

The terrain of the Kenyan safari – Proper position of the camera is very important to get a nice composition. This picture shows the importance of two composition rules: 1. The rule of thirds that dictates that objects of interest must not be centralized in the frame, and 2. The horizon should not be central frame – the ground of the sky should dominate and not be equal. Of course luck plays a great part as the giraffes entering the frame made all the difference to this photo.

KENYA

Putting a safari in a camera



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Photos: Sanjay F Gupta

The tent covers flapped feverishly as the cold wind picked up speed. It was still dark and I slipped on a warm jacket before stepping out. The moonless sky shone bright with millions of stars illuminating the clouds. A tray with hot African coffee and some cookies waited for me next to a lit lantern. Several baboons gave persistent, grunted alarm calls from just behind the mountain to my right. A predator was on the prowl and it was time to leave the coffee and head straight towards the sounds.

I was escorted by an athletic Masai armed with a javelin to the reception of Cottars Camp where awaited my safari vehicle and with it GG, their star guide – one of the 15 ‘Gold Guides’ in all of Kenya. He was looking towards the direction from where I had heard the baboons; his plans seemed to match mine. The vehicle drove out into the complete darkness with just its headlights on.

I was in Africa for not just for a holiday but also to get as many nice photographs for my collection.

Being a filmmaker/photographer, I am very particular about my trips and do a lot of research and preparations regarding the location, guides, hotels, equipment, etc., before making a trip.

Why Kenya

With huge open grasslands and a high concentration of animals, the beauty of Mount Kenya, the rawness of the Masai tribe, the lovely landscapes, well spread out camps/lodges catering to all budgets and ever smiling faces, Kenya is a perfect country for adventure, nature and photography. Besides, it was the low season - my favourite and most recommended period to visit a game reserve. I knew I was visiting a country from where many great wildlife photos, documentaries had come from, a place where the epic movie *Out of Africa* had been filmed!

Animal sightings depend on luck, the level of guiding, off-road driving and concentration of animals in the area. Since on luck I had no control, I decided to concentrate on the remaining points: On a safari,



A Masai walks into the horizon – I clicked this photo lying on the ground which emphasized the sky and helped me create a foreground of grass.



A couple of zebras forage as the sun sets – Watch the exposure carefully and use it for drama rather than just documenting. If I had shot this using auto exposure, I would have had properly exposed zebra but over exposed background. I preferred this rich red feel with darkish zebra so underexposed this by 1.5 stops

where one wakes up early, drives long distances all day in the sun, food, cocktails, pampering and general comfort are of high importance. I had chosen Cottars Safari Camp and Elephant Pepper Camp as they both promised to provide all I wanted, both facilities and cost being better than the other available options.

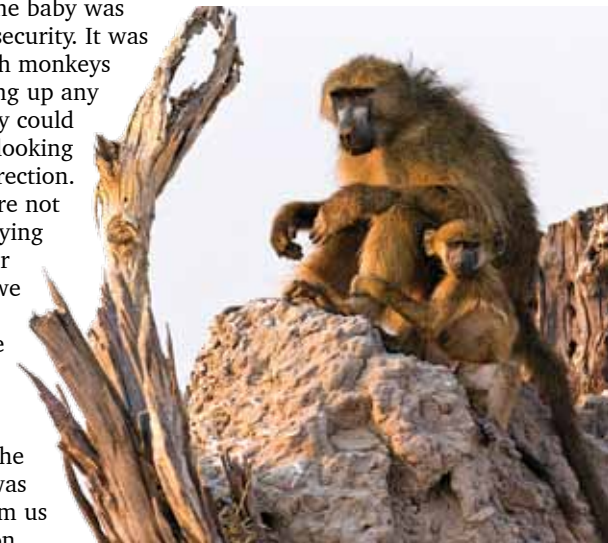
For a change, I have chosen to write a photo travelogue as a guide for anyone visiting Kenya, or any part of Africa who has an eye for the camera and looks outside for the vision. While I firmly believe that the best camera is “the camera in your hands”, I like to have the best available camera and lenses for safari trips. Rare moments start

and finish within moments and if a photographer does not have the right equipment to aid him with the shot, then the moment could be lost forever.

