

# THE PERFECT SAFARI:

*Up-close and personal in  
the Maasai Mara*

*The gnu, a kind of antelope, got the Afrikaans name wildebeest for its wild appearance, with sharp horns and shaggy hair adorning a large head. The animals roam the grassy plains of Africa in large herds and their migration across the Mara River is the Maasai Mara's greatest attraction.*

THE ANNUAL MIGRATION  
OF ANIMALS FROM THE  
SERENGETI TO MAASAI MARA  
IS EVEN MORE BREATHTAKING  
IF YOU CAN AVOID THROGS  
OF TOURISTS.

BY BAHAR DUTT  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY VIJAY BEDI

**T**he animal world strides on to the plains of the Maasai Mara like the grand opening of a theatre production, each species vociferously announcing its role. On this stage, no actor has a minor part, from the male ostrich in his pink slender tights seducing his rather dull female with the clumsy grace of a novice ballerina, to the raucous vulture preying on a carcass, and the half-smiling villainous hyena watching from the sidelines. If you are a tourist from India, used to trundling around the jungle for hours hoping to catch a glimpse of an animal, the open savannah of the Maasai Mara rewards you within minutes of your arrival.

But there's a downside to being in a place that's so spectacular. In July and August, when thousands of wildebeest make their way from Serengeti to Mara, the game reserve gets choked with tourists and their vehicles, as everyone wants to catch a glimpse of the Grand Migration. To beat the tourists, I have signed up to stay in a conservancy—a community-owned piece of land outside the Mara. Conservancies are less crowded, the experience is far more intimate and the profits go directly to the community. It seemed like the more responsible thing to do.

When we land at the Jomo Kenyatta Airport, Kenya feels like an old friend. I was here ten years ago to work for an NGO, building overbridges for the colobus monkey, whose forest habitat had been sliced in two by a highway. In the decade since, the country hasn't changed much except that there are more cars and, I'm told, less crime. As we head out of the airport, the huge acacia trees seem to ache under the weight of large nests occupied by giant, glum-faced Marabou storks. They are the "ugliest birds" in Kenya, our guide declares. Still, I can't help but admire their nest-building abilities. As *matatus* (mini-vans) honk and hundreds of vendors and pedestrians jostle through Nairobi's streets, the birds sit stoically on their trees, oblivious to the chaos. Once in a while, they spread their wings to provide shade to the chicks in the nests. These grand storks are our first indicator that here in Kenya, it is possible to get very close to wild creatures.

We make our way down the road to the Wilson airport, our link to the African bush. Here, hundreds of small white planes are waiting to ferry tourists back and forth. My photographer-husband Vijay and I board an eight-seater Cessna. The planes are so small, they cannot fit big suitcases and since the photography equipment with us weighs 30 kilos, we are asked to leave our clothes behind in a locker. I stuff two shirts into my handbag; the thought of wearing the same clothes for the next four days is daunting.

As we take off I hear violins in my head as the savannah stretches out below us. It's a landscape of yellow and green, with the occasional white and black stripes of zebras. Then suddenly I see a spot of bright red—it's a Maasai man, a member of the community that have the original rights over this magical land. Forty minutes later, we land in the Mara and a group of red-shawled Maasai run towards the plane to

Two male giraffes have their necks intertwined, giving them a Disneyesque comical look. From a distance it's so gentle I'm fooled into thinking it's a display of bonhomie. In fact the males are locked in this position for a while, trying to establish supremacy over the other



*Giraffes are the tallest mammals in the world, able to run at speeds of 56 kph for short distances because of their long legs. They even have rather long tongues (about 53 cm) that help them pluck fresh leaves and buds from tree tops.*

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*A young Thomson's gazelle becomes the unlucky prey of a female cheetah teaching her cubs to hunt by bringing them an easy quarry.*

help us with our luggage. Antony, our guide, drives us to our camp—a tent with no other barriers between us and the natural world.

Around midnight, when the lights are out and I am comfortably ensconced in my bed, I hear a scraping sound against the flap of the tent. I am glad I've zipped the tent flap right to the bottom, but I wake Vijay, who immediately wants to take photographs; but I won't let him step out. We hear some howls and grunts, before the animals move on. This may be a fun story to tell at breakfast the next morning, but for the moment I am a bit frightened. Later we hear that the sounds could have been hyenas or even a pride of lions prowling around in the dead of night. "But they will not harm you, so you had nothing to worry about", says Antony reassuringly.

