



September 2017

Dear All,

At the end of part 5 of this journal, we were on our way from Masai Mara to Samburu conservancy area/park. Nzuki, our guide in Kenya, had left the previous day to drive the van up to Samburu, while we had the easier option of flying there.

Sunday September 24th continued

Our previous three parks are all part of the same ecosystem, with similar animals, but Samburu is quite

separate. Our visit there was suggested by Elvira of TANO Safaris to add some variety to our trip. It is located just north of the Equator and, at 2700 feet, is much lower than the other parks. As a result it is hotter and more desert-like, and some of the animals there have evolved differently.



Samburu is one of a number of parks in the area, which has been famous since the 1960s as the home of Elsa the lioness and George and Joy Adamson, author of “Born Free”.

We’d also be staying in a tent at the Elephant Bedroom Camp rather than in a Serena Lodge, so we were looking forward to a different experience.

Our flight to Nairobi stopped at three tiny airstrips in the Masai Mara on our way to Nairobi. This gave us a scenic tour of the Mara at the expense of a few bouncy landings. At the last stop at Olare Orok, a film crew came on board with massive cases and cameras, filling the plane. I was suffering from lens envy.



When we came into Nairobi we had our first view of the city from above: some very English-looking terraced houses, concrete apartment blocks, a few skyscrapers, some shanty towns, and a pleasant amount of green space. We landed at Nairobi Wilson, home to mostly propeller planes, both private and regional airlines.



After about an hour we were off in a flight to Samburu in a similar Cessna. We seemed to be following the main road north. To our surprise we flew over a large complex of greenhouses. We didn't expect to see greenhouses at the Equator, but apparently they are for watering control, to smooth out the differences between the wet and dry seasons.



Somewhere along the way we crossed the Equator, our first time in daylight. I was disappointed to find that there isn't a dotted line going



around the world.

We landed a couple of times. By this time we knew to shout out "Where are we?" as the pilot's mumble before landing can rarely be heard. At Leva, we saw this rather rustic terminal and waiting room. We passed over this winding river and bounced in to land at Samburu.



Some Samburu people came out to greet the passengers; they seem to dress differently from the Masai, but we didn't know how much of their dress was normal and how much was just for the tourists.

Nzuki was there with the van to meet us. He said we had to drive around the mountain with about an hour to get to the Elephant Bedroom Camp. At the time I didn't realize how many

airfields there were around Samburu; perhaps this was actually the Kalama airstrip; I forgot to ask.

The landscape was definitely desert-



like, with distorted trees and spindly and well-spaced shrubs.



At the end of our ride we came to the lush, green vegetation around the Ewaso Ng'iro river; this flows northeast out of Kenya into Somalia and the Indian Ocean. The Elephant Bedroom Camp is right on the river bank, and we were promptly whisked onto the verandah for a very late lunch. This time we were definitely hungry. The food was good and the view was beautiful, out across the river.

We were in tent 1, one of twelve. It was a large tent on a wooden frame and base and we had two queen beds, a private bathroom, and a deck with a small plunge pool and a view over the river.

We were told to padlock the zips on the tent's screens to keep the monkeys out; they'd learned how to open zips. We were also warned that the camp was unfenced so we would need an escort at night to and from dinner. As there were no telephones, we'd have to signal the escort with a flashlight.



We just had time to look around our tent and then it was time for our afternoon game drive. Nzuki took us out along the river bank, weaving between palm trees. Our first find was this yellow-billed hornbill, obviously relaxed but vigilant, eying the tourists.

Our first new bird though was this vulturine guinea fowl, more splendid than the helmeted guinea fowl we'd seen before. We assume that these had evolved in isolation. They deserve a better name than vulturine though.



The giraffes too are different; these are reticulated giraffes with a whiter background and more regular



markings, These are the giraffes of picture books. Up until now we'd been seeing Masai giraffes, mostly darker and with smaller markings. They're all wonderful to us, dinosaurs marching through the savannah.



The gerenuks were the same as we'd seen before but there seemed to be a lot more of them and they were more prone to standing up to feed. See the one on the left.

The zebra were different; these are Grevy's zebra with finer striping and a bare white underbelly. They made us wonder whether this might have given them an evolutionary advantage amongst Samburu's different plant life. The birds on its back are oxpeckers, living on the ticks and other bloodsuckers that infest all the large animals.



The ostriches too were different and these are Somali ostriches, with bluish neck and legs instead of pinks and oranges.



There were plenty of little dik-diks like this to be seen, but I don't remember seeing any gazelles, next size up on the menu..

This is

a regular termite mound but Nzuki thought it had been used by elephants as a scratching post. Not sure what this would feel like for the termites!





