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SATURDAY, JULY 30 | 2011 | EDITOR CARALYN CAMPBELL 604.605.2784 | CACAMPBELL@SUNPROVINCE.COM



WEEKEND EXTRA

See the 'Big Five' alive On safari

Luxury meets some of nature's most spectacular creatures in Kenya
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ONLINE

Yosemite controversy
Officials at California's Yosemite National Park propose to fell trees to improve views of waterfalls.

INSIDE | H7

The Bard vs. Bieber
Stratford, Ont., has long been famous for its Shakespeare festival, but a teen-idol tour is bringing it some youth appeal.



TUESDAY

Travel Postcard
A special report on how families can get the most out of 48 hours in Boston with children in tow.



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KENYA



A herd of elephants walks towards the sunset on the Masai Mara.

Who needs nightlife when there's wildlife?

A Kenyan safari offers an extraordinary adventure alongside Africa's 'big five' species

BY MHAIRRI WOODHALL
SPECIAL TO THE VANCOUVER SUN

The air in the single-propeller, nine-passenger Cessna was abuzz with anticipation. For many, including my husband Curt and I, a Kenyan safari was fulfilling a lifelong dream. As our tiny plane climbed in altitude and the views below changed from chaotic city to sprawling grasslands, I slowly

relaxed my white-knuckled grip and surrendered to the extraordinary adventure we were embarking on. For the rest of that seemingly endless one-hour flight we craned our necks and pressed our cheeks against peephole windows in hopes of spotting Africa's 'big five'.

The welcoming committee on the dirt runway where we landed included Benedict, our game ranger, Mosaba the manager of "Beyond Bateleur

Camp" where we were staying, and herds of zebra, antelope and cape water buffalo lazily munching the tall savannah grass. While sucking back my first welcome cocktail, I breathed in the surroundings and whispered to Curt "this place is magical."

Overwhelmed with the abundance and proximity of wildlife, we eagerly jumped into Benedict's jeep and headed to camp. The experience so far had been

dizzying and we had only just arrived. On the short drive to camp we took in everything, hanging on Benedict's every word as he pointed out baby zebra and giraffe, a family of warthogs tromping along the dirt road and a group of curious baboons that were as fascinated with us as we were with them.

The sweet sounds of staff members singing *Hakuna Matata* drew us into the tented camp and we were immediately in awe of the sweeping savannah views from the open-air lounge and dining room. While sipping on Tusker beer from weighty crystal tumblers we marvelled at the elegant 1920s décor before settling on a plush leather chesterfield to watch a tower of giraffes delicately nibbling the leaves off a thorny acacia tree.

Within a couple of hours we were whisked away for our first game drive, and as the camp was quiet that day, we had the jeep and immensely knowledgeable Benedict to ourselves. On that special inaugural safari we sighted black-backed jackal, elephants playing in a watering hole, a mother and baby rhino and jet-black ostriches with neon pink legs, along with a myriad of birds, antelope, gazelle and portly warthogs.

Each game drive promises at least one memory that stays with you for a lifetime, and our first outing did not disappoint. As with most of my life's unforgettable moments this noteworthy incident involved a little



There's nothing like having mimosas on the open plains surrounded by wildlife.

wonderment, fear and laughter. After an hour in the jeep our eagle-eyed guide spotted two lionesses and five adorable cubs snoozing under the shade of an umbrella tree. At first our arrival was of little interest to the sleepy cats, and so we shot some stills and revelled in the amazing encounter.

After a few snap-happy minutes one of the great beasts gave us a lazy yawn revealing an exorbitant amount of her

flesh-ripping teeth, rose and sauntered towards my side of the open-air jeep. Squirming in my seat I shifted closer to Curt as Benedict tried with little success to calm me down.

"Don't worry", he said, "she thinks you are part of the jeep, you will be fine."

Given that my only real option was to believe him I swallowed my screams of terror and attempted to regulate my breathing.

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FROM PREVIOUS PAGE



PHOTOS BY CURT WOODHALL/SPECIAL TO THE SUN

The open plains of Kenya offer visitors unparalleled vistas.