During each safari, life follows a simple ritual. Every action, from what we eat to when we eat it, is centred on how to best experience the wilderness. At 5.30 a.m., a tray laden with tea and chocolate biscuits is slid into our cosy tent. I groan. I am on holiday, after all. Vijay has already packed his 600 mm lens, his still camera, his video camera, his 400 mm lens, his batteries, and his tripod. He urges me to hurry, easing the heavy backpack onto my shoulders, and marches outside with his own. Our Land Rovers are ready. Within minutes, we see zebras rolling in the dust, a pride of lions, and banded mongoose hiding in clumps of mud.

Every minute we're in the bush we see animals. In fact, there seems to be a new species to observe every day. But in that frenetic pace of zipping around trying to capture every single animal on camera, I feel that the magic of the moment is sometimes lost. It's probably best to put the camera away and simply soak in the landscape.

On one sun-glazed afternoon, we stop the Land Rover, and silently absorb the sights and sounds and smells of the bush. On our right is a herd of bachelor elephants, among them a young male we name One Tusk. He's presumably cracked his tusk in a fight. He spends a few minutes tearing down an acacia tree. As soon as the tree is down, the rest of the males move in for their share of the morning chomp. Within minutes, giraffes appear as well, bobbing their heads above the trees. Two male giraffes have their necks intertwined, giving them a Disneyesque comical look. From a distance it's so gentle I'm fooled into thinking it's a display of bonhomie. In fact the males are locked in this position for a while, trying to establish supremacy over the other.

Behind them, a male giraffe, bends its tall neck and sniffs at a female's genitals. Is she ready for some love? Could this be his lucky day? He follows her, his tongue hanging like a lovesick teenager, as the shy female gives him chase. Nature's soap opera is in live mode.

The next day, we travel from the conservancy to the actual reserve. "At the end of the day, tell me how many differences you can observe between the game reserve, and my land at the conservancy", Antony says to me.

Half an hour later, as we approach the gates of the Mara, we're greeted by a cloud of dust. Hundreds of vehicles are waiting to get in. Maasai women swarm around, in their bright red-and-yellow jewelry, urging us to buy a necklace here, a giraffe bowl there.

Once inside the reserve, we're hit by the scale of the Mara—it stretches out over 1,500 sq km. It has one of the highest concentrations of lions in the world. Over one million wildebeest, zebra, and Thomson gazelle migrate annually from the Serengeti plains in Tanzania to fresh pastures here in the Mara. But because it's so large, the animals are more dispersed, and it takes more time to sight them. It's quite a contrast from the close encounters we've had with animals in the conservancy.

Up ahead, we are told, there is a cheetah. It's lying quietly on a mound in the midday sun surrounded by a sea of yellow grass when

*The topi are a very social species of mid-sized antelopes that spend much of their time with other animals such as wildebeest, zebras, and ostrich.*



we approach. Even before we can start clicking pictures, at least ten vehicles have surrounded the animals. We move on.

An hour of driving, and we get information that a herd of wildebeest may be crossing one of the rivers. Their dark grey silhouettes make their way, like children, towards the river. In the water, a crocodile is sun-basking with its mouth open and a herd of hippos lazing around. But most amusing is a troop of baboons, on their haunches at the edge of the river staring across it at another troop. There they sit, the leaders on either side of the water, making faces at each other like two army generals ready for war. Baring their canines, they screech, but because they're divided by the river, they can't get any closer.