This is another species of ibis, the hadada ibis, not quite as flashy as its cousins. Similarly this crested francolin lacks the red and yellow face markings of its relatives.



There were elephants everywhere, not surprisingly given the name of our camp, but the figurehead species for the park is the Beisa oryx. It's an elegant antelope with a funny face and absolutely magnificent parallel horns, sometimes growing to four feet. They gather in tight herds and somehow manage to keep their horns up and avoid accidents. Except during the rut, of course, when things get bloody.



Samburu does not have the extensive



grasslands so it does not have the great herds of wildebeest and zebra. Instead it has a green corridor along the river where there's a similar mixture of species. For example, when taking pictures of this marabou stork it was hard not get a baboon or two in the photo. And then we came to this great crowd of helmeted guinea fowl; yes it seems that both kinds of fowl coexist here.





We also found this young Samburu; Nzuki donated a snack and a water bottle and we got a smile for our picture.

Looking away from the river we could see a range of mountains which Nzuki said were the Samburu Hills. I've also seen the triangular mountain referred to as Cone Mountain.



It was getting late now and Sandie took this gorgeous evening picture of the river. We drove past what I thought was the entrance to the camp but Nzuki just shook his head. We drove on a mile or two and came out on the river bank. Sandie looked out her window and thought we were gatecrashing somebody's party. I looked out my window and saw uniformed men with guns and I didn't know what to think. Nzuki opened our doors and added to the confusion with a cheery "Time for a swim!" In reality it was a surprise party, staged by the camp every other day so most visitors get to attend at least once. We had snacks and orange juice spiked generously with rum.



The guys with the guns were park rangers tasked with separating the partiers from the lions. It turned out that most people there were related: eight siblings and their partners (in the picture). They were



Americans but one pair lived in Kenya and had organized the reunion. There was also a family from Melbourne.



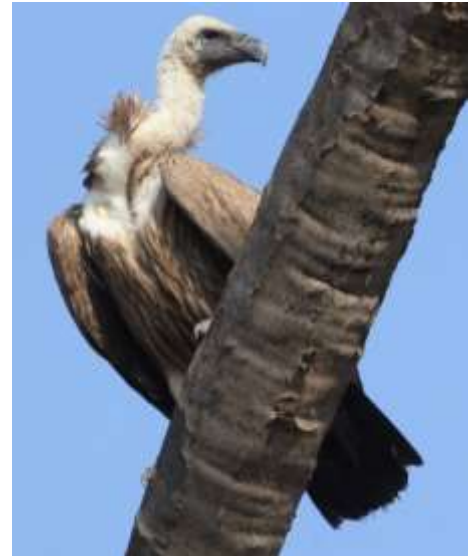
Back at the camp we had dinner by candlelight on the verandah and then were escorted back to our tent where we fumbled around with limited lighting. The generator only runs for a few hours each day, enough to keep the batteries charged. It was still hot but the fan kept us cool until we fell asleep and the fan ran out of battery.

Monday September 25th

It was pleasantly cool for our breakfast looking out on the river. The opposite bank was busy with baboons and elephants. Our tent looked good in the daylight.



So did the river, but any thoughts of a cool swim soon disappeared when we saw this fellow out there on a sandbank. This white-backed



vulture would be happy to help with clean-up too.

Raptors are always hard to identify because of their variation in coloring but we think the bird in the bush is a harrier and the one in the tree looks to be an augur buzzard.

Elephants are easier to identify and this group was demolishing a copse of trees; you can see why villagers get upset when the



elephants raid their crops.



Then, a real surprise, we saw this magnificent leopard on the hunt. So supple; it seemed to flow over the ground. It seemed very unhappy to see us; Nzuki thought it might be a newcomer

to the park, not used to tourists and their vehicles.



Nearby was this dik-dik which might have been grateful to us for distracting the leopard.



These gerenuks might also have been at risk. When standing up to feed they look like something out of Star Wars. In close-up you wonder why they haven't become Disney characters too.



We continued along the river bank, seeing animals everywhere, a mongoose and a large group of those glamorous guinea fowl, most



gathered around water holes, but others proving they could fly by browsing in high shrubs. Some of the larger shrubs hid giraffes and we'd suddenly see a head pop out and start munching on the highest leaves.



Baboons are always fun to watch. This one was using her tail as a car seat for her infant.

We stopped at the Samburu Game Lodge to fill up with petrol and use the toilets. This lodge also featured tents and grass roofs. These two designs came from the toilet's glass doors.



Nzuki drove us out into the desert for a while but we didn't see much that

was new except for this yellow-necked spurfowl, similar save for its colouring to others in the Serengeti.