As we moved out from the Cottars Safari Camp, the landscape somewhat cleared up from the thickets to the grassland, revealing a zebra standing dwarfed under the pre-dawn sky. Just then, we heard the sounds that had made us move in this direction yet again: It was the alarm calls of the baboons and this time we could actually see them at the edge of the mountains, and like cattle eyeing fresh grass, we rushed towards them.

As we neared them, we could see the mother baboon staring at the

predators while the baby was clinging to it for security. It was a large troop, with monkeys of all ages climbing up any tree or stump they could see, but all were looking focused in one direction. Of course, we were not interested in studying monkey behaviour just then and so we turned our eyes towards the cause of the commotion: It was a pride of six lions, partly hidden in the grasslands, that was walking away from us in masterly fashion.



The mother baboon stares at predators (left) while the baby clings for security – When photographing two or more animals together with a telephoto lens, it is best to use smaller f-stops to ensure there is enough depth of field to have both subjects in focus.



The pride of lions makes its presence felt – *It always helps to have two camera bodies with different lenses. If I had just one camera with just one lens, I would have missed out on some of these photographs, as sometimes the lions were close and sometimes far.*

There were some rocks that separated us from the lions, preventing us to get any close-ups. Even as my heart sank a little bit on not being able to get any clear shots, the pride decided to change its mind, climbing atop a mound sticking out of the grassland for what appeared to be a play break. Their bellies were full and with the now-rising sun they would sleep through the day so we drove away searching for other exciting things to photograph.

Howling winds; flying dust; reduced visibility; fast moving clouds, it was a magical morning. GG and I drove without eyeglasses, heads covered with blankets to keep the sand away. Moving clouds kept covering the morning sun. There were lots of zebras and topis around who seemed enjoy the semi-storm like conditions and played with each other in the near red light. Leaving a trail of dust, we moved ahead but it was very quiet with hardly any animals around. GG informs me that Masai Mara got its name from the Masai tribe who grazed their cattle in the marked areas.

The term 'safari' originates from Arabic and in Swahili it means 'to travel' and now travelling in Kenya and looking at the various animals and landscapes, it was easy to see why it is one of the top destina-

tions in the world. The gentle breeze hit my face as I drove by hoards of zebra and wildebeest that grazed peacefully around me.

As day wore on, GG drove us up to a safe spot with a spectacular view, as far as the eye could see of the Masai Mara and announced: coffee.

My barometer on how 'cool' a safari operator is where they stop for breakfast. Not what they serve or how good the coffee is, but where they stop, shows their class. Must admit, I do not remember stopping at a better spot in my 10 plus years of visiting Africa. While they set up breakfast, I stepped away from the vehicle and walked away as far as GG allowed me to feel being lost in the middle of nowhere. The dew was still on the leaves, the air crystal clear and a herd of buffaloes in the plains moved steadily towards a water body. It was so great that I did not





Lions try to push the hyenas away from their zebra kill. At one point the lions had to leave the almost finished carcass to they hyenas who immediately attacked it with gusto – *Do not limit the compositions to close-ups but try to include the environment including clouds to create a mood. In Photoshop I darkened the sky a bit to further add drama.*

even feel like blinking.

With breakfast in our stomachs, we drove for half an hour without spotting anything worth photographing. We discussed that during migration, the plains are dotted with animals but how non-migration periods are equally interesting.

We stopped at a small pool where some zebra drank water. The tracker said something in Kiswahili to GG and pointed to a pride of lions emerging through some thickets. The zebra noticed them too and ran away splashing a lot of water.

The lions were nervous, kept a keen eye as they started to lap the water, the tracker spoke again, and this time in clear English but with much excitement: 'More lion, another tribe'. I turned around to see a lion approaching the tribe aggressively. The pride at the water charged growling at this lion who

turned around and bolted back into the thickets and we could then just hear aggressive growling for a while and it became silent again just as quick as it had started. We waited for a bit and when the pride did not return, GG decided to check the other side of the bush.

