



WAY OF NATURE Herds of wildebeest taking part in the Great Wildebeest Migration, where over two million animals move from the Serengeti National Park in Tanzania to the greener pastures of the Maasai Mara National Reserve in Kenya



EXPLORING THE WORLD Sunshine Lichauco de Leon shares her colourful experiences in Africa

A Safari Song

Kenya offers a one-of-a-kind experience as you enjoy nature and all its creatures and colours, discovers **SUNSHINE LICHAUCO DE LEON**

AS OUR OPEN-SIDED, 4x4 jeep approached a dozen elephants standing in an interlocking pattern in the open savannah of Kenya's Maasai Mara Reserve, my eyes grew wide with curiosity. I saw a slight movement and slowly noticed the backside of a baby elephant waking from a nap, using the body of an adult to prop itself up.

Sensing my wonder, our Maasai safari guide explained their puzzle-like formation, "Elephants are very maternal—they work together to guard their young and will stay with them when they sleep."

An African safari is about learning to "live slow" and to experience life completely through your senses. During a week spent in the bush searching for wildlife in Kenya, I learnt that wind has smell, air has taste, and you can feel



ON THE HUNT A lone elephant at the Amboseli National Park

with your eyes. I noticed that shadow is as important as light, that the smallest movement can lead to the greatest moment, and that everything in nature happens in its own time, for its own reason.

Safari is a personal adventure that transforms you in quiet ways that linger. But every adventure should start with a good night's sleep followed by a hearty meal, and Nairobi's Tribe Hotel is Kenya's warm hug-hello after a long trip. Beyond its stylish design and spacious rooms, this boutique hotel has so many cosy little corners to sit and relax in that you'd be tempted to stay forever.

But Nairobi is also a great city for a "safari warm-up," and we were soon off to an elephant orphanage, where we "adopted" one of the dozens of baby elephants who had lost their mothers in the wild. A visit to the Giraffe Sanctuary followed, where, standing on a platform, we had the amazing opportunity to stroke a giraffe's forehead and look it right in the eye as we fed it pellets carefully clenched between our teeth.

Choosing a safari is like choosing art—you have to have an idea of what makes you happy—as safari can mean anything from staying in permanently built luxury lodges with swimming pools and exploring the wild via air-conditioned mini-vans to living in tents so close to nature that an afternoon nap means falling asleep to an orchestra of birds.

We chose the eco-friendly Gamewatchers safaris to lead us on our adventure in Kenya because we wanted to not just go on safari but to really "feel safari." Gamewatchers' approach provided the perfect balance of living in reasonable comfort while still being in harmony

with nature. Its tented camps are modelled after the Hemingway-style traditional hunting safari bush experience, but the spacious tents have private bathrooms (with flush toilets) and guests are fed delectable three-course meals!

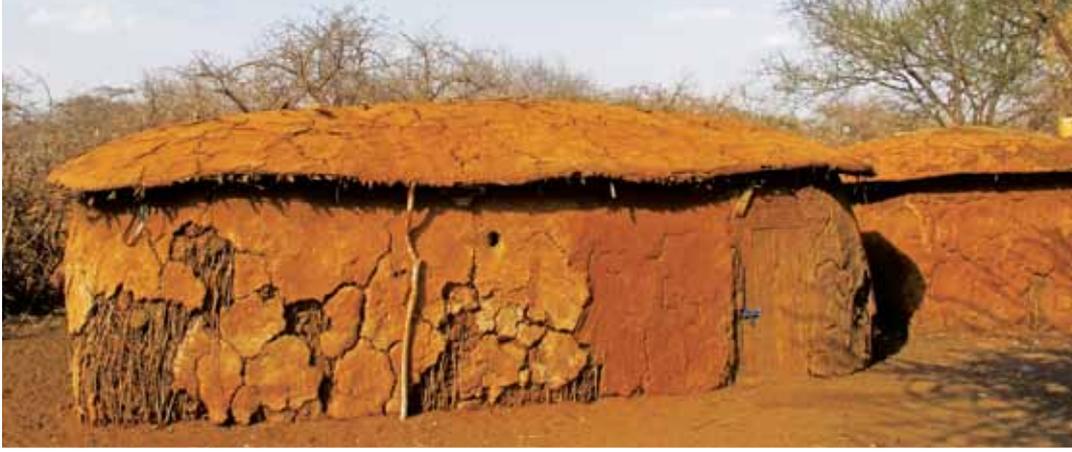
THE SLOW LIFE

A short flight on a four-seater plane from Nairobi brought us to Porini Amboseli, the only permanent camp located on the 15,000-acre Selenkay Conservancy, 10 miles from the Amboseli National Park. The conservancy was the first partnership between a private company, Gamewatchers, and the local Maasai tribe to create a wildlife conservancy that offers unique opportunities to both the Maasai and camp guests.

Instead of using this land for traditional cattle grazing, the Maasai now set it aside as a reserve: they are paid rent and work in the camps on the conservancy. The tribes use the income to fund community projects, and without threats from human activity, animal life flourishes.

Camps are small and simple but provide everything you need, from hot water bottles to warm you while you sleep, to a Maasai warrior to walk you safely to your tent at night (and who also wakes you up with coffee, tea, or hot chocolate, and a bucket shower in the morning)! And with no permanent structures and a maximum of 10 tents, the encampment has minimal impact on the surrounding wildlife and leaves no trace once removed.

