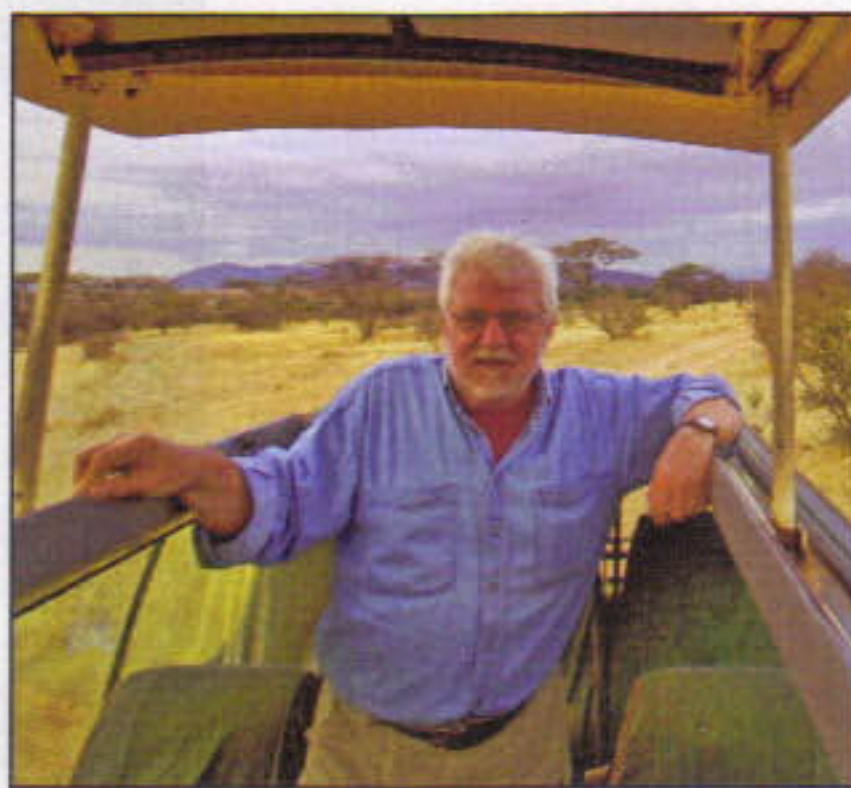




An African Photo Safari

By Chris Klus

As a young boy I watched TV programs about the African wilds and promised myself that someday I would go there. Last year, having just retired, I finally made the decision to do an African safari; not only to do photography but to see some of the last surviving relatively virgin wilderness left in the world. After much research, I chose Kenya because of its numerous wildlife parks and nature conservatories with large numbers of wild game and a well established tourism industry. Tourists from all over the world come each year to view an encyclopaedia of African animals in the wild and to witness the spectacle of herds of wildebeest migrating from the Serengeti plains in Tanzania to the Masai Mara in south eastern Kenya. You're never



too old to try some adventure and to perhaps, for some of you, also fulfill a lifelong dream.

Lying along the Indian Ocean, Kenya is on the equator in east Africa, bordering Tanzania, Ethiopia, Somalia, Sudan and Uganda. From the coast on

the Indian Ocean the low plains rise to central highlands that are bisected by the Great Rift Valley; a fertile plateau in the east. The Kenyan Highlands comprise one of the most successful agricultural production regions in Africa, growing tea, coffee and flowers. There are some 30 million Kenyans, 2.5 million of whom live in the capital city—Nairobi. The predominant languages are English and Swahili. Tourism accounts for almost half of the Kenya's GDP.

One of the key things that need to be considered when planning a wild game safari is the type of tour that is best for you. A number of tour companies have safari tours in Kenya and offer a range of tour packages. Participatory camping, which involves helping in the setting up of camp and preparing of meals each



night of the tour, is the most physically demanding and usually have baggage restrictions which means not much more than a back pack and a sleeping bag. Basic tours typically provide permanent camp sites and prepared camp meals and with the Comfort tours you stay in local hotels and guest houses. There are also some high-end tour packages where you stay in three and four star lodges and resorts.

