

12. Babies in the Serengeti

We were back at camp by 6:20 and had our daily briefing at 7:00. The guides asked us to share our thoughts about our trip. Everyone was highly complimentary, and one of the women even got teary. “Her glass of wine runneth over,” whispered Myrtle with a giggle. Wine or no wine, the consensus was that our time in the Serengeti was nothing short of incredible. Some of the group were sharing their most intense moments, and I was surprised to hear that I was not the only one who had some intense moments from our nighttime camp visitors, which included Giraffes, Zebras, Vervet Monkeys, Baboons and the family of Mongooses, plus the Hyena who took my bar of soap. Our guide said he also saw Servals near his tent last night. The roaring of the male Lions on our first night, even though they were not close by, was still an intense memory for everyone.

The next day, our last in the Serengeti, wakeup call was at 6:30 and I was glad for the extra hour of rest because I had slept poorly. There was so much activity around our tent all night that I kept pounding my fist into the canvas. The activity would stop, then start up a few minutes later. The guide said there was lots of mice activity last night because the family of Mongooses had fed well the day before and was not hungry. OK then! We need some starving Mongooses here! Nothing inside our tent seemed to be disturbed or bitten into, for which I was grateful. After a lovely breakfast at 7:00 we packed the jeeps and left by 8:00 for another gorgeous day on safari.

Almost immediately we came upon an experience that would be for me and Myrtle, and probably most of the group, the most vivid memory of the entire trip. I took over 100 photos and would like to share them all with you, dear reader, but I had to pick out the most important ones. About 8:30 our jeeps pulled over to the side of the road and our guides directed our attention to the tall grasses on the savannah to our left. At first we saw nothing but some subtle movements in the grass, but slowly we saw first one female Lion and then another walking toward us. “It is a pride of five or more female Lions with two cubs,” said our guide. “There are two lactating females, and they are coming to the road to drink the water that collects in the shallow ditches on the side of the road.” Eventually we saw the females, but there was no sign of the babies, and I wondered if our guide was mistaken. Sometimes I was astonished at how keen the guides’ eyes and ears were, and how they could spot things that were not at all apparent to the rest of us.





Then suddenly the leading female walked onto the road, and there were muffled gasps and squealing among us, “Oh! Oh! It’s a baby! A little bitty baby! Oh my goodness!” Myrtle and I were hushing each other, of course, and our pinching fingers went into overdrive. Then the second little baby appeared, and the event was just too big to take in: we were seeing two tiny little Lion cubs only a few months old, who were being taken on a walk to find water. It was unreal. “The first female you see is the mother of the cubs,” whispered our guide, “and the second female is probably the

matriarch of the pride. She is accompanying the mother and cubs. You see that she looks around vigilantly all the time, especially looking back into the tall grass. The cubs are so small they are very vulnerable to predators, especially Hyenas, Wild Dogs, Cheetahs, Leopards and Vultures.” The Lion family did not seem to be in a hurry. The cubs walked sometimes on the road and sometimes they went back into the grass. “Mama and Grandma are so patient with the little ones,” whispered Myrtle. “And they are always watching the grass behind them.” I responded.





Sometimes the babies lay down to rest, and eventually mama or grandma would start walking again and the babies would get up and follow along, seemingly oblivious to any danger, mama and grandma always on the lookout on their behalf.



They crossed the road in between our jeeps and walked for a while in the grass on the right side of the jeeps, as though checking it out, or maybe just to reassure themselves that our jeeps posed no danger. One thing was evident: the adult Lions never let down their vigilance.



Eventually they returned to the road and began drinking the rainwater in the ditch. The babies were just so adorable to watch. Sometimes they would look at the water as though to ask themselves, “What is this thing mama is lapping up?” And then they would bend down on their little haunches and start lapping at it with their tiny tongues. I thought it was telling that the adult females did not relax into getting good drinks until they had spent quite a bit of time exploring the area to be sure no predators were lurking, a sobering thought. “Can you imagine,” I whispered to Myrtle, “what life

would be like for us if we had to scope out our surroundings before we could safely take a drink of water?” “Well,” she responded thoughtfully, “I think there is a price all creatures pay for their continued existence on this earth. Life in a zoo is as safe as it can be for creatures like this, but they have no freedom. I think the more freedom you have, the more vulnerable you are.” Wow! Myrtle, my personal philosopher!





When the Lions were finished drinking, they walked off into the tall grasses and we soon lost sight of them. A little farther on, our guide pointed out two cheetahs behind a termite mound. "They are two adults, maybe brothers," he said. "Cheetahs are usually solitary, but brothers may stay together if they are from the same family. I think the female Lions knew they were here." Not long after that we saw a solitary big male Lion on a low hill. He walked majestically and in no hurry.



‘Do you see that herd of Gazelles that he is walking past?’ asked our guide. ‘He is paying no attention to them and they are paying no attention to him. They recognize that he is just walking, not hunting. They also know they are faster than he is. The female Lions are better hunters.’



We saw this Hartbeest standing on a termite mound watching us, and two male Lions sleeping, and a Giraffe having its breakfast and paying no attention to us in our jeeps.

We saw Elephant tracks on the road, and a herd of Elephants and a Black Rhino in the distance. Then we came upon a herd of Elephants close to the road, and there were babies in the herd! The mothers were again very vigilant trying to keep their babies hidden, but I did manage to get a few shots of one calf nursing.





Eventually one of the mother Elephants became annoyed with us. She threw her ears forward and trumpeted to tell us to get lost, which we did. As we continued driving, we came upon this beautiful male ostrich. Ostriches, most interestingly, have four knees and four kneecaps. It is believed that the extra, lower, kneecap, helps the Ostrich flex its knees more efficiently and run faster.

To be continued . . .