

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

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by Inger Vandyke

Portrait of Figlet in the pink light of sunset (image by Inger Vandyke)

Portrait of Figlet in the pink light of sunset (image 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!

Composite image of giraffes at sunrise. Those bumpy rides in the dark are nearly always worth it afte

Composite image of giraffes at sunrise. Those bumpy rides in the dark are nearly always worth it after a clear sky night (image by Inger Vandyke)

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.

A lioness carries her cub in her mouth (image by Inger Vandyke)

A lioness from the Ilkisiausiau pride carries her cub in her mouth to escape from the danger of an unknown male lion nearby (image by Inger Vandyke)

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.

A Black-chested Snake Eagle takes flight (image by Inger Vandyke)

A Black-chested Snake Eagle takes flight (image by Inger Vandyke)

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.

Maasai warriors greet the new day on our Kenya photography tour (image by Inger Vandyke)

Maasai warriors greet the new day beside an ancient Boscia tree (image by Inger Vandyke)

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

Kicheche Bush Camp with one of our hosts, Frank the Wonder Dog (image by Inger Vandyke)

Kicheche Bush Camp is hidden in a secret grove of acacia trees and whistling thorn bushes (image by Inger Vandyke)

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.

Darren and Emma, the superb hosts of Kicheche, on the Wild Images photography tour of Kenya (ima

Lodge hosts Darren and Emma at Kicheche. You are treated more like friends of the family rather than just guests. Our group never wanted to leave! (image by Inger Vandyke)

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!

Inside one of the rooms at Kicheche Bush Camp (image by Inger Vandyke)

Our rooms were spacious and spotless, providing an ideal sanctuary of quiet between safaris. Falling asleep to the sounds of nighttime Africa while lying in the safety of your tent is magical at Kicheche (image by Inger Vandyke)

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!

Bush breakfast on safari (image by Inger Vandyke)

Delicious and healthy, the packed breakfasts for safaris at Kicheche are superb (image by Inger Vandyke)

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!

Frank the Wonder Dog (image by Inger Vandyke)

Frank the Wonder Dog (image by Inger Vandyke)

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!

The lounge at Kicheche Bush Camp on the Wild Images photography tour of Kenya (image by Inger V

The lounge area of Kicheche is complete with power charging stations (although the rooms had enough places for recharging batteries), lens hire facilities, audiovisual equipment and comfy sofas to relax on (image by Inger Vandyke)

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.



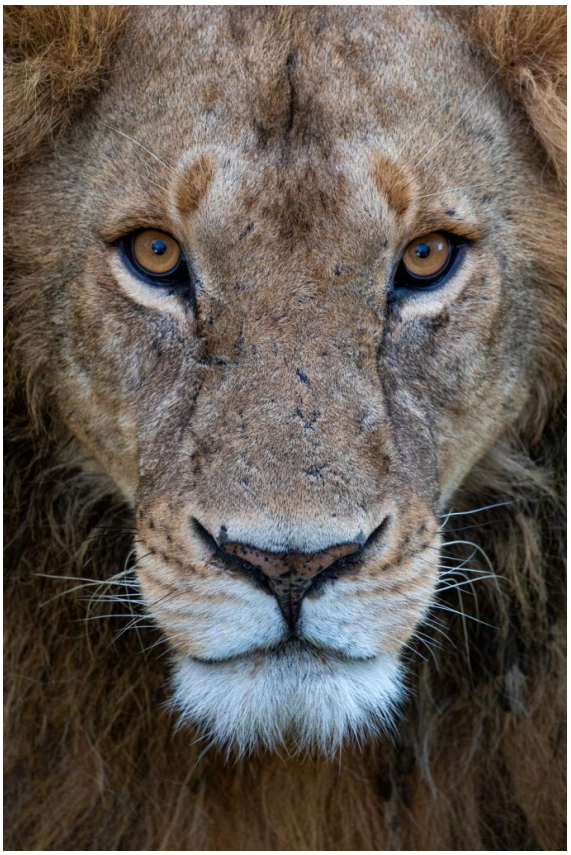
A pair of Yellow-billed Oxpeckers perch on the back of an African Buffalo in the late afternoon sun (image by Inger Vandyke)



Storm skies engulf the last light of sunset in the Mara (image by Inger Vandyke)



Maasai smile - who can resist one? Portrait of a beautiful Maasai woman (image by Inger Vandyke)



Eye to eye with a majestic male lion! (image by Inger Vandyke)



Multi-tasking jackal style! A Black-backed Jackal stops to take a pee while stealing his bounty of a young Impala head from another jackal! (image by Inger Vandyke)