As well, you need to be aware of the group sizes. Typically, the cheaper and more physically active tours have large group sizes of 12 to 14. But small group tours can be found that have no more than six in the party. Prices obviously vary depending on the type of tour and time of year. In Kenya the rainy season is from March to May. The

most popular, and most expensive, travel time is in October and November when the migration is at its height. The shoulder season—June to September—is the cheapest time to travel. I chose a high end tour staying in lodges and permanent tented camps. Though the advertised group size was a maximum of six, luckily we were only three on this tour.

So, what is a wild game safari like? All the tours start in Nairobi, with you checking into your hotel and meeting up with the tour operator, the tour guide and the rest of your party. The next morning you head out in your jeep or van, specially outfitted for off-road travel and with roofs that can be raised for you to stand and watch the wildlife, for the first leg of your

tour. The roads in Kenya are, to say the least, challenging. Though there are a few stretches of freshly paved four lane highways, most major roads are in want of repair. The official speed limit on major roads is 80 kph which is optimistic as with pot holes that rival the best in Canada and speed bumps that are placed in the most unusual spots—like in the middle of a highway—it's hard to average above 70 kph. The secondary roads are sand and gravel, or at least had gravel put on them some time in the distant past, and with the wash outs from the rainy season can be very rough and bumpy and as much fun as a carnival ride. Expect to be jostled and bumped and marvel at the skill of your driver as they manoeuvre around craters and wash-



