

Trip Review

New Million Animal Safari

*By Will Weber
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It really is possible to see more than a million animals on a two week Africa safari. But that is just the beginning. Villages eager to share their traditions, uniformly friendly Kenyan hosts, campsites with no other tourists for miles around, hiking to the top of a sacred mountain where we slept under the stars and the full flavor and color of East Africa made our Million Animal Safari trip rich beyond measure.



This is one of the leopards we observed at length and up close. Photo by Will Weber.

Aardvarks to Zebras

Along with eight other JOURNEYS travelers ranging in age from 10-85, I accompanied our Kenyan guide, James Makau Nzioka on one of the most varied, wildlife-rich and insightful safaris I have ever enjoyed. We saw almost 200 species of birds and an alphabet of mammals ranging from aardvarks to elephants and leopards to zebras. This was my sixth visit to Kenya. From August 1-16, 2004, we traveled in a safari van over a 2000 km path through villages, parks, reserves, farms, mountain ranges and savanna in search of the quintessential experience of East Africa. We found it in the wonderfully warm and welcoming people, the abundant wildlife and the spectacular landscapes that changed by the hour. We visited Lukenya, Nzambani, Kitui, Kitumbe, Samburu, Buffalo Springs, Isiolo, Ololokwe Mountain, Lake Nakuru, Lake Elementaita, Crescent Island of Lake Naivasha, the Loita Plains and Masai Mara National Reserve.

Culture and Hiking with Amenities

JOURNEYS has been refining the Million Animal Safari itinerary over the past 20 years. The current trip has more cross cultural experiences, more optional hiking and upgraded amenities over previous versions of the trip. We enjoyed catered camping, local hotels and comfortable safari lodges.

Our first village experience unfolded in Lukenya about an hour from Nairobi. While tens of thousands of tourists visit Kenya each month, most of them only visit the wildlife areas, beaches and commercial tourist sites. Our guide and JOURNEYS local representative, Makau, had designed our trip differently. From the moment we left our Nairobi hotel we saw other tourists only on the three visits to famous parks and reserves. In at least four locations we were the first foreigners the local people had seen this year. Even when we visited famous animal sanctuaries like Buffalo Springs, Lake Nakuru and Masai Mara our choice of accommodations, timing and exploration route minimized encounters with other safari groups.

Village Visit

Our first village visit was an eye opener. We visited a local school, an underground sand mine, and a quarry where all the work is done by hand without power equipment. It was an experience of the hard reality of life for most Kenyans. Any paid work is scarce in Kenya and wages average \$1/day. Most communities have a difficult time supporting more than a primary school and even the modest tuition is beyond the means of many parents. Still, we were impressed by the earnest politeness of the students and the dedication of the teachers in spite of an almost complete lack of things like text books, paper, electricity, desks or teaching aids donate \$25 each to purchase educational support materials to send back to the schools.

Our next two nights were spent at Kitumbe a delightful village at the frayed end of a winding dirt road in central Kenya. The local Kamba people were spirited, joyful, and generous hosts eager to share the simple pleasure of village life. In the rocky, baobab tree-dotted hill sides, they were making a meager living from the thin, dry red soil. They were famous for honey collecting from wild bees and demonstrated their techniques for us. We joined in musical celebration, observed their strategy for collecting water from a “dry” stream bed as the drought season deepened, and learned about some of their musical and craft making traditions. The huge gulf between the villagers and visitors in relative wealth, education and worldliness mattered little in their eagerness to share traditions with us and make us feel welcome.



We were surprised how easy it was to communicate cross culturally. Despite, limited educational facilities and prevalence of Swahili and tribal languages, many Kenyans speak good English, even in remote villages.

This is an active trip. Travelers to Kenya’s parks are often critical of the absolute policy prohibiting foot travel in the parks and reserves. In fact, Kenya has unlimited hiking potential. By camping in wildlife rich areas outside of the parks we enjoyed the best of both worlds—unlimited opportunities to explore on foot and opportunities to see wildlife without being confined to the safari van. I have always felt that hiking in the savanna lands of the Great Rift Valley is akin to a sacred pilgrimage in the footsteps of human ancestors. The animals are not as easily approached on foot and the roar of a lion is much more stimulating. But with the interpretive insights of a local guide we found our Kenya hiking completely engrossing revealing the subtleties of animals tracks, insect and rodent burrows, bird songs and the finer botanical texture of the terrain.

