

November 2019

We spent the week of Thanksgiving on a family adventure to Kenya and France. Having been to the Serengeti in Tanzania 14 years previous I wanted to give my 6 kids ranging from 6 to 17 the traditional plains experience while seeing something new myself. Accordingly I focused on lodges/operators with locations in both Samburu and the Masai Mara area. I researched based on websites and tripadvisor and then corresponded with several before selecting the Saruni group (now the Saruni Basecamp group <https://sarunibasecamp.com/>). I crossed my fingers and hoped that the benefits of staying in the conservancies rather than in the national parks would pay off. The lure of night drives, smaller crowds and the flexibility to go off the beaten path persuaded me. If going to Kenya with 6 children wasn't ambitious enough we added complexity to the trip to save money and add some culture by driving 5 hours from Boise to Salt Lake City for a direct flight to Paris.

Going through immigration a French woman exclaimed, "Big family, CRAZY!" I confirmed it was a bit crazy but assured her it was fun too. We landed at 11:00 AM, dropped our bags at a hotel near the airport and made it the city center by 1:30. Fall was clinging to the City of Lights as winter came inexorably closer. When the sun poked through the clouds and the wind rested it was just right for walking outdoors. The last leaves hung limply to the trees lining the Parisian streets were outnumbered by Christmas lights for the festive season. In the Louvre we learned again that you can lead a child to culture but you can't make them drink as most of the kids caught a glimpse of the Mona Lisa from across the hall and then chose to wait seated in the hall while Lisa and I waited our turn to see it up close. The exhausted kids fell asleep almost immediately in the car and then again when we reached our room.

We boarded a flight the next morning for Nairobi, arriving around 9:00 PM. In contrast to the reaction to our large family in Paris, an airport employee in Nairobi blurted, "Big family, I love it!" My evisa worked fine but Lisa and Natali's hadn't actually been issued yet and it turned out that Mack needed one even though the website said only for 17+. All of that meant exhausted kids waiting for another hour to get through immigration. A light rain welcomed us to Africa. It was immediately apparent that we had left grouchy Andrew behind in Paris. Even though it was too dark to even look for animals in the big city he was all smiles. We stayed at the modern Crowne Plaza convenient to the Jomo Kenyatta airport which was great to get to sleep that night but gave us a challenge to fight the Nairobi traffic to get to the Wilson Airport for our domestic flight the next morning. I had received an email the night before from Saruni that my domestic flight would take off at 9:30 rather than 8:45. I was a little hesitant to show up late, but I had booked my flight through Saruni so we slept in an extra 15 minutes. It took us nearly an hour to cover the 8 miles in Tuesday morning traffic and the pastries we picked up in route weren't quite up to Parisian standards. Andrew spotted the first animal in Africa, a Marabou Stork sitting on a fence near the airport.

We filled most of the 12 or so seats on the plane with our family. After leaving the Nairobi metropolitan area we flew over fertile green agricultural zones. It was chilly on the plane and at one point I turned around to see Kate knitting with gloves on. That made Lisa smile. Water dripped from the ceiling onto an empty seat. One of our favorite memories from the Serengeti was seeing our first giraffes and several other species from the air as we descended for our landing. We were hoping the kids would

have a similar experience and weren't disappointed as we spotted giraffes and elands on our way down to the Loisaba airport where we stopped in route to Samburu. There had clearly been a lot of rain for when we touched down on the grass strip mud and water splattered all over the plane windows. We were scheduled to fly to the Kalama Conservancy airstrip but learned when we disembarked at the next stop from our guide Jommy that we had actually been re-routed to the Buffalo Springs airstrip due to the excessive rains. Fortunately the Saruni team was in the loop and knew where to pick us up. We were an hour and 45 minutes from the Saruni Samburu lodge so we enjoyed what turned out to be a fabulous game drive on the way.

