

HIGH PLAINS DRIFTER

*A new airborne safari concept in Kenya has raised the bar — by a few thousand feet. **Stanley Johnson** straps himself in to enjoy the ride*



Elewana's newly launched SkySafari Kenya is a totally brilliant concept. Provided there are two or more of you, you have guaranteed seats on a private Cessna Caravan plane which will transport you in comfort to some of the finest national parks and wildlife reserves that Kenya has to offer. SkySafari Kenya bypasses most of the normal difficulties and inconveniences of travel, allowing you to experience the magnificent variety of Kenya's wildlife in an intense, yet totally non-stressful, way.

To put you in the mood, some well-known 'African' quotations are inscribed on the walls of the dining room in Hemingways, the boutique hotel in Nairobi where I spent the first night after arriving from London. I raised a glass of Tusker beer in homage to the great WC Fields, whose endearing and enduring quip — for my money — won first prize in a hotly contested field: 'Reminds me of my safari in Africa. Someone forgot the corkscrew and for several days we had to live on nothing but food and water!'

The next morning, refreshed and invigorated, I headed for Nairobi's Wilson Airport. Peter Wachira, the pilot of the luxuriously upholstered SkySafari Cessna Caravan, welcomed me on board. Forty minutes later we landed on the airstrip in the heart of Amboseli National Park, the first of three parks I would visit that week. At around 100,000 acres, Amboseli is not the largest of Kenya's national parks, but it forms part of the Amboseli basin, a two-million-acre ecosystem extending across the border into Tanzania. I stayed at Tortilis Camp, one of the first eco-lodges of its kind in East Africa. Stefano Cheli, a towering figure in Kenya's sustainable tourism movement who set Tortilis up in 1993, told me that the camp had played a crucial role in helping to build the support of the local Masai community for conservation objectives.

'The community must benefit from the tourist dollar if wildlife is to survive,' Stefano explained. 'From the outset, we partnered with the local community, leasing a 12,000-hectare wildlife corridor >>



RIGHT: ELEPHANTS IN MERU NATIONAL PARK. BELOW, LEFT TO RIGHT: THE CESSNA CARAVAN IN FLIGHT; RHINO IN MERU NATIONAL PARK; THE KENYAN SUNSET



» between Amboseli National Park and Tanzania from 3,000 collective landowners.’

At a time when African elephant populations are facing a poaching epidemic, with 30,000 being killed each year, the good news is that in Amboseli, thanks to local involvement and firm anti-poaching measures, the elephant population today probably exceeds 1,600.

Tortilis Camp lies just a few miles north of Kilimanjaro, Africa’s highest mountain. One evening, as the sun set on the mighty peak, my driver took me to a hilltop vantage point for the traditional sundowner. I looked down at the wildlife on the salt plains below. Elephants, buffalos, impalas, lions, cheetahs, hyenas, giraffes, zebras, wildebeest — they are all there in abundance. With 400 species of birds, including pelicans, kingfishers, crested cranes, hammerkops and 47 types of raptor, this is surely one of the finest wildlife viewing areas on the planet.

PERPETUAL MOTION

The brilliant thing about SkySafari is that it entirely dispenses with any tedious hanging about. An hour after we took off from Amboseli at the end of the first leg of the SkySafari, we arrived in Meru National Park, where I stayed at Elsa’s Kopje.

The lodge occupies the site where George and Joy Adamson based their camp and eventually released Elsa the lioness back into the wild. *Born Free* was filmed in Meru almost 50 years ago, and Virginia McKenna, the star of the film (well, apart from Elsa!), is still a regular and very welcome visitor to the camp. Her son, Will Travers, is now the president



Top left © africa-shot.com; bottom right by Justin Mott

of the Born Free Foundation which Virginia and his father, Bill Travers, founded. Born Free helps fund wildlife rangers and other conservation activities. Thanks to Will, I was able to spend a morning trekking with the rangers through the bush on a hunt for illegal snares.

Later, I had a fascinating hour-long conversation with Captain Kenneth Ochieng, himself a pilot, who is Meru’s senior warden. ‘I flew over the park yesterday morning,’ he said. ‘There were elephants all over the place. When the rivers dry up outside, they come into Meru.’ There are actually thirteen rivers and streams in Meru, and an extraordinary array of habitats from open grassland to acacia woodland, commiphora bushland, riparian forest and even pockets of rainforest in the west.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Meru’s wildlife had virtually been shot out in a frenzy of poaching. There was a danger that the park itself might be degazetted. But people like Stefano Cheli and his wife Liz fought back. The park was restocked, with at least 1,350 animals being successfully translocated to Meru, including reticulated giraffe, Grévy’s zebra, impala, Bohor reedbeek, leopard and elephant. The funds generated through tourism have enabled Kenya Wildlife Service to install a 20,750-acre rhino sanctuary which now protects a population of over 60 white and black rhino.

An afternoon spent looking for rhinos in Meru will almost certainly be rewarded by a sighting or two. As a matter of fact, one afternoon we almost ran into a couple on the track.

TO MARA, TO MARA...

The last of the three parks on the SkySafari circuit is the Masai Mara National Reserve. If you want the Mara at its most dramatic, go between July and October, when you are bound to see vast herds of migrating wildebeest, zebras and elands.

I stayed in the Sand River Masai Mara camp. Recently opened, the camp aims to bring back mem-

ories of the 1920s. The manager, Tim Allen-Rowlandson, who has a PhD in zoology, came out to the Keekorok airstrip to meet me. ‘Think yourself back into the Teddy Roosevelt era,’ he said as we drove to the camp. I wasn’t sure about the allusion to Roosevelt. As I recalled, huge numbers of animals had bitten the dust at the hands of the great American.

‘I think I’d prefer to imagine Robert Redford and Meryl Streep in *Out of Africa*,’ I countered. I had visions of Mozart’s Clarinet Concerto being played on a wind-up gramophone by the camp-fire.

Tim took me to the other side of the Sand River camp, where a huge tent containing a vast four-poster bed had been erected right next to one of the main migration crossing-points. ‘This is the Honeymoon Suite,’ he explained. ‘You can wake up in the morning to the sound of thousands of thundering hooves as the wildebeest ford the river and, literally, gallop past your door.’

The Masai Mara, even without the migrating herds, is an amazing place. You may see lions stretched on the kopjes, warming themselves in the late afternoon sun, or leopards with their kill hoisted high up in a tree. There are elephants in abundance. One afternoon I watched a black rhino, with the sun on its back, walking through the grass the other side of the river, while at the same time a hippo strolled back to a pool in the river.

On my last day in the Mara, as I was being driven back to the airstrip for the flight back to Nairobi, I photographed a pale eastern chanting goshawk, perched high up on a dead branch of a tree. It looked so beautiful, I wanted to cry. *f*

The eight-day SkySafari Kenya itinerary starts from US\$6,520 (approx. £4,200) per person, including all flights, full-board accommodation, park fees, transfers, game drives, bush activities such as bush meals, sundowners and walking safaris, statutory taxes and laundry

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