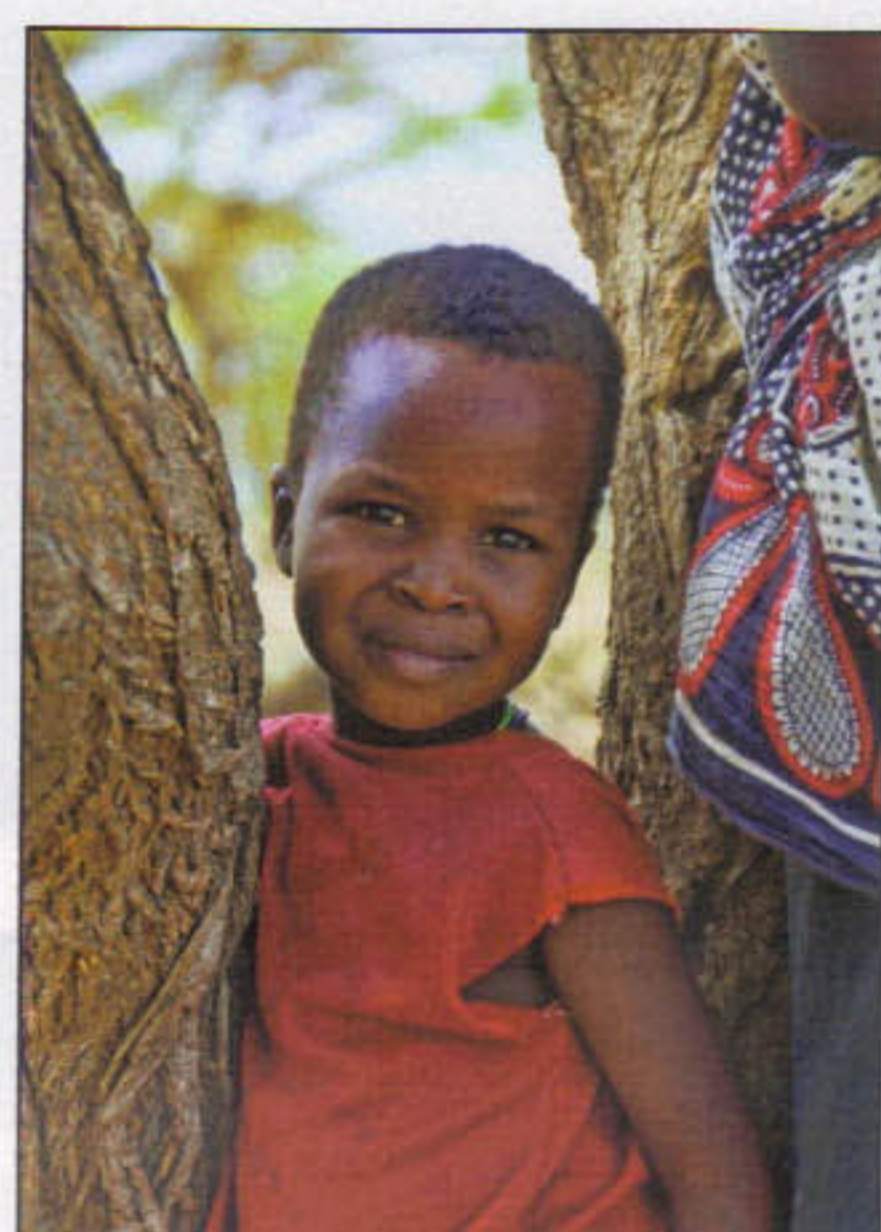
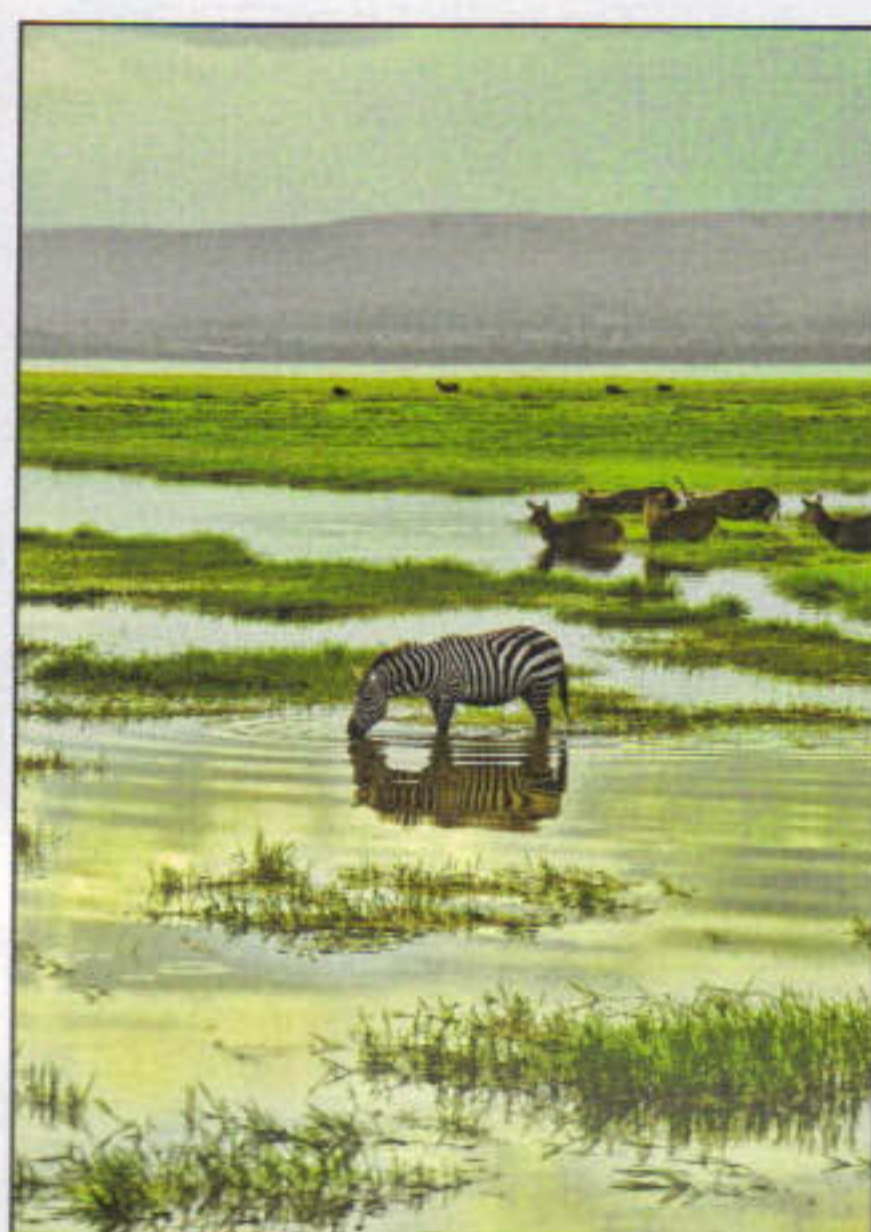
outs at breakneck speeds. All this to say that getting to your destination is usually a lot longer than the distance would imply. A 250 km drive can easily take five or six hours.

