

On a family vacation,
Subramanian Srinivasan
explores four outstanding
East African safari parks

EAST AFRICA: UNANIMOUS

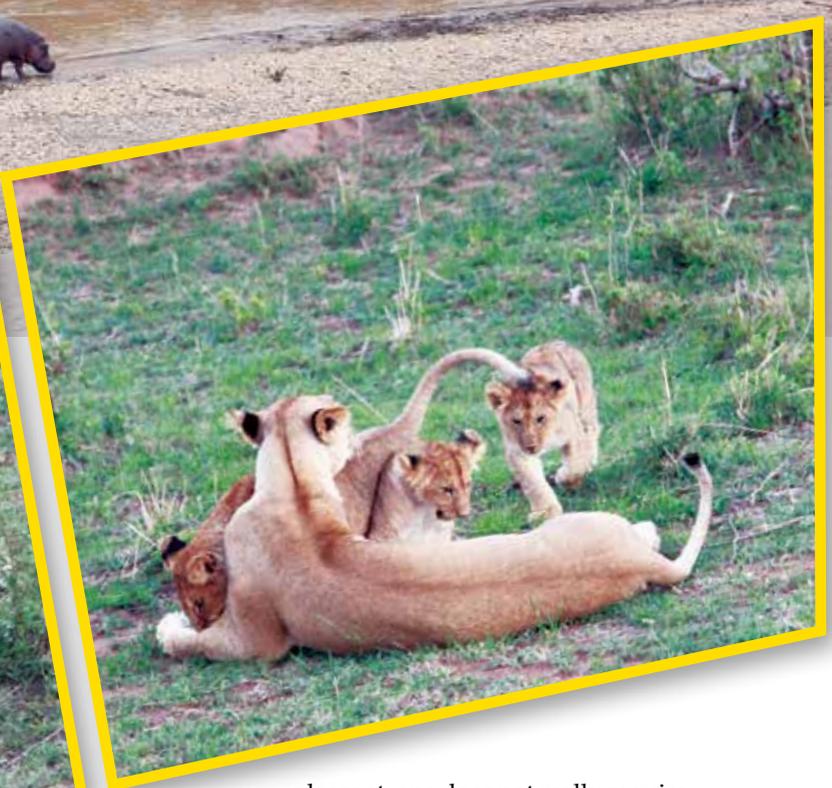
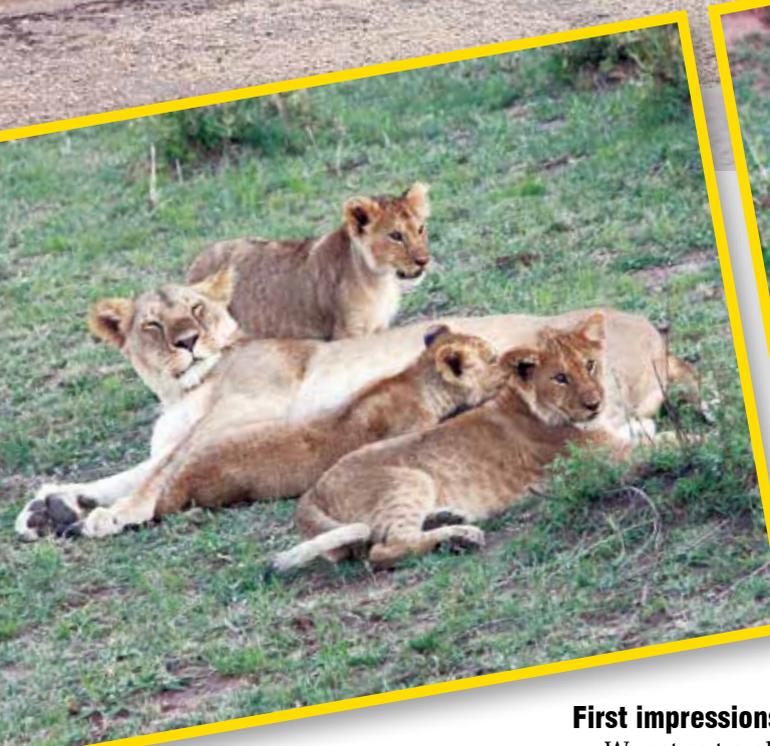
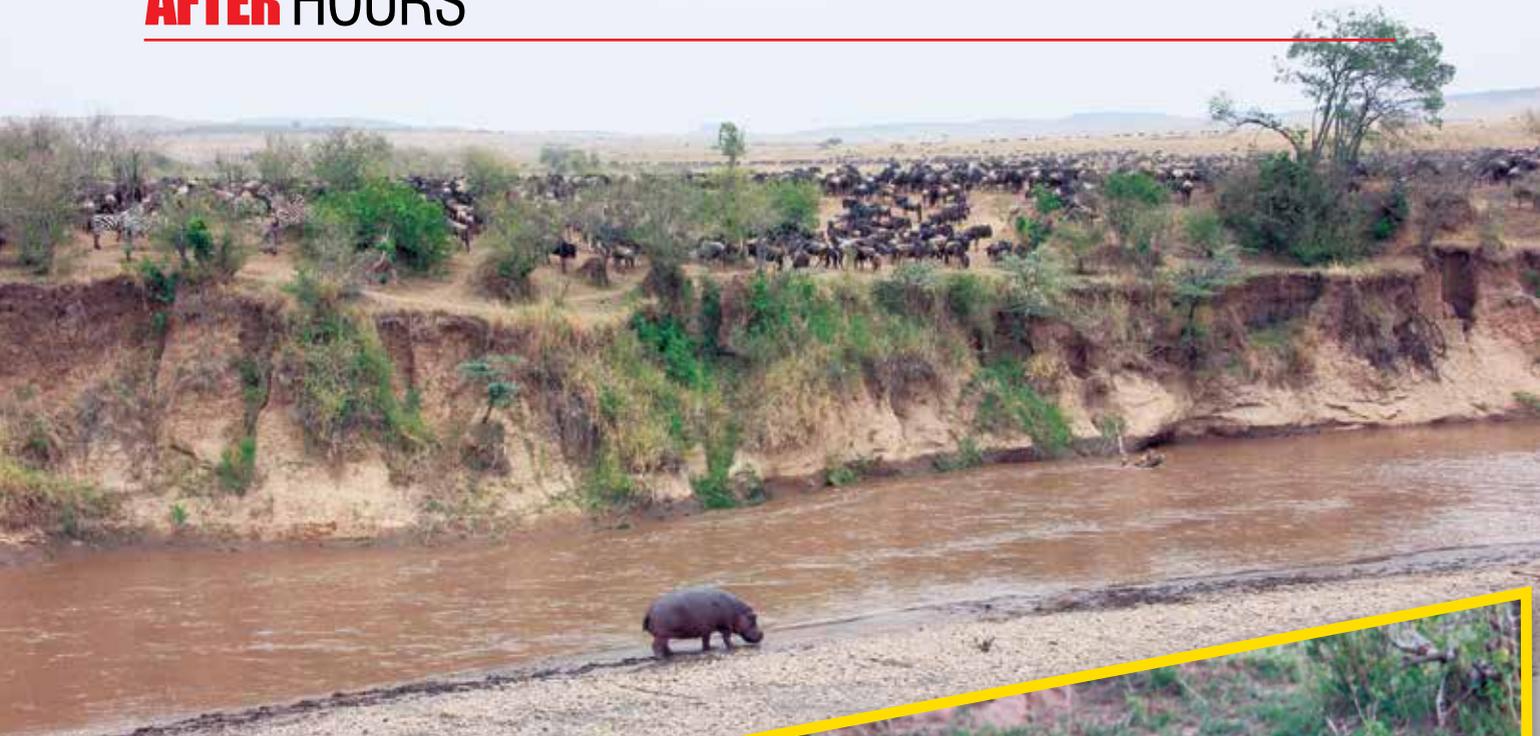


