

MASAI MARA Kenya

In Harmony with Nature





SANJAY F GUPTA

A filmmaker based in Mumbai, with several mainstream movies and commercials to his credit. A wildlife photography enthusiast, he spends considerable time every year in African game reserves. His website is www.greypartridgefilms.com

Photos: Sanjay F Gupta

Absolute silence. A Thompsons Gazelle, its tail flicking continuously, on the open plains with its back to a cluster of tall grass grazed peacefully. The lifeless grass with no activity seemed safe. The Sand River Camp safari vehicle under the watchful eyes of my ranger George was overlooking the endless plains of Masai Mara, Kenya. His binoculars scanned the horizon trying to locate a predator. He knew there were hungry cats in the area.

A few hours earlier just as the sun prepared to emerge on the horizon, I climbed into the large vehicle as George wiped the dew off the windshield. The luxurious Sand River camp gets its name as it is on the bank of Sand River in a private conservatory on the border between Kenya and Tanzania. This area has a very healthy population of lions which was evident by the lion footprints all around the camp area and the constant proximity of roars starting early evening and continuing till sunrise. Even now, as I placed my weapons of war: Canon 1dx2 with several telephoto lenses in the vehicle, they were roaring, but the sounds came from across the river, in the non-accessible Tanzania side. Not a concern, there would hopefully be lots of game on



our side of the river. George set the machinery in motion; the vehicle moved towards the sun casting a deep crimson hue on the low lying clouds promising us a gorgeous, yet unpredictable day ahead.

Within few minutes on the road, we faced our first hurdle – a road block. A large herd of buffalo was on the road, surrounding grassland and hills. George said they were at least two thousand of them, and I believed him; the black spots scattered the entire landscape. The big males kept staring at us, smelling the air. Cape buffalo are considered dangerous to humans but a herd has never been reported to attack. It is only the lone males that attack and that too when their flight path gets blocked or if a human stumbles upon it. In unison, they decided to move and disappeared quietly with the young ones trotting between their parent's legs.

Masai Mara, located in the Great Rift Valley in primarily open

These cheetah cubs are still to start eating solid food and depend on the mother for milk. Like all kittens, they love to play and nuzzle with their mother. Cubs this age are very prone to death by starvation, dehydration, and predation. The Cheetah Foundation in Kenya is doing a great job by deploying staff that monitors young cubs and protects them from excess tourist vehicles surrounding and chasing away hyenas and lions that come too close when the mother is away on a hunt (**previous page**).

The lion cautiously watched as the buffalos steadily approached it. By the time they were uncomfortably close, the lion realised that all its escape routes blocked, it had to jump across the swamp to escape (**above**).

Savannah elephants still roam most of Central and parts of Southern Africa, but they remain under extreme threat from habitat loss and poaching and their numbers are declining at a rapid rate. A poacher gets just a few hundred dollars, but ivory fetches top dollar at the black market. The only way to save the elephants is to create awareness in the common man about the situation (**left**).

Portrait of two lions in their prime (right).

Lions will mate any time of the year for approximately five days going every twenty minutes. They may go without food for the five days (far right).

The young lion managed to bring down the wildebeest with great effort at dawn. The commotion attracted the full grown male who came to steal the kill and hide it in the thickets. The lion dragged the prey and the clinging adult cub for a while and then suddenly growled loud and lashed at the youngster who promptly aborted the pursuit (facing page bottom).

These four-month-old cubs are defenceless against any enemy primarily buffalo and male lions from other and own pride; and predators, including jackals and eagles. The next day, I saw one of the cubs had gone missing, and after hours of scanning we found it dead, trampled to shreds by a buffalo herd. The mother was able to save only one cub, by fleeing with it in her mouth (right).



grasslands, is one of the most accessible wildlife destinations in the world. The ease of access combined with great weather year round and the richness of wildlife makes it a popular choice for tourists from all over the world. It provides an excellent chance of viewing the big Five: Lion, Leopard, Buffalo, Elephant and the Rhino. The Rhino remains the most elusive as its population is on a steady decline due to poaching for their horns. As of now, the poachers are winning. Besides poaching, the ecosystem is fragile and at times in some areas can get stressed by uncontrolled vehicles.

Travel Tips

Peak Season: Lasts from July to October during the migration, but I recommend that if you want uncrowded Mara without hoards of vehicles at the river bank or at every lion sighting, consider visiting in the low season – avoiding the peak rains of April.

Flying In: Nairobi is approximately six hours overnight flight from India and visa is available on arrival. I recommend doing visa online to avoid queues. Wilson airport which connects Nairobi to Mara is 60 minutes away from the international airport, but I suggest at least 4 hours gap between flights as the traffic (and slow baggage service) can disrupt connecting flights.

Elwana Collections Website: www.elwanacollection.com They have unique lodges in Kenya and Tanzania situated in great locations.

