

**March 2005**

## **Serengeti, The Rest of the Story**

You will recall that we left off with a description of a pride of lions gorging themselves on a zebra. I'd like to continue here giving you a portrayal of life on a safari. I hope that you'll put this on your list of things you plan to do before you die.

Anzie is the great travel planner. She took it upon herself to learn all there is to know about Safaris in the Serengeti. She then found a company that would tailor-make a safari around her specifications at a competitive price. The company we worked with is **Predator Safaris**, of Arusha, Tanzania. One of the oldest safari companies, it is still family-owned and operated by the Kahn family. We would recommend highly both the company and our guide, Shaibu.

Shaibu has been a professional guide for many years. He wears well. He's sharp of eye, but not of tongue. He knows just about everything there is to know about the Serengeti. Yet he attends a two-week seminar every summer to sharpen his skills. Last summer his course was on bird identification.

After a fascinating trip in a ten-passenger plane from Arusha, past Mount Kilimanjaro, and over the Rift valley, we landed in the middle of the Serengeti at the Seronera "airport", a cleared strip of grass with a small wooden shack as a terminal. We could spy animals – giraffes and zebras – dashing out of the way as our plane landed. Shaibu met us, and we were pleasantly surprised to discover that we would be the only clients with Shaibu in a Toyota Land-Cruiser for our six-day safari.

We began our tour and immediately came upon topi, zebra, gazelles and giraffes. Within 15 minutes we spied our first lions, a pride of four lying around a tree scoping out a herd of zebras. The zebras were acting skittish and barking warnings to each other. When nothing happened after about 15 minutes, we headed on down the road. Within a mile we found another pride of lions lurching on a full-grown zebra. We were surprised at our fairly mild reaction to what others might describe as gruesome, bloody savagery. The blood and guts involved were just reality. Also, we were watching the feeding from the back of the carcass, which thankfully hid most of the gore. We tried not to identify too closely with the zebra.

All of this noshing made us hungry, so Shaibu drove us to the **Seronera Wildlife Lodge** for lunch. The first hotel built in this part of the Serengeti, it's a fascinating structure, built in and around a cluster of huge, upright, rounded boulders called a *kopje*. From the reception area you climb steps that lead through the kopje to the bar, which resembles Aladdin's cave. From there you enter the dining room with floor-to-ceiling glass walls that overlook the front lawn and surrounding savannah. We spied several monkeys, a weasel-like creature and a family of hyrax (they look like rabbits without tails) during lunch. The buffet offered a nice selection.

## Kirawira

We headed west 45 miles towards the Kenyan border to our destination – Kirawira. We wanted to stay in a tented camp, and this was it. Roughing it? Far from it. This is a five-star lodge that's listed in Conde Nast's "Top 100 Small Hotels in the World". It's situated on top of a mountain with a 30-mile view over a valley. Our "tent" was built on a wood deck on the side of the mountain. This canvas tent was in fact a tent within a tent, screened on three sides with a front porch. The bathroom took up the rear. It was all rosewood, marble and brass. The bed was a large four-poster. The furniture – chairs, desk, tables and closets -- was "campaign" style, all wood with brass fittings, the kind that one could pack up and move out within a couple of hours. I could picture Teddy Roosevelt or Hemingway feeling right at home here. (You can picture it in the photos. See instructions at the end.)

The cuisine was first class. Both lunches and dinners were five-course. Breakfasts included champagne. We didn't miss one meal. The night of my surprise birthday was a special meal. Anne arranged for a delicious cake, which was presented to me by the entire kitchen and wait-staff singing "Hakuna Matata" accompanied by various kitchen utensils used as percussion instruments (boy, could that guy play the eggbeater!). Well, it wasn't really my birthday, which we had already celebrated in Zanzibar. But, what the hell, it got us a great cake!

At night we were always chaperoned back to our tent, just in case we were surprised by a predator. One night we did discover some fairly big "scat" on the walkway. No one could identify the animal from which it came.

Kirawira is close enough to the Kenyan border that they offer day trips to Lake Victoria. We were content to "road-hunt" the area for animals and birds. Bird-watching was more successful than animal-watching. The selection of birds was extraordinary. Shaibu explained that, since Kirawira was opened only five years ago, the animals aren't used to the vehicles yet. That's why we saw so many animals at a distance. We did view many animal butts, though. That's the profile they exhibited as our vehicle approached. Whereas, in the central part of the Serengeti, the animals are so accustomed to vehicles that they try to use them for shade.

