

September 2017



Dear All,

We were on our way to Kenya and the Masai Mara. At the end of Part 4 we had said goodbye to Ayoub, our guide in Tanzania, and climbed aboard Coastal Air's 12-passenger single propeller Cessna at the Serengeti national park's Seronera airstrip.

Friday September 22nd continued

We'd been asked to remember which hatch our checked luggage went into and we soon realized why; we wouldn't be

getting off until the plane's third stop at Tarime. The planes are like shared taxis; they follow a rough schedule to and from the Serengeti but the actual airstrips and times depend upon which lodges are involved. It's similar to the flights we had between lodges in the Falkland Islands.

The planes have a netted area by the door for carry-on baggage, which you'd better leave there as hauling it along the very narrow aisle while you're bent over for the low ceiling is not easy. There are four rows of three seats tucked in right behind the pilot.

Airfields have a single gravel runway, a parking area, and sometimes a grass hut for shade. We landed at Lobo and Kogatende, both within the park, and about twenty minutes apart. There is no ground control: the pilot just growls "Traffic!" into the radio to warn any other pilot to look out for a moving aircraft. Then we crossed this agricultural area and landed at Tarime, close to the border with Kenya.



We grabbed our luggage and an airline van took us and

another safari group to the border at Isibania. There we had to formally exit from Tanzania and re-enter Kenya. Despite already having visas for Kenya, the latter was a lengthy process as the border guard read every page of our passports. There was a luggage scanner too but it wasn't working. Our luggage was moved to another van with another driver and helper and we crossed through the gate into Kenya.



And stopped. A market lines the road right up to the gates and someone had double parked, right in front of the gates. With lots of shouting and honking the driver was located and urged to move his truck before something nasty happened to it.

We had another short drive to the airfield at Migori. We had at least a half hour wait for the airplane, so we went and sat in the shade of a grass hut and ate the rest of our packed lunches. Garbage was dropped into a convenient hole. Bushes were available for those that needed the toilet.

We were talking with some Chinese Americans from the other safari party and they asked what we'd seen in the Serengeti. Of course, we were bubbling over with stories of rhinos and leopards, and lions fighting with a crocodile. They were visibly upset by our stories as their experience had been dismal. Their guide had no radio so could not pick up sightings by other guides and his technique for finding rhinos was to park for hours and wait for one to appear. It made us realize how lucky we'd been to have guides like Nzuki and Ayoub who were willing to work hard to find animals. Their final indignity had been a flat tyre on the way to the airfield and a driver who didn't seem to know what to do.



They asked how much we'd spent for our private 12 day safari and ours had cost about a third less than theirs of a similar length and one fewer park. We concluded that their American tour company had applied their own markup. However there's a risk in dealing with a local company as we'd found that we could not get cancellation insurance. If we hadn't had the recommendation from Ryan and Christina then we probably wouldn't have taken the risk. As it was we were delighted by TANO's people and their service.

Our plane arrived, a twin engine Otter operated by Air Kenya's Safarilink. Most of the pilots we had on our flights were white men but it was good to see that our co-pilot on this flight was a



black woman. Our flight took us along the Mara River directly to the airstrip for the Masai Mara Serena Lodge. Ayoub had told us that we'd have Nzuki again for a guide but it was still a relief to see him waiting for us. It



was a short drive to the lodge and we arranged for a game drive in an hour.





Serena's lodge is quite different from the others we'd seen; with a great mosque-like hall decorated with Masai designs and a spectacular view out across the golden Mara. Rooms are in a number of terraces off a complex of steps and patios. It's fenced so there's no need for security but the steps are tricky after dark. The staff there ushered us into lunch even though it was gone three. We felt obliged to eat something even though

this was our second lunch and we weren't hungry.

We told Nzuki about all our days in Tanzania and the amazing dramas we'd seen, like the lions and the buffalo, and the lions and the crocodile, plus the rhinos and the leopards. I think he was wondering how he was going to keep our good luck going.



"Mara" means spotted and that it is: a golden plain covered with spots



of trees and shrubs. There are also hills and ridges covered in forest, and of course the famous Mara River winding through the park.