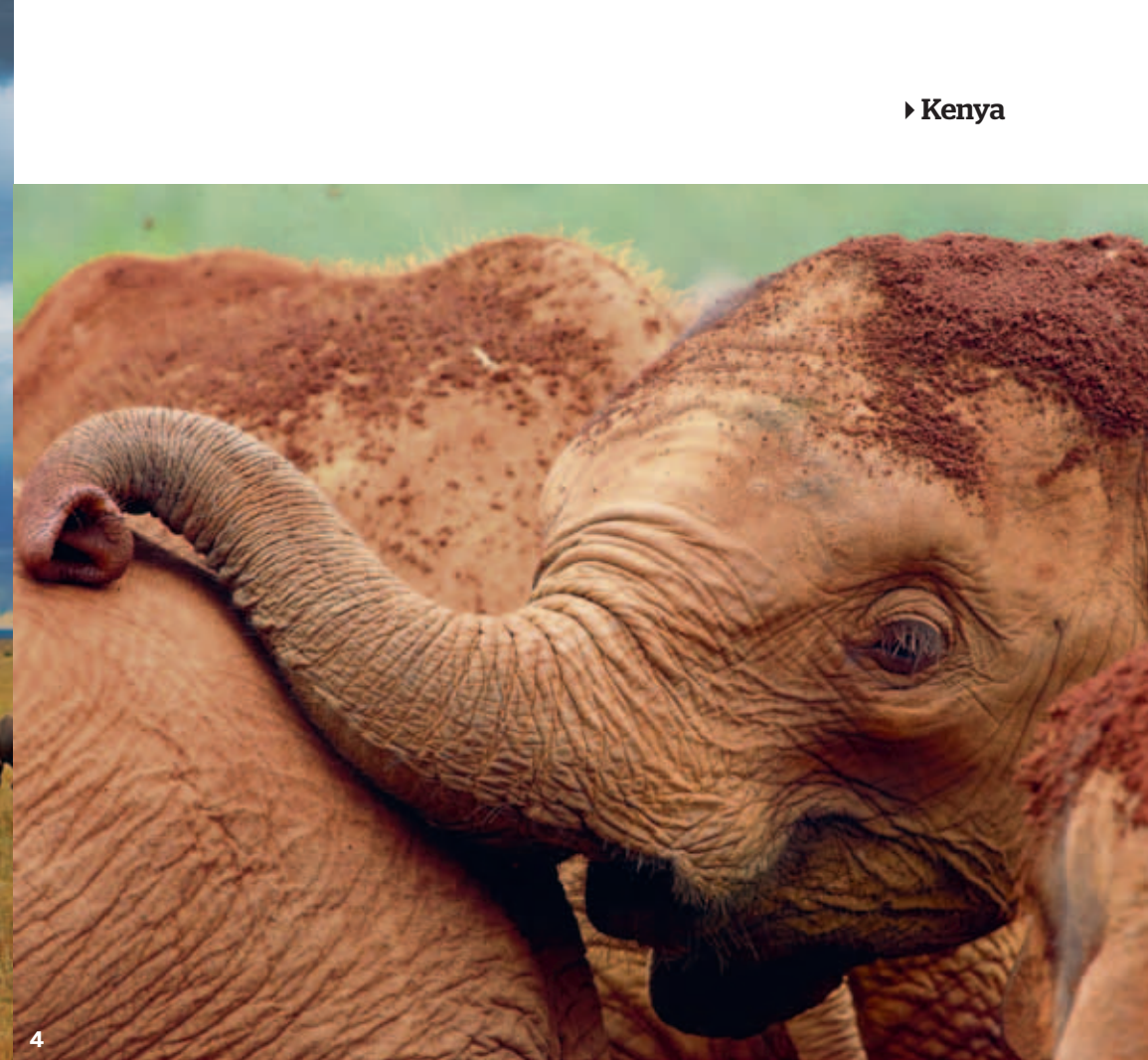
The wildebeest disappoint us. Just short of the river, they decide not to cross today and start grazing on the plains, before dispersing. We head back, tired from being rattled around. The Mara has been fun, but the intimacy of the wildlife experience was far greater and richer in the conservancy. As if to make our evening even more special, we are told to be ready and stay close to our tents because there are lions ahead. We see the male first, with a gorgeous dark mane; he's just taking in the last rays of the sun. Behind him in the bush, are four cubs, gambolling, ignoring their grumpy father. He gives us one look, glances back at the cubs, and rolls over to sleep. We are told that the mother is probably out hunting. We spend almost half an hour watching the cubs playing. When the mother returns, the male continues to sleep.