I chose Samburu primarily to see the endemic 5 species—Reticulated Giraffe, Grevy's Zebra, Gerenuk, Beisa Oryx and Somali Ostrich. We'd crossed off all 5 by the time we reached the lodge. The gerenuk and reticulated giraffe were both seen within ½ a mile of the strip. The gerenuk is an elegant antelope that is so slender it appears fragile. And then it stands on its hind legs strains its neck up into the tree and forages while it appears to stand on stilts. The reticulated giraffe has distinct almost precise white lines that give its coat a cultivated look. We crossed the swollen brown Uaso Nyiro River and it seemed the kids checked off a new species every other minute. The ubiquitous vulturine guinea fowl never seemed to be far out of site. Impala were abundant with large males shepherding their harems while the other less fortunate bachelors could be found together. The Kirk's Dik Dik quickly became our favorite and the girls sang "All I Want for Christmas is a Dik Dik." Always in mating pairs, we counted more than 200 of these miniature antelope over our 2 full days in Samburu.



While watching some distant olive baboons on a hillside, Jommy told us to look down. Laying in the shade of a tree, obscured in tall grass, nearly beneath our Land Rover were 5 resting lionesses. Only one of them even deigned to raise her head when our attention turned their way. They could care less

about the clicking cameras or excited whispers but when I stood in the front seat to get a shot from a better angle the alert one bared her enormous fangs and let us know I had crossed a line. Jommy put the vehicle in reverse and she quickly returned to her afternoon respite.

Next we encountered a male Somali Ostrich whose body looked identical to its common cousin but rather than a pink neck and legs it was decorated with a surprisingly dark blue neck and legs. When crossing a backwater eddy off the main river we spotted the only Nile Crocodile of the trip and a monitor lizard too. A family of elephants were feeding in some denser vegetation so we drove around to get a better view. They were caked in the red mud that is predominant in the Samburu soil. The youngest stayed close at its mother's feet while another tossed dirt and vegetation onto its back.





Another gerenuk grazed in the acacia thorns. In the distance along the river plain we spotted a lone oryx and then a single Grevy's Zebra that we were able to approach for pictures.