Then we stopped at this elephant skull, a spot where Nzuki thought it was safe enough for us to get out and walk around and look at the view of the Samburu Hills. We were underneath a tree full of weaver nests. These were black-capped social weavers, and there was also a pretty yellow bird in the tree top. After shooting a dozen pictures through a screen of twigs we almost missed it when the bird, a golden palm weaver, flew down by our feet.



The black bird is a drongo, notorious for mimicking other birds' alarm calls so they can steal their food. In Australia there's a similar bird, but in Oz slang it's one of many

names for a useless idiot.





Sandie captured these kids playing on the beach. Hopefully they were wearing their crocodile repellent.

We saw more bee eaters, all perched on branches overlooking the river, where bugs were plentiful. The one on the right was trying to angle its bug dinner to where it could be swallowed but the bug didn't want to go.



This common water buck poked its head up: I still think it deserves a better African name as those horns are quite handsome and it's far from "common".



Then we briefly saw a ground squirrel. Nzuki didn't understand why we'd get excited about such a lowly species. We were just surprised to see one in Africa, our first.



We returned to the camp for lunch. There always seemed to be a crowd of



oryxes around the parking area. Sandie found that the staff had a baby oryx in a pen. It had been abandoned by its mother and the staff were trying to keep it alive.

We had time to look around our tent and take some pictures of the internals and the art. The vervet monkeys were looking at us too, maybe hoping we'd leave the zips open. I took a swim in our plunge pool, actually more of a crouch as it was



tiny, covered by a Velcro'd tarp. The day was in the mid 30s C, (mid 90s F), so the water felt good. After lunch we spotted another ground squirrel under our deck. Sandie wanted a picture and I was racing around the deck looking through the lens when I strayed onto the plunge pool's tarp.





The Velcro gave way, my left leg plunged, and my right knee smacked into the deck, but I didn't actually fall in. The only permanent damage was to my lens which no longer zooms smoothly. I did get the squirrel's picture though. Sandie also captured this red-beaked fire finch while I was floundering around and cursing.



The first bird on our afternoon safari was this African harrier hawk; even prettier when it took off



Along the river, this was one of a number of elephants come to drink, shower, and add sunscreen.



The two weird little birds on stilts and standing beak to beak are spotted thickknees and the one on the tree top is a white-bellied goaway bird, first seen in Amboseli.

Nzuki drove away from the river and up into the hills. We think he was hoping to find lions, but we'd seen so many already we weren't bothered. The scenery was certainly interesting. To his surprise we found a camel instead. We thought it was most likely an escapee rather than a migrant from the Sahara. The light was going as we headed back towards camp.





We found this African hare, not our first but nice to see one with its ears up.

We stopped to take some pictures of the sunset and soon found ourselves surrounded by elephants. This mother looked to be feeding her calf, trying to get it to eat its greens perhaps. The sunset was worth waiting for.



Tuesday September 26th

This was our last morning in Kenya, a sad milestone, but to be honest we were feeling our age. It was time to go home, or at least go back to England for our last week.

The baby oryx had died, not I think to anyone's surprise. We had a yellow-billed stork striding past us at breakfast, and then a large elephant came by for its meal.



The area was known as the Elephant's Bedroom before the camp was built and the elephants still think it's theirs. This one was just eating the local shrubbery and of course I had to take a picture. I was promptly joined by a security guy who made sure I didn't harass the elephant. Or get stepped on.



Nzuki suggested a game drive along the way. We'd be covering the same ground as the previous morning so we might not see much that was new. Happily that prediction was wrong.

We saw the usual line of crocodiles along the sandbanks and then came to this impala and her calf, a rare sight for us as we'd arrived outside the Serengeti's February calving season.





This marabou stork was sitting and looking like a demonic penguin. But look at those feet! And then we found another squirrel, this time standing balanced on its tail.

And a pair of raptors, an augur buzzard and a tawny



eagle sharing a tree, and a pair of Egyptian geese with a single gosling. The bird with striped skirts is a hoopoe.



We found this tiny ball of a bee eater which took off and showed us its golden underwear.

There were families of warthogs along the river bank. This one we assumed was the dominant male as he gave us a look that said "All these are mine".

Then we found a parrot, an orange-bellied



parrot to be precise. We had not



expected to see parrots, and we didn't get a clear look at this one. We followed it around the tree but it took off with a characteristic parrot squawk.



Mama baboon and child were hanging out on a log in the shade while this other hooligan was playing Tarzan.



As well as the baboons we had elephants, giraffes, and monkeys on our side of the river. Across from us the Samburu people were bringing their herds of goats down to the river to drink. They'd been allowed into the park because of the persistent drought.



We stopped at the Game Lodge again and these painted figures



came from the Crocodile Bar.

