



MERU NATIONAL PARK Kenya

Return of Game

The massive concentration of vehicles, each filled with people around the Mara River during migration leaves a huge footprint every year. Private efforts, over the past ten years, have helped breathe new life into the wilderness.

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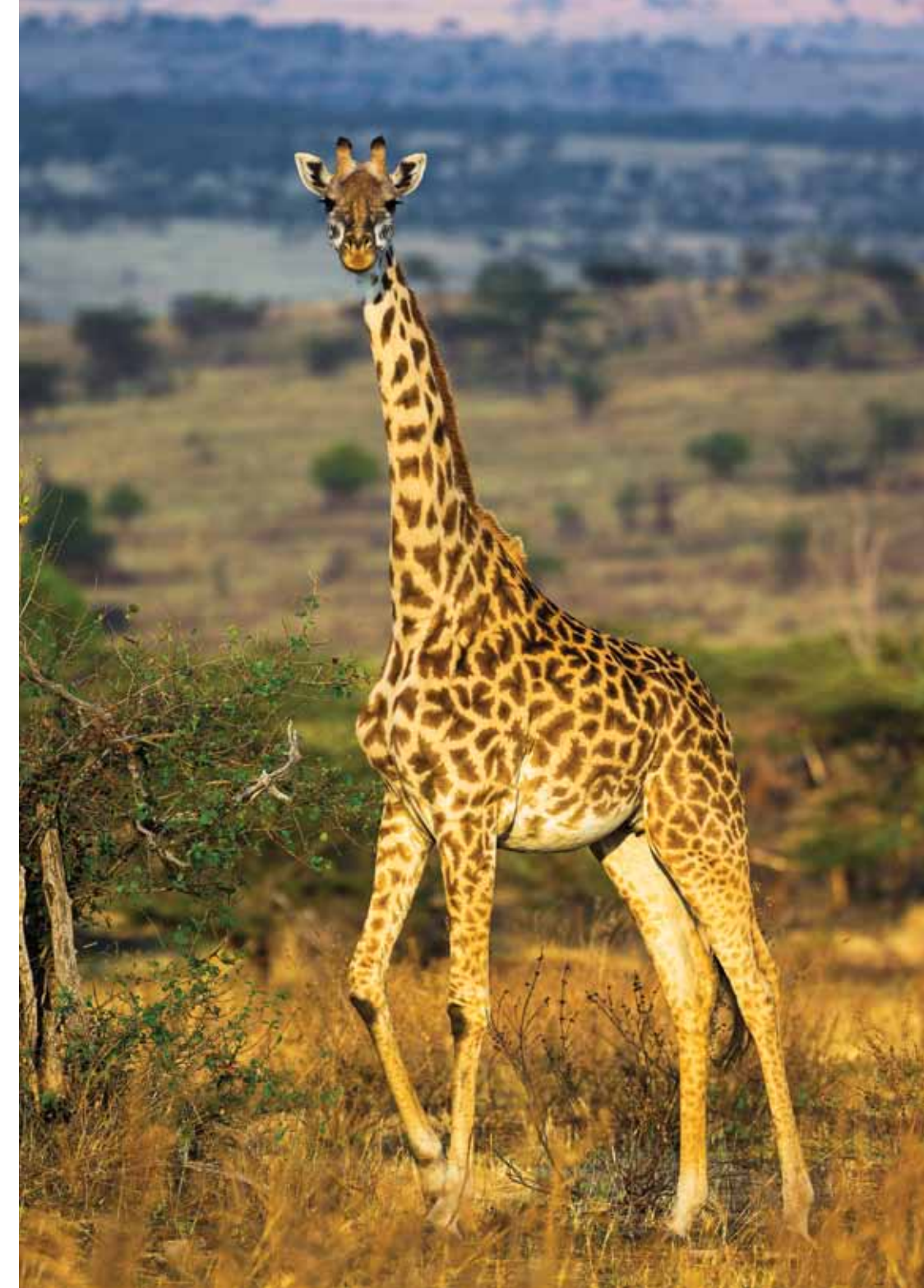
My safari vehicle raced leaving a dust trail obliterating the setting sun. The radio crackled information about a large pride of lions with tiny cubs moving towards a grazing buffalo herd some distance away. If we wanted to view them we had to reach there before the sun hid behind the trees. George, my guide, slowed down as we neared the vicinity of the pride, ensuring our presence does not interfere with the hunt. The vehicle crept forward with our eyes scanning for the slightest movement in the fading light and our ears tuned in to hear the slightest rustle in the utmost silence. My eager wrists clenched the camera.

Black shapes on the dry grass over the red sands converted into buffalos, the land that seemed barren few minutes ago now teemed with them. All grazed peacefully, the lions must have moved into some other direction or were hiding close by waiting for darkness to kill. The sky lost the golden hue, turned grey and we headed back.