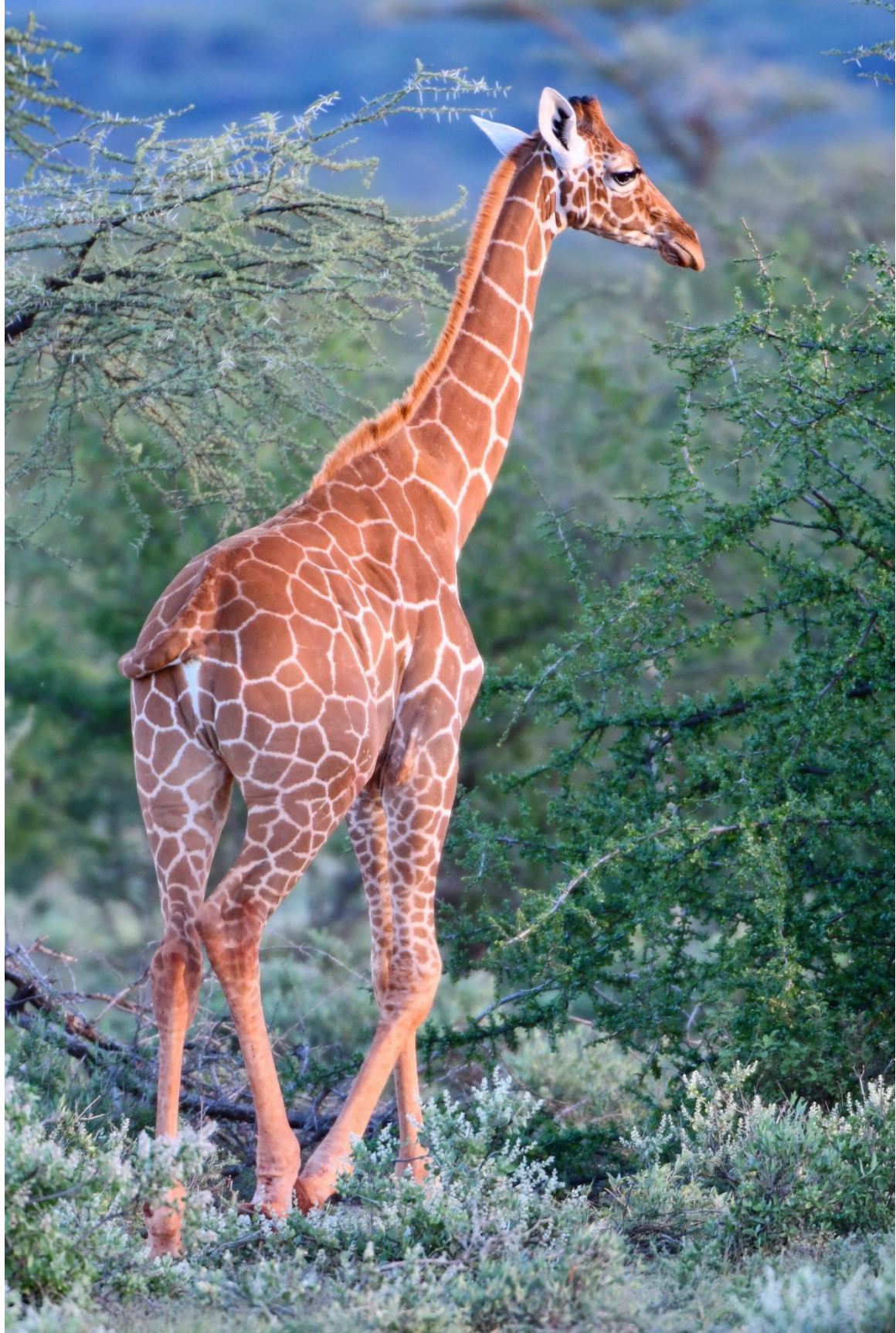
A massive reddish bull elephant looked surreal between a bright blue sky and lush green landscape. When we reached the highway we put up the windshield for protection from rocks for the mile long drive to the entrance to the private Kalama conservancy. The dirt roads were in general disrepair and really more tracks or washes so we drove slowly which made spotting wildlife easier. The vegetation

was much thicker and greener than I had expected. Water was pooled in many places which meant the wildlife was abundant but not concentrated. The highlight in the conservancy drive was a wholly unexpected sighting of a male and female lesser kudu. Another lifer for me.





Periodically we passed rock signs on the edge of the road with the Saruni logo and encouraging text like, “Getting closer...Saruni, a world away.” Eventually we could see human development on the tops of a distant hill. The last couple hundred yards the vehicles drive directly on the mountain rock. In typical custom the staff was there to greet us dressed in bright native attire and bearing cool orange juice mixed with grenadine. As we were introduced to Daryl and Angela the managers we stepped through the entrance to the open air dining and lounge air with an astonishing view. It isn’t normal for the real experience in lodging to surpass the pictures on websites but Saruni Samburu was an exception. The heavy rains made the dramatic view all the more impressive as the verdant green covered the deep red soil. The lodge’s design made the most of the stunning views with every unit having a commanding private view from the edge of the cliff. Even the two swimming pools allowed you to scan for animals below while relaxing and cooling off. The lodges had permanent rock or stucco construction on one side and permanent canvas on the view side so that the walls could be open to appreciate the views from every room. Our afternoon drive in the conservancy lasted from about 4:15 to 6:45. The National Park is a bit too far away for the shorter afternoon drives. There was plenty of game in the conservancy to keep us interested. The highlight for the afternoon was watching several reticulated giraffes and a sizable herd of oryx in the setting sun’s dazzling light.