Our daily schedule usually went like this:

- Up early at dawn for a road-hunt as the animals were rousing themselves.
- Back to Kirawira in time for a sumptuous English breakfast: fresh juices, eggs, ham, sausage, coffee and champagne.
- Some days we napped and swam until lunch. Then off for a late afternoon road-hunt.
- Other days we would road-hunt after breakfast and eat lunch on the road.
- Then back about 4:00, and nap until the cocktail hour.

We spent two nights at Kirawira. Everyday we would visit the river crossing to assess the possibility of a crossing. Every day the river had receded somewhat from the day before. Still Anzie refused to give the go-ahead. Those crocs were

still waiting open-mouthed on the downstream side to feast on her succulent body.

### Serena

The following day we began heading east, and ended up at the next lodge on our itinerary, The **Serengeti Serena Lodge**. It consisted of a series of two-story thatched-roof bungalows ranged along a steep hill. Each commanded a beautiful view. We jumped in the swimming pool to wash off the accumulated dust and heat. Off to the restaurant for a wonderful buffet washed down with a couple of beers.

Then off for an afternoon road hunt topped off with a visit to a hippo pool. We climbed down to the river bank where we sat on huge rocks right next to the pool, which contained about 60 hippos. Hippos remain in the water all day long to protect their tender skin from sunburn. They only leave the water after sundown to forage. Hippos are responsible for more human deaths than any of the Big Five: lion, elephant, rhino, leopard and hippo. Despite their portrayal on Saturday morning cartoons, their disposition is far from sunny.

We stayed there for over 45 minutes watching these animals, which ranged in size from a PT Cruiser to a Dodge RAM pickup, fight each other over territory, open their cavernous mouths in a yawn, and poop. This last activity bears watching. As hippos poop they rotate their tails like a fan. Their shit flies in a fairly wide radius. Maybe this is where the old adage about the shit hitting the fan originated. One hippo started pooping too close to us for comfort. We jumped to our feet and moved out of range. Unfortunately a lady sitting in front of us wasn't that swift. "Madam, you have a little something on your blouse."

Back to our bungalow for cocktails on the balcony, then off to a buffet dinner in the rambling restaurant complex. One "après diner" listening to a guitar player. Then off to bed.

### Hot-Air Ballooning

Anzie arose at 4:00 AM to take a hot-air balloon ride. She explained that she and the other flyers installed themselves in one of eight compartments of this wicker basket as it lay on its side. As the balloon filled with air the basket tipped up vertically and slowly ascended. Most of the time they drifted at the 100 ft. level. On occasion they would ascend to around 500 ft. Anzie was disappointed in the number and types of animals they sighted.

They descended after only about 30 minutes. There was a banquet table laid out on this hilltop. They all tucked into a sumptuous champagne breakfast.

Anzie arrived back at the hotel about 10:00. Was it worth the money? Not really. Still, she enjoyed the experience – one that she had always wanted to try

## Ndutu

Next morning we checked out with a box lunch, which turned out to be of rather poor quality compared with those of our table companions at our lunch stop.

We continued our trek east through changing topography. The Serengeti is mostly savannah. That's why one sees so many animals. There're not many places for them to hide. On occasion we came upon a small forest, a river bed (not much water; the rainy season was pretty sparse this year.) a hippo pool, a *kopje*.

Along with the herds of zebra and giraffes we began to see elephants and wildebeest as we went further east. The migration pattern depends upon the rainfall. The animals typically migrate west to east during the dry season, from the Masai Mara in Kenya to the Ngorogoro Crater. Although we were in the rainy season, the rainfall was sparse this year. We noted many pregnant wildebeest. Shaibu explained that they would have normally given birth by now, but nature seems to protect its own. Had the births taken place many of the calves would have already died from lack of food. Apparently a rainstorm or two will initiate the birthing process. I always found that chocolate milk and a pizza, followed by a ride over a bumpy road, did the trick. But, what do I know?