Nzuki took us upstream along the river. The river is supposed to be full of hippos and crocodiles and it certainly seemed that way as we saw them both at most viewpoints. The Nile crocodile is a splendid animal, but best viewed at a distance.

The Mara is the river that the wildebeest cross during their great migration to and from the Serengeti and its steep banks guarantee that there will be injured animals, easy prey for the crocodiles. There didn't seem to be any wildebeest or zebra around the river at this time though. The Mara seemed quiet after the Serengeti; perhaps the herds had already migrated?

But there were still new animals to be seen, particularly birds. Nzuki pointed "Bee eaters!" Sandie thought they were cute; I couldn't see them at all. My brain was looking for Australia's rainbow bee eaters, much larger birds and it was a long time before it accepted these little guys. They are called "little bee eaters" and yes they are cute.



We'd already seen plenty of buffalo on this trip, but this was the first to face us down. It seemed to be pondering whether to charge and knock us over. It has happened before to others but not this time.

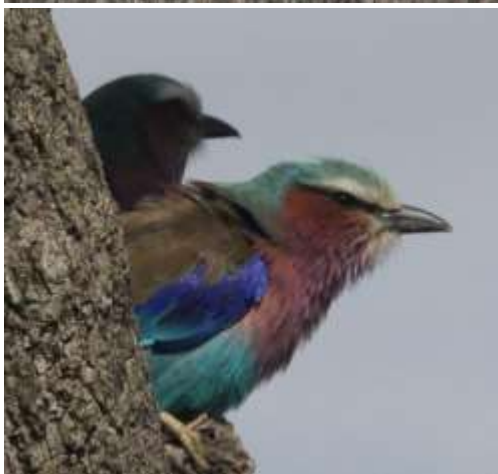


We had some close-ups of magnificent topi, the antelopes we'd seen in the Serengeti.



There were also plenty of elephants about, including some adorable little ones.





We saw a hyena on the prowl, always a chilling sight, more sinister somehow than the lions. Then we had a sequence of birds, a black-headed heron, and an



Egyptian goose, and some lilac-breasted rollers. We'd seen these in the Serengeti but this time we could really see their strange lilac colour.

A troop of baboons entertained us as they moved across the landscape and we found yet another kind of plover, the spur-winged plover.

The antelopes with the splendid horns are elands. We'd seen elands before on this trip but never close



enough to note their odd knee patches.

The yellow bird has two names, the parasitic weaver and the cuckoo finch, clues that the bird has a habit of laying eggs in another weaver bird's nest. It doesn't make cuckoo-like noises though.



We found another hyena, this one snuggled down contentedly in its



nest. Perhaps we spent too much time looking as its expression changed to a frown of irritation.



We found more birds: a black-bellied bustard, what we think is a white-browed coucal, and a spurfowl.



We were quite happy with how much we'd seen but Nzuki was determined to find more for us. Unlike the other parks we'd visited, the Mara allows off-road driving in the low traffic areas away from the river, and Nzuki was taking us between trees and through gullies. Finally he hit the jackpot, a pride of lions. The light had almost gone, but the lions were still enough for some of our pictures to come out.





Yes, it was a beautiful sunset. Of course, we arrived back at the lodge too late to look around outside. It had been a long day, starting with breakfast in the Serengeti. Our personal migration to the Mara had been longer but faster than the wildebeests'.

It was tough to stay awake long enough to download the day's pictures. Outside we could hear odd growling noises, but not lions, something different.

Saturday September 23rd

We had an early 7 am start as Nzuki had to leave in mid-afternoon to drive the van up to Samburu to meet us from our flight the next morning. He turned in the other direction this time, to follow the Mara River downstream. There was an immediate difference; this part of the Mara had much more wildlife.



We saw herds of zebras and some tight-knit groups of wildebeest. They may have been getting ready to cross the river but there's no way to know, so we moved on.



There were herds of impala mixed with elephants and topi and waterbuck. This was going to be a good day.





And then we encountered a pride of lions at their kill site. They'd eaten most of a zebra and it looked like one of the lionesses was trying to pull the remaining carcass into the shade. As Joanna commented when I posted this on Facebook, "Looks like the ears are a delicacy."

