named the acacias after the dreaded yellow fever, which always seemed to occur in their vicinity. The explanation for this mystery lies in the fact that the trees are found in damp areas, often along river courses, which the settlers naturally liked to use as resting places, unaware that the mosquitoes found particularly frequently near the water carry the yellow fever virus.

We were served a hearty breakfast at the camp, after which we drove by jeep to a very beautiful viewpoint – though we first had to climb up to it! On the way, Metti showed us a Masai trick: the ‘toothbrush tree’. These are wild olive trees; you can sharpen the ends of their branches with a knife to expose the tough fibres, which you then use to brush your teeth, whilst the plant’s sap has a disinfectant effect – very handy! At the top of the rock, a magnificent 360° panorama awaited us, stretching across the vast plains we’d travelled through yesterday all the way to the Loita Hills. Meanwhile, down below, two elephants strolled leisurely past our jeeps...

In the afternoon, we set off from our camp on a walk to a nearby Maasai village – a genuine one, not just built for tourists. As the Maasai chief, a good friend of Jakob’s, had invited us, they were already very business-minded and well-prepared for our arrival – the women had laid out their handmade goods and jewellery, so we were once again tempted to buy a souvenir or two. The men, meanwhile, were more keen to showcase the weapons of the Masai warriors, offering spears, knives, and bows and arrows. Jakob also led us into one of the

The Maasai’s ‘houses’, which are more accurately described as mud huts. In small groups, we stepped through a narrow entrance, no more than 1.50 m high, and found ourselves in another world. Jakob had brought a head torch with him, as the huts had no windows, just a tiny slit for the smoke from the fire to escape. In the flickering glow of the embers and the small circle of light cast by the headlamp, Jakob told us a great deal about the culture and way of life of the Maasai. The huts are built solely by Maasai women, and they are rebuilt time and again whenever the village moves on, roughly every 10 years. All other household chores and the upbringing of the children are also carried out by the Maasai women. They traditionally protect their village and herds with two walls of dense thorny branches – the construction of these is also the women’s responsibility. The men look after the livestock, namely

goats, sheep and cattle – the Masai's greatest asset and source of pride. Jakob also mentioned that the chief was very wealthy; he alone owns cows worth over 50,000 USD, and he also has six wives – each with her own household, of course – and 29 children – the Masai's greatest wealth. Slowly but surely, we began to realise just how different the world was here... Afterwards, the Maasai demonstrated the traditional method of drawing blood from cattle using a bow and arrow, whereby a small amount of blood was taken from the cow, collected in a hollowed-out gourd, mixed with milk and immediately drunk by one of the children.

Back at our camp that evening, a group of young Maasai warriors came to pay us a return visit and showed us some traditional dances. As part of a sort of apprenticeship lasting around 10 years, between the ages of 16 and 26, during which they are expected to learn martial arts and gain experience, the young men travel in groups from village to village and, as warriors, are held in the highest regard. Whenever they enter a village, they always perform a dance, which they showed us first. As it used to be traditional for a young Maasai warrior to have killed a lion before he was allowed to marry, they next showed us the dance depicting the lion hunt. A lead singer narrated the story, and the warriors joined in rhythmically in many-part harmony. The way they fervently sang, stamped their feet and thrust their spears as they surrounded the imaginary lion in an ever-tightening circle was truly spine-tingling! No wonder that even today lions still fear the Maasai and give their herds a wide berth! Another dance was about which of the warriors could jump the highest from a standing start – after all, he would have first choice among the village women! I found the whole spectacle by the campfire wild, thrilling, exotic, primal, fascinating and yet frightening at the same time – definitely a very special experience that really got under your skin!

To top it all off, the starry night offered not only a gigantic, almost within reach, African starry sky but also a heavenly spectacle in the form of numerous shooting stars...



Wednesday, 27 July

An early farewell ride took us through the bush for about 1½ hours at a leisurely pace, to give the horses a bit of exercise one last time before their long journey home of about 9 hours in the horsebox.

Not only our horses, but we too faced an hour on an off-road track before we reached the tarmac road. But even the motorway turned out to be a tricky affair, as wide potholes kept appearing. It was only after another hour that we reached a motorway – the direct link to Uganda – whose tarmac surface was in much better condition, though it was teeming with traffic: dozens of lorries, overcrowded matatus and even donkey-drawn carts! Cows and zebras stood in a colourful mix by the roadside, alongside plenty of colourful stalls run by street vendors.

