

Out of Africa

Everything in Africa bites, someone once said. But the best of them all is the safari bug, for once the teeth have sunk in, you sink with them into a land that is unlike anything else in the world. Nature is in full bloom here and no matter how much you try, you will never be prepared for the beauty that is waiting to captivate you.

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▲ Above: Our charming resort in Shaba—the Sarova Shaba Lodge.

Left: Close encounters such as this one are quite common in these parts of the world.

The seduction began the minute our 13-seater Cessna Caravan was airborne, for magic is grafted into the soil, air and DNA of Kenya, so to speak. We were on a flying safari to the arid northern reaches of the country to explore its three great reserves—Samburu, Buffalo Springs and Shaba—before heading off for the legendary savannas of Masai Mara in southwestern Kenya.

Welcome, naturally!

The gnat-like aircraft flew over farmlands of wheat and barley; over lakes and scrubby bush, past the arrogant Mt Kenya dusted with snow at the equator. We gorged greedily on the sight of the sun-gilded landscape that unravelled below. An hour after we had taken off from Nairobi, we landed on a handkerchief-sized airstrip, where the terminal comprised three makeshift stalls with 'Duty Free' scrawled on them. The colourful garbs of the bronzed vendors who manned them were in bold relief to the stark splendour of the terrain around us. Indeed, we were in semi-desert bush country, land that is owned by the colourful Samburu tribes.

We climbed into a waiting Land Cruiser and trundled away in a cloud of dust thrown up by our vehicles, past low hills and scrub with a few blood-red desert roses and a swooping hornbill providing daubs of colour. What we remember of that first game drive was being enveloped in parched arid beauty; Samburu and Buffalo Springs had none of the lushness of the Masai Mara that we would see later. Soon we felt like we were part of a National Geographic film. Kenya does not believe in pulling its punches; the country immediately grabs you by the collar and forces you to witness a Steven Spielberg-style spectacular each time you embark on a safari.

As we bounced on red-earth rutted roads, we saw the first of the unusual species that are special to the region—the long-necked gerenuk. A graceful antelope, with an elongated body, stood on its hind legs to nibble at the leaves of the acacia trees that dotted the landscape. Soon the thorn-studded plains, rimmed by the mighty and lyrically named Ol Olokwe Mountain gave

way to a riverine forest, where tall, doum palms fringed the river. The Ewaso Nyiro River is a liquid beacon for the wildlife of this region, especially herds of elephant that stomp and wheel around here.

As we watched, a matriarch scooped up valuable nutrients from the squelchy mud and then prodded her young ones to do the same. Close to her, another tableau unfolded: a baby elephant suckled on her mother, while mama unconcernedly continued to pluck grass with her trunk and gorged on nature's bounty. Two young bulls played nearby, interlocking tusks and trunks to establish territory. A lone reticulated giraffe splayed its legs and bent its long neck to drink some life-giving water from the river and then loped away to the horizon with delicate grace. A pair of Grevy's zebra sauntered across. And iridescent birds arched across the vast African sky, swooping, gliding and riding the thermals with an almost abandoned grace.

Samburu and Shaba

We were by then ready for our lunch break at the deluxe Larsen's Tented Camp in Samburu, where 20 tents snuggle in the shade of acacia trees and doum palms. We sat down for open-air lunch at tables located in a grove of trees, where



▲ Above & left: A Masai Mara male and a Crested Crane showing off their respective headdresses.

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baboons checked us out curiously, ready to raid the table, vervet monkeys swung from tree branch to tree branch and impala sipped water at the river that flowed just outside the property. Feasting in the bush on such unlikely delicacies as avocado soup, stir-fried chicken flakes, buttered spaghetti and pan-fried fillet of Lake Victoria Tilapia fish with lemon and garlic sauce and a spectrum of desserts gave the experience an edge of romance and of the luxury safaris of yore.

Later we drove to Shaba: *Born Free* country and home of the conservationists Joy and George Adamson, who hand-reared lions and leopards and released them in the park. The park continued to dish out the sights even as we gasped at its raw primeval beauty. A huge 50-year-old tusker eyed us belligerently flapping his ears, which resembled huge dishrags

while his tusks gleamed in the dark. A comical Somali ostrich, found only in these parts, flounced away resembling a school principal chasing her errant pupils, while a herd of buffaloes was a dark hump against grey-blue hills. We drove across savanna grasslands that melted into acacia woodland, which in turn gave way to natural crags and springs that cascaded into the river. Here, hippos wallowed and stared at us with bulbous eyes; at night they would haul themselves out of the water to graze.