The pride was huddled on top an anthill with its complete attention to where it had come from. It had chased away an approaching lion but was still nervous. It was a rare sight with all of them high on the mound.

As we were scheduled to visit a Masai village that evening, we returned to the resort by mid-morning and I had a nice swim in the pool. It was a nice break from the rush of the bush adventures. By early evening, we left for the village. The trees and clouds around the village were lovely by themselves but to make it more interest-



Zebras flee from a small pool on sighting a lion (left) – *When in bright sunlight, it helps to keep the camera on a fast shutter speed (even with slightly high ISO and wide f-stop) as one never knows when fast action will need to be frozen.*

Giraffes gather near a water pool (below) – *Lighting is key to pretty pictures and the photographer needs to take advantage of morning and evening light, that is when pictures come alive with textures and colours.*



ing, I requested a Masai villager to walk into the horizon and I took his photograph with him lying on the ground, emphasising the sky and helping me create a foreground of grass. Masai kids spend their entire day grazing cattle. They return home in the evening and will put their cattle in an enclosure called *boma* for the night. They drink a full litre of milk in the morning, eat nothing all day and drink a litre of goat milk at night before sleeping. Masai men spend most of their day lazing around while the kids and women work. When kids grow up, the wives give away their husbands to a younger bride who then takes care of the new husband and the older wife. Returning to my resort in the evening was so delightful after a long day in the bush. Cottars is

Vignettes of life in a Masai village – It helps to frame the composition, as in the photo below with the tree, to add interest.