We return to our camp. It's time for a sundowner and a chance to sit around the fire, surrounded by howling jackals and roaring lions. ■

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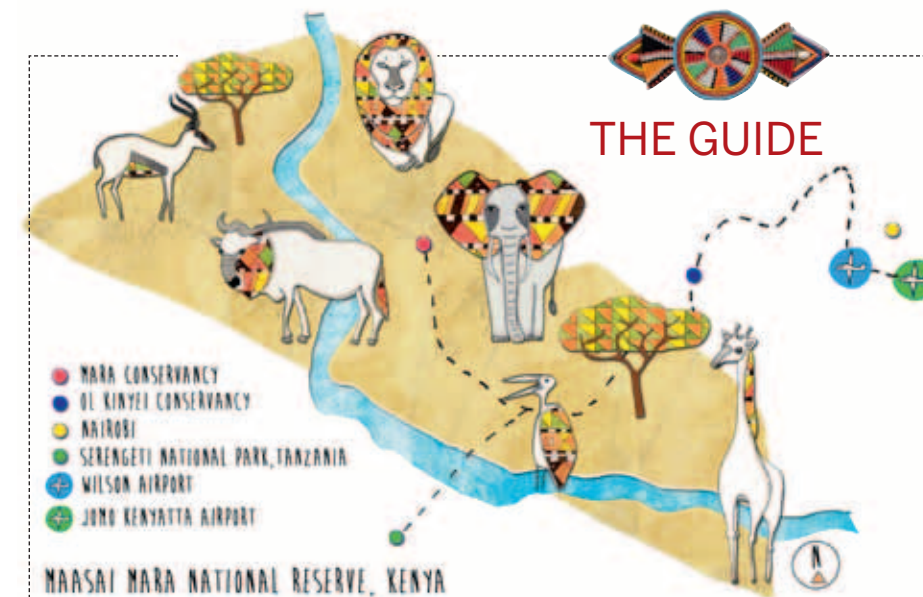
1 About five lakh wildebeest calves are born in February and March each year, at the start of the rainy season. 2 Maasai women weave intricate bead jewellery that is worn by members of the tribe to indicate their identity and position. Each colour holds a meaning—white for peace, red for bravery, etc. 3 Cape buffalo, the largest species of African buffalo, is one of the Big Five animal attractions of the Maasai Mara. It is seldom spotted without its companion the red-billed oxpecker that spends most of its life on its hosts.

4 A distinctive feature of African elephants is their enormous ears, which radiate heat and help them stay cool on hot afternoons in the Maasai Mara. 5 Safari guides from the local Maasai community know the bush well and are able to quickly spot animal signs, calls, and pugmarks. 6 An ostrich's wings might be useless for flying but useful as rudders to help change direction while running at speeds of up to 70 kmph.

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The conservancies surrounding the Maasai Mara provide an alternative livelihood through tourism to the Maasai people, whose pastoral lifestyle was affected by the creation of the national reserve.



**Orientation**

The Maasai Mara National Reserve is a 1,500-square-kilometre protected wildlife area in southwestern Kenya, adjoining Serengeti National Park in Tanzania. It is famous for the Big Five—lion, leopard, elephant, rhino, and buffalo—that roam its landscape, which varies from thick woodland to open plains. Conservancies are areas around the reserve boundaries that protect the park by providing buffer zones. They are run by the Maasai people and help to ensure that some of the benefits of tourism go back to local communities. The Ol Kinyei conservancy, which is 17,500 acres of communal land owned by 85 families, is one of the oldest in the Mara ecosystem and the wildlife here is both prolific and varied.

**Getting there**

Kenya Airways operates direct flights from Mumbai (duration 6 hours) and Delhi (duration 7.5 hours) to the Kenyan capital Nairobi. Flights that are routed via Middle Eastern cities like Doha, Sharjah, or Dubai, take a total travel time of about 13 hours but tend to cost significantly less than the direct flights. To reach the Maasai Mara, visitors can take a 30-minute flight from Nairobi Wilson Airport to one of the smaller airstrips in the reserve. AirKenya flies to the Mara thrice daily during high- and mid-season, and twice daily during the rest of the year. An economical option is to rent a vehicle for the 6-7 hour drive to one of the 5 gates leading into the reserve.

**Visa**

To apply for a visa for Kenya, travellers require a visa application form, which can be downloaded online, and supporting financial documents. A single entry visa

to Kenya costs \$50/₹2,600 and should be submitted via a bank draft in favour of the Kenya High Commission. Applications can be made directly at the commission's office in New Delhi or via a travel agent. The processing time is at least 24 hours (011-26146537; [www.kenyahicom-delhi.com](http://www.kenyahicom-delhi.com)). Do get a yellow fever vaccine in time. The certificate may be required with the visa application and will definitely be demanded by Indian immigration officials when you return.