I have been frequently visiting African game reserves for a decade now but have been perplexed by the topic of impact of tourism on conservation. This is a much-debated issue with purists fighting to curtail; while other groups insist that there is no possibility of conservation without tourism. Tourists litter, their vehicles pollute, they corrupt the locals and disturb animals. How can such elements be weapons of conservation?

For this study I selected Cheli & Peacock because of their strong presence in Kenya with a wide variety of lodges. And I needed a broad/varied perspective of the issue for better understanding. The presence of a single tourist in a Masai village, just the presence, is enough to cause serious damage – the tourist can transmit an airborne disease and with the lack of medical and transport facility around, the entire village may perish. The massive concentration of vehicles, each filled with people around Mara River during migration leaves a huge footprint every year. I clearly remember a very disturbing sight



95% of poached rhino horn goes to China. Trading/importing Rhino horn and elephants tusk is illegal all over the world but poachers always seem to be a step ahead of authorities. Rhino horn price has been escalating in the international blackmarket as it's a key ingredient in Chinese medicine due to a belief that it cures various diseases including erectile dysfunction, nightmares and dysentery (above left)

Buffaloes are amongst the most feared animals in Africa, even more than a pride of lions. With 900 kg of body weight they pack tremendous crushing power. When not in a herd, like these two males, they tend feel vulnerable and attack. Many trackers refer to them as 'black death' (left)

Right leg scraping the grass and her looking straight to the camera indicates that she is uncomfortable and assessing the situation. They spend most of the day eating and sleep around two hours a day. Their life span is 25 years. A giraffe's legs can measure up to 6 feet (above)



Travel Tips

How to reach

- It is a very friendly, cost effective, year round safari destination.
 - August and September is peak season because of migration.
 - Weather is generally pleasant; a light jacket is required for early mornings.
 - Flight from Mumbai to Nairobi is approx. 5 hours and visa is on arrival.
 - Lodges are connected via short flights.
 - Nairobi traffic is bad and schedule 2 hours drive between international to Wilson airport from where flights depart for lodges. It is possible to self-drive and camp if you are the adventurous type.
- Email me for any information:
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Female lions are faster than males and team up with other females to hunt zebras, wildebeest and antelopes. This photo was taken just outside Elephant Pepper Camp as the lioness focused on a herd of topi antelope drinking water (**above top**) **Lions roar** to make their presence known to any other lion that could stray into their territory. Contrary to what the uninitiated may think, the roaring does not stem from anger. This male finished a big meal and roared long and loud. The entire bush including birds went silent (**above below**) **The two-** to three-month-old cubs miss no chance to pounce and play with each other. If an outsider replaces the dominant male of the pride, he will most likely kill cubs. Experts predict that they may be extinct in the wild by 2020 (**facing page top**) **Loving and** social lions of the same pride great each other several times a day by head rubbing; a mutual display of affection, the recipient expressing pleasure and reciprocating. The lioness was focused on some far away trees but the cub wanted to play. A herd of buffalo soon appeared from the direction she was looking at and she disappeared in the trees. A buffalo herd would not hesitate to trample the cub (**right**)



on a hot afternoon where all the trees were taken by tourist vehicles for shade pushing animals out in the blistering sun with no relief. Can there be a silver lining? Next morning well before sunrise a lion roared in the plains while I readied my camera gear for another daylong trip. A deep sound getting louder and louder then tapering off to start again conjuring images of a fierce beast challenging the world. Lion roars are such that it is always difficult to judge the exact distance or the exact direction of the sound. Experts claim that it can be heard as far as 5 km - it can well be so in the silence of the bush. Awe and fear further confuses the brain. In the darkness of the African bush, with blankets covering our bodies the open-air vehicle left the lodge. Our plan was to drive to a Masai village bordering the reserve,



selected by Cheli & Peacock. The 'village' actually is an extended family living in remote locations in basic huts with no shops of any kind. No electricity, no running water. It is always educational and exciting to mingle with new cultures and learn new customs. But first, George suggested, we visit the area where the lions were spotted the previous evening. He too had heard them roaring earlier. We must have driven for about half an hour in the early morning light and there it was- sitting on grass that was still wet with dew, a big lion in his prime. This was the one roaring in the darkness. A little to his left on the slope of a hill were the playful cubs returning from a small river. The lionesses were still drinking. The slow flowing water shimmered golden with steam rising from it. The beautiful



sight was a reminder that conservation should be on top of everyone's minds. In just the past ten years lion population has reduced more than half: from 50,000 to around 22,000 (National Geographic statistics). No statistics are accurate as by the time the survey finishes the population substantially reduces. At this rate, unless the entire world wakes up to the epidemic, there will be no lions left soon. No cubs pouncing on each other, no roars at night. The role of tourists must be analyzed perfectly, and proper policies implemented.

The cattle had left the village by the time we reached and I jumped out of the still moving vehicle to get a shot of last goats leaving the village. Village girls found this amusing and started laughing. I swung around and photographed them next. Masai men jumped

trying to reach the sky to welcome me and their ladies showed me their handcrafted jewelry. Everyone smiled, looked healthy and there was no dirt anywhere. The English speaking local guide showed me around intermittently giving an insight into his village life: their accepted practice of keeping several wives, daily rituals and chores, staying up at night chasing away leopards in search for a quick meal of their livestock.

