

A Kenyan Safari:

The Greatest Show on Earth

Young Masai giraffe, Masai Mara

PART 2

Shooting the Mara

A minimum of two weeks is recommended for shooting in the Masai Mara. Getting there, however, can be a little tedious as many of the incoming roads, including those from Lake Nakuru, are fairly poor; although with outside help they are improving. There are a number of choices for accommodation both inside and outside the Mara. It is best to choose bases in different parts of the park and the typical choices are Keekorok Lodge, Serena Lodge and Intrepids Mara Camp.

Keekorok Lodge is a recently refurbished hotel-like establishment. The gardens are not fenced and grazing animals and predators alike are free to wander about. At night, guests are offered a Masai warrior armed with a spear to escort them to their rooms as the flashlight picks up many pairs of green eyes punctuating the darkness. Lions, buffalo and hyenas can be heard throughout the night and reports of lions moving

around noisily outside bathroom windows are not unusual. One witness reported seeing a cheetah pursuing a Thomson's gazelle through the grounds before downing it several yards from a guest's room. Some interesting bird species, sunbirds and Violet-backed starlings, show flashes of brilliant, iridescent plumage around the lodge during the midday shooting break. There is also a boardwalk that leads to a hippo pool where guests can look down at the wildlife while sipping a cool "Tusker"; hippos can sometimes be found grazing on the lawns at night within inches of guest's front door: sleepwalkers beware.

At first light on the Mara, the predators of the night can be seen lustily consuming the early morning kill: Topi, Eland, Zebra and remnants of the Wildebeest migration. This is also cheetah and lion territory—and these cats are day hunters. An understanding of the cheetah's behavior and their method of hunting can often help budding photographers capture stunning action shots.

A female cheetah with cubs lives her life on

Graeme Guy, EPSA
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This is part two of a two part series. Part one appeared in the November *Journal*



the edge. She is a solo Mother with no social security and many problems. She has to protect her offspring while sustaining herself and keeping 100% fit and injury-free to run down her prey. She hunts by stealth and guile, she has a limited choice of small animals that she can outrun, and she must get close enough to release her high-speed dash.

But, like an alcohol-powered dragster, her speed can only be sustained for short distances and the prey can run nearly as fast. If successful, she must sequester her kill from lions and hyenas and even consume it before they come on the scene. Any muscular or bone damage to her high performance limbs is likely to be fatal to her and her cubs.

Young lioness bringing down a wildebeest



Leopard resting in a tree, Masai Mara



Lions cubs playing, Masai Mara



Graeme Guy, EPSA

Photos ©
Graeme Guy, EPSA

The hunting strategy of lions is entirely different. The pride, based on related females, can virtually kill anything they choose. Well-conceived team strategy, astuteness and brute force can provide food in abundance when the grazers are in the vicinity. The problem is that the grazers are not always around in high numbers. Lions will bring down giraffe, ostriches, any of the grazers—including Masai cattle—and even kill pesky hyenas if they push their luck too far around a kill.

One of the most delightful sights can be observed around lion prides especially in the early evening when it is playtime for the older cubs. Like mischievous children, they play tricks on each other, practice stalking and choking and have games of hide and seek with gymnastic romps around the bushes. One of the most endearing events in this playtime can be when the mothers join in with the same gusto as the youngsters while demonstrating tolerance and love.

The interactions between members of a lion



Male Agama lizard in courting colors, Masai Mara

pride make interesting viewing. The mother sequesters new cubs from the pride until she determines a suitable time for them to be introduced to the more muscle-bound members. Mating, in contrast, seems to be a cross between angry wrestling and a static marathon. Belligerent connections take place every 15-20 minutes, and each ends with a grimace or snarl from both participants and often the male flops on the ground as if felled by a hunter's bullet. A bold biff in the face 15 minutes later quickly reminds him of his ongoing duty.

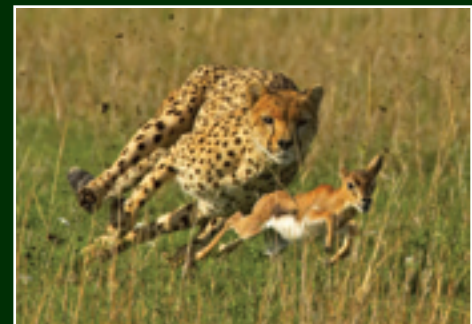
Another choice location for accommodation inside the Mara is Serena Lodge. The rooms at the Serena Lodge are skillfully blended into a rocky outcrop. Even the telecommunications tower is disguised to make it look like a tree, albeit a Northern Hemisphere Ponderosa Pine. The view from every room is magnificent—sweeping panoramas of the planes below, like a private box at the theater. The players beneath howl and roar and never allow a weary photographer an afternoon siesta. From Serena Lodge, Crowned Cranes, European Cranes, Hyena, lions on various kills, lions mating, Marabou Storks, Kori Bustards on the ground and flying, Topi with young and several ground birds, such as the Yellow-throated and Rosy-breasted Long-claws can be photographed. Servals, small, spotted and usually