My family loves animals, and our one wish was to see them in their natural habitat, roaming wild and free. This made our vacation choice very simple: Kenya and Tanzania it would be!

The first thing you need to know about planning a visit to these countries is the series of vaccinations that are required. A yellow-fever shot is mandatory, and must be completed at a government centre. (To our pleasant surprise, we found the entire process at the Bengaluru centre to be far better than we had imagined.) One must also 'fill in the blanks' in terms of other necessary vaccines, including typhoid and influenza.

Air connectivity from Bengaluru to Kenya is surprisingly good. We flew Air Arabia via Sharjah – a nice flight that touched down in Nairobi early in the evening. (For those interested in geography, the equator passes right through the middle of Kenya.) Nairobi, we found, is bustling with people and vehicles, and countless vendors sell everything from fruits to junkets. The one night we were there, the weather was a pleasantly cool





20-Celsius or so.

One can either drive or fly down to the Masai Mara, a reserve named after the Masai tribe prevalent in those parts. We decided to take the road option – 280 km, or about 6 hours from Nairobi – because we wanted to soak in the sights along the way.

First impressions of the Mara

We set out early morning in our Toyota Land Cruiser. The road is fairly decent up to a point, and then the dirt road begins. By lunchtime, we were at our lodge, where we received a warm welcome. What came as a bit of a surprise was that all of the lodges in this area run on generators, and they switch off the power during the day – so there's no Wi-Fi! The temperature being very

pleasant, one does not really require air-conditioning, or even a fan. Another interesting fact was that at least 60 per cent of the guests were Indians, with Europeans making up the balance. That meant that the food servings followed the same pattern: good Indian cooking three times a day!

That afternoon, we had our first taste of the famous African safari. What struck us is there are no fences anywhere, aside from a small protective barrier around the lodge. A short drive – no more than



a couple of minutes – and we were at the Mara’s entrance. Again, apart from a few signboards, there was nothing to distinguish it – no fences or barriers of any kind. That’s where the topography really becomes interesting: miles and miles of green

grass running over the endless African plains.

Driving along, animals appeared as if out of nowhere. Since this was migration season, there was good movement (mainly wildebeest, zebra and Thomson’s gazelle) of animals crossing the Mara River from the Serengeti plains into the Kenyan side. Many regard this annual event – when as many as 1.5 million wildebeest make the journey – as the ‘Greatest Show on Earth.’ Coincidentally, August-September, the peak of the migration season, is also the best time to visit Kenya.

We came across a pride of lions lazing in the sun. Watching the lion cubs running around, and their mothers caring for them, was quite a sight. (The pride consisted of a few male lions, but mainly the lionesses and their cubs.) We also saw a pair of beautiful cheetahs, and thousands of grazing zebras and wildebeest – the two seem inseparable for some

reason – as well as large groups of the beautiful impala. There are designated routes for safari jeeps, which must stay on these paths. As a result, some of the sightings are a fair distance away, but there is plenty of game, and lions can often be seen only a few feet away.

The Great Migration

The next day, we set off early for the Mara River. According to our driver, we needed to reach by noon to have a better chance of watching the animals migrate. It is, however, impossible to predict

A word on the Masai

Regarded as protectors of nature and wildlife, the Masai are allowed to move freely between Kenya and Tanzania, with no need for passports or visas. They rely for their survival on their herds of cows. Potable water is a rarity in these areas, and not only do they eat cow meat, but they also drink its blood. Always friendly and smiling, they also sell local items to tourists. Don’t get overwhelmed if you are surrounded by a group of Masai women selling bangles and other trinkets – they don’t mean any harm. Importantly, don’t be shy to bargain, and remember that US dollars are welcome everywhere.



whether there will be a crossing on a particular day, and apparently, people sometimes wait for hours, or even an entire day, to see it happen.

During our 2-hour drive, we saw giraffes and elephants on the plains, but as the river drew near, we could see columns – literally columns – of marching wildebeest. It was like an army on the move, stretching as far as the eye could see!

Arriving at the river, we saw animals standing in big herds on the other side. Our driver told us that they sometimes wait for hours before crossing. Lots of jeeps had gathered, full of people waiting in expectation. In the water, countless crocodiles waited in patient expectation, while hippos waddled about nearby. (Now, exactly what

is it that prompts these animals to cross this river each year, given all the lurking dangers? No one seemed to know.) All of us were hungry, so we used the interlude to eat our packed sandwiches.

