

Kenya: Masai Mara & the Great Rift Valley

Arguably the most adventurous horseback safari in the world, 30 July–8 August 2012

Captivated and slightly tense, I peer through the horse's ears – the lioness stares back at us just as intently. She is crouched on a rocky outcrop just a few metres in front of us. The fact that we are all standing near a precipice, with her cubs sheltering in a rock face steeply below, does little to ease the tension. But Jakob, our experienced guide, reassures us and even ventures a little closer to her. Minutes pass – minutes filled with awe, joy and fascination. When we finally tear our eyes away from her and turn to leave, we still can hardly believe it. But that wasn't the only surprise that morning: A few moments later, we come across some of the attentive camp staff, who are preparing a magnificent bush breakfast for us by the campfire in the middle of the wilderness. Adventure interspersed with culinary highlights – that's how one could sum up our horseback safari through the Masai Mara in Kenya in a few words. However, I wouldn't want to deprive you of the full story.



At the end of July, I set off on my long-awaited trip to East Africa, with an overnight stopover in Bahrain. Upon arriving in Nairobi, the driver from the charming Wildebeest Camp was already waiting for me; there I would be staying for the next two nights in a cosy tent with a magnificent view of a small pond and an inviting camp terrace. The next day, Joe showed me the

highlights of Nairobi. We start at the Giraffe Centre, where, from a terrace, you can look deep into the eyes of one of the tame giraffes; sometimes – as was the case for me – it even leads to a kiss – or at least that’s how it feels when the noble animal nicks the treats I’ve tucked between my lips.

We then head on to the David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust, the Baby Elephant Orphanage, where we watch motherless baby elephants being fed – simply adorable. The slightly older ones hold their milk bottles firmly wrapped around their trunks without any help at all – a delightful sight. After lunch at Margarita House, we then follow in the footsteps of Karen Blixen at her former home, which is now open to the public as a museum. Afterwards, we’re treated to a fascinating guided tour of the Kazuri Bead Factory, where orphans and women craft enchanting jewellery. Finally, we go on an action-packed jeep safari through Nairobi National Park – it’s a rare opportunity to watch giraffes at sunset against the backdrop of a major city’s skyline!

The following morning, on the first day of the horseback safari, our group meets at Wilson Domestic Airport in Nairobi. Our adventure begins with a charter flight, offering us breathtaking views. We fly across the fertile Kikuyu Highlands and the volcano-dotted landscape of the Great Rift Valley until we finally reach the Loita Hills and Siana Springs, where we immediately meet some of the colourfully dressed Maasai. During our first jeep safari to the camp, over a refreshing Tusker, I get to know my fellow riders from the UK, Australia and the USA, as well as our Austrian-Argentinian guide Jakob, a little better. We also meet Nati, who, dressed in his magnificent traditional costume, always sits right at the front on the jeep’s roof, scanning the landscape for animals with his eagle eyes. What makes this trip special is that we’re sitting on the roof of the jeep; whilst this isn’t particularly comfortable, it does offer an excellent vantage point – and puts us at eye level with the elephants. Along the way, there are magnificent, endless expanses, a few shy yet curious wild animals, and the constant jolting of the vehicle – you’ll need to hold on tight to your beer, and to yourself, if you don’t want to be thrown off the vehicle at the next pothole...

The first of our three camps is idyllically situated on the southern edge of the Loita Plains near Olare Lamun, in a breezy little acacia grove. It smells so good here – fresh and spicy! The safari atmosphere is perfect: in front of our khaki-green tents, beneath a small canopy, a ‘washbasin’ awaits us – a tarpaulin shaped and supported by sticks, filled with lukewarm water. A small mirror dangles makeshiftly from a corner of the tent above it. The comfort is complemented by a slightly worn safari chair and a rustic version of a dressing table – fitted as standard with a colourful Kenyan tablecloth, a mirror, soap, a paraffin lamp, mosquito repellent and matches. In front of the tent, true to style, is a small rug, and inside is a camp bed with a small bedside table and a large rug. Each tent also has its own ‘toilet’: a hole has been dug specifically for this purpose, a simple stool with a hole in the middle has been placed over it, and the small tent has then been pulled over the whole thing. Flushing is done using a sort of wooden spoon and soil – a toilet brush is unnecessary. The two shower tents are also unique, yet practical, constructions: standing on a sort of wooden pallet, you turn a

tap, whereupon the water – previously heated over the fire – splashes down from the bucket onto you.

On this day and the following one, we go on lively horse rides around the camp and are amazed by quite a few elephants, giraffes, zebras and many other animals – the variety and density of wildlife here are enormous!

Sometimes we also come across herders with quite large herds of cattle and even witness a bullfight on one occasion. I ride Sorrel, a small, clever grey mare who seems quite calm, but who becomes a completely different horse at a gallop when allowed to give free rein to her passion for racing. We become a good team, so that in the end we find it hard to part ways...