I requested George to take me to another village. He resisted, I pestered. A ten-kilometer journey that took two hours because of lack of a proper road but I was not prepared for the contrast in the two villages. This one had heaps of trash all around with swarming flies and rummaging dogs. The kids constantly tugged at my shirt asking for money and most adults stared

at me disapprovingly. It became obvious to me that the villages C&P sent visitors to are thriving while the neglected are plagued by dirt, malnutrition. Is either village more authentic than the other? Is the one where tourists visit a tourist trap and fake? I have visited several villages all over the African sub continent and can assure you that both are authentic, 'un-spoilt'.

The sun was still high when I returned to Meru National Park's leading lodge – Elsa's Kpje. It was constructed in the memory of George Adamson's first camp; his love affair with the orphaned lioness Elsa which led to the legendary book and movie "Born Free". It was quite a feeling to realize that my suite was built on the very rocks Elsa slept on. Speaking with the manager Philip, an immaculately dressed man of light built and sharp eyes, about conservation was



A cheetah yawns to greet dusk. To eliminate conflict with lions and leopards this cat is diurnal. It hunts and feed in sunlight and is rarely spotted after dark (above top) The most nocturnal, elusive and shy of all the big cats, leopards are tough to spot. They spend substantial time hidden on a tree behind thick foliage making it difficult to photograph them. This hungry leopard walked down a tree in front of me when it started raining. The smell of wet sand and the sound of rain on ground gives predators an advantage while hunting (above below) It took the baby wildebeest less than twenty-five seconds to stand up after birth. It was unsteady and kept falling down. It prepared itself to cross the vast lands of Tanzania and the Mara River for the rest of its life. The calf will stay with the mother until it reproduces again the coming year (right)





Masai tribe live in Kenya and Tanzania but are the best known people of Africa due to their reputation of cannibalism and because they are a popular tourist attraction in places like Masai Mara and Serengeti. The livestock is taken for grazing before sunrise and brought in every evening before sunset to be locked in an enclosure made of thorny branches. The tall, traditional warriors rely on animals for food including milk, meat and blood. On occasion they still will spear a lion to prove their status in the village. They believe all the cattle in the world belong to them and were given to them by Enkai, the God **(above)**

The **percentage** of Masai girls going to school has doubled to 40 per cent since early 2000s. Traditionally the girls are circumcised at age 12 and married off in exchange for cattle. For a Masai girl, a typical day consists of milking cows and walking considerable distances to fetch water. They found my fascination for the village funny and kept laughing **(facing page top)**

Lodges with lovely views and pampered service eases out the rigor of spending time in the bush enticing tourists of all ages. View of Elsa's Kopje **(facing page below)**

Considered scavengers, hyenas can actually be efficient hunters and bring down large antelopes like wildebeest and zebra. Active both in day and night they can smell a carcass over long distance and reach there even before the lions or leopards have finished eating. A large cackle of hyenas drives away lions from their kill. When they finish eating, the carcass site can has nothing left as they eat away the bones too. This family of spotted hyenas was coming out of their burrow at sun down **(right)**



bit of an eye opener. He told me, as we sipped crisp martinis at the pool overlooking the reserve, how he takes care of each and every guest at the luxurious lodge personally not only because he wants them just for business but because he wants them to have such a great time that they go back and promote all of Africa to their friends; conservation cannot be isolated to just Kenya. In 1980 for about ten years tourism dropped in the area because of poaching and reduction of animals. Just as tourism dropped, poachers were free to invade the area and they steadily wiped out the entire rhino population. The situation became desperate, elephant carcasses were discovered on a daily basis and essential

funds to fight back, because of lack of tourists, were just not there.

Stefano and Liz, the founders of C&P realised the gravity of the situation and built the lodge in 1999. In 2011, they raised \$225,000 for the Kenyan Wildlife Service that started the process of rehabilitation of the Meru National Park, Kenya. I could see the pride on Philip's face as he educated me about his efforts and the region. The rhinos are back now and next morning I could photograph them if I wished. He smiled and gulped the last sip.

The rhino was skittish in my presence and I had to keep a safe distance. He kept stomping his feet to demonstrate his displeasure until we backed off. This must be due to years of persecution. That was

perfectly ok; I would rather have cautious rhinos in the bush than none at all.

It was easy to conclude that eco-friendly tourists help wildlife and villagers by bringing in revenue; policing the area far more than just rangers. They spread the word on the importance of conservation when they get back home. I am happy C&P (www.chelipeacock.com) is an integral part of this process. Over the years they have perfected the art (yes it is an art) of safari and have lodges all over Kenya and Tanzania, each providing unique experiences: Elsa's and Sand River with seven star luxuries, to my favorite Elephant Pepper Camp where I slept amongst lions with just a tent canvas between us. Nice! ■