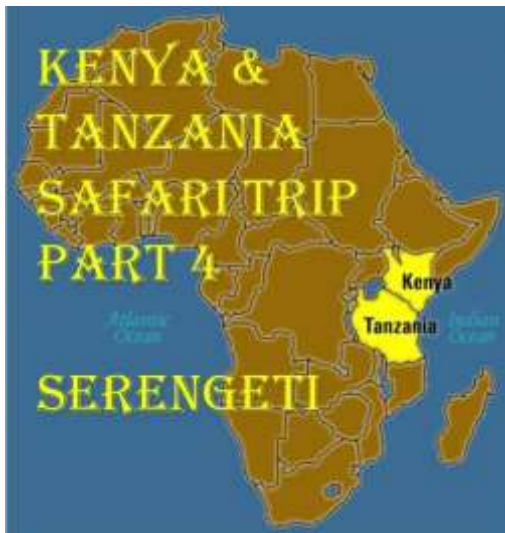


September 2017

Dear All,

At the end of part 3 of this journal we had been visiting the Ngorongoro Crater and were now on our way to the Serengeti. We had made a stop at Oldupai Gorge and were taking a short cut from there to the park's entrance. Ayoub, our guide in Tanzania, was keen to get to the gate quickly as entering the park involves much paperwork and the fewer before us in the queue the better.



This was open, flat country with widely spaced and spindly acacia trees, mixed with rocks and dust holes, very similar to Australia's savannah country. For us, the track was similar to those leading to mines in the Aussie Outback, interesting driving in the dry, probably too interesting in the wet.



We'd heard that the Serengeti had experienced heavy rain a few days earlier. On the downside, some of the tracks in the park might be difficult, but the upside was that the smell of rain might cause some of the zebras and wildebeest to begin their migration back to the Serengeti from the Masai Mara.

We rejoined the main road into the park with its bonejarring washboard. At the entrance the parking area was crowded with safari vehicles and wandering tourists. Ayoub said we had at least a half hour to eat our packed lunch, and he pointed out a couple of buildings that sold drinks and souvenirs.



One of them had a dead-looking coffee machine. I asked for two lattes and paid in dollars. The attendant left and the coffee

machine came to life; he'd started the generator. They were surprisingly good lattes.



We found a spot to eat in the shade and were joined by a half dozen superb starlings. I've shown them before in this journal but these pictures really show off the iridescent back and those eyes, willing us to drop our food.

Ayoub suggested that we stay in the southern part of the park for the rest of the day. The lodge is centrally placed so we could explore that part of the park the next day. We hadn't yet seen either leopards or rhinos and the southern section would be our best chance for rhinos. He added that the chance was slim; few visitors get to see one.

We entered the park through the arch and soon turned off the main road into an area of large rocks and rocky



hillocks; leopards sometimes sit on top where they can scan for prey. We didn't see any but there were other things to keep us interested. Two white-headed vultures gazed out from a flat-topped acacia. An aloe showed off its red flowers against a brown landscape.



We were already familiar with the koji bustard but were surprised to find that the Serengeti has black-bellied bustards too. A bigger surprise though was this lilac-breasted roller. When did you ever hear of any kind of lilac coloured bird? This one has a similar shape to a kingfisher and has turquoise-blue underparts.



Off on the horizon, giraffes were practicing their geometric skills.





And then Ayoub pointed to a distant hillside, thinly populated with large trees, “Rhino, maybe two rhinos.” It took a while for Sandie to see them, and even longer for me, but eventually we agreed that there were actually three of them, perhaps a cow and two young, not necessarily both hers. They were a long way away, so we were having to guess. Similarly, the photos are grainy, just good enough to confirm that they were rhinos.

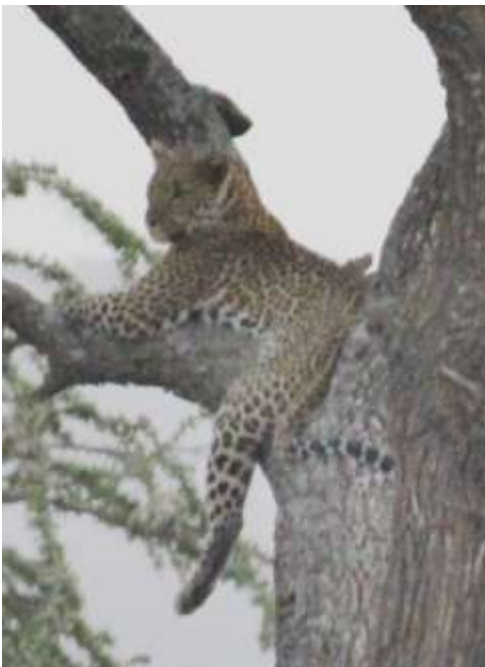


We know that these were black rhinos as the Serengeti has no white



rhinos. The names are confusing as they have nothing to do with colour: white rhinos have wide mouths for grazing while black rhinos have narrow mouths for browsing.