The cubs looked like 8-year-old boys plotting mischief. They didn't want the carcass to disappear.



A tug of war developed and then a certain amount of correction was required.



After which, the lioness seemed to give up on moving the meal. The cubs had won.

We left the lions and moved on. A few minutes later Sandie spotted another lioness going down into a gully. Nzuki hadn't seen it and Sandie had to insist that it really had been a lioness. Nzuki drove into the gully to check it out.





Sure enough, it was a lioness, and she went down to the water to drink. When she was done, she came out of the water with a mighty leap and then she was gone. Our exit wasn't as graceful though as we backed onto the remains of a termite mound, with the differential stuck on top and both drive wheels airborne. Nzuki was out looking for rocks and sticks he could wedge under the wheels; our job was to watch for lions and anything else that might want to eat him. Eventually we came free with a cloud of tyre smoke.

We came to an overlook of the Mara River, giving us views of its steep banks and the usual hippos in and out of the water. Look closely and you will see a crocodile too at the edge of the sand bar.

This was another, about fifteen feet of appetite.



We found this magnificent guinea fowl, perhaps the largest we've seen. Despite spending most of their time on the ground they are strong fliers,



which may be why it was ignoring this band of striped mongooses. (No, it's not mongeese.)



this croc lurking near the bridge and these marabou storks downstream, available for any clean-up duties.

We crossed the little bridge over the river into another area of the park. We saw





The bridge was guarded, presumably to prevent poaching. These were the pretty park buildings next to the bridge.

The bridge brought us to the sausage trees. Nzuki showed us one that had been opened and it was rather disappointing, a mass of fibrous pulp and large seeds, but the animals like

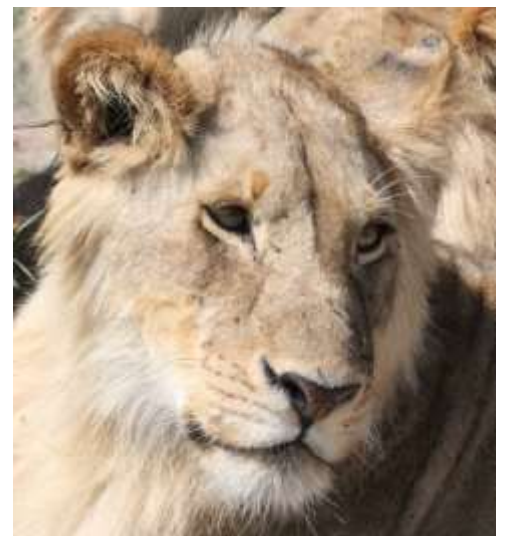


them.

This strange, large bird is another kind of hornbill, the ground hornbill.



We found a very different gathering of lions, four bachelors, just hanging



out and hoping one of the others would get up and go out and bring back a pizza, or a zebra or a wildebeest. Life is tough when you don't have lionesses around to do your hunting. That's why this one had posted his profile picture on an online mating site.



This hyena came prowling past, teeth bared in anticipation.

We found yet another lion, this one fast asleep in a gully. We wondered if it was dead at first, but then it rolled over, saw us, and yawned. .



A warthog with a couple of piglets came by. Maybe she knew the lions weren't hungry...yet.



We were responding to a radio message and heading towards a reported leopard in a tree, when Nzuki made an abrupt U-turn. "Rhino in the bush", he explained as we were picking ourselves up. Clearly, rhinos trump leopards. Justifiably, as the leopard probably wouldn't have moved before we got back from the rhino.



We got to the site of the rhino sighting but saw nothing. The rhino was thought to be in an area of dense trees and shrubs and we danced around the area looking for movement, without any luck. Then the shrubs moved and a very large dark shape loomed behind them, and then disappeared never to be seen again, at least by us.

However, on looking at our photos, we had captured a very large dark thing with a rhino tail and rhino eyeball, as roughly outlined in the picture. Not as good as the pictures of our Serengeti rhinos, but much closer.



Heading back towards the leopard we saw this



shipyard landscape of giraffes, and Sandie captured this neat picture of a dining giraffe.

