

Kenya: A Taste of Africa

January & February 2005

Tour Report



In January and February 2005 Peter Smart, Wild Arena's photographic guide and tour leader, accompanied four groups on the hugely popular nine day safari to Kenya's Masai Mara offering clients a true *Taste of Africa*.

All the safaris were based at the delightful wilderness camp on the edge of the Masai Mara national park (the same location used for the *Great Migration* trips in August and September each year), but each tour had its own special character from a combination of the animals seen, the weather conditions and of course the clients comprising each of the groups.

During the first week the group saw three Cheetah undertake a crossing of the Talek river, Wildebeest giving birth at the same as their massed cousins who had followed the migration path into Tanzania, and a Caracal Lynx was viewed for half an hour in perfect lighting conditions (albeit by only one client who had arrived a couple of days before the main group).



Leopards were seen each week, but sometimes fleetingly and not by everyone in the group. However on the final day of the last trip, the group were treated to magnificent views of a young female leopard as she walked around our vehicle with a totally unworried air.

For many, a highlight was the regular sightings of the 26-strong pride of Lions – including cubs of all ages - which were resident around the camp, and sometimes almost in it! Whether returning from hunting in the mornings or preparing to set forth in the evenings, the light was often perfect to watch and photograph the cubs playing, the lionesses greeting each other and the single male lording it over the pride. In all nearly 200 Lions were seen during period of the safaris, including the equally large Ridge pride which features in BBC's *Big Cat Diary* programme.

In addition to the many mammal sightings, the birds were also plentiful. For those who haven't visited East Africa the huge range of species can sometimes be overwhelming but Peter and the local driver/guides were able to assist with identification – sometimes following spirited discussion! The birds are often colourful, sometimes large and nearly always approachable and provide great photographic opportunities.

As well as enjoying the wildlife and landscapes, time was also spent with the local community. Each week a visit was made to the local Masai village where the groups were made most welcome. One group made an impromptu collection to assist the schooling of the young children whose classroom was the grass under an acacia tree. By the time Peter left, the classroom was still in the same place but desks and chairs had been constructed using materials purchased by the generous donations. Similarly a local community project which Wild Arena has been supporting since 2004 in association with the camp, was providing a local primary school with a replacement toilet, fencing around the school compound and many of the clients took basic schooling materials. And a visit to a White Rhinoceros conservation project managed by the Masai always proved exciting!



In order to make the best use of the time on each safari, picnic breakfasts and lunches were often taken – sometimes under an acacia on the plains or by the river with a pod of Hippopotamus snorting nearby. Whenever conditions looked promising in the evening, a dash was made to an appropriate location to capture an African sunset which was made all the more pleasant by the serving of sundowners! The evening meal was often enjoyed under the stars and later time was spent around the camp fire discussing the events of the day and the plans the following day.

A full tour report by Peter follows and an album showing a selection of photographic highlights from each of the safaris may be viewed at:

http://www.petersmartwildlifephotography.co.uk/wa/tour_gallery/ky2005ap/

The *Overview* folder contains a selection of images that have been chosen to show the wide range species, habitat and the local people that were seen, and the extensive photographic opportunities that were available. Additional folders contain more of the birds that were seen, and further images of Cheetah, Lion and the Masai people. All photographs were taken by Peter Smart, mostly using a Canon EOS20D D-SLR with the Canon 100-400mm IS lens.

We wish to thank Boniface and Julius, our superb driver/guides, and also Safari Consultants Limited who handle our African travel arrangements. They are a fully bonded UK tour operator holding ATOL licence 3783. Also bonded through AITO Trust (No. 1091) and holding an IATA licence. Your financial protection when travelling on safari.

Here is Peter's report for the four *Kenya: A Taste of Africa* safaris in 2005 ...

Tour Report

“Lions, Cheetah, Elephants, Giraffe and a whole variety of other animals and birds were seen regularly by all the groups, but on each safari – all following a similar itinerary – there were several highlights which made it unique. The report which follows highlights some of those special occasions and the photo album offers a pictorial insight to what was seen.

Safari Group 1

A close-up encounter with the resident pride of 26 lions made a fitting climax to our first afternoon game drive, after our overnight flight from London and arrival at the camp in time for lunch. We had already seen the local Cheetah mother with her soon to be departing cub, whose development I had observed during previous trips. In addition a large pod of Hippos were seen a few minutes after landing at the Mara airstrip and many other plains animals – including gazelles, Giraffe and Zebra had been eagerly photographed. All this in just the first day!

The following day we set up before sunrise (a common occurrence on my safaris!) and were waylaid on our trip to the Talek river by the local pride returning from a night's hunting. Eventually we managed to draw ourselves away only to soon find ourselves in the midst of the equally large Ridge pride which had just featured on BBC's *Big Cat Diary*. More cubs have arrived since the series had been filmed and were a delight to watch. After all this activity, a hasty breakfast was taken in the vehicle as we moved off and parked alongside a coalition of five male lions which made a nice backdrop to our first breakfast in the Mara!