An African Elephant shepherds its baby across the grasslands of Olare Motorogi Conservancy (image by Inger Vandyke)



A Tawny Eagle chooses an unlikely nesting spot of Candlestick Euphorbia to raise her young (image by Inger Vandyke)



A gorgeous young Black-backed Jackal cub at its den (image by Inger Vandyke)



Lion stare (image by Inger Vandyke)



Beautiful Maasai woman in Kenya (image by Inger Vandyke)



Rainy skies can be a nightmare for photography in some places but in Kenya they can be magical (image by Inger Vandyke)



Wildebeest break into a rut on the grasslands of Mara Naboisho in Kenya (image by Inger Vandyke)



Male Tree Agamas display very bright colours to attract females. If the female disappears and they feel under threat their colours fade quickly (image by Inger Vandyke)



A Serval stops to check on the whereabouts of her cub (image by Inger Vandyke)



A Maasai warrior wearing his Isidai proudly while sitting in the door of a manyatta, or Maasai home (image by Inger Vandyke)



Look at me! I can stalk prey too! A little lion cub practices being an adult even though he is still drinking milk at his age! (image by Inger Vandyke)



Full of attitude, hippopotamus often lunge out of the water to attack each other when too many are in one pool (image by Inger Vandyke)



Portrait of a Maasai warrior with his shuka blowing in the breeze (image by Inger Vandyke)



Portrait of a Maasai moran (warrior) (image by Inger Vandyke)



Portrait of a Grey-headed Kingfisher (image by Inger Vandyke)



The boss! A young lion cub surveys his world (image by Inger Vandyke)



A Little Bee-eater with his wasp lunch (image by Inger Vandyke)



Look at those claws! A Rufous-naped Lark perches on a thorny bush (image by Inger Vandyke)



Tito's young cub goes off exploring, only to find a hippo in her path! (image by Inger Vandyke)



Tito's young cub has a roll in the grass (image by Inger Vandyke)



A Yellow-billed Oxpecker takes in the sunrise from a giraffe's neck (image by Inger Vandyke)



A majestic lioness glances back at us from her rocky resting spot (image by Inger Vandyke)



Backlit lion at sunrise with bokeh (image by Inger Vandyke)



Composite image of giraffes at sunrise. Those bumpy rides in the dark are nearly always worth it after a clear sky night. The wonderful thing about the conservancies is you can get out of the car in scenes like this to get low angle shots! (image by Inger Vandyke)



Cheetah Kweli's young cub wants to play! (image by Inger Vandyke)



Kweli's cub gets her beautiful looks from her mother (image by Inger Vandyke)



Giraffes at sunrise (image by Inger Vandyke)



Portrait of a Lilac-breasted Roller (image by Inger Vandyke)



With the safety of mum, a tiny lion cub stares down at us on safari (image by Inger Vandyke)



Dramatic sunset skies in Olare Motorogi Conservancy (image by Inger Vandyke)



Portrait of Tito on a pink sunset (image by Inger Vandyke)



A pretty pair of Thompson's Gazelles stop to stare at us on safari (image by Inger Vandyke)



The lions of the Mara are perhaps some of the most beautiful and photogenic in Africa (image by Inger Vandyke)



A lioness from the Ilkisiausiau pride carries her cub in her mouth to escape from the danger of an unknown male lion nearby (image by Inger Vandyke)



Pretty Lilac-breasted Rollers are irresistible for photographers! (image by Inger Vandyke)



Beautiful leopardess Figlet in her tree (image by Inger Vandyke)