If you're on a comfort tour, when you arrive at your first location you'll be greeted with a loud Karibu Kenya (welcome to Kenya) and given a cool wet towel and a glass of mango or passion fruit juice. The porters will escort you to the check-in counter and take your bags to your room. Your room will most likely have a spectacular view of the savannah and may have a balcony with camp chairs for quiet evening sit-about. Meals will typically be in an open dining hall and will be a large buffet with many choices of meats, vegetables and fruits. Shortly after

lunch, you'll have your first game drive.

You'll head out on dirt trails into the savannah and usually within minutes you'll spot wildlife, whether impalas, gazelles, dikdiks (a small antelope only 18 inches high), giraffes or other ruminants. The guide will usually stop nearby to let you photograph them. Though you can get quite close to these animals a camera with a long lens (at least 70mm and preferably 300mm) will give you frame filling photos. I took with me a newly purchased Sigma 150-500 mm with vibration reduction—quite heavy but it did a great job. The guides have mobile radios and communicate with each other on the plains usually in Swahili sharing what animals are being found. One afternoon, our guide received a message and then said to us

“Hang on. You're in for a surprise.” He then took off at breakneck speed hurtling along the trails, manoeuvring around pot holes and slowing down only slightly for bumps. We quickly discovered why there were so many hand holds in the jeep and grabbed onto one as we bumped and weaved along the trail. A few minutes later we turned a corner and came to a stop beside the other jeep parked on the side of the trail. The occupants told us to shush and pointed in the direction of young female cheetah that had just made a kill of a young gazelle. She was still panting and trying to catch her breath. Instead of biting into her kill she kept looking around anxiously and our guide explained that she was looking out for lions or hyenas that often follow them to



rob them of their kills. We stayed there very quietly for about 10 minutes rapt in the spectacle of animals living in the wild. It was a magical and memorable experience for all of us.

One day I asked our guide if we could visit a Masai tribal village that was just outside the Samburu game reserve. He made arrangements with the tribal chief for the next day. I had brought candy and colouring pencils for the children and presented them to the chief's son who gave it to one of the women to distribute to the children. We were greeted by the young warriors with a dance and then the women formed a group and chanted us into the village. They were dressed in fabulously coloured clothes and the women scores of beaded necklaces symbolizing their wealth. I said

to the chief's son that they didn't have to dress up for us and he said in perfect English "Oh, don't worry sir. We always wear these. Masai people love colourful clothes." We had a wonderful time being guided around the village, speaking with the people and playing with the children—mouths full of candies.

Most tours will include a visit to the Masai Mara—a huge expanse of plain stretching from the Serengeti to Lake Victoria. It is home to huge numbers of wildebeest or gnus that migrate the Great Rift Valley each year in search of fresh grass and water. Mixed in with the wildebeest are large herds of zebras and gazelles and constantly following the herds are large predators—lion, leopards, cheetah and hyenas. Driving through this scenic vista makes you

imagine what Eden was like or what the Canadian prairies looked like before the buffalo were decimated. If you're lucky your guide will order box lunches from the lodge and you'll spend a whole day on the Mara having a picnic lunch on a hilltop overlooking the majestic plains and watching the sun set over the hills as you drive back to the lodge that evening.

Unfortunately human encroachment and climate change are greatly affecting these wild lands and they may not be here very long—at least not as virginal as they are now. So, for a fabulous adventure, muster up your energy and plan a wild game safari in Kenya. It will fill your senses and leave with memories to last a lifetime. Oh, and great photographic moments too. ✨