Our main objective for visiting Talek was to locate *Big Cat Diary's* mother leopard, Bella, and her son Chui who are known to spend much time in the area. On our way we spent time with three young Cheetah which we hoped were the children of *Big Cat Diary's* Kike which had now parted from her. It turned out they were not, although this did not diminish the wonderful experience of spending several hours with them both before and after lunch. Then there was a shout of 'Stop!' which often signals a Leopard sighting and so it proved. Not Bella, but a huge male – probably Chui's father - resting in the heat of the day under a bush. Reportedly a shy cat, but with no other vehicles around we were able to spend half an hour with this magnificent animal who allowed us to approach quite closely. Lions passed near by and we could still see the three Cheetahs, so for a while we had all three of Africa's big cats in view at the same time!



The following day was a little more relaxed with much time spent with the local Lion pride in the morning and evening, and we delighted in the playful antics of the cubs of various ages in lovely lighting conditions. Another full day expedition took us into the heart of the Masai Mara national park to search for the few Black Rhinoceros which are known to be in the area, and our search was finally rewarded with a sighting of a magnificent male who allowed us to approach very closely and, with no other vehicles around, we were privileged to enjoy his company alone. A storm was brewing up and we were forced to start a mad dash back to the camp. On the way a combination of black skies, sunshine and rainbows led to some quick stops to capture the beauty of the dramatic landscapes that unfolded before us.

On the final full day we returned to the Talek river and caught up with the three Cheetah we had seen at the start of the week. They looked hungry and so we stayed with them in the

hope they might start hunting, despite the fact that the plains on the north side of the river were virtually empty of game. They began to move towards the river itself, surveying the other side, and to our great surprise, they launched themselves in to it. Cheetahs are not known for their liking of water and this showed with the speed and ungainliness with which they crossed! The photographic opportunities were unusual (to say the least!) as we enjoyed this rather unusual river crossing and the wish that they could find a meal on the other side.

During a morning game drive before the first group left, we were treated to sightings of one of the leopards which are known to live within the area around the camp. It was sitting high in a tree as we passed but this rather shy male decided to make its way down and disappear into a nearby thicket. We continued, watching the local female Cheetah unsuccessfully trying to hunt (not helped, as usual, by her son who did little to hide from the potential prey), catching up with another large pride of Lions in the area adjacent to the local pride and when we returned to camp we were amazed to see the male Leopard once again in the same tree! With improved light, better photographic opportunities were offered as he once again came down from the tree make a fitting ending to the first group's safari.

Safari Group 2

When the second group arrived in camp after their short drive from the airstrip – the 'zoo keepers' safari as the group comprised people involved with three of the venues at which Wild Arena hold workshops - the general feeling was that they had already seen it all! A pride of Lions posed obligingly, Hippos were seen in the river, Giraffe surrounded the vehicles and large numbers of plains game were seen. Well, not quite all as the next few days proved!

On the following day we returned to the spot where the previous evening we had watched one of the local Lionesses feeding on a just killed Zebra and later joined by the rest of the pride. By morning nothing remained, having been devoured by members of a nearby den of Hyenas. As we approached the den we were delighted to see a number of pups - some only a few weeks old and still with their black fur - playing amongst themselves as well as been attended to by their mum.



A full day in the National Park started with a late picnic breakfast on the hills where *Out of Africa* was filmed and which offer magnificent views over the Masai Mara. As we left there was a fleeting glimpse of a Leopard leaping down from a tree seen by only a few in the group and, unfortunately, not by the owner of the Big Cats workshop venue! However, soon after, we located a Black Rhinoceros mother and calf which, like the male the previous week, allowed a fairly close approach and excellent photographic opportunities. This was followed by Cheetahs on a kill and then, like the previous week, a dash back to camp was required to avoid an approaching storm characterised by black skies!

Over the next few days large family groups of Elephants were seen on the plains and around camp - a very different situation to even 10 years ago when the impact of poaching for ivory was still in evidence from the smaller sized groups who were often very shy near vehicles. The local Lion pride, seen regularly by the group during the week, put in a final appearance on the last morning as did a Cheetah on a kill bring to an end another enjoyable safari.

Safari Group 3

Before the third group arrived, I had a “morning off” and was joined on a local game drive by one of the clients who had arrived a couple of days earlier than the rest of the group. A pair of twitching ears were seen in the grass and we were amazed to see it was a Caracal Lynx bathed in beautiful early morning light. We kept at a respectful distance from this notoriously shy and elusive small cat and were rewarded by half an hour of stunning viewing and photographic opportunities as it walked, laid down and attempted to hunt. I had only occasionally seen Caracal before in all my visits to Africa, and never one as obliging as this. It was just a shame that the full group did not get to share this opportunity!