On the drive back to the lodge in the early evening we saw a pair of bat-eared foxes. During dinner the kids entertained themselves trapping insects under unused cups and flicking bugs into the candles. Walking to our rooms we found a 6" long $\frac{3}{4}$ " thick millipede on the path. Back at the room we learned an important safari lesson. One of our units was the family suite which had two entirely separate rooms with private baths that were separated by a common living room. When we had left for the afternoon drive we had not checked the room where our three daughters aged 6, 9, and 12 were staying. Upon our return we learned they had left a light on and the bugs had descended by the hundreds. I've never seen such variety and concentration of insect mass. Some had even penetrated the mosquito nets that

enveloped the beds. We focused on getting the bugs out of the enclosure while our girls protested sleeping there. We cleared the bed space and then turned the lights out in the room while opening the door to the hallway and leaving a light on there to effectively draw the bugs out of their bedroom. Lisa and I sat on our patio in the dark gazing at thousands of stars and a few bats hunting the bugs we had attracted to our villa.

The morning drive started at 6:00 to enjoy the early morning light and cooler temperatures. The ever attentive staff brought hot cocoa to our rooms at 5:30 to make sure we were awake and warm us up for the drive. Specially designed safari vehicles optimize wildlife viewing angles and provide welcome fresh air but aren't exactly kid friendly. Lily had the most troubles dropping her hat and back pack during game drives and falling down another day while trying to climb up to the bench. Exiting the conservancy we saw black backed jackals, another species that is almost always found in mating pairs, and several different eagle species including a massive Martial Eagle. Along the highway we saw our first warthog digging in the dirt. Jommy stayed far from the river all morning driving along the mountain edges in hopes of finding an elusive leopard. While we didn't find a leopard we saw hundreds of other large mammals, though no new species. We stopped mid-morning for a fabulous breakfast picnic. Banana pancakes, yogurt & granola, bacon, juice, hot cocoa, and what we thought were round donuts that turned out to be hard boiled eggs wrapped in ham and then breaded and baked or fried—in any event they were delicious. We had another great encounter with an elephant family, many impala and Grant's gazelle and a single male common waterbuck that had broken off one of its horns.

On our way back through the village we stopped at the gate for a bathroom break. We had brought a soccer ball to give to local kids so we had our kids get out and start kicking the ball around. Within minutes a crowd of kids had joined them in their game of keep away. One of them quickly learned our kids' names by listening to the siblings' discussion. Some were barefoot, others had sandals, and one kid had one of each. They obviously had some experience with a soccer ball. When the game ended we left them with an indestructible soccer ball and big smiles. Lily said giving them the ball, "made them and me smile." Mission accomplished. Back on the highway an army checkpoint had been set up where we were asked for our passports. I thought ours were back at the lodge but was pleased to learn I had left them in the backpack that I had put the ball and rope in that morning. Our kids weren't sure what to think of the uniformed men with machine guns but it was an uneventful inspection. Before we turned off at Kalama we passed a carcass we had seen on the road that morning. My son had thought it was a hyena earlier and Jommy and I had both told him no, it was just a domestic dog as it was far too small. Upon closer inspection it did look like a hyena but was actually an unfortunate aardwolf.

We lounged at the pool with the 360 degree view from the top of the hill where the wind kept it just a little too cool to make the pool appealing. Walking back down to our villa we heard a low growl that was simultaneously disturbing and exciting. Andrew and I watched and waited for 30 minutes hoping something would emerge from the bush below the villas but we didn't hear or see whatever it was again. Andrew later reported seeing a pair of mating ostriches below. Our afternoon drive ventured out into the valley below the lodge. The highlights were jackals and a frustrated male Somali Ostrich whose mating dance wasn't quite persuasive to the female who ran away.



We planned to go for a night drive right after dinner but our meal was interrupted by news that another lodge vehicle had sighted the leopard that lives around the lodge. We quickly loaded up and drove more rapidly through the dark than we ever drove during the day. We were the third car there so didn't have the best view but the leopard was preening itself beneath a tree at the base of a hillside. You could feel the excitement. After a few minutes it stood up and walked away into the dark. All three cars followed after and quickly found her again. We had a nice view of her walking through the other vehicles headlights right in front of their Land Rover. And then she was gone.