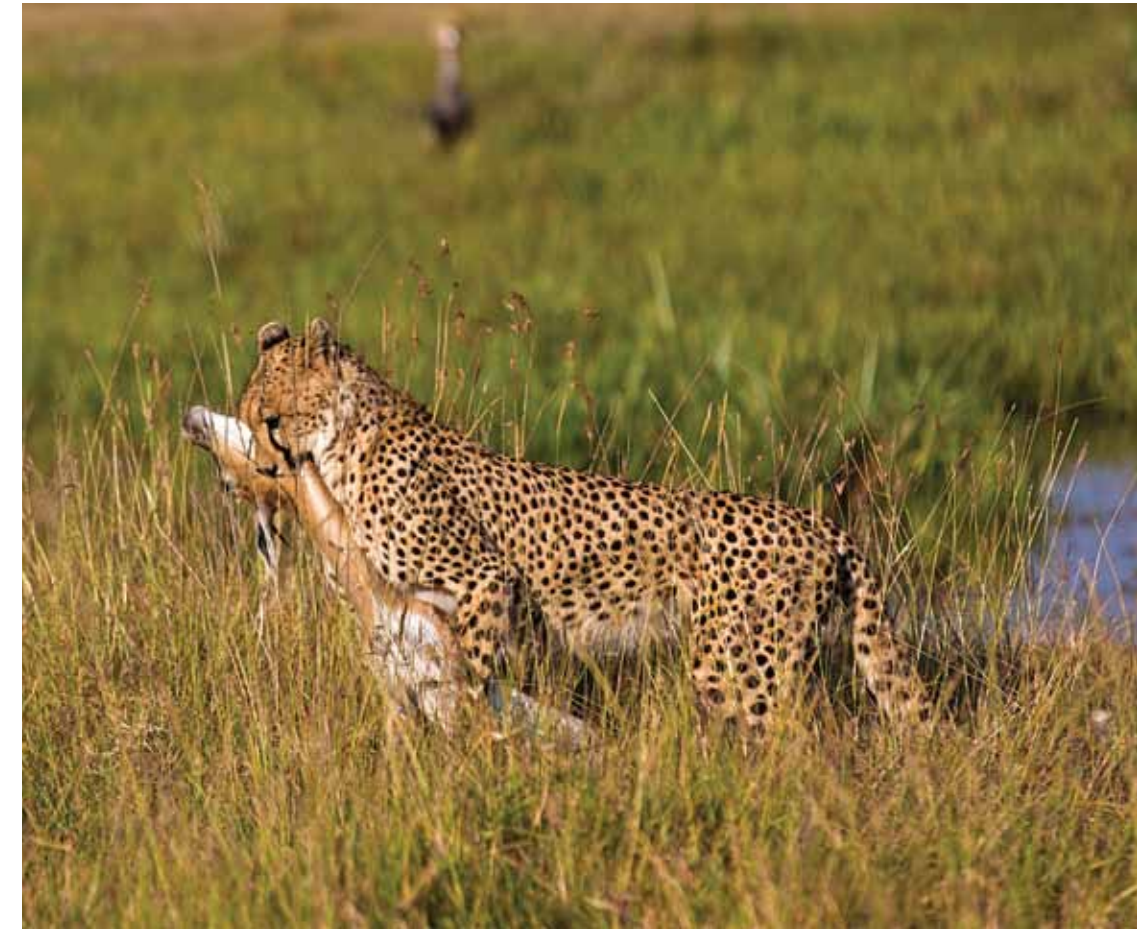


Keep these in mind while clicking

- In pre-dawn situations, it is best to steady the camera and bracket the exposures while shooting. Then in Photoshop, blend the various exposures to effectively increase the dynamic range and avoid getting over exposed skies or dark ground.
- It is mandatory that all wildlife photographers carry tele-convertors to boost their telephoto reach. They cause a slight drop in light and IQ, but they are very useful. In open lands, there are often nice pictures to be made of unapproachable or shy wildlife using such converters.
- It helps to frame the composition to add interest.
- This may perhaps be the most important tip – always have your camera handy, you never know when you may find an interesting photo.
- Whenever possible, photograph wildlife from the lowest possible angle, it gives the photo an added dimension.



Cheetah mother hunts a gazelle – Master the craft of using servo focus to maintain focus on fast moving animals. That is the best way to get sharp photos.



unique in its décor and original safari antiques from the 1920s. Smiling hosts are always around to provide for any needs. That evening I preferred wine to coffee.

Elephant Pepper: Cheetahs, Savannas and more lions

The next day, GG offered to drive me to my next camp – ‘Brother’s for life’. Approximately two hours through rusty roads and we reached close to my destination but I had to stop to take some photographs as the sun was going down. Giraffes can survive in dry season just by the water they get from leaves but when available, they can drink up to 40 litres of water everyday.

I wanted two distinct habitats for the two lodges and choose Cotters for its landscape with thick trees and bush; Elephant Pepper for its endless open grasslands. By the time I reached Elephant Pepper, it was late for a game drive, so the staff greeted us with reclining chairs and a bottle of bubbly. On my way to the tent from the reception, I heard soft

calls and sneaked to see baby jackals waking up. Jackals spend their days in shallow burrows and wake up at sundown. The babies were calling out to their mother and were not very shy.

The next morning was unduly cold with overhanging clouds. Within minutes of driving out, we witnessed an incredible tussle for food between lions and hyenas. The lions had killed a zebra at night and the large pride fed on it till morning. As I observed this drama, the hyenas started building in numbers and their yelping became louder and louder. The lions were still hungry and snarled back pushing the hyenas away. As time progressed, the hyenas started getting desperate and started pushing in. At one point, the lions had to leave the almost finished carcass to the hyenas who immediately attacked it with gusto.

Leaving the hyenas as they tore the carcass to pieces, we went to the area with tall trees to find the pride of lions that had been chased away by the hyenas. It is surprising how quickly an entire pride can disappear; it was just less than 15 min-

utes I had spent with the hyenas. And, one lion not liking his dismissal from the kill was in a very foul mood. He walked straight towards my camera, stopping only a short distance away before disappearing into the trees.

The next two days cheetahs were the focus of my photography. They almost were the resident cheetahs of Elephant Pepper at that time. We found them one afternoon lying lazily in the grass till they all got up looking hungry and started scanning the landscape. In one swift movement, without any indication, a mother cheetah took off and in a chase that lasted almost a minute hunted down a gazelle. The cubs could not keep pace and stopped almost immediately.

By the time she managed to kill the gazelle, she was far away from the cubs and had to call them with her soft sounds. They fed under a tree for two hours until vultures drove them away. ■

For any information on photography tips, please write to me at sanjayfgupta@yahoo.com