We’d hoped to see a rhino and we’d seen three! Part of that is due to luck of course, but most is due to Ayoub’s sharp eyesight and his knowing where to look.



After nearly an hour of rhino gazing, Ayoub heard on the radio that lions had been seen in a tree. Although most of Africa’s lions stay on the ground there are a few prides in the Serengeti that will climb

trees, either to get away from bugs or to watch for prey.



After driving up and down scanning the trees we found no lions but we did find a leopard. This one was resting in a tree, occasionally moving its head to scan in the other direction, but otherwise motionless. We stayed watching for a little while but it was hard to see with the sun behind it. Moving on, we found the lions.

If these had been the lions that had been in the tree, they were there no longer. Instead, they were asleep in the long grass beneath a tree. For a while all we could see were ears and backs and flicking tails but then one lioness got up to change position and I snapped that one glimpse.



And then we found another leopard, also in the branches of a tree but more difficult to see. Ayoub said that the leopard's last kill was also in the tree, though I couldn't see it.

We began making our way back towards the main road and



the route to the lodge, but minutes later we were stalled by a gathering of birds crossing the road to drink. They were yellow throated sandgrouse, a hundred of them. It was all very orderly; each flock would land on the road and walk across into the muddy water.



Eventually Ayoub had to slowly thread his way through the gathering. There



were more stops for birds and animals, a red necked spurfowl, some



ostriches, and this group of baboons. Look closely and you will see baby baboons in all the pictures.



We were running out of time as we had to be off the road by 7pm or we might get treated as poachers. But there was so much to see. We ignored or took distant pictures of elephants and more giraffes and the herds of wildebeest and zebra and buffalo. Then came a radio report of a leopard on the ground nearby and that could not be ignored.

The leopard came so close to the line of safari vehicles that it would have been easier to stroke it than take a picture. It was too close for my long lens to focus. It stayed on the road, perilously close to our wheels for a while, and then calmly

stalked off into the long grass and disappeared.

Now the schedule was even tighter and we were going to make no more stops. The light had almost gone anyway. Somewhere along the way we saw this lion though I have no memory of taking this single picture; it may have been a drive-by shooting.

Ayoub was rocketing along. He was also pretty pumped by all that we'd seen. He pointed out that Tano Safaris had lived up to its name. Tano in Swahili means five, and big game hunters used to talk about the "Big Five", elephants, buffalo, lions, leopards, and rhinos. We had seen all of the Big Five in one afternoon. We were just happy to have seen three rhinos and three leopards.



The Serena Lodge is on a hill and the approach road had been washed out by the recent rain. So we rushed up it at walking pace. We were glad to be in a Landcruiser. We beat the curfew by five minutes.

The lodge reception staff said we were welcome to walk out to our rooms as it was (just) daylight but we must call for a security escort if we wanted to walk anywhere after dark. That included going to and from dinner. They explained that the lodge is unfenced so wildlife is free to walk through the grounds. Sure enough, the gardens were full of dik-diks, little antelopes, who probably felt safer with all the humans around.

The rooms are in "rondavels", based on traditional East African dwellings, but without the dung-based mortar (we hoped). They are arranged in a circle around the gardens and swimming pool.

Our room's décor was styled after Makonde art. It had a balcony that looked out forever, which is what "Serengeti" means in Maa, the language of the Masai. There are over a



hundred such tribal languages in Tanzania, but the official language of the country is Swahili, originally a trade

language based on Arabic, now a lingua franca for all of East Africa.



The dining room and bar are in larger versions of the rondavel, across the gardens from ours. When it was time for dinner we summoned our security escort, wondering whether he'd show up with a traditional spear or the ubiquitous AK-47; he had

neither, but delivered us safely. After dinner, we appreciated the escort back to our room as we might not have found it in the dark.

Thursday September 21st

Our schedule called for morning and afternoon game drives, but we'd told Ayoub that we were so stuffed with food that we'd be happy to stay out all day and skip lunch. He compromised by ordering a packed lunch for us all, so we were going to spend all day in the Serengeti.