Getting Started Early

Of course we enjoyed visiting Buffalo Springs, Lake Nakuru and Masai Mara, three of Kenya’s most popular protected wildlife areas. Makau’s strategy was

to get very early starts in these areas and sometimes begin the safari drives from obscure gates or access routes so that we minimized contact with other groups. August is a popular time to visit Kenya due to good weather, European vacation schedules and, most significantly, the presence of huge numbers of migratory animals from the Serengeti ecosystem in southern Kenya. Most roads are passable and insects are a minimal annoyance. Our clever drivers, Tony, Ben and Sammy, seemed to find the leopards, cheetahs, lions and elephants before other van drivers and by the time the caravans arrived, we were ready to move on.

In Buffalo Springs we easily found and photographed many leopards, lions, elephants and the local specialities like gerenuk, Grevy’s zebra, oryx and reticulated giraffe. At Nakuru we observed perhaps 600,000 lesser flamingos and impressive numbers of great white pelicans. Nakuru also proved great habitat for seeing and photographing black and white rhinos, reedbuck, Rothchild’s giraffe and the beautiful colobus monkeys.

Mighty Masai Mara

In Masai Mara, we encountered enormous herds of zebra and wildebeest, several groups of hunting cheetahs, many lions, elephants and thousands of gazelles including Thompson’s Grant’s, dik-dik, topi, hartebeest and Eland. We were never far from Masai giraffe, Cape Buffalo, scores of hippos and crocodiles. There was so much predation taking place on the wildebeest and zebras that many of the vultures were just sitting on the ground too gorged to take flight. Similarly, every lion we saw seemed to be bulging around the belly. In one instance, a wildebeest with a broken leg limped within a few yards of an approaching lion seemingly too lazy or too sated to bring down the easy meal.

How Many Wildabeest Are There?

We heard differing reports that the current size of the wildebeest population is 600,000 to 2,000,000. We did not see them all, but we probably did see at least several hundred thousands during our three days in southern Kenya and at times there seemed to be tens of thousands munching their way across a single meadow. This is the greatest large animal wildlife spectacle on earth!



We enjoyed a good combination of wildlife, culture, amenities and activity so that anyone who felt there were too many zebras, too many smiling faces or too fragile a barrier between them and the sounds of the night soon found the scene totally changed. My favorite experiences included a Kamba cultural dancing, drumming and singing event.

The fittest among us completed a steep climb and overnight under the stars on top of Ololokwe, sacred mountain of the Samburu people. All of us enjoyed hiking across the savanna with our Masai guide, David Kamishina Ole Nkuito. David has guided many previous JOURNEYS groups and combines both a commitment to living the traditions of his own culture as well as revealing and interpreting the Masai lifestyle to our groups. Finally, all of us felt fortunate that we obtained so many close up experience of the big cats: cheetah, leopard and lion.

To be fair, any safari in Kenya must contend with some obstacles. The Kenya roads are in terrible condition and the distances between parks and cultural venues are sometimes long. Every safari begins and ends in Nairobi, a city with diminishing attractiveness. We stayed at the Fairview Hotel and felt safe and protected inside the park-like grounds. It seems that Kneyan citizens are wonderfully cooperative and sympathetic to each other. Most hold strong Christian values about personal behavior. Kenya is truly a multicultural society with 29 recognized ethnic groups generally living in harmony with each other. But the population growth exceeds economic growth and the growing urban areas seem tattered from heavy wear and no repair. Kenyans are migrating to the cities at a rate faster than housing, utilities, schools and other public services can be built to accommodate them. Fortunately, parks and wildlife tourism income provides an incentive for protecting natural areas.

In fact, many wildlife populations including wildebeest, zebra, elephant, rhino and lions are probably increasing as more private ranches are switching to wildlife oriented strategies for continued existence and Kenya's anti-poaching and no-hunting policies benefit wildlife populations.

Americans, heeding the advisories and warnings of the US Department of State may believe Kenya is unsafe. Kenyans feel this is an absurd assessment and believe they are being punished by the Bush administration for their opposition to the Iraq war. Many educated Kenyans express belief that our war on terrorism is actually producing more terrorists. Kenyans really and sincerely love to meet and talk with Americans, but they are very concerned about consequences of our government's policies and actions. In many of the rural areas and villages where we spent our time, international politics, world events and mass media have no meaning or relevance. People live poor, but blissfully trusting and innocent lives. We can learn a lot from these friendly people.

Note: Special thanks to all the Kenya crew of our safari including Makau, Travis, Wycliff, Joseph, Kamau, Michael, Tony, Ben and Sammy. Safari participants Barbara Bailey, Jim Gray, Conner Bailey, Jorgen Visback, Ursulla Wilson Booth, Howard Booth, Diana Small and Jim Small all contributed immeasurably to the success of the trip with their good humor, sharp wit and imperturbable tolerance of unexpected events.