The trees in their gardens were full of birds, a cardinal woodpecker and a Van der Decken's hornbill, and then a glossy black bird with a fine curved bill which I think is a kind of sunbird.



Then they were joined by a grey-headed kingfisher, more colourful than it sounds, and a pair of hornbills that arranged themselves in artistic poses.





Underfoot we had ring-necked doves and some superb starlings, always worth a picture with their iridescent blue feathers. We were strolling through the gardens looking for flowers and more birds. We could hear Nzuki having an animated phone conversation. He waved us back and said we had to go. He'd just found out that we were



flying from Buffalo Springs rather than the nearby Oryx airstrip. Even worse, we were leaving an hour earlier than we thought!



Nzuki roared off and got us there just in time. So we had a hurried goodbye and then we were walking between these stalls and out to the plane.



We wondered what the chances were of carrying one of those skulls through Canadian customs!

We set down at another airstrip and there were more Samburu people in what we assumed was their traditional dress. It certainly didn't seem to be too practical for carrying luggage around.

We arrived at Nairobi Wilson in early afternoon; our flight back to England wasn't till midnight, from Nairobi Jomo Kenyatta, the international airport. We were collected at Wilson by Elvira and driver Timothy. Elvira and I had been exchanging e-mails since last November but we hadn't met. She was younger and more bubbly than I'd imagined. She told us we'd been amazingly lucky. Most



people were happy to see a few lions and maybe a leopard and a cheetah. But we'd seen dozens of lions and multiples of everything, including some things that even she hadn't seen.

Elvira offered us a loan of their van in case we wanted to go sightseeing in Nairobi. We looked at the traffic and politely turned her down. They delivered us to the Ole Sereni hotel, where we had use of a day room until it was time to leave for the airport. This gave us time for lunch and a clean-up and a reshuffle of our luggage for regular air travel.

Timothy picked us up when Nairobi's rush hour was at its height with horns at full volume. He was obviously used to it, zig zagging and using all the road. We had to get out of the van and go through security even to get onto the airport's roads. Timothy dropped us off and we joined a long queue for the departures building. There appeared to be another security check there and it had stalled because most of the passengers ahead of us were

British soldiers, carrying packs and duffles that were bigger than us, and definitely too big to go through the scanners. Eventually, there was a bellowed command and all the soldiers trooped off somewhere else, cursing their officers.

There was another security check for us to get to the gate holding area, which was obviously smaller than the plane itself as many people were left standing. There were a lot of kids waiting there, very well behaved considering that it was 11 pm and they were there for well over an hour.

We had a long time to think about how lucky we'd been on the trip, and not just with what we'd seen. The weather had been kind and never interfered with our plans. Apart from a few minutes with the tsetse flies we'd been largely bug free. A very complicated trip had gone smoothly, tight at times but not missing any connections. Lots of thanks to Elvira and our guides Nzuki and Ayoub for making it all work for us.

Before the trip we had been concerned about potential violence and disruption around the Kenyan presidential elections. Uhuru Kenyatta, son of Jomo, was declared by the electoral commission to be the winner of the August election over Raila Odinga. However Odinga disputed the results, alleging corruption and manipulation of the results by the commission and this was upheld by the Supreme Court, which ordered another election in October. We were lucky enough to be there during the hiatus between elections. After we'd left, Odinga withdrew from the second election, saying that it was pointless to hold it with the same corrupt commission in place. Kenyatta won of course but nothing has been resolved.

If I have any regrets about the trip it is that we didn't really take advantage of the wonderful hotels, lodges, and camps that we visited. There were a lot of hardworking people trying to make sure that we enjoyed them, but we were focused on getting outside and seeing something new. Bars and pools and exercise rooms tend to be much the same the world over.

Loading the plane was a bit chaotic as there were some first time fliers who were unaware of seat numbers, but it all soon settled down. Even those kids were quiet. So was Sandie; she'd asked for a Riesling, which seemed a reasonable request of a German steward, but what she actually got was a tumbler of neat Scotch.

On a cold morning in Frankfurt we were in a mob of business commuters waiting for our packed flight to Heathrow, when the gate official pointed to us "Komm her!" Wot us? I tried to look as if my 15 Kg carry-on only weighed the regulation 8 Kg. He just waved us on to the plane, ahead of the line of uber-commuters lined up for business class. Then we realized that this was all due to Sandie's neck brace. She wears it because it's more comfortable than those soft pillows, but it does make her look like a hospital transferee. I told her she had to keep it on until we got to Heathrow.

And this is a good point to end part 6 of this journal. The remaining part covers visits with family and friends in England.

Love to you all from Pete and Sandie