We continued our night drive retracing our afternoon tracks around the base of the mountain beneath the lodge. In addition to the headlights I was provided a powerful flashlight to sweep back and forth on

the sides looking for eye shine. The impala and dik dik were just as common as during the day. You learn to see recognize the species by the height and look of the eyes and the animals regular movement. A pair of eyes off to the left differed and when Jommy turned the car in their direction we were looking at an African Wildcat! He walked away from us and we followed him as he hunted for several minutes before disappearing. In the night we passed sleeping ostriches and a herd of elephants that appeared as gray apparitions in the dark, shockingly quiet despite their enormous size. We struck out on striped hyena, aardvark, aardwolf and other nocturnal animals but were thrilled with the two cat sightings. That night we could hear lions harrumphing in the dark.

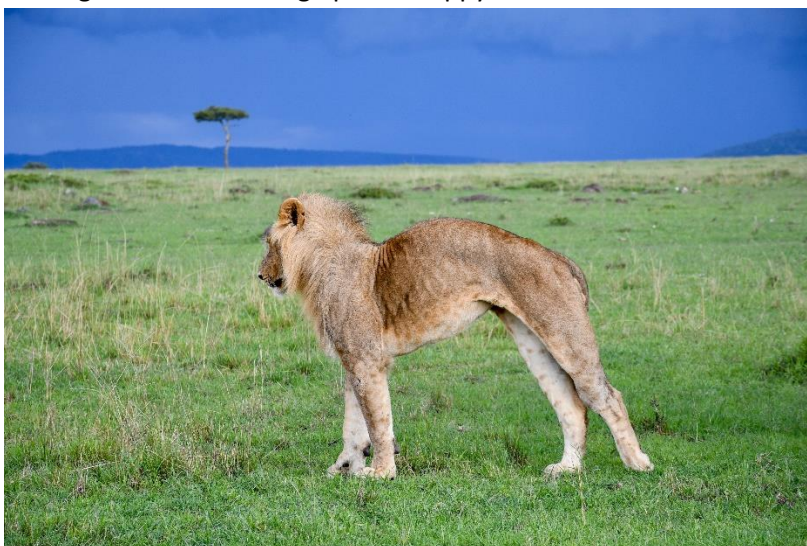
The next morning we slept in until 6:30 and were packed up and done with breakfast by 8:00. While waiting to load up we noticed a crow flying by with food in its mouth. When it went by the 2nd time we realized it was going back and forth to our room where we had left the door open and it was helping itself to the biscuits they had brought with our hot chocolate. We took a few last photos with the fantastic staff and headed out for a final game drive through the conservancy. The Kalama runway had dried out enough to use. No surprises on the drive, just lots of dik dik, and gerenuk, a few oryx and some warthogs. We stopped for a photo op with one of the man-sized termite mounds. Daryl and Angela met us at the airstrip with our luggage. We bought some jewelry and souvenirs for the kids from a group of women selling homemade wares while we waited. Lily wrote a cute little note to Kennedy that she sent back with Darrel. She told him thanks for carrying her bags, making her laugh, and teaching her a secret handshake. We weren't ready to leave Samburu but we knew another adventure would take its place when the plane landed in the Mara.

Unlike the last frigid flight, this plane's heaters were blasting enough air to make us sweat. As we descended to the Mara North airstrip we crossed the Mara River several times and could see large groups of hippos half submerged in the muddy water. Safari camps dotted the banks of the river too. Our heads whipped back and forth looking out windows on either side of the plane as the kids shouted spottings of another large mammal. We were met by Chris, the manager of Saruni Wild, and one of the guides named John. There were two vehicles to handle our luggage and family. The Saruni Wild camp was only 10-15 minutes away but it took us more than 30 minutes because we had to stop for every new species. The plains zebra, vervet monkey, masai giraffe, Thompson's gazelle, wildebeest, hartebeest and topi were quickly added to the list. A young zebra colt stared at us curiously in a herd with expectant mothers. The sheer number of animals not to mention the diversity of the Mara-Serengeti ecosystem is astounding, even when the migration is elsewhere. The kids' expressions of excitement and wonder were nearly continuous on the short drive. I had chosen to start our trip at Samburu because I knew the animal population was less dense than the Mara and I didn't want my kids to be disappointed if we had been spoiled at the Mara first. My approach worked perfectly.

