

6. Safari Dream

Our Safari Dream Day in the Ngorongoro Crater just seemed to get better and better, and my handwriting in my little journal got sloppier and sloppier and began to resemble free association writing, except this was not my imagination. “Two Guinea Fowl, lots of little Widow Birds, huge piles of Elephant dung, bull Elephants in the distance, very windy, female Ostrich in front of Zebras, 4 Hippos out of water in far distance, bull Black Rhino with both horns, Greater Flamingos in the salt water here, (less pink, feed on insects, the Lesser Flamingos eat algae and are pinker,) salt in the water comes from the volcanic soil, sometimes Jackals jump into the water trying to snatch a Flamingo, male Ostrich, little Thomson’s Gazelles running fast, male Ostrich, 2 Gray-crowned Cranes in distance, more Flamingos, Thompson’s Gazelles, Hippos, fresh water runs into the salt water lake here, Grant’s Gazelle, December-May the crater is very green, another sleeping Rhino, two Hippos, one young, 3 Cape Buffalos, males, 6 others behind, Black-headed Heron, 6 Warthogs, Blue Heron, Zebras and Wildebeests drinking, tusks of male Warthogs are dangerous even to Lions, Black-bellied Bustard, 6 more Warthogs, 3 more Warthogs, Zebras, Black Smith Plover, 2 Grey-crowned Cranes, 2 Hartebeests, Hawk with red tail, Kori Bustard with polka dotted wings, big herd of Cape Buffalos maybe 400-500, Hartebeest by water, Guinea fowl,” etc. It was hard to believe we were seeing all these animals in their natural habitats.



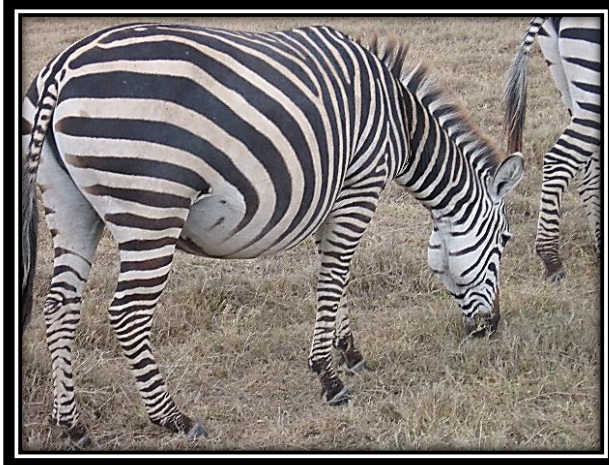
In this pond are Black Smith Plovers (the black and white birds,) Egrets, Sacred Ibis, Hadada Ibis (black bird,) Egyptian Geese, Hottentot Teal, and Red-Billed Teal. This Hippo pond had about 40 Hippos in it and my goodness! What a stink rose from that pretty pond! “Hippos mate in the water, have babies in the water, and come out of the water at night to feed,” said our guide. “Hippos can weigh up to 3 tons, Elephants to 6 tons, Rhinos to 1 ½ tons. And you remember the ‘Big Five’ people want to see on safari: Elephant, Rhino, Cape Buffalo, Lion, and Leopard.”



“I wonder what would happen if I tried to play hopscotch on the backs of these Hippos,” said Myrtle with a smile. One of the women said, “Well, I heard that the Hippo is one of the most dangerous animals in Africa, especially if there is a baby involved, and you can clearly see that baby there. So I would guess that unless you were as light as a feather and swift as an angel, you wouldn’t last long.” “But if you want to try, Myrtle, I will cheer you on!” piped up one of the men with a laugh. I refrained from commenting because I was taking pictures of this Kori Bustard and White-Bellied Bustard.



This heavily pregnant female Zebra suddenly fell over onto the ground, causing some of us to cry out, "Oh, no! Did she die?" But then she started rolling back and forth in the dust and then sat up. I wondered if she did that because she knew the rain was coming. And it did come, in brief sheets that lasted only minutes but left the roads in puddles.



We came across these two male Lions that our guide said were probably part of the pride we saw this morning. “The dark brown or black manes mean the Lion is more than 16 years old. As you can see, these Lions are huge, over six feet long. “But look at him!” cried Myrtle. “He is nothing but a big pussycat rolling around on his back with his paws up in the air.” “Ha!” responded one man, “some pussycat!” The guide said, “These two are probably waiting for the females to call them for dinner.”



We drove on and came across a sight that I will never forget: a Lioness kill. There was more than a little petrified shuddering among our group as we sat in our jeeps above the watering hole, watching and listening. The kill had just been made, and the Lioness was opening the back end of the Wildebeest to get at the choice intestines and organs.



“But I thought she was supposed to call for the male to come get the best parts,” whispered one of the men in our group. “She is selfishly eating the choice parts herself!” We could hear the bones crunching as she bit into the pelvic area to slurp up the intestines. “Maybe she is eating enough that it becomes lighter and she can carry it up the hill to the males,” said our guide quietly. “When she finishes with the intestines, she will go for the liver and interior organs. She was probably part of the pack we saw this morning. She waited for the Wildebeests to come to drink, and she was hiding, and then she leaped and caught one. If we came back tomorrow, we would see a lot of Hyenas wherever she drags the carcass, after the Lions have their fill.”