Then, suddenly, the movement began. I cannot describe it in words, but it was like flood gates opening, with lots of dust kicked up in the process – quite a sight! The animals seem to have a sixth sense about when to begin moving, but the waiting crocodiles were also ready. We saw a few zebra and wildebeest getting caught and dragged down by the crocs. The hippos sat by placidly, but our wise driver pointed out that, even though they are vegetarians, they are very aggressive, and anyone (or anything) that comes

nearby risks getting snapped, quite literally, in two.

Once they started moving, it was a steady stream. Some unfortunate ones got dragged down, but the majority made it across, coming up where we were waiting. What came as a complete surprise was seeing a small pride of lions only a few feet from us. Possibly, we had not noticed them all this time, or maybe they only emerged after sensing that the movement had begun. We were not lucky enough to see an actual kill, but we did see a wildebeest that the lions had hunted down barely minutes ago.

Into the Serengeti

Early the next day, we set out on the long journey to Serengeti



National Park. Before leaving the Mara, we were in for a real treat: a mating pair of lions on the side of the track. Our driver informed us that, during such times, lions often eat nothing for as long as a week, stay far away from other lions, and do nothing but sleep and mate. To see these beautiful animals so close was a real blessing.

The decision to drive rather than fly was a poor one. Although we

knew that it is going to be a long drive, none of us was prepared for just how bad it would be. Barring a few state roads in between, the entire journey was along a path cut out of rocks – a very rough ride that took about 9 hours. What makes the journey so much longer is that, even though the two parks are contiguous, one is required to clear immigration to enter the Serengeti, which means travelling all the way around the Mara before entering on the Tanzanian side.

But what a spectacle the great plains of the Serengeti offer! The park is home to a large elephant population, and plenty of lions as well. As soon as we enter, we are welcomed by a group of beautiful giraffes blocking the road, who only move out of the way as our vehicle draws near. Next, we see a herd of mighty elephants at close quarters, lazily eating grass, and entirely unmindful of the tourists in the jeeps around them. We realise now why it is that all the zebra and wildebeest have moved out into the Mara – at this time of year, the Serengeti is bone-dry, with no water anywhere.

Descending into Ngorongoro

You can spend days on end just in the Masai Mara and the Serengeti. These are beautiful parks, and a photographer's paradise. After two nights in the Serengeti, though, we set off for another famed nature reserve – the Ngorongoro Volcanic Crater (NCA).

180 kilometres from Arusha, the NCA is a World Heritage Site in the highlands of Tanzania, and in 2013, it was voted as one of Africa's Seven Natural Wonders. Its main feature is the Ngorongoro

Crater, the world's largest inactive, intact, and unfilled volcanic caldera. Formed when a large volcano exploded and collapsed on itself 2-3 million years ago, the crater is 2,000 feet deep, with a floor covering 260 square kilometres, and home to about 25,000 animals.

Just as we enter the park, we are lucky to see another pair of mating lions, again at the side of the road. We begin our descent into the crater – it is like going into a huge well – and immediately see game all over the place: bison, gazelle, zebra and lions, who seem to sleep most of the day.

Our stay is in a lodge deep in the forest, on the ridge of the crater – another beautiful, relaxing property. We also visit a Masai village on the way, which proves to be an eye-opener as to how people can live in such difficult terrain. The village even had a school of its own.

Wrapping up in Amboseli

After a good night's rest, we move to our last stop before heading back to India – Amboseli National Park, famous for its elephants, and its views of Mt Kilimanjaro. At 5,895 metres (19,340 feet) above sea level, Kilimanjaro is Africa's highest peak, and the world's highest free-standing mountain. Unfortunately, we do not see the mountain peak, which is covered in cloud and mist. We do however, see what must have seen the biggest herd of elephants on this trip – I counted 21.

A tip for all future travellers: Most people will tell you that mosquitoes are a big problem in East Africa, but believe me, the lodges are kept clean and tidy, and there are no mosquitoes. The real enemy, especially while you are travelling in safari vehicles, is dust. So be advised to carry a good dust-mask and properly cover your face. ■



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