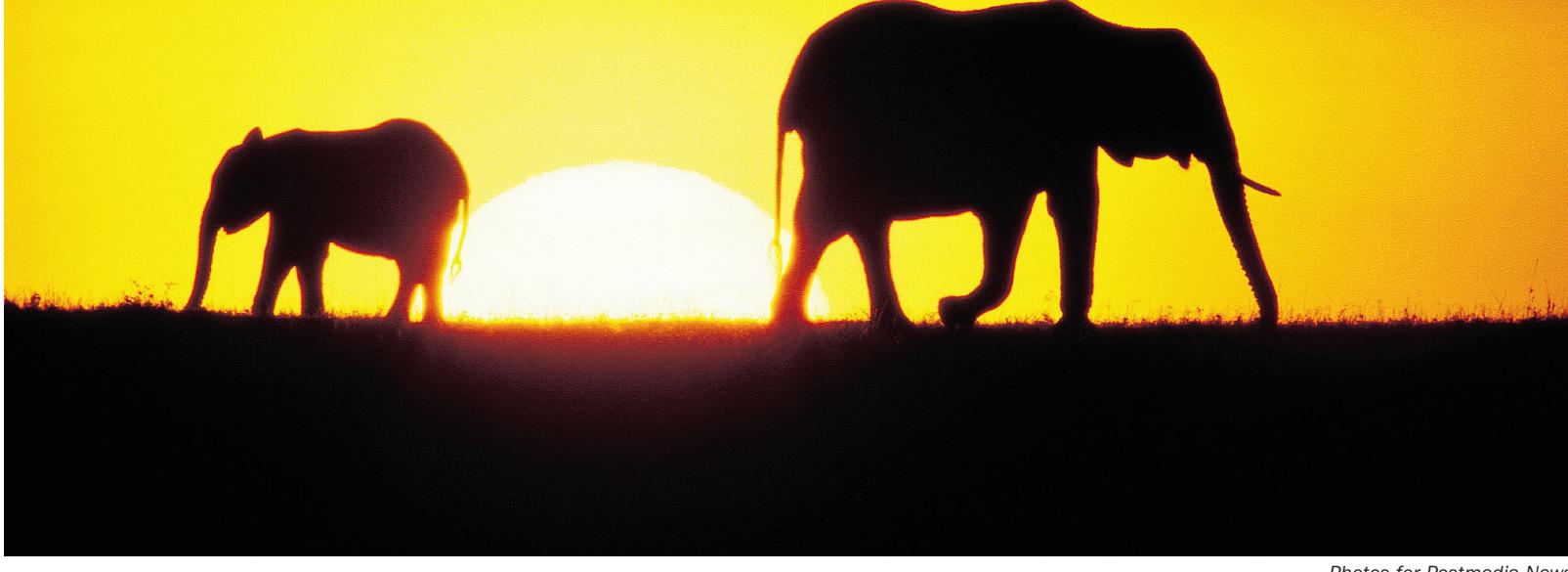


# TRAVEL

BREAKING NEWS AT LEADERPOST.COM

SECTION B FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 9, 2011

## MASAI MARA MAGIC



Photos for Postmedia News

Upscale, adventurous treks let tourists see the awesome beauty of elephants and other African wildlife up close in Kenya.



### Safari life doesn't have to mean roughing it, upscale camp proves

MHAIRRI WOODHALL  
FOR POSTMEDIA NEWS

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 decor 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.

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. 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

screams of terror and attempted to regulate my breathing.

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.

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.

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](http://www.visaconnection.com)

Proof of a Yellow Fever vaccination is another entry requirement, contact Travel Medicine & Vaccination Centre to book a consultation: [www.tmcv.com](http://www.tmcv.com)

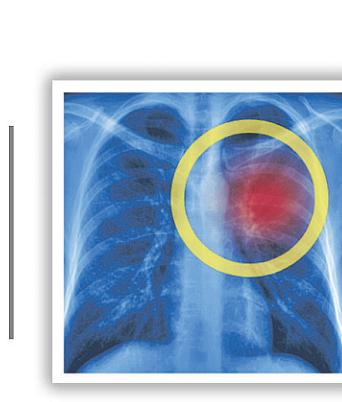
The intimate & Beyond Bateleur Camp is pure perfection: [www.andbeyondafrica.com](http://www.andbeyondafrica.com)

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