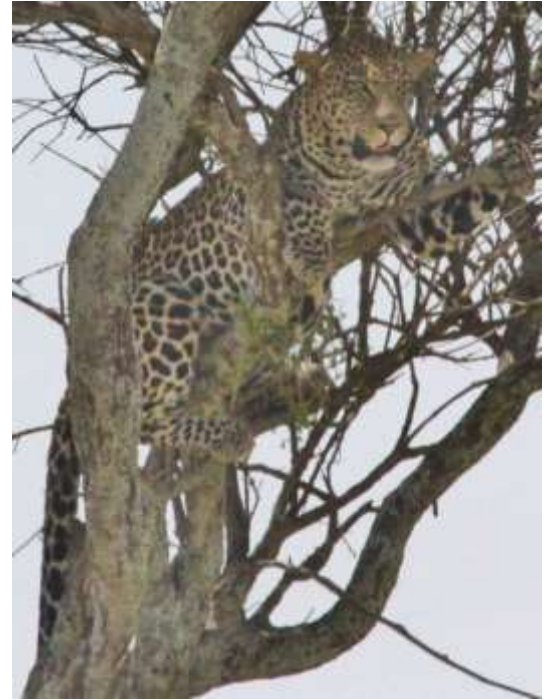


We also interrupted a heated discussion between lappet-faced vultures, presumably about food.



I captured this hyena crossing our path at high speed, but it was only later that I realized it was carrying a trophy, a piece of some animal's kill, which might explain the rush.

We finally got back to the leopard, which was still in the tree. We took our turn at a close up and were then moved on by the ranger who was making sure the leopard wasn't being harassed.



The secretary bird is one of our favourites, an opinion probably not shared by the frogs and lizards it preys on.

Yet another hyena but this one was laid back in its hot tub and looked to be feeling no pain.



While we were watching the secretary bird and the hyena we saw a lioness coming towards us through the grass. She dropped down into one of the gullies for a drink.

We also went down into a gully and found that getting out was more difficult than getting in. We helped in the only way we could: bouncing our weight over the rear wheels!



These gigantic hooded vultures were rooting around on the ground amongst a mass of body parts, remains of a recent kill.

Our game drive in the Masai Mara was coming to an end as Nzuki had to set off for Samburu, so we began our return to the lodge.

But we weren't done yet! On the way back we met two more lions lazing in the shade of a tree. For this one the next hunt was still in the planning phase.



Nzuki dropped us off and after a late lunch we explored the lodge and its gardens. The plants were tropical, from around the world. It would have been more interesting if they had all been African, but Sandie was enjoying the flowers anyway. I've merged some of our pictures into this montage.



There was wildlife in the gardens too, like this common bulbul and the hyrax. The hyrax looks like a cute rat, but it's not even a rodent; its closest relative is



thought to be the elephant. Hyraxes were responsible for those weird growling noises we'd heard the previous night.

The lodge had some Masai dancers in that evening for entertainment. Masai dancing involves jumping high (as in the blur in the middle of the picture.) I think it would have been a better show if staged in a more natural environment than the inside of the lodge. We didn't stay long anyway as Sandie was feeling unwell and needed to be close to a toilet.



Sunday September 24th

We had a rare lie-in as our plane didn't leave until mid-morning and the airstrip is close by. However, Sandie still had her problem and wasn't looking forward to two hour-long flights in planes without a toilet. The good news was that she'd taken the antibiotic we'd brought with us and that seemed to be helping.



I took a walk around and found this very gaudy agama lizard and a few mongooses; they seemed to be in a feud with the hyraxes

This was our last view of the Masai Mara from the lodge's terrace. It had been a great couple of days.



The lodge was going to drive us to the airstrip and from there we'd fly back to Nairobi and then north to Samburu, the last park on our trip. The staff told us where to wait and said someone would collect us. We waited and waited. Finally, on hearing a plane coming in, I went to the desk to inquire again and got the same story. "So what plane did I just hear?" "Oh, quick, time to go!" The planes will wait up to an hour or so for late passengers but you don't like to keep people waiting.

Our Safarilink Cessna was still there. We were, of course, the last ones on, but Sandie was feeling a bit better by now and we were soon on our way to Samburu, to be described in Part 6.

Love to you all from Pete and Sandie