

## 4. Visit to a Maasai Boma

That evening during our daily briefing, our guide asked us to guess how many animals we had seen today on our 250-kilometer drive through the 2850 hectares park. The prize for the answer that came closest to the actual total would be one free beer. After a few minutes of thought, we all started throwing out numbers, and our guide recorded our numbers and our names. Most of us gave answers between 500 and 1000. One self-styled math whiz took out his little notepad and scribbled furiously, eventually coming up with an answer of 839. "Wow!" I thought. "He will probably win." Then Myrtle drew some outright gasps with her estimate of 1400, which drew some verbal scoffing. "No way!" "We could not have seen that many animals!" "Way off, I am afraid."

When all the answers were submitted, our guide ceremoniously presented Myrtle with a bottle of beer dripping from the ice chest. "Madame," he said with a lovely bow, wiping off the drips, "You have won the prize for the best answer." This was followed of course, by a chorus of "What?" "How could we have seen that many animals?" "There must be a mistake." Our guide smiled and said, "Yes, there is a little mistake. Myrtle's answer is not correct, but remember, the prize was to be given to the person with the answer closest to the correct answer, which is . . ." With a flourish he whipped out a small notepad, consulted it, and said loudly and clearly, "2063. 2063 animals we saw today on our game drive."

For a moment there was silence. I think everyone thought he was joking. Then there was a jumble of mumbling and heads shaking and looking at each other. Our guide took pity on us and said, "I have a little tape recorder in my microphone, and every time I spot animals and tell you about them, my recorder picks up that information. Today we saw 20 Baboons, 2 Gazelles, 1 Common Water Buck, 12 Giraffes, 24 Dik-Diks, 4 Water Bucks, 120 Cape Buffalos, 300 Elephants, 500 Zebras, 9 Ostriches, 3 Secretary Birds, 3 Tawny Eagles, 30 Love Birds, 60 Warthogs, 150 Elands, 50 Vultures, 2 Barbets, 8 Hornbills, 20 White-headed Buffalo Weavers, 10 Superb Starlings, 10 Shrikes, 10 Magpies, 60 Red Necked Spurfowls, 500 Wildebeests, 250 Impalas, 8 Plovers, 40 Ibises, 80 Egrets, 6 Monkeys, and 2 Spotted Hyenas. Admittedly my numbers for the Elephants and Zebras and Wildebeests are estimates, but my tendency is to underestimate numbers, so I am quite sure that today you did see over 2000 animals."

At that statement there were some spontaneous "Wows!" and lots of clapping and slapping each other on the back. Myrtle and I had done enough pinching for the day, so we refrained from that, but we did give each other a happy hug.

When we all calmed down, our guide continued the briefing. "Tomorrow we will go to 5500 feet. Right now we are at 2500-3000 feet above sea level. It will be cooler tomorrow. We leave here at 8:00 am, so wake-up call is at 6:30 and breakfast at 7:00, bags out. Pay your bar tab, use the Tip Box. You need to be ready to leave by 7:55. On our way we will visit a Maasai village, called a boma. The Maasai women build the homes with mud and cow dung. The men take care of the livestock. We will visit the head man and his wife in his boma. There will be cow poop in the boma, so be careful where you step. We can take pictures, especially when we buy the things they make and offer for sale. We will spend 1 ½-2 hours with the Maasai, then drive to the Farmhouse, arriving about 1:00 pm. At 4:30 we will have a walk through the coffee farm and organic garden. Then one free hour, then briefing and dinner 6:30. We stay in the Farmhouse two nights. Be sure to check the

skies for a beautiful view of Venus. We will talk more about the stars when we are camping in the in the Serengeti.” Of course, Myrtle and I had to pinch each other as we whispered, “Camping in the Serengeti!” There was a question: “Is the Maasai the largest tribe in Tanzania?”

Our guide responded with a short lecture about Tanzanian tribes. “No, although the Maasai have become famous all over the world for their nomadic ways and their expertise with cattle, they are only one of over 120 different tribes in Tanzania. There are four major groups of tribes, according to where you are from. The Bantus make up the largest tribe by far, 80% of Tanzanians. They came from Western Africa. The Cushitics came from Ethiopia and East Africa. The Nilotics came from Egypt and the Nile region. The Maasai are in their group. They arrived in Tanzania about 200 years ago. The Khoisan Group came from the Kalahari and include the Hadzabi, related to Kalahari Bushmen. They have the click language. The movie, “The Gods must be Crazy,” featured them.

