




I always said they'd never get me out here...

A safari? The actress **Imogen Stubbs** was terrified of catching malaria. Then she was persuaded to join a trip to Kenya's Maasai Mara.

Although I love animals, I am squeamish about insects – especially mosquitoes. For me the potential joy of many a paradise is eclipsed by the horror of the high-pitched whine, followed by the midnight bite and subsequent malaria.

Consequently, I steered clear of Africa, choosing instead to enjoy

ersatz safari adventures with David Attenborough and *The Lion King*. Then I began to have a niggling sense that seeing animals in the wild is something everyone should do if blessed with the opportunity, mosquitoes or no.

And then the opportunity arrived: the chance to accompany a friend, Serena Gordon, on a trip to Kenya. We would travel to Little Governors'

Camp in the Masai Mara, for Prestige Promotions' now renowned "Celebration of African Wildlife" where our hosts would include Jonathan and Angie Scott of BBC Big Cat Diary fame.

I learnt that the trip would include a hot-air balloon ride with a champagne breakfast in the wild. I was shown a brochure with elephants and giraffes wandering

Imogen Stubbs in the middle of the Maasai Mara

Photographs by
Serena Gordon
Angela Scott
Richard Long



freely about the camp. And I was informed of a new malaria pill that doesn't make you crazy. And I said: "Yes please, thank you very much."

We flew to Nairobi in ultra comfortable seats with Kenya Airways, and on to the Masai Mara in a small private plane which Prestige Promotions had chartered just for our group. Beneath us stretched acres of dark undergrowth staining the arid landscape. As the plane descended I realised the undergrowth was moving. I had not appreciated that "The Celebration" always coincided with the Great Migration – when a million wildebeest cross the plains and rivers in order to provide fabulous photo opportunities for an equally impressive migration of tourists and documentary crews.

We landed on a tiny expanse of tarmac and were met by Clive Thomas, our effervescent and larger than life host, and Jonathan and Angie – disarmingly humble despite being world-famous photographers. We were also welcomed by singing, leaping Masai, who seemed oddly familiar thanks to the BBC television logo clip.

We boarded waiting Land Rovers

with experienced driver-guides, and set out immediately on a game drive. I was not wearing my contact lenses, and soon embarrassed myself by leaping up and down shrieking "Elephant!" – only to discover it was some Japanese tourists in a people carrier.

Nevertheless, within minutes we saw all sorts of animals – even lions. This prompted cries of "Oh my God! It's just like The Lion King!", at which our Masai driver launched into a rendition of Hakuna Matata. After several exciting hours – including time spent watching mating lions, mating zebras and even mating ostriches – we arrived exhausted at a river, where we climbed into a small boat for the less than a minute crossing to Little Governors' Camp.

The camp consists of large, old-fashioned airy tents with verandas, facing a watering hole teeming with animals and birds. The tents have wooden floors covered in comfy rugs, large en suite bathrooms, and are romantically lit by kerosene lamps. They are completely netted against mosquitoes. Nevertheless, an insect spray was provided –

encouragingly called "Doom".

At night the camp is lit with candles and fires, and manned by armed guards, in case something more dangerous than the ubiquitous warthog decides to come for a sleeper.

Each evening we gathered in the bar for illustrated talks by the Scotts and others about wildlife and photography. These turned out to be fascinating, especially for those of us who have never ventured beyond "on" and "auto". Then we tucked into gorgeous food on candlelit tables under the stars before bedtime, which arrived with little gifts from Clive on our pillows, hot-water bottles and the sounds of animals crashing around outside our tents.

One morning I woke to a roar that I hoped was a lion, but turned out to be a hot-air balloon being inflated behind our camp. It rose behind the trees like something out of James and the Giant Peach.

The first time you see animals in their natural habitat you get an incredible adrenalin rush: Shamefully, however, after a few game drives you get a bit blasé, and start to crave new thrills: OK, we've

Mara Magic:
(clockwise from top left)
Entertainment from the Masai;
A dramatic wildebeest crossing;
A good reason for a delayed transfer!
The author with Jonathan



seen impala – where's the leopard?

And once you have seen animals grazing and mooching happily about, you get a deviant desire to stir things up – you hope for a lion in among the zebra, and so on. Our own animal instincts rapidly emerge.

The most enjoyable game drives were with the various speaker hosts, especially the delightful, eloquent Jonathan Scott. Once we sat in a dappled glade - just listening to the different sounds. We were beside an oxbow river shadowed by an escarpment much tramped upon by Meryl Streep as Karen Blixen.

Jonathan stressed the importance of humility in the Mara and of living in the moment – not regretting what you have not seen. Nevertheless, a competitive instinct develops: one group may have seen a cheetah, but another is wearing the ecstatic afterglow of having seen a leopard give birth. People resign themselves to photo swaps: you send me your “crocodile eating warthog” and I’ll send you my “serval cat with tawny-flanked prinia”.

I loved the thrill of the search: looking for tracks, hearing alarm

calls, and watching the alert head-angles of grazing animals. Especially on the walking safari. At one point we stopped to listen to an animal in distress. Sadly it turned out to be Serena's squeaky boot, but we did see giraffes and lions unexpectedly close up.

We were protected by a Masai with a spear who was very proud of his tradition and heritage. That said, at one point he took out his mobile to get the results of Manchester United versus Reading.

We also went to a Masai village. They were very accommodating, and smiled and danced for the cameras. We felt embarrassed that this seemed exploitative – so we returned the compliment by launching into “We're All Going on a Summer Holiday”, with a spontaneous dance worthy of David Brent. They looked utterly mystified, but grateful. Probably overwhelmingly grateful not to be us.

We ate our farewell breakfast with genuine sadness as elephants and giraffes waded through water lilies behind us in the watering hole. One guy asked me not to mention how good the trip was in the article.

Last time he had told his wife it was just grotty, boy-scout tents, Pot Noodle and the odd monkey.

Our last day was spent in Nairobi visiting animal sanctuaries and an elephant orphanage. Over drinks at the well-known Kenyan sculptor Denis Mathews' workshop and gallery, we exchanged addresses and website links, hoping that between us we had captured everything, and promising to meet again, as of course we would all rebook for next year.

The huge success of the trip was due in no small measure to the exuberance and enthusiasm of Clive Thomas, the attention to every last detail of his team, and the many absorbing workshops and talks given by interesting hosts they had added, that would not usually be part of a safari trip.

The emotion was captured by one of our party, for whom it was the fulfillment of a lifetime's dreams and savings. As we watched giraffes ambling across the crimson horizon at sunset, she whispered: “How gorgeous is this? I mean, how unbelievably lucky are we to be here, and in such comfort? Sure as hell beats Slough.”

Call of the Wild:
(clockwise from top left)
Shakira filmed for Big Cat Diary and 3 cubs.
Breakfast in the bush after our walking safari.
Early morning hot air balloon flight.
A room with a view.
Jonathan Scott demonstrating how close we were to the wildlife.

MARA BASICS

Imogen Stubbs and Serena Gordon travelled with Kenya Airways to Little Governors' Camp on the annual “Celebration of African Wildlife & Tribal Life” trip devised and run by Prestige Promotions 01442 879000. www.prestige-promotions.co.uk

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