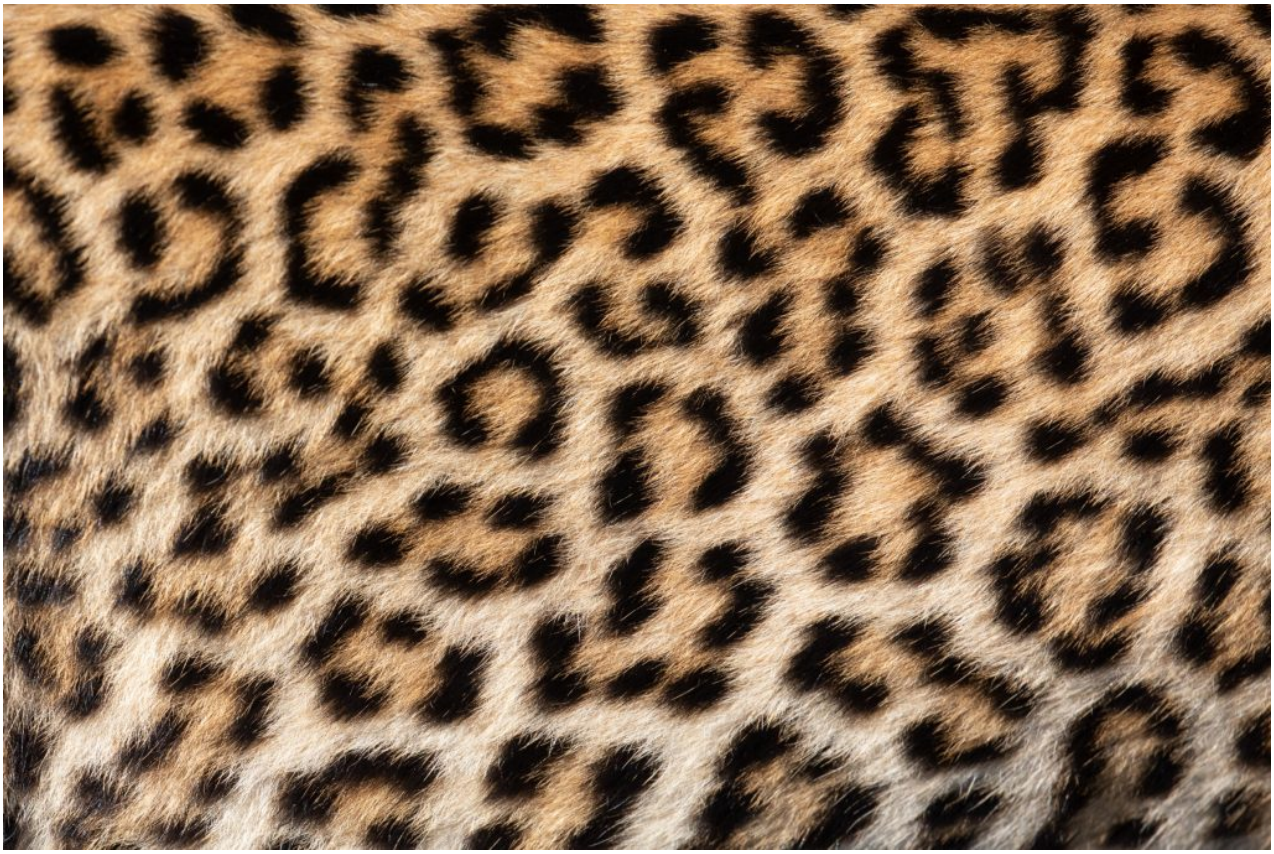
The tree that tells a thousand stories. An ancient Boscia greets a Mara storm (image by Inger Vandyke)



Portrait of a Green Boomslang we found in a low acacia bush (image by Inger Vandyke)



Figlet showing she really is a wild girl! (image by Inger Vandyke)



Detail of a leopard pelt (image by Inger Vandyke)



Safely in mummy's paws - a lion cub looks up towards its mother (image by Inger Vandyke)



Maasai warriors greet the new day beside an ancient Boscia tree (image by Inger Vandyke)



Post-meal a pair of Spotted Hyenas take a spontaneous swim in a muddy pool (image by Inger Vandyke)



Portrait of a swimming Spotted Hyena (image by Inger Vandyke)



Isidai, the traditional headdress worn by Maasai men as they transit from one life stage to another (image by Inger Vandyke)



On cool evenings it is possible to see the warm breath of a lion when it roars! (image by Inger Vandyke)



Portrait of a Kori Bustard in the grasslands of Naboisho Conservancy (image by Inger Vandyke)



Figlet climbs down from her perch in a twisted acacia tree (image by Inger Vandyke)



A Black-chested Snake Eagle takes flight (image by Inger Vandyke)



A Maasai warrior wears an Isidai, or ostrich feather headdress, in the grasslands of the Mara (image by Inger Vandyke)



Maasai head man wearing an Olgnatuny, the traditional lion mane headdress worn by warriors who would have killed a lion to prove their manhood in the past (image by Inger Vandyke)



A young male lion wanders through a grove of whistling thorns at sunrise (image by Inger Vandyke)



Beautiful hands of a Maasai girl. Maasai women are known for their intricate beading skills (image by Inger Vandyke)



Lion in the golden glow of sunrise at Olare Motorogi Conservancy (image by Inger Vandyke)



The mesmerising skies of the Mara at sunset (image by Inger Vandyke)



Portrait of a Maasai warrior wearing his Isidai, the symbol of goodwill worn by Maasai men as they pass from one life phase to another (image by Inger Vandyke)