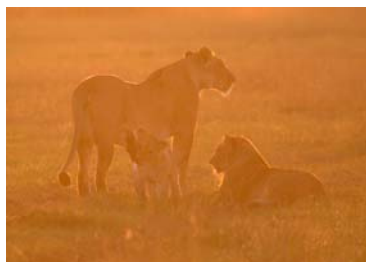


However there as plenty more to interest us in the week ahead with the local Lions and Cheetah making regular appearances. Again the large family groups of Elephants were prominent on the plains, with a large bull getting rather upset with a hot air balloon on one occasion! At least two leopards were seen during the week by different members of the group, although these were rather fleeting glimpses.



Capturing a good African sunset was high on the agenda during each of the safaris (as you may have noticed with the selection in my photo album!) and we did particularly well during this week. At the end of a full and interesting day, there is nothing better than to watch the equatorial sun begin its incredibly quick descent to the horizon – silhouetting animals and trees – and, trying to balance photographic needs on one hand ... and a sundowner in the other ...

On the final evening we spent a wonderful time watching the local Lion pride coming out of the woodland just outside camp as they got ready for a night's hunting. We witness a great deal of interaction as the sun began to set behind us, bathing the whole scene in glorious warm light. The temptation to carry on photographing was as it got darker was too much for at least one the group, despite the difficulty of focusing and this was made clear when one of the party finally looked up from his viewfinder and delivered the quote of the week – ‘No wonder I can't see it any more, it's not there'!



Safari Group 4

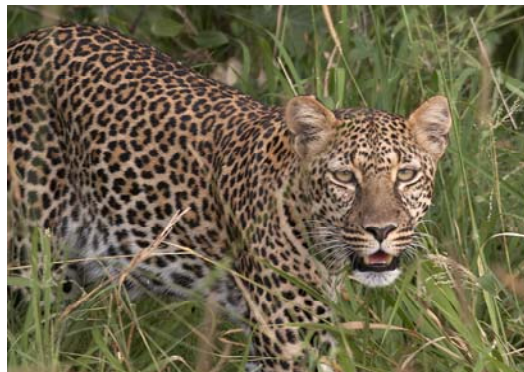
The local Lion pride (now well trained!) greeted the arrival of the final group and we spent several game drives enjoying their company, often bathed in perfect morning or evening light. During the week, there appeared to be some commotion with the two neighbouring prides and it was unclear what would be the outcome.



On one early morning drive we noticed Hyenas in the distance and we were delighted to find a large pack near a kill including some delightful cubs who were as interested in us as we were in them! Later that day we spent time in the National Park where we saw a lioness attempting to hunt in the heat of the day. We decided it was best to rest under the shade of the trees by the Mara river and spent an enjoyable time watching the Hippos. A crocodile was also swimming to and fro and some of the group were amazed to see (and in one case successfully photograph) the amazing site of it catching a large fish!



On the final afternoon, we were treated to one of the most outstanding sightings of all the safaris when we came face-to-face with a Leopard ... a lovely female called Supuu, meaning beautiful lady. Keeping a respectful distance we were about to follow her for some time as she made her way through the woodland and long grass and at one point she walked right in front of our vehicle. A fitting finale to this safari and for my own extended stay in Kenya.



Summary

A total of 38 animal species were recorded and a list of these may be found here:

http://www.petersmartwildlifephotography.co.uk/wa/tour_report/ky2005a_mammals.pdf



Being an experienced ornithologist I was able (with the help of the local driver/guides!) to identify most of the vast range of colourful (and often similar!) bird species that can be found. While not a 'twitching' tour, I believe most people think that seeing, identifying and photographing the birds adds a further rewarding dimension to a safari. A total of 135 species were recorded and that's excluding many of the LBJs ('Little Brown Jobs') that we didn't have time to identify. For those people who have not yet been fortunate enough to visit Africa (and as I hope the album shows) many of the birds are either large and/or colourful and, using the vehicles as mobile hides, provide great photographic opportunities. The full list and birds recorded may be found at:

http://www.petersmartwildlifephotography.co.uk/wa/tour_report/ky2005a_birds.pdf

At the end of all my reports I attempt to think of a personal highlight that made the safari memorable. Having accompanied four safaris, each with their own unique highlights, this is proving difficult! However observing the Caracal Lynx was a very special period, and seeing the Cheetah make the river crossing during the first week was wonderful to watch. However the unrushed time spent near camp having the opportunity to view and photograph most of the species one would expect to see in the area and, for me in particular, observing the interactions in the local Lion pride was always was always highly enjoyable experience ... especially with a sundowner in hand! The area once again lived up to its promise of offering a true *Taste of Africa*."

Peter Smart, June 2005