Sure enough the lioness continued her slow stalk past me, to a large boulder safely out of pouncing range. "Six feet", I exclaimed "she was practically within petting range." An experienced safari guide is keenly attuned to sensory overload and as such, sundowner drinks immediately followed my narrow escape from death.

Our first sunset on the Masai Mara was mesmerizing. Parked under an acacia tree we slugged back ice-cold Tusker and stared in wonder at the vibrant burnt orange and ruby glow that enveloped the horizon. When the last of the light sank into the ground we headed back to camp, intoxicated from the day's mind-boggling events.

How could a day like this be topped one might ask? A surprise barbecue dinner by a hippo watering hole would be the answer.

Torches, lanterns and a large bonfire lit the night sky, while presumably preventing us from becoming prey. The little elves at &Beyond had been busy setting up a full bar, buffet spread, candlelit white-linen tables sprinkled with rose petals and even tented lavatories with heated water basins, hanging mirrors and rolled towels.

Within seconds of arriving we were given our 'medicine' of Dowa, a lethally delicious drink made with vodka, freshly squeezed lime and honey. From that moment on the night became a blur of exceptional food, an overdose of 'medicine' and the sounds of hippos snorting in the riverbed below.

After dinner, Masai Warriors took the stage and engaged in a series of dances, tribal songs and a jumping ceremony to showcase their strength and endurance.

It was close to midnight when we climbed wearily into our luxurious king-sized bed, already



Visiting a Masai village is a must to learn about their unique culture and way of life.

warm from the hot water bottles Nasiti, our room steward, had tucked beneath the covers. The note he left on the pillow wished us sweet dreams and in an instant we were well on our way.

Each morning at the Bateleur Camp we awoke to a soft knock at the door of our deluxe tented sanctuary where Nasiti waited with a silver tray of freshly brewed coffee and bite-sized biscuits. Following coffee we would walk to the lodge for a gourmet three-course breakfast before our morning game drive.

Throughout our time on the open-plain savannah of the Masai Mara National Reserve we were fortunate to see cheetahs stalking prey, two elusive leopards, an endangered black rhino, crocodiles and a magnificent male lion.

There were nail-biting moments, including a screeching baboon's narrow escape from a hungry trio of lions, as well as heartwarming scenes such as the reunion of a three-



The luxurious five-star Bateleur camp is decorated as a throwback to the 1920s safaris.

month-old cub with his mother after spending a night alone in the Serengeti.

The camp also offered morning walking safaris, which I managed to drag my hesitant husband on. Unfortunately, the adventure started by climbing through the camp's electric fence to avoid walking on the lower slope side of a massive Cape Water Buffalo; apparently this causes the beasts to charge. I felt quite safe with our Masai Warrior guide Jackson, who was accompanied by a camp guard carrying an

antique shotgun, however Curt remained rather jumpy throughout our trek.

In speaking with Jackson and learning more about the life of a warrior, we decided to visit a local Masai camp. Our guide, the chief's son, explained that the small dark huts, built by the Masai women, were made from sticks, mud, grass, cow dung and urine, and that his people's diet consists primarily of the milk, meat and blood of their cattle.

We then listened in earnest to the painful process of becoming

a Masai Warrior, a seven-year journey that starts after boyhood circumcision. At the close of our visit, after much persuasion, I donned some ceremonial jewelry and happily danced like a fool with the striking Masai women.

When it was time to leave this almost imaginary Dr. Seuss-like world of the Serengeti my heart filled with sadness; five days was simply not enough. Of all the places to which we have travelled, nothing compares to the magic found in the Masai Mara.

If you go

A visa is required to enter into Kenya; contact Visa Connection for more information:

www.visaconnection.com

Proof of a Yellow Fever vaccination is another entry requirement, contact Travel Medicine & Vaccination Centre to book a consultation: www.tmv.com

The intimate &Beyond Bateleur Camp is pure perfection: www.andbeyondafrica.com

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