In the late afternoon, we arrived at Deloraine Estate. Here we encountered a completely different landscape with lush green meadows and vast fields that merged almost seamlessly into a huge, well-tended park and garden, featuring magnificently flowering ornamental shrubs and the finest English lawn, leading up to Deloraine Lodge. Picturesquely nestled amidst lush greenery stood the time-honoured manor house in typical colonial style, with its six guest rooms, each individually designed and furnished with antique furniture. We made our way up the wide, grand staircase to the large, covered terrace, where numerous sofas with soft cushions invited us to linger. Cindy, the lady of the house, not only gave us a warm welcome but also invited us straight away to tea. Afterwards, we took a tour of the grounds and, of course, visited the stables. After all, this was where our brave safari companions came from – horses that had not only carried us safely through the bush for nine days but had also grown very dear to all of us. Here at Deloraine, the horses are carefully trained and prepared for their demanding role in the bush – only the very best horses, some of which are also successful polo ponies, go on safari. Up to 90 horses frolic in the open stables and across the numerous pastures. And then our horses arrived at Deloraine too – full of joy, they stormed onto their home pasture!

We then began by enjoying the comfort of our bathrooms – what a pleasure it was to have a proper, long shower! Freshly groomed, we were then ready for the festive dinner in good company, before rounding off the evening in style in the fireside lounge with a few drinks and exciting safari tales.

Thursday, 28 July

We had a whole day to spend in Deloraine – and so many options that it was hard to choose. Before breakfast, we set off on a ride to wake ourselves up. We were able to swing back into the saddles of our trusty horses and ride through lush meadows that glistened emerald green in the golden morning light. A brisk gallop took us over an obstacle course laid out along a meadow. Jump after jump, we flew, as it were, over one bush after another. Slightly out of breath but absolutely thrilled, we returned to the lodge after our energetic morning ride – we'd certainly earned our breakfast!

Some of the guests had opted to visit Lake Nakuru National Park, about 45 minutes' drive away. The journey there was a real African adventure, taking them through the bustling little town of Nakuru. Cyclists, three-wheeled tuk-tuks, fully laden donkey carts, reckless pedestrians, crammed buses and matatus – there was absolutely everything on the road here, except for traffic lights and road signs!

The entrance to the national park was firmly in the hands of the monkeys! The dainty green monkeys were scampering about everywhere and even gave our jeep a thorough inspection. It was interesting to see the numerous school groups, easily recognisable by their school uniforms, out and about here. We'd found out that a big singing competition was taking place nearby – when we asked, a group of pupils even sang a song for us!



We then drove into the park, where we were greeted by the soft green of rare 'Yellow Acacia' forests. In glorious sunshine, we reached the silvery, shimmering salt lake with its pink rim, which, as we drew nearer, turned out to be teeming with flamingos! Numerous pelicans mingled amongst the flamingos; a herd of zebras came to drink from one of the freshwater tributaries; plenty of marabou storks waded through the shallow water; mighty buffalo plunged into the water amongst the flocks of birds; and we spotted white rhinos – which, sadly, are no longer to be seen in the Masai Mara – in the forest. There, we also watched numerous baboon families playing and grooming each other at length. I would have loved to spend the whole day in the park, which offered such an incredible abundance of wildlife against a magnificent backdrop! Back at Deloraine, we enjoyed an exquisite lunch in the garden by the pool, as well as some time to relax. In the evening, we were given the chance to try our hand at a taster polo session! We were provided with new horses and given instructions on how to hold the wooden mallet and the

striking technique – then off we went onto the polo field. Everyone had a chance to practise a bit with a ball of their own. My polo pony was quite a character, as every time I struck the ball, it thought it had to gallop towards the goal – even though I'd either missed the ball entirely or hit it far too weakly, so that instead of flying 50 metres like the pros do, it just rolled a few metres. Well, a proper professional polo horse with a complete polo novice in the saddle... Still, I had a lot of fun and it really whetted my appetite for the game! And my horse probably, out of sheer pity, gave the ball a nudge with its hooves every now and then when I'd missed the ball yet again!

Friday, 29 July

Another early morning ride made our farewell a little sweeter. After lunch, it was sadly time to set off. A good three hours' adventurous drive to Nairobi meant the time flew by. But once we arrived in Nairobi, it was time to say our final goodbyes, which wasn't easy after 11 days of shared adventures and experiences. Luckily for me, there was still an extension to come, with a riding safari in Amboseli National Park – but that's another story...

Lara

All the details about the trip: <http://www.equitour.com/mmr011.htm>