It was a warm sunny morning, but the tracks bore evidence of the recent rainstorm. Ayoub confirmed that the rain has started the reverse migration, the return of wildebeest and zebra from the Masai Mara in Kenya to the Serengeti in Tanzania.

Our first evidence of wildlife was definitely dead, a skeleton that had recently been picked clean. We'd see many more in the Serengeti, an ecosystem with millions of prey animals and thousands of predators eager to dine on them.



We saw this magnificent impala, with fearsome horns. Less magnificent but definitely cute was this dik-dik, with just its head poking out of the undergrowth. Dik-diks are the Snickers bar of Africa, a tasty snack for just about every predator, including humans.



We saw our first hornbills, a Van der Decken's with a red splash across its bill and a yellow billed. While we were looking, this weaver bird landed in front of us, a white-headed buffalo weaver.



We came across a big gathering of impalas, mostly females and calves, all dainty gazelles. Mixed in were a few hartebeest, not as elegant, looking to me like a cartoonist's rendering of an antelope.





This giraffe was browsing on the shoots of the whistling acacia, loaded with two inch thorns. Even worse, some of the branches have galls full of biting ants which come out to defend their home tree. Maybe that's the reason for the giraffe's sour expression. The other picture shows a giraffe drinking, hard to do when your head is usually 16 feet up.



We were now on the great plain of the Serengeti, with grazing animals as far as the eye could see. The scenery was quite varied though, with distant hills and the occasional line of trees following a stream. Roads were gravel, mostly good except for recent rain damage.

Both zebras and wildebeests were on the move, the zebras



moving as a clump and the wildebeest in long lines. The two species do not compete; zebras like to eat the top of the longer grasses while



wildebeest prefer to eat the short grass. It's obviously best if the zebra get to the grass first. We stayed still watching the movement. As so often happens, staying still means other things happen around you, like this mongoose returning to its roadside lair, and some white-bellied bustards came by. Yes that's the third kind of bustard we'd seen here.



Ayoub took us out to a side road where we had wildebeest lines passing on either side of us. The leaders zigzag rather than stick to a straight line, and the rest plod along the same path. Occasionally they'd break into a canter, presumably more from exuberance than fear as there was no obvious threat. They stayed fifty yards or so away from us, more wary than the lions.

Our watching was interrupted by a radio message that said a pack of wild dogs had been sighted. Ayoub was excited about this; he said such sightings were rare. We said to



go take a look; we could always come back to the wildebeest.

On our way there we crossed a small river, with lots of immersed hippos and lively looking and large Nile crocodiles. The one in the end-on picture may look to be sleeping but both eyes are open and focused on a potential lunch: us on the bridge.





The wild dogs were there as promised, a pack of ten or so. Ayoub drove us as close as the road allowed, but the dogs were distant dots, definitely dog-shaped but impossible to see coat colours and patterns. It looked like they were searching for a tree big enough for them all to get in the shade. They'd gather under one tree until about a halfdozen were there but then move on to another tree. We watched them working their way across a hillside until they disappeared.

They hunt as a pack, chasing an antelope until it collapses from exhaustion and bites to its legs. There's concern that the packs are becoming too isolated for the



inter-pack breeding that's needed for a healthy population. Wikipedia even says that the wild dogs "may no longer occur" in the Serengeti. We'd struck lucky again.



On our way back we spotted another line of animals crossing a hillside. These were topi, large antelopes with a hump and a slope towards their rears. We have a better topi picture at the end of our Serengeti story.



Sandie was scanning the roadside and finding a few flowers, rare at this time of the year, the end of the dry season. There was nothing exciting, mostly variants of the pea, and potato, and hibiscus, but I've captured them here. Of course, this intrigued others that passed us "What have you seen?". "A flower". A disappointed "Oh."



We were making our way towards the valley of the Seronera River. Ayoub said the area had a large lion population and we might as well settle down there and eat lunch and see what happens. However it took us a while to get there as we kept stopping to look at distractions. Sandie found this dik-dik, similar to those hanging around in the lodge's gardens.

These water bucks were showing of their shaggy coats.



We'd seen these hornbill species before but I couldn't



resist the pictures; hornbills have an air of authority and these two looked like they commanded their branches



This termite mound looked very similar to those in parts of Australia, and these termites were harmless too.



These zebra were gathered close to the river.