High surveillance



The chase is on



Closing in on the baby gazelle



*Ground Hornbill
with grasshopper,
Masai Mara*

nocturnal, can be observed resting in the grass or stalking an unwary prey before attacking with an exaggerated photogenic leap.

While regarded as the ‘baddies’ on the game plains, vultures can provide some spectacular photographic opportunities. The long sweeping descent of the common White-backed Vultures homing in on a kill enables some mesmerizing flight shots. Other species of vulture that gather around kills are the visiting Egyptian Vultures and the comedian of the carrion-eaters, the Nubian Vulture, who descends with his undercarriage down from some distance away, easily traceable by an autofocus system.

Although Samburu is a good location for photographing elephants, the more open terrain on the Mara makes it easy to capture these magnificent beasts. Juveniles can be observed getting life lessons from the parents and aunts.

There appears to be no genetic instructions on the use of trunks; moms can be seen coaching foraging techniques, but junior often seems to get this errant protuberance spiraled up like an uncontrollable rubber band and, instead, feigns a fainting attack, until a parental knee in the backside focuses a juvenile mind on the lesson at hand.

There are many dramatic documentaries on TV showing wildebeest crossing the Mara River through a gauntlet of gigantic crocodiles. This flailing of hooves and gnashing of teeth can be a major photographic target. Crossings tend to take place between July and early October each year. The giant herd grazes their way through the greater Masai Mara, Serengeti and Ngorongoro Crater interconnecting game reserves. They essentially act as a massive lawn mowing system staying on the move to survive. Since the ‘crossing season’ is also peak tourist period on the Mara, the



The gazelle is tripped



All over, the gazelle is captured



The cheetah rests after the chase



Martial Eagle landing, Masai Mara

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Cheetah kits mutual grooming, Masai Mara



prices are inevitably higher. Several professional photographers reflect that a lot of time can be wasted waiting for a river crossing. During the later parts of October or early November, there may be a number of Wildebeest stragglers who merge together to cross the river *en masse*, whether it is in the murk of the descending night or during the middle of the day. Sometimes, the wildebeest unite with Topi and Zebra to cross. Other times, individuals may probe various crossing points for several hours before a hidden ‘go’ button is activated and the race to cross safely is on.



‘Auxillary Jack,’ a cheetah kitten investigates the Safari vehicle, Masai Mara

Usually, the animals will cross in groups with their own species: the Wildebeest seem frenetic and guided by some hidden hypnotic force; the Zebras are fairly controlled, find the best place to cross and then shepherd their young; the Topis seem to find anything that resembles a cliff and jump off into the water with a maximum splash. While waiting for the animals to make up their minds to cross, colorful Little Bee-eaters can be photographed as they dart after insects along the edge of the river and rest on branches to consume their chitinous meal.

When the grazers have moved on, the lion prides are left with the endemic species for their meat supply. Warthogs are often such targets and watching the stalking process with them as targets is fascinating. Every step is slow and deliberate. The toes carefully probe the ground before the weight is effortlessly transferred; but this is often to no avail as the cat is detected and an indignant warthog family trots briskly away with their tails haughtily upright. However, there is no doubting the strength of the king of beasts, and when a large male wants to protect his kill from rivals he can carry a full-grown warthog nearly half a mile to secrete the carcass from vultures, hyenas and other lions.

Another favorite accommodation site for exploring life in the Mara is the Mara Intrepids Camp. The area adjacent to the Mara Intrepids camp is the best cheetah country and these sleek cats are much-loved targets for lenses. A chase can come after some carefully planned stalking or it can happen abruptly if a sequestered baby Thomson’s gazelle chooses to run from the pathway of an advancing cat. After a brief and frenetic chase, cheetahs will trip their victims and, before their collapsed legs can be re-programmed, rapier-sharp teeth are sunk into the windpipe.

Kenyan Nature parks are home to some 1400 species of birds, the big five Safari mammals, the millions of mobile grazers, the lurking reptiles and even walking catfish—without a doubt, this is the “Greatest photographic Show on Earth!” ■