**Seasons**

The Maasai Mara has a mild and damp climate throughout the year, with highs of 30°C during the day and night-time lows of 15°C. The rainy season is from Apr-May and in Nov, and during this time the road from Nairobi can become impassable rendering some parts of the reserve inaccessible. The dry season (Jul-Sept) is usually considered the best time to visit the reserve as it is easier to spot animals out in the grasslands. The wildebeest migration across the reserve and the crocodile-infested Mara River takes place between July and October.

**Park fees**

Entry to each of the park's three sections is \$80/₹5,042 per day. Children below 3 years are free, and those between 3 and 18 years are charged \$45/₹2,836. There is a daily fee if you stay in a camp inside the reserve (\$70/₹4,412 for adults; \$40/₹2,521 for children). The conservancies charge separate fees.

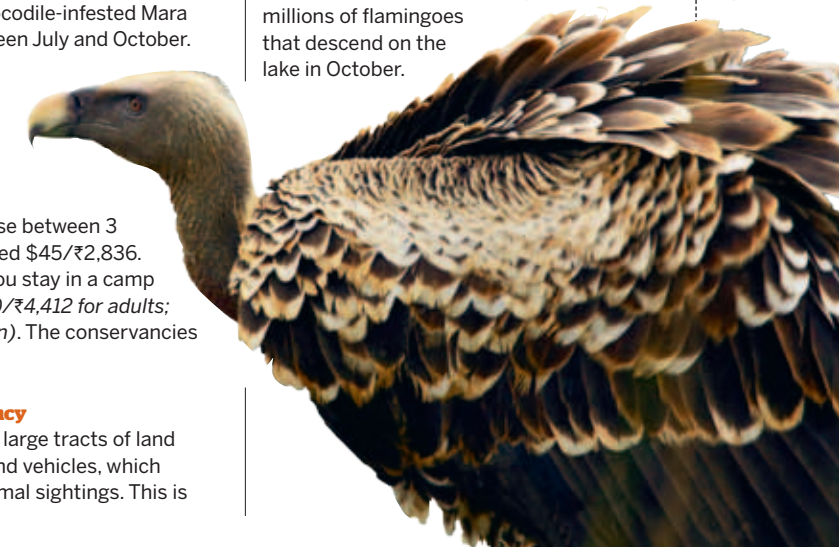
**Staying in a conservancy**

The conservancies are large tracts of land with very few camps and vehicles, which makes for plentiful animal sightings. This is

especially important during the migration season, when the main reserve is teeming with people and vehicles. However, if you want to see wildebeest you will have to join the melee. I went on game drives in the Ol Kinyei conservancy and stayed at Porini Camps, which is run by Gamewatchers Safari and has been awarded the "Most Responsible Tour Operator" by Kenya Wildlife Services. This is the only camp within the Ol Kinyei conservancy and hosts only 12 guests at a time. I liked that as soon as we arrived, we were advised to conserve water since it is scarce and told that the camp itself had no walls constructed to minimise human footprint. The camp seemed committed to sustainable tourism and had a clear policy on solid waste and garbage management and ran on solar power. This to my mind is low impact tourism at its best. (+254-774 136523; [www.porini.com](http://www.porini.com); \$350/₹22,060 per person including stay, game and night drives, park fees, meals, and airstrip transfers.)

**Booking a safari**

Using a reliable tour operator to book a safari is convenient as they bundle park fees, accommodation, game drive charges, Nairobi to Mara flights, etc. so you don't have to worry about the details or carry extra cash. The Internet is flooded with information on how to book your safari, which can leave you quite overwhelmed especially since the market caters more to a western clientele and follows a very fixed plan. I used an Indian travel company called Chalo Africa. One of the co-owners is Sangeetha Prasad, a trained biologist who had a number of ideas on where we could go to avoid the crowds, since we were travelling during peak season. It was on her suggestion that we went off the beaten track to travel up to Lake Bogoria to watch millions of flamingoes that descend on the lake in October.



SUMEDHA SAH (MAP)