To reach Ndutu Safari Lodge we left the tarmac and traveled ten kms. over open country. We surprised many a topi, kudu, gazelle and impala, plus several ostriches. We descended to the bed of a partially dried up "soda" lake. Due to high evaporation the salinity becomes extremely concentrated. The water feels soapy to the touch. There's a surprising amount of life in these lakes. Green algae begets insect larvae and tiny crustaceans. These in turn beget soda-resistant fish, which attract water birds in the millions.

The Ndutu lodge overlooks the lake. Ndutu is the oldest lodge in the parks, home for decades to explorers and wildlife photographers. Originally tented, it now offers single bungalows. Ndutu's fame has to do with its location on the wildebeest migration, which passes right in front of the lodge. Unfortunately we were two weeks late.

The family atmosphere is relaxed. The rooms aren't fancy but quite adequate. Everyone gathered in and around the lounge for cocktails, including the hotel manager.

We sat with a delightful family of four who admitted that they had decided to spend their life's savings to finance this once-in-a-lifetime safari. However, they had a problem. Their guide was a drunk. Their first clue was a bottle that slid from under the front seat when he put on the brakes. Then they noticed that his personality changed drastically during the day. He'd start out very grumpy, complaining that he had slept poorly. By the afternoon he was in fine spirits, talking loudly, laughing at nothing and driving fast and erratically. On their third morning nobody could wake the guide. He finally showed up around noon, complaining of the flu. They had lost a half-day of their five-day safari. The father had already taken action. "I'm not one to make waves," he declared

concernedly, "But when he placed my family in harm's way, I had no choice." He phoned his safari company, explained the problem, and asked for a new guide. The new guide arrived early the next morning. As we were leaving we passed the father. The ex-guide was pleading with him to give him another chance. Shaibu knew the whole story. "That man will never work as a guide again."

The meals, though not fancy, were very good. Five giraffes walked by the dining room during dinner. A family of *genets*, a black and white-spotted cat with a striped tail, live in the rafters of the dining room. They looked straight out of Dr. Zeuss. The children were fascinated by them. After dinner many people gathered outside around a large bonfire.

The only downside was the water. The water for bathing was pulled directly from the lake. Although the shower was cleansing, we couldn't get used to that "soapy" feeling.

### Olduvai Gorge

We left early the next morning with a box lunch (great this time), anxious to get to the Ngorogoro Crater. But first, we had to make the obligatory stop at the Olduvai gorge.

Made famous by James Leakey as the site where he discovered the bones of the oldest known human, dating back 1.8 million years. Lectures are given every half hour. A museum does its best to maintain the interest of "the great unwashed" in the important discoveries made here. But, much to Shaibu's dismay, we two unwashed were determined to keep the visit short so we could get to the Crater as soon as possible. After all, we had read and studied about these finds in school. Old bones and pottery shards didn't necessarily make the history lesson more interesting.

### Ngorogoro Crater

As we approached the Crater the topography changes to rolling hills. We spy more and more Masai herdsman – tall, lightly built, wearing their distinctive red cloth. The men all carry a thin spear about five ft. long. When the government decided to form the Serengeti national park, they evicted many Masai villages and family compounds. In return, the Masai retained the right to graze their cattle on the parklands.

I remember very few sights that gave me chills and the thought: "Thank God I lived long enough to experience this". Yosemite Valley was one. The Crater is another. We came over a rise and there it was, 2000 feet below us, the 8<sup>th</sup> wonder of the world. From a distance it looks almost perfectly round. The bush and tree-covered walls are steep. Two roads snake their way to the crater base – one to enter, the other to exit. From the rim we note the green-ness of the savannah... the silver disk of a soda lake and several streams that criss-cross the base. We note that the only trees are nestled under the rim. Finally we spy the tiny clusters of dots that are the animal herds. It would make a perfect Eden.

We slowly descend into the Crater, passing more Masai moving in both directions with their herds of cattle and goats. We're struck first by the vast numbers of animals: wildebeest, zebra, black buffalo and, yes, even lions. What's that pink stain on the lake? Flamingos, hundreds of them.