The Mara is the more stereotypical east African plains and savannah where one can often see for miles. But the terrain is definitely not uniformly flat. There are gentle hills, small streams, and forest groves scattered throughout. We were staying once again in a private conservancy next to the national park which we never actually entered. On the edge of an open plain we drove into a cluster of trees where a road of crushed red rock led us to the Saruni Wild. Saruni has a lodge in the Mara but I wanted the kids to have the camping experience so chose Wild to get them closer to nature. It's hard to say it is any less

luxurious than the permanent lodges but it is technically a semi-permanent tent camp. There are four structures for the guests and a number of smaller outbuildings for the staff that you never quite see. They have just three guest tents built on wooden platforms raised about a foot off the ground. The dining tent had a comfortable lounge area as well. We were the only guests during our stay so were able to pick which of the tents to use. Andrew wanted the small tent next to the dining area because it wasn't adjacent to the family tent and felt further out in the plains though they all had open views. We wanted to keep everyone a little closer together so we picked the family tent on the other side of the dining tent for Lisa, Lily, Emily, and I and put the older 3 in the remaining tent just down from the family. On the plains before us we could see zebra, wildebeest, and antelope grazing in the mid-day sun. The tents had every comfort I could want with comfortable beds, mosquito nets, fans, running water and plenty of space. The sinks were carved from a single slab of tropical hardwood. When you want to shower you have to give a little advance notice and the staff brings warm water to fill the system outside your tent. Chris joined us for lunch. Ironically he was from Samburu so we learned more about that region and its people while in the Mara. We celebrated Thanksgiving by going around the table and expressing gratefulness.

We were given the choice whether to squeeze everyone into one Land Rover or take two and be a bit more comfortable. We chose to stay together in the nine-seater that had benches instead on the last 3 rows instead of individual chairs. Although it was only 1 month earlier in the year than our trip to the Serengeti in 2005, the color could not have been more different. Heavy rains over the last few weeks had turned the plains a deep hue of green and made the driving tracks muddy suggestions of where to drive. As we departed for our afternoon drive the stormy dark blue sky clashed with the verdant plains and gathering clouds. Our driver/guide John was of the Masai tribe. He told us he had been in contact with the conservancy's rangers and that a mother cheetah with 6 cubs was on an impala kill. What great luck to start our time in the Mara. As anxious as we were to get to the cheetahs we kept being distracted for new species or spectacular scenes. A pair of jackals was followed by a pair of juvenile male lions resting beneath a small thorn tree. We pulled around in front of them to frame the shots with the sky behind them. They rolled lazily and then one got up and stretched like our pet cat does arching its back and rising up on its tippy toes.



Spotted hyenas were the next addition. John said that their numbers were growing too rapidly and were beginning to threaten some of the other populations. They are strange and fearsome creatures that are almost hard to take seriously because of their queer facial features and stilted almost sideways gait when they run. But as we would learn, they are devastating predators and caring parents. The retired generals are a group of 4 large old male cape buffalo that are no longer with the herd. We were further delayed by a lion pride with numerous cubs and lionesses lounging as only lions do. Driving through a forested patch along a stream we added the Defasse Waterbuck to our list.

