Kenya: Cats and Critters of the Maasai Mara Tour Report 2020

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by Inger Vandyke

"This place is just stuffed with cats!" were the first words that fell out of my mouth after our first day on safari in Kenya's Olare Motorogi Conservancy. I have just returned from leading the Wild Images photo tour where we were based at the wonderful Kicheche Bush Camp, hidden discreetly away in a grove of acacias and whistling thorns, in southern Kenya.

The fact that Kenya's conservancies are good for cats is no secret but even by the standards of any safari tour, seeing no less than five cat species in two weeks was extraordinary. During our tour we were blessed to see lions, leopards, servals, cheetahs and even a Caracal hunting for prey in the pre-dawn light. Sadly we couldn't capture photos of the Caracal but that didn't detract from it being an awesome sighting. For cat lovers there are few places in the world that rival Kenya's conservancies. If you want to see some remarkably habituated cats in the wild this is your place. Seeing them is a given but what is really surprising about going on safari in somewhere like Olare Motorogi Conservancy is the multiple chances you have with certain species. Want to see a leopard up a tree? Watch lions resting with their pride or a Cheetah surveying its world? These sorts of encounters have a higher probability here than in most places. Instead of just catching a glimpse of a cat on safari, in Kenya you can sometimes get completely immersed in their world.

As the trip progressed, of course we started to realise that southern Kenya isn't just a haven for some of Africa's most spectacular big cats, so many other encounters simply just took our breaths away!

Leading a tour during the Covid pandemic sometimes felt like travelling in an alternative universe. The safety protocols put in place by Kicheche, the airlines and hotels, however, were comprehensive, well guided and made us feel very safe. The lack of tourism down in Olare Motorogi had an unexpected advantage for our trip also. For the first time, our group could go off and explore the neighbouring conservancy of Naboisho, something that isn't generally allowed when the lodges are full and more safari trucks are out exploring. We felt truly blessed.

In the Realm of Africa's Big Cats

Before visiting Kenya I'd read so many reports describing the early months of the year being THE time to visit if you want to see big cat cubs and kittens in Kenya. We soon found out this was not the case when we saw a mother Serval shepherding her young kitten around on our second safari!

The cub sightings continued throughout our trip with Cheetah Kweli and her remaining surviving cub (her second cub was killed just about a week before we arrived), three very charismatic young leopard cubs – Figlet, Natito and also Tito's youngest cub out hunting on her own for the first time. After seeing many lion cubs of various ages, the highlight of our cat experiences came when we saw two lionesses carrying their cubs in their mouths. They belonged to the Ilkisiausiau pride and this was our second attempt to see these very tiny cubs. Normally pride mothers will hide such little cubs in the woods to avoid them being attacked by unfamiliar male lions so it was with some surprise we spotted a large male lion heading in the direction of the pride one morning in Naboisho. We watched as he approached these lionesses and, in shock, they decided to move the cubs to safety. To do so they had to come out into the open carrying their cubs in their mouths and for some reason one of the lionesses didn't seem to approve of this move and she lashed out at a second lioness carrying a young cub in her mouth. The carrying mother dropped the cub and lashed back at the interfering mother. The cub just fell into the dirt. When the battle between the two females had settled down, the carrying mother lion regrouped with her cub and continued their move back into the bushes. What an incredible thing to see!

The beauty of witnessing encounters like this in a conservancy is the relative quiet of it all. Numbers of cars attending cat sightings in the conservancies are limited to five and this allowed us to truly share an intimate moment with these apex predators of the African bush.

Other cat highlights included watching young leopard Figlet hunting in the rain, the famous Tano Bora cheetah coalition of five males prowling around the grasslands for prey, a magnificent backlit male lion at sunrise, watching the warm breath of a roaring lion in the cool of a Mara evening and listening to Tito, a leopard mother calling for her cub at sunset. It was the first time I'd heard a leopard calling and she was doing so after she'd heard a lion roaring nearby. It was as if she was calling her cub to safety.

Wildlife Wonderland

After understanding our encounters, it isn't hard to see why so many photographs of cats come out of Kenya safaris. At times our feline encounters almost felt overwhelming.

What you don't often see, however, is how beautiful somewhere like the Olare Motorogi Conservancy is for general wildlife photography. As acute watchers of the wild, we were blessed with many beautiful bird encounters, great views of Agama lizards, Leopard Tortoise and even a stunning green Boomslang snake lounging around an acacia in the early morning sun.

We were travelling at a time when a lot of ungulates also had young so we delighted in watching springy young Topis, some just a day or two old, trying to find their wobbly feet near their mothers.

Even the elephants had young when we were there and we were blessed to meet a hilarious young elephant who wasn't quite sure what his trunk and large ears were for. He would alternate between waving his trunk around almost saying "What is THIS THING?" and doing mock charges to act tough around his older brothers and sisters. It was hard to draw ourselves away from this little guy actually!Seeing elephants in the beautiful, wide expanses of southern Kenya is magical. At one point we followed a herd of elephants out on to the grasslands, watching them graze and enjoying a play fight between two youngsters in the beautiful open countryside.

Our young animal fiesta continued throughout the trip and was rounded off by finding a litter of Black-backed Jackal cubs being fed and cared for by four adult jackals who occasionally lured them out of their termite mound den for food.