It was time for lunch and this was our distant view of the other side of the valley. Those bumps under the tree were lions and they were also scanning the valley. Between us and the lions was the Seronera River, mostly hidden by shrubs.



This is what became known as the story of the Lions and the Crocodile. While we were eating lunch, close to the Seronera River, a couple of lionesses came down to a rocky area closer to the river.



Eventually they left their perch and came towards us along the riverbank. One of the lionesses was wearing a radio collar.



The other was moving in and out of the reeds and shrubs, invisible for much of the time.



Small groups of elephants dotted the hillside. There were herds of zebra, wildebeest, and gazelles all around the river, some coming down for a drink.



The lionesses hid in the bushes around the river and waited for someone to make a mistake.



Many times zebras would come down close to the lions and then seem to catch a whiff of lion scent and gallop away to safety.

Four more lionesses came down to help with the hunt and some of them managed to get down wind of the zebra herds.



A lioness burst out of the bushes and charged a group of Tommies (Thomson's gazelles). The Tommies scattered and the lioness gave up. The Tommies regrouped but looked to be in shock.



After tens of minutes of not seeing a lion these charges only last seconds, so catching them with the camera is unlikely, but we were ready for the next one a few minutes later. Another lioness charged a group of zebras and everything disappeared in the dust as they panicked and ran.



This was another failure for photography as the lioness is somewhere in that dust. It looked to be a failure for the lions too, as by now every animal in the valley had to be on alert. We thought the show was over but another pair of lionesses had taken advantage of the confusion to take down one of the zebras on the river bank. When we got close one lioness had the zebra's neck in a choke hold and the other was opening up the other end. The zebra's legs waggled a few times and then went limp.



One of the lionesses set off up the hill, probably to invite the rest of the pride to the meal.



Another couple of lionesses came out of hiding and joined the meal. After a minute or two of enthusiastic chewing, something caught their eye.



Amazingly, a large Nile crocodile came lunging open-mouthed out of the river and challenged the lionesses for the kill.



Crocodiles can move very fast.



And before the lions could stop it, the croc got its teeth into the zebra carcass.



But watch the lion at the back that's close to the croc's front leg.



I think that open mouth is the croc language for "Ouch!" or maybe "I'm gonna get you for that!", because its next move was to lunge at the lion.



The other lions took this opportunity to drag the zebra carcass away from the river, and, annoyingly for us, behind some bushes. Another lioness set off up the hill, maybe to ask for help.



The croc went in again. It disappeared into the bushes and all we could see was its tail.



The bird next to the croc is an Egyptian Goose, unworried by all the activity, but that wasn't true for the elephants. The separate groups had come together and formed a defensive circle with the calves safely inside.



Back at the zebra, the lions were feeding messily and apparently ignoring the croc.



There was a dusty tug of war going on behind the bushes, with the crocodile trying to pull the carcass into the river, where it could do its usual revolving trick to tear the carcass into bits it could swallow. It looked like a stalemate but now the rest of the pride, lionesses and cubs, were arriving.



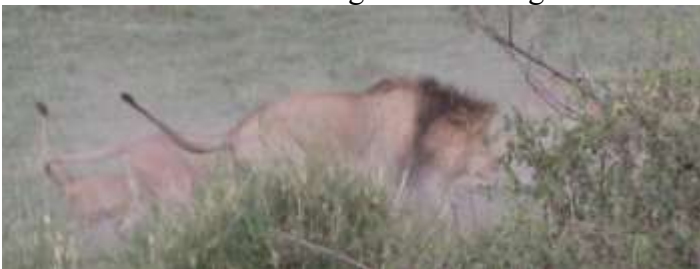
Most of the zebra disappeared under a pile of lions, but if you look to the right, the croc is still there!



The lions would jostle the croc but it wasn't letting go. It looked to be a stand-off, but finally help arrived, a male lion.



The male lion, large and assertive, went straight to the crocodile and attacked it. The dust was flying and we could see the lion's mane repeatedly lunging and the crocodile's teeth snapping. We think one of the lionesses was also biting the croc's legs.



After about four lunges, the crocodile appeared to give up and make a run for it.



The croc wasn't finished though as it made a lightning turn ...



...and then a lunge at the male lion.



The lunge missed but the lions backed off. They didn't need to kill the croc, just chase it off the kill.



The croc backed up away from the carcass and the male lion sat down with his back to the croc, perhaps a deliberate insult? Meanwhile the pride fed on the carcass undisturbed. Ayoub thought the male must have been full already to be letting the rest of the pride eat before him.