The next morning, most of us were standing by our jeeps by 7:45, eager for another amazing day.





This tall termite mound was astonishing! And our sharp-eyed guide pointed out a female Lion in the tree below, with its paw hanging down. We saw another mama Elephant with a tiny baby, probably months old. Myrtle and I were thrilled to note that there were so many baby Elephants, but we really wished we could have had a good view of the baby. In every instance mama shielded her baby from our view. Look underneath mama Elephant and see how tiny her baby is, barely up to her belly.







As we drove into the Maasai boma, a procession of Maasai women come walking into the boma carrying bundled reeds on their heads, singing. It was thrilling to watch and listen to them. They seemed to walk so effortlessly, despite the obvious weight of those bundles. Our guide told us that when our travel company contracts with a Maasai boma for visiting privileges, they ask the Maasai to conduct their “normal” lives while we are visiting.







The Maasai women build the houses, and we were invited to help them put thatch on the roof being repaired and patch the walls of one hut with mud mixed with cow dung. Several of us, including Myrtle and I, climbed up the rickety ladder to help thatch the roof. While I was on top of the hut, our guides found the goats gnawing at my journal, which I had put down on a woodpile. The guides saved my journal, or I would not be able to tell you all this fascinating stuff, dear reader! No one volunteered to pick up the clods of mud/dung to help patch the walls. I think we were all afraid there



might be parasites in the dung that would make us sick. The dung had no smell, and I wondered if that was because of the diet of the cows. Myrtle thought the lack of smell was due to the dry air here. We watched the women pound corn, and some women in our group gamely pitched in and helped, lasting only a few minutes before relinquishing the stout cudgel with a sheepish, "That is hard work!" "Everything the women do is accompanied by song," said our guide, "because without song the work would be too hard and would be a punishment. The women sing for every activity, a different song for each." "Yikes," said Myrtle. "I guess I am not cut out to be a Maasai wife!"



The first wife invited us into her house to welcome us formally to the boma and answer any questions about Maasai life we wished to ask. She said she built her house herself and decorated it. The kitchen was in the center of the hut, with two sleeping areas on the sides, one for the male, the other for the women and children and the goats they keep for milk. In cold weather one side of the hut is reserved for baby animals. The soot that forms on the ceiling from their cooking is mixed with water and used as medicine for the evil eye or upset stomach. This tribe is semi-nomadic. The women stay here quite permanently even when the men move the cows to far pastures. Her husband has nine wives because he has enough cattle to support nine wives. Children go to school here at age seven. If the husband dies and the wife continues to bear children, the children will still belong to the dead husband.



The old grandmother in front of her hut was agreeable to having her picture taken, but she kept muttering in Kiswahili, which freaked us out a bit because we could understand nothing. As Myrtle said, “Is she hexing us?” The woman’s eyes were white with cataracts, so I don’t know how much she could see. The first wife had told us that a grandmother has more power than you would expect in the tribe. For example, if a grandmother does not want her grandchildren to live in her hut, she will hit the hut or the door of the hut with her bare bottom to curse the house. “Wow!” exclaimed Myrtle. “wouldn’t it be easier just to tell them to leave?” She had a point, I thought.

But at that point I had my own issues to deal with. After an hour in the first wife’s hut, with twelve of us crammed into that small place and the air getting so hot and close, I started to feel faint from heat and dehydration. I excused myself and walked outside and sat on the ground by the wall of the hut, hoping not to faint. I removed some of my layers of clothing, which included a blouse and shirt and safari vest plus the heavy Maasai toga the women had draped us all with. Our guide saw me and brought me water. The water and cooler air revived me. When the rest of the group eventually came out of the hut, all fanning themselves and sweating, a doctor in our group came over and insisted on taking my pulse, to my chagrin. His solicitation was lovely, but so embarrassing. Myrtle said to me later, “What was your problem? He was handsome and you should have played it up, maybe fainted a bit or needed mouth to mouth resuscitation . . .” Typical Myrtle! Then we watched a demonstration of bloodletting, which is done by the men, since only they are in charge of the cows.