When leading photography tours my absolute favourite times of the day are very early sunrises and late sunsets. I love storms at any time of the day and this trip didn't disappoint on that front either. After a bumpy pre-dawn drive along the dirt tracks of the conservancy, we were rewarded with the most spectacular journey of giraffes sauntering up a small hill towards the grasslands. With the setting crescent moon and orange glow of the sunrise as our background, we watched this magical scene unfold, crouching low to take photographs and capture their beautiful bodies silhouetted against the heavens.

Walking with Maasai

Perhaps one of the biggest differences between safaris in the Masai Mara National Reserve and the privately run conservancies is the shared landscape the conservancies have with Kenya's beautiful Maasai people. While you drive around on safari looking at all of this incredible wildlife, it is very possible to see young Maasai men herding their cattle across the very same landscape, fearless of lions or other predators. It is almost like the lions sense that Maasai are not to be messed with. These people have an almost unspoken sense and understanding of lions.

Many lodges in Kenya offer you the chance to visit Maasai people in their villages and while I would really recommend any chance to meet Maasai people and get to know them better than just meeting your safari guide, I really hoped to do something different for my guests travelling with me in Kenya.

Before we travelled I'd read extensively about the traditions of Maasai people including their different passages of life, customs and their lifestyles. I wanted to experience the real Maasai, even though it was just a small component of our trip. With limited time but careful planning, I hoped and prayed that I would be able to show my guests that side.

When we arrived I asked our Maasai guide James about meeting some of his friends. I showed him photos of Maasai warriors wearing their traditional Isidai headdress (the crown of ostrich feathers worn as a goodwill symbol for young Maasai passing through a life phase like warrior to Mzee, for example) or the spectacular Olgnatuny headdress made from the mane of a lion and worn by a successful lion hunter in Maasai culture.

Since many Maasai people now dress in a more modern version of their traditional shukas I asked about photographing Maasai wearing some of their traditional dress and if it would be possible during our visit.

My initial fears around the potential of spreading Covid19 to these people disappeared when we first met James and his four friends all willing to show off their traditions with a great deal of pride. We had, after all, already been in the country for quite a few days with no symptoms of illness. A Covid negative test was required by all of us before we could even travel to Nairobi and mask wearing and social distancing was easily worked out when we were there.

We met them all before sunrise and we immediately drove out (masks on!) to a nearby Boscia tree for photos. Earlier in the trip we found ourselves very drawn to this incredible stretch of uniform grassland high on a plateau and we suggested that would be a good place to get some early morning people photos. Needless to say we weren't disappointed! As the light got slightly stronger we headed to the edge of a rocky gorge for breakfast and on the other side of a hill we spotted two lions looking across at us from their rocky domain. How magical to sit on a hillside getting to know new Maasai friends while looking out at lions!

After a break in the middle of the day we enjoyed an afternoon visit to a local Maasai boma where we took some beautiful portraits of local Maasai women.

As someone who does both people and wildlife photography, this day was definitely a highlight for me. After all, I've always had so much joy from introducing my guests to new cultures and collectively learning about local people with them.

I have since returned to the UK and arranged for prints of the people we met to be sent to Kenya. I truly hope they enjoy these images as much as we enjoyed meeting them.

Our Base Camp in the Bush

While we were on safari we honestly couldn't have chosen a better lodge to stay at than Kicheche Bush Camp.

Hidden deep in a grove of acacia woodland and whistling thorns, Kicheche Bush Camp is rustic glamour at its best. Hosted by the wonderful Darren and Emma who are not only superb company, their attention to detail is excellent.

Our permanent tent was spacious and comfortable. We had to walk through an unfenced section of the lodge grounds, accompanied by a Maasai askari in the evenings or before our morning safari started, so as to not be attacked by the lions who, during one of our evenings, were seen hunting right outside our tent!

Fresh coffee was always delivered early before we went on safari and the food was sumptuous at every meal. I jokingly coined the added weight I put on at the camp as 'Kicheche Kilos' at which Darren said "Well you could always say no" at which point I laughed. How could I say no to such fantastic meals!

Of course the evenings sitting by the fire, under the stars with a glass of wine were a superb way to start dinner.

These earthly delights didn't stop there though! One of the highlights of our stay at Kicheche Bush was meeting Frank the Wonder Dog! A loveable Jack Russell who will more likely lick you to death than ever be a danger to your stay, Frank is adorable and I think he knew we were a soft touch as he sometimes tagged along on our walks or greeted us when we arrived back from safaris. He really is the Kicheche Critter!

The protocols put in place by Darren and Emma to handle the Covid situation were excellent. Temperature checks, hand-washing station, masks worn in communal areas, hand sanitiser everywhere, including in our room which also had a supply of masks. Literally no stone was left unturned in the preparation for the lodge receiving guests during this time. We felt very safe there with our guests, who all remarked that they felt safer in Kenya than they did in their home countries!

Our guide from Kicheche was not only a superb driver and guide for the conservancy, he just had an innate sense of guessing the next move of creatures, allowing us all to take superb photos! We felt truly honoured to have him as our photo guide on our trip. He was gentle, ethical and knew exactly where to position us to get incredible shots from our trip.

In the end, leaving Kicheche felt more like leaving home for us, rather than just the end of our trip. As the group leader I long to return and I know in my heart, I will.