There were two other vehicles watching the busy cheetah mother when we arrived but the advantage of the private conservancy is that there weren't a host of other vehicles en route. The tangle of spotted tawny fur and 7 long tails made it a little difficult to know where one cheetah ended and the next began. As our excited breathing slowed we counted each of the 6 cubs that must have been just a few months old. There wasn't a great deal of impala left. The female's head was largely intact but after that it was mostly bones with morsels of flesh remaining. The stomach was set aside untouched—obviously unappealing to the cats. The cubs took turns gnawing on the carcass, doing their best to pick it clean. When not feeding they would lie in repose, their small stomachs swollen far beyond normal girth—more similar to a constrictor's stomach swollen by prey swallowed whole than the customary sleek figure of the world's fastest mammal. The cheetahs acted as if we weren't there. The mother would eat lying down and then sit up her haunches to survey her surroundings anxious to keep her brood safe and to consume as many calories as possible before any larger predators try to claim her kill. Mortality rates for cheetah cubs of 70% mean all 6 cubs are unlikely to survive long together. For a mother to feed 6 half-grown cubs would require prodigious hunting success. Even if the mom manages to nourish them, lions and hyenas are never far away and won't hesitate to reduce competition for game by eliminating a young predator. A large lone vulture arrived, waiting patiently from the top of the nearest tree. As a heavy rain began and darkened the late afternoon the other two vehicles departed and we were left alone with the cheetah family. We unrolled the tarps on the Land Rover to keep out the downpour. The cats don't like rain but there was really nowhere to go and they weren't going to leave the last impala scraps. Within minutes they were wetter than my housecat has ever been. Several of the wet cubs sauntered our direction and then sat up staring straight at us. Over the rain drops we heard a loud chirp, almost like the smoke detector in need of a battery change. They repeated the chirp communicating some unknown message to their siblings or mom. They began walking again right up to our Land Rover. We held our breath and hoped they might jump up on the hood as can be seen on youtube. John said that they try not to end up in the situations with the cheetahs on the vehicle but there's not much to prevent it if the cheetah's of a mind to other than driving away. Mack took some great video through an open flap as the cheetahs walked within arms' reach of the rear of the car. Puddles grew on the grass plain and water ran wherever slope gave gravity a chance to do its work.





As the light gave out we headed for camp. John picked his way across the open terrain avoiding deeper pools and pressing the accelerator to power through the mud filled ruts from previous traffic. Andrew finally asked if John was going to turn the headlights on because we were just about driving in the dark. John chuckled, waited another minute or two and turned them on. A stream had become a lake and forced us to detour, another case where freedom from the restrictions of roads proved beneficial. I gave Lily a piggy-back ride to our tent as we had to walk through a couple of inches of water to reach it. The safari life at Saruni is a bit too easy. We dropped our gear, put on flip flops and walked to the dining tent where dinner was ready to be served. The lanterns around the perimeter of the tent were drawing

the flying termites in mass but fortunately stayed away from the table. Four course meals are the norm on high quality safaris and Saruni is no exception. Breakfast is a mix of continental classics bacon / sausage, eggs, and toast with fresh local fruit. The kids each had a favorite drink available at any meal. Mack preferred mango juice, Kate a tropical mix, Andrew orange juice with a shot of grenadine, and Lily had a permanent orange Fanta mustache by the end of the trip. Saruni serves family style lunch and dinner of Italian cuisine in a nod to their owner's native country. The waiters would bring the dish to each of us individually starting with Lily and ending with me. Sometimes they served us and sometimes we handled the portions ourselves. We were fed a variety of vegetables, salads, pastas, chicken, lamb, and beef with focaccia at most meals. During dinner John made a comment about some sounds in the dark likely being a lion. I didn't hear him but later wished I had. Soon after we settled into our tents for the night the hyenas started their ungodly choir. A mix of barking, laughing, howling, and hysterical crying all comes from the same throats. Kate, Emily, and Lily in the room adjacent to ours in the family suite were unsettled and unnerved. They laid in beds snuggled under blankets with the heated water bags that were a pleasant surprise in the evening cool. Despite being within a few hundred miles of the equator, nighttime in the Serengeti/Mara is brisk due to the elevation of 6,000 feet. The volume rose and fell sharply and it seemed clear that something interesting was happening...I recorded the noise on my phone to capture the feel of the moment. In attempt to get clearer audio I unzipped the corner of the tent and stuck my phone outside. I could see flashlights waving back and forth less than a hundred yards away and in the direction of the hyenas. We had been told that there would be guards on patrol at night and that we were not to leave our tents in the dark without a guard. As the hyenas quieted the girls fell asleep and we weren't far behind. It is easy to go to bed early on safari because every morning starts before daylight spreads across the plains.