The croc gave up completely at this point and slunk down the bank into the river. One of the smaller lions came over to look down on it and roar lion insults from its safe position.



More lions were still coming down to the kill. There was no rush; it was likely that there was enough prey in the valley to keep them all well fed.



And so ended the story of the lions and the crocodile.



The story takes only a few minutes to read, but from the time we saw the first lions until we moved on, four and a half hours had elapsed. We weren't watching this by ourselves either. The picture shows a different story. There was a similar traffic jam on our other side. We were hemmed in from the time we spotted the lions on the zebra, but we'd had no desire to leave our pole position.

We didn't see much else during this but a white crowned shrike came to visit.



We continued along the road and saw even more lions in groups under the trees. One of them, a lioness, jumped into a large tree and proceeded to climb up three forks and into the canopy, where she snuggled down like a leopard. I only caught one picture of her on the way up. Once into the canopy she's hard to see so I've added an arrow pointing to her tail.

Bear this in mind; if being chased by a lion, climbing a tree just puts you in the larder! This climbing behavior is supposed to be unique to the Serengeti's lions, but I wouldn't bank on that!



We were making our way back to the lodge when we started to feel bites. “Tsetse flies”, said Ayoub. I asked if they carried sleeping sickness, but he said they didn’t in the Serengeti. He asked if we wanted to stop and pull the roof panel down, but we said no as we were enjoying the breeze. This was a big mistake! We soon had dozens inside. They are large and bite like a horsefly. Whacking them doesn’t work as they quickly recover and bite somewhere else. You have to chop them in half with your fingernail. We were slightly better off than Ayoub as our clothes had been treated, but none of us had bug spray on our skin. Eventually we left the fly zone, something to do with the boggy ground we thought.

We came to this sad sight, a buffalo calf lying in the mud. It looks dead in the picture, but it was still moving feebly. You feel like you should do something but of course it’s against the rules. Even if we could haul it out, it would probably just collapse. There was also



a chance that one ton of mama buffalo might be close by and misunderstand our intentions.



We thanked Ayoub for an outstanding day and arranged for yet another early start; he would be driving us to catch our plane to the Masai Mara.

For once we were back early enough to have time after dinner to drink some beer on our balcony and gaze out over the Serengeti. It was dark but we could hear the sounds. We must have left the door open as this spider came visiting while I was processing the day’s pictures. It looked like a wolf spider, a bit bigger than those I had in my flat in England, but probably harmless. I tried to wrestle it outside but it was

faster than me, so I just made sure that the mosquito net around our bed was snug.

Friday September 22

We were up well before dawn again. The dining room opens at 6.30 am to accommodate early game drives. Unfortunately, it was cool and breezy enough to blow the flames out on the food warmers, so breakfast was tasty but cold and we didn’t have enough time to get it warmed.

This picture gives some idea of how our mornings would start, with the safari guides coming up to reception to pick up the clients. That’s me with Ayoub.



Ayoub said we had about an hour’s drive, bouncing over some of the same roads we’d used the previous day to get to the airfield. We said we wanted to leave some time to rearrange our luggage if we were exceeding the weight limits. He laughed “The airlines don’t even have scales. They quote those limits to make sure you don’t show up with a massive amount of luggage.”

The buffalo calf was gone and nearby we saw this rack of ribs. The savannah's recyclers had done their job.

We didn't stop very often as we had a plane to catch but we had to have this close up view of some topis. We'd seen topis at a distance the previous afternoon, marching up a distant hillside.



The airfield is called Seronera, same as the river. It was more comfortable than I expected, with a waiting room and someone making coffee to order. Security was casual; if you wanted to go outside and walk into a propeller nobody would stop you. We passengers were all confused but somehow everything worked.

We said goodbye to Ayoub and gave him a memory stick with some of the lions and crocodiles pictures. He'd looked after us very well and we'd had a great four days in Tanzania.

We were flying on Coastal Air in a 12 passenger single prop Cessna. This plane would hop around the Serengeti picking up passengers at various airfields and then take us to Tarime where we'd be driving across the border in a van into Kenya to pick up another flight to the Masai Mara. We'll describe that trip in Part 5 of this journal.



Love to you all from Pete and Sandie

PS

That evening I got an email from Elvira at Tano Safaris, asking how we were doing and asking us to say hello to the lions for her. I replied that we'd lost count of how many lions we'd seen, and I sent her one of our lions and crocodile pictures. Along with some of the files I gave to Ayoub, these pictures are now on TANO's website.