On the second day, we venture up a small hill in the jeeps, from where we let our gaze wander over the seemingly endless expanse whilst sipping a Tusker from the chilled jeep bar. On the way back, we stop at a Maasai village, where we buy various handicrafts made by children and women and spend a while playing with the little ones. Afterwards, in a hut shrouded in complete darkness, Jakob describes the daily life of the Maasai to us. As we step back out into the light, we witness a picturesque spectacle against a magnificent sunset: the herdsman drive the cows past us into their corral, which was built in the middle of the village to protect the animals from big cats. Later at the camp, after an excellent dinner under the starry sky and by candlelight, the men from the same tribe pay us another visit.

Around the campfire, they delight us with their singing, their dancing and their brightly coloured clothes.



The following day, an eventful 50-kilometre ride lies ahead of us. Until our lunch break – when we're met by the camp jeep laden with a variety of food and drink, which also has comfortable cushions ready for us so we can make ourselves comfortable on the grass – the wildlife remains somewhat hidden. But immediately afterwards, they appear in droves. For example, we have the pleasure of galloping side by side with giraffes and wildebeest, racing each other. Our encounter just a few minutes before reaching the second camp, on the edge of the Masai Wildlife Reserve at Olare Orok, is also particularly impressive. At first, we spot only a herd of buffalo consisting of several dozen of these powerful beasts. But a moment later, we also spot the four lions lurking a little further back in the grass, never taking their eyes off these magnificent creatures for a second. A solitary elephant completes this fascinating scene. We tentatively approach the buffaloes to within arm's length and, a little later, venture quite close past the pride of lions – pure goosebumps! Back at camp, the next highlight awaits us straight away: a sundowner against a blood-red sunset, with a view stretching all the way to Tanzania! But the evening isn't over after the sumptuous dinner: in the spirit of adventure, we set off on a party night game drive on the roof of the jeep to the sounds of James Brown – and get stuck! So we set about looking for stones to free the wheels from the depths of the potholes, which we eventually manage to do after a while. Afterwards, we head back to camp, where the evening draws to a cosy close around the campfire.

Over the following days, we experience even more of the countless wild animals on exhilarating horse rides as well as on jeep safaris – the latter usually accompanied by atmospheric background music. It is during this time that the encounter with the lioness described at the beginning takes place. Before that, we get to meet her adorable cubs on the aforementioned rock face. As if our rides, with their many wildlife encounters, weren't exciting enough, we also have the chance to jump over rough and rugged terrain on horseback – a real treat for both horse and rider!

Finally, another change of camp – the last one. Across the Mara Plains and varied terrain, we reach the Mara River, again with a picnic lunch and a siesta along the way (given the high density of wildlife in the area, a certain degree of composure is required to doze off in the grass here...). The third and final camp far exceeds our expectations: situated right on the Mara River, we can watch the hippos grunting merrily from our tents, practically from the comfort of our beds. There are so many of them here that it's hard to count them all. But a few crocodiles also make an appearance – crouching motionless on the misshapen rocks in the river. One evening, a camp staff member alerts us to a cheetah up to its old tricks not far from the camp. In a flash, we're in and on the jeep, keeping an eye on it with the help of a bright safari light. Over a cool Tusker, something we'd never have imagined unfolds before our eyes: the cheetah lies in wait for an antelope, then lunges – and snatches it. We watch at close quarters the individual stages of the kill and the subsequent consumption, all of which follows a very specific pattern. However, the big cat cannot savour its prey in peace, as hyenas are lying in wait, having already caught the scent of the

have already caught the scent of the 'roast'. Although she tries to defend her prey with hisses and her characteristic behaviour, the hyenas eventually wrest the antelope from her.

The next day, we pluck up our courage and venture into the currents of the Mara River for a swim. It's a bit unnerving when you think of the crocodiles and hippos further upstream... Later, we finally cross the river on horseback – Jakob, who prefers to ride in flip-flops, cracks his whip loudly against the water a few times to keep the hippos at bay, and so the crossing goes almost without a hitch. Only one horse stumbles – at least that means one less person has to wonder what order the showers will be in today. The final dinner is particularly lovely. Afterwards, we entertain ourselves with a series of fun games until we all have faces blackened in various ways by candle soot.



On the final day, one last unforgettable ride awaits us – today, for me, on Gigalo to give Sorrel a break. After one last exhilarating ride on the jeep roof and a sad farewell, we board the charter flight – and finally, for me, the onward journey to Tanzania – but that's another story. The Masai Mara will remain unforgettable to me – the up-close wildlife encounters, the delicious delicacies from the simple bush kitchen, the feeling of freedom and boundlessness as you roam the vast expanses on horseback or on the jeep roof to the sound of music, the friendly people and, last but not least, our brilliant group.

Lara von Breidenbach

You can find all the information about the trip at
http://www.equitour.com/pegasus/d/reisen/afrika/tans_ken/mmr011.htm