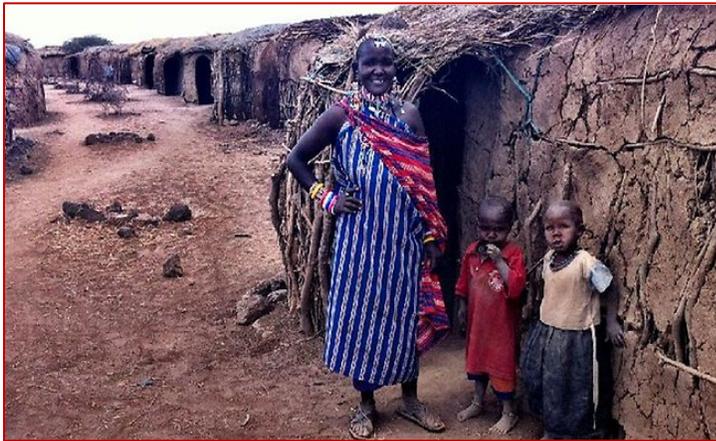


Herald Sun

Wild time with the locals in Kenya

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A Masai woman and children stand outside their hut in Amboseli

WE SPOT him the moment we round the corner in our Jeep. There, lying quietly by the bushes, is a small, fluffy lion cub.



A herd of elephants being led by a matriarch at sunset in Amboseli National Park.

After watching him for a few seconds he lets out a tiny meow and suddenly a second cub peeks out from behind the bushes, ears erect, and slowly make his way out. A third is just behind. As they move to lie down near their brother, Mt Kilimanjaro - shrouded by cloud throughout my stay - is finally visible.

And then the silence is broken. "Look!" our guide, Alex, exclaims.

I follow the direction of his finger and there in the background is a bull elephant procreating with a female.

Just when we think it can't get any better, a fourth cub emerges from the bushes and lies down by her siblings.

So it goes with wildlife safaris - you can go days without seeing much at all, then everything happens at once.

After a few minutes, we hear the lioness, still hidden in the bushes, call to her brood. They prick their ears and look in her direction. One by one, in the order in which they arrived, they get up and return.

We get word via the two-way radio that a cheetah has been spotted. When we arrive she and her two cubs have just finished dinner - a baby gazelle. One cub has blood on her paws, which Mum dutifully licks off. He rolls on to his back playfully.

The next morning we return to the spot and find the trio running around a large bush. At first I think they are playing but I soon realize they are darting in and out of the bushes with too much intent. We hear the sharp cry of an animal and the cheetah comes out carrying a large white hare in her mouth.

The two cubs quickly follow. As they lie down and start to eat, the cubs' heads wobble from side to side.

We are close enough to hear the sound of bones crunching, but far enough away not to disturb them.

Afterwards one cub goes over to its mum and she again licks the blood off his face and mouth. The cub reciprocates. It is a tender moment.

Soon the other cub appears and takes over. Every now and then the cheetah looks up to see what else is going on. When she is finished, she walks slowly away, stopping occasionally to call her cubs to follow. One climbs a tree and sits on a branch. For a minute it can't work out how to get back down.

The cheetah has other things on her mind - she has spotted gazelle in the distance. As she stalks them silently, the gazelle stand in formation - the male watching at the front, protecting two females and a calf.

As the cheetah gets closer, they start running towards the horizon. We think we may see another kill, but the gazelle are too far away. It may not be as famous as the nearby Masai Mara, but Amboseli National Park has the same wildlife - and significantly fewer tourists.

While it is not uncommon to have several safari Jeeps around a lion in the Mara, here you are likely to have it all to yourself.

In the Mara, you can see up to a dozen hot-air balloons in the air at dawn; here the balloon company went out of business because the small camps refused to recommend their service over concerns the noise scares the animals. Night game drives are also forbidden.

Amboseli is best known for the image of elephants wallowing in swamp in front of Africa's tallest peak, Mt Kilimanjaro, over the border in Tanzania. Although it is a relatively small national park, Amboseli has more than 1500 elephants.

I arrive in the middle of a baby boom, with about 300 calves born in the previous few months. On one occasion a two-month old calf lifts its cute little trunk in our direction. On another we sit and watch as a calf runs back and forth around the herd.

At sunset one evening we find ourselves surrounded by a herd of elephants that walk in front of and behind our car a metre or two away on their daily migration.

The elephants sleep in the woodland close to villages, where it is safer as lions are speared if they attack livestock or other animals. Each morning, they make the 30km journey to the swamp to eat and drink, before returning again at dusk.

There are plenty of other wildlife encounters: a three-week-old zebra suckling, the hilarious sight of a giraffe drinking from a waterhole with its front legs spread, a lioness post-kill lying exhausted, paws spread in front of her, at the edge of a drinking hole.

Other guests from our camp, **Tortilis**, see ostriches doing a mating dance and hippos protecting a baby hippo after it was attacked by hyenas.

Tortilis lies on a migratory corridor in a private conservatory outside the national park, overlooking a waterhole. As we are sitting down to dinner one night, we see elephants coming to drink.

As well as the permanent tents - which I am warned to zip completely so monkeys don't get in - the camp has two large, open-sided adjoining wooden pavilions with thatched roofs. The lounge has a safari-lodge feel, with slate floors, backgammon boards, a library and a gramophone.

Each morning the staff greets you with a chorus of jambo (hello) as they sweep floors and prepare for the day. One of the waiters, William, is an expert on identifying stars but, sadly, his services aren't requested so much these days. There's an app for that.

Tortilis is heavily involved in the local community. The local Esitetti Primary School was built with the help of donations from the camp and it also supports the Masai village near the school, which guests can visit.

On the way there we see a borehole paid for by sponsors. Before it was built the villagers used to walk 18km to the swamp to get water.

We are greeted by a line of men and women in traditional dress who dance for us and pray, before guide Melubo takes us on a tour of the village.

The 70 people in the village live on a diet consisting mostly of blood, milk and meat, but the younger generation is increasingly eating vegetables.

The huts are built by women using timber, elephant grass and cow dung.

We go inside one hut, which has two beds - one for the parents and one for the children - with cow-hide mattresses.

Afterwards, a group of men show us how they make fire with a "Masai lighter", using cedar and acacia sticks and dung from elephants, donkeys or zebras.

The Masai practice polygamy and Melubo says he has one wife, but will get more when he has more cows and can pay the dowry. It costs six or seven cows a wife.

Tortilis is now raising money to build a dormitory for girls, who often walk distances of 10km or more with the constant threat of elephants and lions to get to and from school.

Unfortunately, like many parts of the world, families will pay fees for boys first and often girls get left behind. It is nice to be able to make a small difference.