We cruise for a bit to get the lay of the land. Shaibu turns off the main road onto a dirt path as he spies a cluster of vehicles. We arrive to find a pride of lions: one adult male, several females, a few teenagers and a couple of cubs. They're all lolling about digesting what must have been a large meal. We see no carcass about. We park about 10 ft. away from the male and two females. They look at us. We stare at them. All at once a lioness gets up and saunters over to our vehicle. Shaibu immediately starts the engine and moves off a few yards. He explains that the animal was looking to crawl under our car for shade. If she succeeded, park rules dictate that we couldn't move until the animal did. We could have been stuck there until sunset. Nonetheless, we stayed there for a good half hour. It was hot, and these animals weren't ready to scamper about.

We followed a gully until we saw two lions walking along the bottom. "You see that herd of zebra and buffalo over there?", asks Shaibu. "The lions are using the gully as cover until they get close enough to attack."

Sure enough, when the lions reached the part of the gully that was closest to the herd of zebra, they sprang out. They hadn't gone more than ten yards before two huge male buffalo charged them. The lions immediately reversed direction, jumped into the gully and out the other side. Black buffalo take no guff from lions. Their reaction to the lions was amazingly swift. Either they were very alert watch-buffalo or else they smelled the lions before they saw them.

For lunch we stopped at a large rest area which bordered a large, freshwater pond. We and at least fifty other cars and busses parked on the grass. We ate and we strolled. We could never set our food down. A large family of monkeys made nuisances of themselves trying to cadge food from the tourists.

We came upon several large land birds: ostrich, secretary bird and crested crane. The ostrich is such an oddly designed creature: long legs below and long, skinny neck above this ovoid, fluffy body. The secretary bird stands about four ft. tall, walks with a slow, loose-jointed gait. It's quill-like appendages from its head must be the origin of its name. The crested crane sports a yellow "punk rocker" headdress.

We also spotted a black rhino and a cheetah from a distance.

We entered a forested area near the crater rim and discovered a herd of elephants grazing on the eucalyptus. Further on we stopped at a rest area. We were heading for restrooms when we saw a large adult female elephant standing outside the entrance to the ladies room. Was she waiting to get in? We grabbed our camera and hurried around the opposite side of the building to see if we could get a close-up. About ten other people had the same idea. We peeked cautiously around the corner and ... saw the butt of the retreating animal. We just weren't quick enough.

From there we took the exit road. At every turn we noted the animals below becoming smaller and smaller. We reached the rim and passed two lodges before we reached ours, the **Ngorogoro Serena Lodge**. Maybe it's just the location, but I like this much better than the Serengeti Serena. Maybe it's because our room was cantilevered over the rim. As soon as we settled in we took our gin & tonics out on the balcony to watch the sun set on the crater. Since the sun was at our backs, over half of the crater was in shadow. We could still pick out those slowly-moving, multi-colored dots – the animals.

Maybe it's because this was the last dinner of our safari, but it was especially good ... and romantic. Maybe it's because it was such a long, event-filled day, but we certainly slept well.

We arose early and ate from the breakfast buffet along with eggs cooked to order any style. We packed up the car, and headed for Arusha. About 200 yards from the lodge we rounded a curve, and came upon an elephant in the middle of the road. It had climbed 2,000 ft. to eat the juicy, green plants that lived on the rim. At that 8,000 ft. elevation Anzie had trouble climbing two flights of stairs.

On the way we passed several Masai villages and compounds. Their blazing red or magenta cloth they wear makes them stand out against the drab browns and ochres of their landscape. Their compounds are surrounded by two concentric circles, living fences, to keep their animals inside and to keep the predators out.

We reached the edge of the Rift Valley. It startled us to realize that the huge plain we were leaving actually lay 300 ft. above this valley. The road angled down the edge of this steep escarpment.

We arrived back in Arusha. Shaibu first drove us to the office of Predator Safaris, where we met with Mrs. Kahn, daughter of the founder. She was very interested in our feedback. We couldn't say enough good about Shaibu and their ability to tailor-make our safari. Mrs. Kahn presented us with polo shirt emblazoned with the company logo. Chuck wears his for the embassy golf outings. When asked about it he's quick to respond: "My sponsor."

Shaibu drove us to our old hotel, the **Hotel Equator**. We laid what we think was a fairly good tip on him. He thanked us profusely, though he's such a gentleman I don't think he would grouse even if the tip was too small. We embraced and departed, vowing that we would return.

And, in ch'allah, we will.

A la prochaine!

Chuck