Do the tribal dance

En route we made a brief stop at a Samburu village, where the Samburu pastoralists greeted us with characteristic verve to their modest settlement of 180 people. The slim men jumped higher and higher, while the bejewelled women ululated and clapped, their cries of "O, O, O" hanging on the still air.

Suddenly the tribal women pulled some of the women from our group, clasped chunky beaded necklaces around their necks and showed them how to dance Samburu style, shaking and heaving the upper body so that the necklaces bounced rhythmically, while moving backwards and forwards. Later Simon, the son-in-law of the 79-year-old chief of the tribe, welcomed us and told us how jumping is an expression of joy for the Samburus. "We jump when we return victorious from battle or kill a lion or return home after a long absence."

Our attention was drawn to a group of young blades, which were bedecked with jewellery, and sported a cocky headdress

▼ Get carried away by the colourful and hypnotically rhythmic Samburu tribal dance.

with feathers. Simon explained that these bejewelled young men were looking to attract brides and proclaimed their intentions by adorning their ebony-skinned torso with beaded trinkets.

After that colourful interlude, we reached the romantic Sarova Shaba Lodge, bathed in the soft light of a post sunset sky. We sloughed off our tiredness here, as a snake would its skin, even as we dined in the Lodge's charming open-sided thatched roof restaurant.

Coursing the Mara

Next morning we took off for Masai Mara, a 1 hour 20 minutes flight, which skimmed over the Great Rift Valley, over bush and scrub and fields that resembled a giant patchwork quilt. And finally we were over the Mara, a vast green ocean of grasslands sliced by the Mara River. This is when we got the full impact of the expanse of the country's largest game park.

The Governors' Camp, located at the site where the first luxury safari camp was set up on the banks of the river for Kenya's colonial Governors, served as our base for our wildlife odyssey in the Mara. Here, we set aside our watches and unwound completely amidst the stunning vistas that stretched beyond our luxurious tents set on raised platforms, some of which had commanding views of the Mara River snaking by. A wildlife tableau would unfold every night outside our tents—hippos grunting as they grazed; elephants that left their calling cards in the form of large footprints outside our tents... We would be escorted to our gourmet dinners by a guard who's armed with a



rifle as the Governors' Camp is unfenced and our hosts did not want us to be taken aback by any animal intruders who might have strayed in!

Our meals were served just off the riverbank and it was not uncommon for a herd of elephants to stroll by and for hippos with babies in tow to waddle out of the water, while we sipped wine from crystal glasses and ate out of fine bone china with sterling silver cutlery.

Here we fell into a routine of morning, afternoon and evening game drives across the savannas, where the unscripted drama of the wild unravelled no more than a few metres from our safari vehicle. Stalking cheetahs, prowling leopards, mean-looking buffalos, endless herds of elephant, graceful impala,

topi standing watch on anthills, a family of bat-ear foxes, hyena pups, brilliantly plumed birds... The Mara brimmed with game. At dusk we would relax by the river front bar and watch hippos wallowing in the river and crocodiles guarding their eggs.

Then on our last drive we saw them—two richly maned lions lazing in the shimmering sun. Their breathing seemed to rustle the long grass around them. They looked like prizefighters that could pack a mean punch. Not too far away were five lionesses, probably sisters, that stood erect as sentries and stared fixedly in the distance, waiting... waiting... eyes peeled for sudden movements of vulnerable juicy prey.

Yes, Kenya's game parks are nature's stage on which the eternal drama of hunter and hunted is still being played out.

▼ A photo op unlike any other!



Fact file

Getting there

Jet Airways has regular flights to Heathrow, London from major Indian cities. A connecting flight can be taken from there to Nairobi.

From here one can either drive or fly in a light aircraft to and between the various wildlife parks scattered around Kenya. In a flying option, the game lodges provide the guests safari vehicles to explore the parks. In the drive option vehicles (called *combis* in these parts) will meet guests on arrival at the airport and stay with them throughout the trip; transferring them from one park to another and taking them on game rides – the retractable roof on these safari vans allowing for a 360-degree view.

Accommodation

Kenya has a wide range of accommodation options in the game parks, from luxury lodges to pitching one's own tent at a campsite. For those looking for a tented experience with five-star luxury, Governors' Camp in Masai Mara is the ticket.

Travel tips

Kenya has a wide range of safari options ranging from walking or camel safaris in Samburu, Buffalo Springs and Shaba, balloon safaris where one drifts over a park for an hour at dawn and tops it off with a champagne breakfast in the bush.

For more information: Log on to www.magicalkenya.com