Having been raised on the land that we were exploring, our Maasai guide and driver knew just where to look to show us the nuances of this natural world. They introduced us to the resident wildlife as if they were old friends and



THE DAY'S RHYTHM (from top) A traditional Maasai house, called "Manyattas" are built with mud and cow dung; Maasai warriors take a look at the photos that show their land's beauty; A family of cheetahs takes refuge from the midday sun under shrubbery of the Maasai



answered my endless questions with great insight.

A visit to a Maasai village was a good reminder that if you listen to and care for the land, it provides you with what you need to survive. A Maasai warrior can make fire from cow dung, a stark reminder of how easily—yet unconventionally—basic human needs can be met.

Because conservancies do not have the same regulations as national parks, we also went on educational nature walks, fascinating night-game drives and were able to follow wildlife

"off road" which was handy when we saw the more elusive and swift predators.

Life on safari follows the rhythm of the sun. We would wake up before sunrise, have a hearty breakfast, and start our day invigorated by the knowledge that a family of lions or elephants could be just around the corner. After a few hours of morning game drive, we would either return to camp for lunch and a siesta or break for a picnic lunch somewhere breathtaking.

As we sat in our open top jeep, scanning the vast spaces for movement, nature's hues change as dramatically as an oil painting in progress—oatmeal-coloured earth becomes ochre or deep brown, fields of golden yellow grass become crisp green, the endless sky an ever-changing shade of blue. With the sun bringing life to our

faces, we start to time our breaths to the rhythm of the wind rushing by, realising what it means to be completely free and present.

The transition between a day of adventure and a night of relaxation was a daily "sundowner" or happy hour in the bush. It turns out that being pampered was less about enjoying fine wine or soft sheets, but about finding a moment of calm perfection at the right place at the right time. At the hour the sun started to set over the rolling hills, familiar shapes becoming intriguing silhouettes, a full bar and cooked sausages appeared on a foldout table in the bush, and we found ourselves in a state of special happiness.

In the depths of nature, light always finds a darkness to fill. As we returned to camp under a star-filled sky, the sound of crickets and the crackle of a flame drew us to a campfire, where we joined the great African ritual of sharing stories of the day that has passed before moving to the dining tent for a communal dinner feast.

The potential for education while on a safari is bound only by the extent of our curiosity. We saw the daily life of animals as they ate, drank, reproduced, and protected their young, discovering that not only do leopards eat alone but a mother leopard actually licks the paws of its baby cub after it finishes devouring a gazelle she has hid in the treetops. After a few days, we started to understand a new language. A buffalo scratches a tree to mark his territory; a lone impala has been exiled from his herd and is destined to roam alone forever; and when a

SAFARI PACKING ESSENTIALS

Find out what items will come in handy on your vacation

A wide-brimmed hat, neutral-coloured clothing that you can layer, hiking shoes, lightweight safari pants, a day pack, a good camera with a great zoom lens, binoculars, a sense of curiosity and adventure



ENDANGERED SPECIES (from left) Two of the world's seven remaining Northern White Rhinos, four are residing at the Ol Pejeta Conservancy, East Africa's largest Black Rhino Sanctuary; zebra at the Ol Pejeta Conservancy

warthog runs through the tall grass with its tail up, it's often saying "follow me" to its babies, who are often too small to see its mother.

And for a good mixture of locals, we visited a watering hole or "the local pub" where wildlife such as elephants, wildebeest, and zebras gather to find relief at the hottest hours of the day. (I could not help but wonder what kinds of things they must have been discussing!)

WILD WONDERS

The contrasts—in light, colour, shape, and texture—nourished our imagination. Zebras glowed in the late afternoon sun when standing against a field of yellow grass. The shiny, sleek spots of a leopard shouted at us as he silently slunk through the taupe-coloured earth. The silhouette of a tree trunk against the setting sun looked like a lady frozen in *arabesque*.

At Porini Rhino Camp, located in the 90,000-acre Ol Pejeta Conservancy at the foothills of Mt Kenya and hidden in a secluded valley among acacia trees, we realised that each part of the country we visited had its own unique geography and specific animal life. A mix of grass plains, wooded grassland, and evergreen thicket, Ol Pejeta Conservancy contains a home for rescued chimpanzees and the largest sanctuary for the endangered black rhino; it is also the home of four of the world's seven endangered northern white rhinos.

After a scenic drive through a kaleidoscope of nature, we reached the Maasai Mara ecosystem. The Porini Lion Camp and the plains and hills

of Porini Mara in Ol Kinyei Conservancy, both of which are located in exclusive community conservancies within the Maasai Mara, are well known for their large cats—lions, cheetahs, and the elusive leopard.

Whereas life in the city tends to shield us from directly observing death in all its forms, one quickly grasps its importance to the very sustenance of life in the bush. When I saw three cheetahs hungrily devouring the raw flesh of an impala—tearing hunks of its muscle with every bite—I surprised my normally squeamish nature with my own fascination.

I spent one hour videotaping the dismembering of a species of antelope I had only learnt to recognise just the day before. While the dead impala gazed vacantly but powerfully at my camera, the cheetahs' mother stood by the lone tree, protecting her cubs' feast from the jackals hovering for leftovers. By the time I left, all that remained were a stomach and some internal organs. A scene that had been filled with the yellow-golden colour of predator and landscape had faded to red with blood.

A safari is a collection of powerful images—of experiences and stories that in that instant may have just been a passing note, but later on join together into a beautiful harmony. In a world that is becoming focused on the need to progress and communicate, where life is in continuous motion, sometimes the greatest luxury is the gift of time—time to listen to yourself and time to just imagine. Kenya is this gift and safari its song. 🐘