The Hartebeest is a beautiful antelope, with its distinctive large ears and curving horns. This Verreaux's Eagle was standing on a tall rock. As we drove toward the exit to leave the Crater, we came upon this magnificent bull Elephant. Our guide said it is very old, probably 58-60 years old and is living in the swampy area of the Crater because it has lost all its teeth and can now chew only soft swamp grasses and vegetation. "Its tusks are over four feet long, very remarkable," he said. "It probably weighs 4 ½ to 5 tons."



As we went up and out of the Crater, our guide said, “We are on the Western edge of Rift Valley Escarpment now. There are many streams here, and the vegetation is lush. People from fifteen tribes live here. Even rice can be grown here. And there is more wealth. The Rift that we are going over is 1000 feet high.” After we left the Crater area and were on our way to the Ngorongoro Farmhouse, we saw a very large Maasai boma with many huts. “The chief of that boma has 26 wives and 150 children,” said our guide. “Yikes!” whispered Myrtle. “Can you imagine all the bickering and arguing and jockeying for position that probably goes on there? This is almost as bad as the harems of the Chinese emperors!”

We passed by an area where thousands of people were moving around. “This is the market at the town of Karatu,” said our guide. “The market is held on the 7th of every month. There are probably 5000 people here today.” I think we were all glad that we did not stop! We arrived at the Ngorongoro Farmhouse about 1:15 and happily tucked into another wonderful lunch of green salad, bean salad, chef salad, pasta, rice, beef Stroganoff, quiche, and cooked veggies, a veritable feast. Most of us bought a bottle of beer to toast our amazing day and process all we had seen. There was even a bit of squealing, and not all of it was from Myrtle and me. We went briefly to our beautiful rooms (with running water and shower, pure heaven!) and then settled on our private verandah looking out over the hillside. Ahhh.





At 4:30 we went for a walk around the Farmhouse grounds, which were large and impressive, with a total of over 500 acres under cultivation. One hundred people work at the Farmhouse. Five acres are for coffee, five acres for organic farming. "It is the dry season now," said the Farmhouse guide, "so there are not quite as many plants. We produce Arabica Coffee only for internal use, not for export. The coffee plants are six years old now, and we have had beans for the third time now. We pick the red beans by hand. There are two pieces of bean inside. We put them in water for two days,

then dry them in the sun. Good coffee will not float, it will go down. There are two types of coffee, Arabica and Robusta. Only Arabica grows at this high altitude. People say high-altitude coffee is the best. Each tree gives about 20 kilos of beans. You must also prune the trees in the rainy season. We do spray, so this is not organic coffee. After ten years we will chop the trees close to the ground so the bushes regenerate and bear better then. The coffee plants will live for 25 years and give one crop per year.”

When we were all treated to small cups of coffee, there was unanimous agreement that the taste of the coffee was superior. Many people in our group bought small bags of beans to take home. I heard one woman saying to her friend, “They don’t know that by the time they get their beans home, the beans will have lost some of that fresh wonderful flavor, and they will not have the coffee they fell in love with here. I have been down this road in Guatemala, which has coffee that is out of this world.”

After another wonderful dinner, we had our evening briefing. “This has been a very unusual day,” said our guide. “To see as much as we saw is rare. I have only seen a kill once before this year. It is a pretty memorable experience, hearing the lion’s powerful jaws snapping the thick pelvic bones of the Wildebeest and pulling out the intestines like she is slurping spaghetti.” There were a few shudders and some comments about what an incredible day it has been. Then our guide told us what tomorrow will be.

“Tomorrow will be a busy day again. Wake up is at 6:30, breakfast at 7:00 with bags ready to leave here at 7:45. Our first stop will be a school. If you brought small school gifts for the children, as your travel company suggested, have them ready in your backpacks. The school we will visit is one of the schools supported by your travel company. It is a Public Primary School. We will stay there about one and a half hours, then drive on to Olduvai Gorge, which, as you know, is the site of the ancient hominids excavations where they found a skull that is 1.75 million years old. We will have a guided museum tour and a short lecture about the work done at the Gorge. We will stop by kopjes, rock formations where we might see interesting animals, including Leopards. After that we drive on to the main entrance of the Serengeti to begin our four days of camping in the Serengeti.” At this statement, there were smiles all around, and a few small squeals, mostly from me and Myrtle. “Our Serengeti camp is in the middle of nowhere,” continued our guide, “so we may have animal visitors. There are wooden beds with mattresses. The tents are large, each with its own bath and shower area.” This statement generated excitement. “Wow!” “Really? How wonderful!” One man chortled, “Is this a glamping expedition?” The guide said, “Not exactly. The shower is what is called a navy shower, with a bucket of water hanging outside the tent, five gallons of warm water. You pull the string to start the shower, soap up, then pull the string all the way for rinsing. In the toilet area you flush by scooping water from a bucket. There is also a bucket of water outside your tent for laundry. There is a large mess tent for meals. Beer and wine will be available, water, and soft drinks. We will have a campfire and debriefing every evening. For the Maasai, ‘Serengeti’ means ‘endless plains.’ In 1951 the Serengeti became a national park. It is as large as the state of Connecticut in the United States. The big rock formations in the Serengeti are called kopjes. The plains cover one third of the total Serengeti. Our camp is at an elevation of about 3500 feet, so it will be cool in the morning and evening and warm during the day. Prepare your clothes accordingly.”

To be continued . . .