And now, at the spot I was parked a slight wind picked up, and the grass started swaying, and through it ever so slowly crept out a cheetah, its eyes focused on the grazing gazelle. I turned to see if the gazelle had noticed, it had not. The cheetah stepped closer; the wind changed direction, the gazelle got a whiff, and before it could turn to see the source of the odour, the cheetah charged reaching a speed of approximately 80km within



seconds. The hunt began. My camera began rapidly firing off shots while attempting to frame and focus the fastest land animal in action. The gazelle made quick turns to dodge the predator, but within seconds the cheetah hit the hind leg of the antelope crashing to the ground and went for its throat choking the already short on breath gazelle. She picked up the limp gazelle to carry into the grass but changed her mind, dropped the meal and let out two sharp calls. I realized she was calling out to her cubs and two balls of fur stumbled out of the grass hurrying towards the mother utterly delighted by the catch.

Tourists and photographers can be divided majorly into few categories. Either those who want the adrenaline rush of watching a hunt; or those who want to watch sunsets while sipping on their favourite beverage; or those who will scan every leaf to spot their favourite bird; or those who will wait for hours at Mara riverbank waiting for the frenzy of the river crossing.

Often they do not overlap, but I belong to the other extreme that

The Rhino is the most elusive of the Big Five in Masai Mara as its population is on a steady decline due to poaching (above).

The annual wildebeest migration involves 1.5 million animals arriving in July and departing in October (left).

Travel Tips

Photography: Mara is excellent for all levels of photographers. For beginners, I recommend a crop sensor camera since there is little low light photography and the crop factor negates the need of heavy super telephotos. A zoom lens with 200 – 400 mm is sufficient for most purposes unless the photographer is focusing on birds. A wide lens with image stabilization helps to capture the sunsets. Leave the tripod behind; all photography is from a vehicle.



each of these interests is of utmost importance to me. For this trip, I carefully researched and chose Elwana Collection's Sand River Camp and Elephant Pepper Camp for their unique locations and wildlife viewing possibilities. Sand River Camps guaranteed sightings of large herds of buffalo, lion pride exceeding sixteen members, active cheetahs all in a quiet, non-disturbed part of Mara Reserve while I would have the luxury of ornate tents with the finest wine and butler service. Elephant Pepper for the great bird life, day-long trips for the river crossing, giraffes and the near guarantee of watching lions every safari. Of course, the

Clockwise from top left:

Intense and focused predators, Herons spend hours on the shore waiting for the slightest movement and strike at lightning speed to catch a fish. It is fascinating to watch the hunt.

Two cheetahs surveying the grassland.

A lion walks majestically behind another safari vehicle.

The fastest predator on land, a cheetah brings down a baby Thompsons Gazelle. The cheetah hit the hind leg of a running gazelle, trip them to fall and suffocate them by their neck.

A Masai creates fire using wood and dry grass. The technique is demonstrated for all tourists; I doubt if they still use it in real life.

This Masai boy and girl showed me around their village. Their shoulders kept rubbing against each other, and they finished each other's sentences. I found alone time with her and told her that I could see she loves him. Tears rolled down her cheeks, and she looked around to see if anyone was watching. There were no words required, but she whispered a 'Yes.' The Masai village elders do not allow girls to marry boys in their village and she could not be with him. He could not be with her. I asked her if there was a solution. She sobbed continuously and said "What can we do? Where can we go? There are lions everywhere."



View of sunset from lodge

hospitality of camp manager Patrick and the cuisine enhances the experience superbly.

The annual wildebeest's migration involves 1.5 million animals arriving in July and departing in October. By mid-September, the probability of watching river crossing becomes very difficult as by then the wildebeest have already left Mara towards Tanzania to give birth, but I did not want to miss my chance and decided to leave early and drive almost ninety minutes to view a possible river crossing. Early departure proved to be a good idea as a pair of mating lions were on my way to cause delays. This pair had recently started their courtship and would continue without food every twenty minutes for the next five days. I decided to wait and photograph the lions for an hour or

until I would get an interesting photograph. After all, a lion in the bush is better than wildebeest in the river. The hour turned into two then into three, and after about four hours I got a photograph that I was happy. It started to rain and the trip to the riverbank was put off for another day. Rain can disrupt safari in the huge open vehicles, but I often prefer it as it makes the visitor one with the surrounding. Lions and other predators walk within few feet from the vehicle, even make direct eye contact but rarely, if ever, attack a person.

My last night at Sand River I will never forget. I sat at the campfire by the river sipping Merlot and emptying my camera card of the day's photography onto my laptop, a troop of baboons started a huge ruckus across the river barely thirty-five feet away. My butler James

shone his tiny flashlight, and there stood a beautiful male leopard under a tree. The camera was out of ammunition, I tried taking a photo with my phone but the leopard being as elusive as ever, slowly walked away into the darkness. The exhilaration of watching a leopard from outside my tent just metres away while having dinner was rare and once in a lifetime experience.

I urge all readers to visit Wild Africa. Wilderness is one of the earth's most precious commodities; there is so little of it left. Each day there is less, but we do not worry about it as we do about oil or uranium for it does not, for now, bear on our everyday with urgency, but it will. I urge all readers to do their best to conserve wild land, there is nothing more precious than it. ■