

BEAUTIFUL ABUNDANCE

One man's visit to Kenya's Masai Mara

I am sitting in my chalet, overlooking the Kenyan plains of the Masai Mara region. My view is a never-ending variety of magnificent, endless beauty. One moment I look up and I see a herd of wildebeast; the next time I look at the same area the wildebeast are gone, replaced by a herd of elephants or zebra.

Not only does my scenery change as I gaze out my window, but so do the sounds. I have my sliding doors wide open. If I pay attention, I can hear grunts, bellows, nays, cries, screeches, fear, warnings, laughter, howls, growls, brays, songs, chirps, growls, moos, anger, hoots, trumpet calls, pleas for help and rescue, threats, territorial claims, love calls, sounds of silence, bush planes, and the engines of vehicles transporting tourists to up close and personal encounters with the sights and sounds of the Mara.

Every trip to the Mara is different, every game drive with your guide an adventure. Everything is a matter of timing. Show up two minutes later and you have missed the kill, the mating, the vultures finishing a feast, the jackal marking his territory, the elephants pushing over a tree. If you look left instead of right, you may not see the giraffes or the lions that emerged from the trees for a quick look at you.

Look there! I just happened to look up from writing and used my field glasses. I see twelve, no thirteen elephants, walking across the plain. They are moving so slowly, not a care in the world. Where are they going? They don't know; they are just following the food.

It's all about food and water in the Mara. Everyone is someone else's enemy, someone else's food source. No one is safe. The lions run from the hyenas, the hyenas avoid the elephants, the elephants keep a close eye on the lions, who in turn are watching for an opportunity to feast on the elephant young.

Abundance! Everywhere you look there is an abundance of dew on the grass, water, insects, game, vegetation, sights, dangers, clouds, beauty, and sounds. There is no anxiety in the Mara. The residents know that there is plenty of whatever it is that they need. They just have to find it.

Yesterday, we came to a riverbank and there were a slew of crocodiles tearing into a zebra carcass. We were alone for ten or fifteen minutes – who knows how long, for time ceases to exist when you are on a game

drive. Then another vehicle came by, but the show was over; there's that timing thing again. We read in the guest book today that someone saw two lions mating yesterday. They saw it; we missed it. They, however, didn't see the crocs twisting and rotating in the water to tear off a piece of zebra flesh. There seems to be something for everyone every day to talk about at breakfast or dinner.

Speaking of food, it is great and plentiful at the lodges. Meals are a time to reflect on what you just saw, telling your table or bar mates about the wonders of the Mara from your perspective, trying to convince anyone who will listen that your guide is the best guide in the world. The guides are good, but I wish they would tell us a little more information about what we are seeing. While they speak English, I don't think they are confident to teach mostly white tourists Mara secrets.

The guides have a sixth sense of where to go and what to see. They spot things that aren't there, or at least you think aren't there until closer inspection. *They were right! There is a cheetah just at the edge of that tree line.* It helps to have everyone looking but it helps more to have someone who knows what they are looking for.

There are a lot of shrubs and bushes in the Mara, but very few trees. The trees that do exist are singular acacia trees. Someone in our group said that they serve more as landmarks than anything else, and I think he's right. "Let's meet at the acacia tree next to the four-foot high termite mound." Did I mention that the termite mounds are so skillfully constructed that the internal temperature in the mound is always 55 degrees Fahrenheit. How do they know? The cheetahs love to perch on top of the mounds, which affords them an overview of the dinner menu before them on that day.

Did I mention cheetahs? On my last trip here, my son and I traveled all morning, looking for cheetah. We finally came upon a mother cheetah with five cubs in tow. The morning sun was perfect and the guide positioned our vehicle positioned for a perfect view. Then he said, "She is stalking." She didn't look like it to me but before we could say, "Hakuna matata (no worries in Swahili)," she was off and running after an impala. The cheetah lost that hunt, and returned to her cubs empty-handed and exhausted.

What had just happened? All we knew was that we had stopped breathing for a minute or two, spellbound by what we had just witnessed. This wasn't the Discovery Channel or *National Geographic*. This was real life in the Mara, happening right before our very eyes. Fortunately, my son

had the video camera rolling – I was too awestruck to use my camera – and he had something that looked like a scene from the show *Animal Kingdom*. He must have watched that video 100 times before we got back to camp.

The camps are comfortable, and the rooms are well furnished and comfortable. We arrived to the camp via a Cessna Caravan single-engine prop plane. The ride was bumpy and the landing strips are hardened gravel and dirt. It rained hard during one landing and take off, but the weather was beautiful just five minutes away. You can see game from the air, but it's much better at ground level. I'm not sure why anyone would pay \$300 for a hot-air balloon safari, but they do and the balloons dot the morning sky.

The guides usually take you out at 6:30 AM and 4:00 PM for about two and a half hours in a land rover. Don't drink any liquids; there are no rest stops. One morning they usually serve you breakfast in the bush where Masai tribesmen in their famous red and blue plaid togas escort you to your tables and answer your questions. The Masai are the tribesmen of the area, the Mara is the name of the area itself. Thus you have what's known as the Masai Mara. Some drop the Masai and just call it the Mara. The Mara blends into the Serengeti in Tanzania. I wonder if the animals know where they are?

I just took a break to locate the elephants with my glasses. How did they get all the way over there so quickly? They seemed to be moving so slowly, yet they made great progress. Why am I always in such a hurry? Some of the herd has lingered behind, perhaps tantalized by some choice bit of grass or berries. But they'll catch up because elephants understand family. They may separate for a while, but they always reunite.

While looking for the elephants, I decided to see how many other animals I could locate in one 180-degree sweep of the plain. I located buffalo, wildebeast, zebra, giraffe (there is a now famous video of a pride of lions who brought down an adult giraffe; I didn't think it was possible), topi, warthogs, and a hippo in the river. Not bad from the comfort of an armchair in my chalet.

I leave this afternoon, but I have more than 300 pictures and some video. They aren't really necessary, however, for these images are imprinted on my mind forever. The pictures are for someone else; the memories are for me.

Nothing lasts forever. I take one more look in my glasses and the elephants have vanished! That's kind of sad, but wait, there's a long line of buffalo, walking across the valley in single file. Who chose the leader? Why do they follow? Just when I was mourning the loss of the elephants, I have gained a new visual expression of the variety the Mara has to offer. Even that has to end, however, for my plane is leaving for the trip back to Nairobi.

I hope nothing much changes before I can return again. Somehow I don't think it will, although in other ways, the Mara is always changing, compliments of the beautiful abundance that is here.