

March 2005

Tanzania and the The Serengeti

It happened during our second day out. We were cruising the Seronara area when Shaibu, our guide and driver spotted a bunch of cars parked alongside the road ahead. As we came closer we noted a herd of about 40 water buffalo moving through the waist-high, wheat-colored grass savannah on our left. Then we spied the lions laid out on a rocky outcropping to the right. They were gazing at the passing herd with mild interest. Water buffalo are one of the few animals that take no crap from lions. They're big enough and mean enough to take care of themselves.

We stopped the car, turned off the engine and waited. Nothing happened for about 20 minutes. The lions (four females) maintained their position and idly watched the parade go by. Simultaneously they jumped up. We followed their gaze back 100 yards behind the herd. Here was a baby buffalo, about the size of a six-month old cow calf, trying unsuccessfully to catch up to the main herd.

The lionesses were on the move. They used the cars as cover. All of the animals here are habituated to automobiles. They crouched beneath the vehicles. Then, as if on a signal, they broke into a run. They reached the calf in less than 10 seconds. The baby tried to run. It tried to kick. It bawled loudly. This brought three huge buffalo on the run. When they reached the baby, all of a sudden lions were being tossed every which way. The baby staggered to its feet. It looked for a minute that the buffalos had saved the day.

Those lions were not to be put off. As the buffalos worked over one of them, another would sneak around their flanks and attack the baby again. The baby was down again with a lion going for the throat. The huge buffalos gave up the fight, and walked back to the herd. It was as if they all came to the same conclusion that this was a lost cause.

It looked to us like a lost cause. The lions were all over the baby. The baby continued to kick and to bawl.

Then a strange thing happened. Another adult buffalo galloped back to the calf. We wondered if this one would renew the fight. As this big buffalo approached, the lions strangely backed off just a few feet. Was this the mother? We'd like to think so. Anyway, the baby struggled shakily to its feet, its head hanging, its tongue lolling, blood streaming from its neck and haunches. The big buffalo nuzzled the baby for just a minute or two, as if to say goodbye. She then turned and walked slowly back to the herd.

As soon as she left, the lions pounced on the calf. It was over in a minute.

A graphic example of the circle of life that is carried out forever in the Serengeti.

Arusha

We flew from Zanzibar to Arusha, a town about 10 hours drive north of Dar Es Salaam. We had actually considered taking a bus and saving \$300, until we realized that we would waste the better part of two days out of a one-week trip. Arusha is a pretty town. The words “green” and “lush” come to mind. It is surrounded with coffee plantations, with Mount Meur – a companion to Mt. Kilimanjaro – in the background. A river separates the low rent from the high rent districts. Here lie the government buildings, gardens and our hotel, **Hotel Equator**, just down the street from the Precision Airline office, where we were to pick up our ride to the airport the next morning. The Equator was a pleasant surprise. Our second-floor balcony overlooked spacious lawns and gardens. We ate at an excellent Indian restaurant located in the **Hotel Arusha**, a short walk from our hotel. We ate a lot of Indian cuisine this trip. It’s one thing we really miss in Senegal, where the closest Indian restaurant lies in Gambia.

The next morning we flew to the Seronara airport, which lies smack in the middle of the Serengeti. The planes often must buzz the airstrip before landing to frighten off the animals. The Serengeti ranges from Tanzania into Kenya. It is called the Masai Mara Game Reserve in Kenya. We flew over the Rift Valley, which ends in a 200-300 ft. escarpment that, from a plane, seems to extend for miles. It actually extends for some 5200 kms., from the Dead Sea through Kenya and Tanzania to Mozambique. Above the Valley is this fairly flat plain on which lies the Savannah, seemingly endless and almost treeless plains containing literally millions of hoofed animals.*

*East Africa, Lonely Planet, 1997, p. 700.

Nowhere else will you see wildebeest, gazelle, zebra and antelope in such concentrations. There are around two million wildebeest (How’d I get that number? I simply counted the legs and divided by four.) They’re famous for their constant migration on the search for grassland. Of course the zebra do the same thing. And, of course, the large carnivores – the lion and hyena – follow. Then there is the crocodile that wait for them at the river crossings.

Meet Shaibu. He’s our guide for five days. He met us at the Seronara airport. Shaibu lives in Arusha. He’s worked as a guide for over 20 years; first for Abercrombie & Kent and now with Predators. About 50 years old, he stands about 5’5”, built like a fire hydrant, steady, unflappable ... the kind of guy that makes you feel like you’re in good hands within the first five minutes of meeting him. His job is to drive us around the Serengeti, show us the best the Serengeti has to offer, both in fauna and flora, and get us back to Arusha at the end of our tour. Shaibu has an amazing pair of eyes. Of course he is trained to spot animals way before we see them (Anzie is a close second). He explained that becoming a guide is difficult. One must go through a four-year apprenticeship as a driver. Then there is an exam to pass. Every year the guides must take a two-week seminar to expand their knowledge and to maintain their edge. This year his course was on bird identification.

We were forced to land 60 kms. from our first camp because the river at our scheduled crossing was too high. We stopped at the crossing on our way to our first camp. The river was indeed flowing quite forcefully over the crossing, a concrete way constructed at river level, which was wide enough for one vehicle. I was up for attempting a crossing until Shaibu pointed out at least three large crocodiles positioned just downstream of the crossing. They maintained position with their mouths wide open, filtering the water for any passing fish ... or humans. Shaibu's message was left unspoken: sure we might be able to make it across, but, if we didn't, he didn't want to suffer the consequences.

Sightings our first day:

Kopi: Leaving the airport we saw what looked like a statue of a large antelope. It was a live specimen standing stock still, just waiting for touristas to take its picture. We discussed whether the animals were on shifts – eight hours perhaps. Maybe they even had coffee or water breaks. Shades of Gary Larson.

Lions: Not far from the airport we spied a “pride” of 4 x4's gathered. Then we noticed a pride of five lions assembled on a knoll. I'll tell ya, your first lion sighting is truly exciting! Across the road was a large herd of zebra. When they gather close, they resemble an “Op Art” piece from the '60's. Must have been over 100 of them. We parked and waited for something to happen. Nothing did. The zebras barked their awareness of the lions' presence, and gave them wide berth.

Just a few kilometers down the road we came upon another passel of vehicles. This time something big was going on. Just 10 yards off the road a pride of lions were dining on a fresh kill, an adult zebra. Judging from the state of the zebra, the kill had occurred within the past 1/2 hour. Not to get too graphic, but we found it fascinating how the social structure determined who ate what. The male lion got the choice cut, the underbelly. The lionesses had next choice, the hind quarters. The young ones picked what they could. One worked on the rump. Another chewed on eyeballs and ears.

As soon as the adult lion ate his fill, he walked slowly about 15 feet away and lay down, a look of pain on his face. Shaibu explained that lions don't chew their food; they swallow it in large hunks, which take a long time to digest. This lion looked like the perfect candidate for an Alka-Seltzer commercial. Do you remember “I can't believe I ate the whole thing!”?

As soon as he left the kill, the other lions switched positions.

Continued soon!

A la prochaine,

Chuck