With an arrow the men make a wound in the cow's neck in the carotid artery. When the blood spurts out, they collect it in a gourd. Then the men use hair to close the wound. Only the men drink the blood. If you mix the blood with some milk, the milk will not spoil and it will curdle. Women drink this curdled beverage. I noted that all the Maasai wore the sandals made of old tires, and as I took this photo I could not help but think how much more "at home" the tire sandals were than the white sneakers one person in our crowd wore.



As we were preparing to buy some of the cloths and wares the women made, the chief came out of his hut to help put medicine on the dogs. Our guide said that was mandated by the government to protect the lions from diseases spread by Maasai dogs. The chief had also supervised the cattle bloodletting, but he spent most of our visit in his hut. I bought two necklaces from the first wife because she had given me the first honorary welcome of necklace and toga, maybe because I was the tallest in our group. We returned these ceremonial items to the women as we left the boma.

Before we left, we watched the cows and goats going out of the enclosure to the wide plains of the savannah. Our guide said, "The cattle may go to only five kilometers today. If so, the men will bring them back by about 6:00 pm tonight. When they go far, the men will barbecue goats and drink the cows' blood and milk. Also, they take corn and a sour milk mixture along to eat. They do not kill and eat their cows unless they must, because the cows represent the wealth of the tribe. The goats are for eating and getting milk."





Our group all agreed that the time we spent at the Maasai Village was a privilege. Our guide told us that this is the first time he has been to this boma, that our travel company switches bomas for interest and economic fairness. He said today's tribal group was a very friendly one and very approachable in his opinion, that they seemed to genuinely appreciate talking to us and learning of our culture and sharing their culture. They were particularly interested in our concept of monogamy, just as we were interested in their practice of polygamy, one man having many wives.

One of our women said, "I think it is most interesting that a married woman is free to take lovers, and if a lover visits her and plants his spear outside her door, her husband cannot enter and must find another hut to sleep in. Then, if he returns to his wife, he cannot question her, and he must support any child born to the wife."

Myrtle piped up, "I think the spear-planting thing is quite wonderful, and I am thinking of getting myself a spear, just in case!" That brought more than a bit of laughing and hooting.

At that evening's briefing, our guide said this is the second time he has been to a Maasai boma, and at today's visit the Maasai were much less shy. "There is no divorce in the Maasai tribe," he said. "Malaria and stomach problems and chicken pox are the main health problems here. When Maasai people die in the huts, the tribe never uses the door of the hut or the gate of the village. They break a hole in the house wall and the compound wall and spirit the body out to take it far away. They push a banana stalk into the dead person's rectum to prevent him or her from coming back and doing bad luck on the living. They believe a dead body does join its ancestors. The chief who dies is buried in the cow corral under the cow dung. A cow is killed then and they bury the man in his cow skin. For the bloodletting, there is a short thorn on the end of the arrow that cuts the artery, and that heals up quickly. The Maasai like to have their jewelry and robes on all the time. When they go to bed, they simply flip their cloth over themselves. They don't buy any more clothes until the ones they are wearing need to be replaced. Parents like their daughters to have only a primary education so she stays in the tribe and marries into the same tribe. That way she brings cattle home to the benefit of the family and tribe."

He continued, "Tomorrow we go down into the Ngorongoro Crater. We leave here at 7:00 am. We will take a picnic lunch, so you need to choose the kind of sandwich you want and write your name



on it. Wake-up call is 5:45, breakfast buffet at 6:15, done with breakfast 6:40, prepare lunch and be ready to leave by 7:00. So come to breakfast prepared so that you don't have to go back to your room. We will come back here about 4:00 pm in the afternoon. Dress warmly in layers because the temperature changes at noon in the Ngorongoro Crater. Roads will be bumpy and dusty, or muddy if it is raining. Take insect repellent and sunscreen. There will be more cars and visitors in the crater than what you have been used to. On the crater floor there are two nice restroom facilities. Most of the crater floor is grassland. Going down to the crater floor takes about 1 ½ hours. The crater floor is 100 square miles."

To be continued . . .