Dawn found me sitting in a camp chair outside our tent watching a giraffe gracefully and noiselessly stride across the wet savannah. As we clambered into the Land Rover I asked John about the hyenas. He explained that the lion we had heard during dinner had killed a zebra less than a hundred yards from where we were eating and that the hyenas had moved in and dispossessed the unfortunate lion of her hard-earned meal. John and the other staff had been standing on foot watching the animal crime while we wondered what was going on outside our tents. I ruefully told him to come get me next time. What a bummer to have missed that!

If we had been staying 3 nights in the Mara we would have spent 1 full day in the Masai Mara National Park, but we were never bored staying within the Mara North Conservancy. We stopped at a swollen pond whose water level was even higher due to the 15 hippos hiding from the sun in the shallow waters. A pair of juvenile male lions did very slow walk by of our vehicle posing along the way. We checked off several species on our baby mammals checklist—hartebeest, buffalo, and topi. We had glimpsed a couple of swiftly disappearing dwarf mongoose in Samburu but had more extended views of several different packs of striped mongoose in the Mara. They remind me of the pet ferrets we kept as children—constantly moving and very social with their companions. They wouldn't let us get too close. One or two were typically on their hind legs watching for danger. Their gait looks almost like a rolling wave with their flexible spine. Eland look like a cross between an oryx and a slender cow that inherited most of their traits from the cow but is still an antelope. John pointed out an impala ahead of us whose

attention was locked on a cluster of trees. “Impala never lies,” he proclaimed. Most animals would turn their gaze to us as we approached but this impala was interested in nothing but whatever was under the trees. We drove towards the trees and were not surprised to find a resting lion pride.

In a grassy hollow we encountered a hyena clan with 6 pups of various ages. John explained that as hyenas had adapted to using dens the cubs’ mortality rates plummeted and populations surged putting additional pressure on competing predators. We watched them long enough to witness tender interactions between mother and young that temporarily had us looking past their ghoulish and savage visage.



For our picnic breakfast we parked on the banks of the Mara River about 20 sheer vertical feet above the churning brown water—a safe distance from the hippos. Unfortunately with the river raging we were unable to find any of the Nile Crocodiles that famously feast when the Serengeti herds must cross. A large fish eagle watched from the top of a nearby tree. Eager to stretch my legs and anxious to keep Andrew from wandering I followed him along the river 50 yards from the vehicles. As I turned towards the river and walked down the slightest of declines my flip flop lost all traction and slipped violently forward. I was holding my camera with my bazooka lens attached so this was no laughing matter—at least not for me! As my foot slid forward I pulled back sharply and managed to twist my ankle as my toes inverted backwards while my weight continued forward. With a hand on my camera and one near the end of the lens I had no chance to catch myself or brace for the fall so I went down hard on my left elbow in the grass and mud then flat on my back. Lying in the mud I paused just long enough to realize that my camera had never hit the ground and I clearly hadn’t broken any bones so I gingerly stood up. As I turned towards my family and the waiting staff I was covered in brown mud and red embarrassment but managed to laugh with them. Before lunch we drove through a massive herd of several hundred

cape buffalo where the insects were so thick the kids pulled the blankets on the seats over their heads to keep from inhaling them. On a small rocky knoll John found another group of lionesses with their charge of cubs. They once again paid no heed to our presence as cameras need not interrupt nap time.



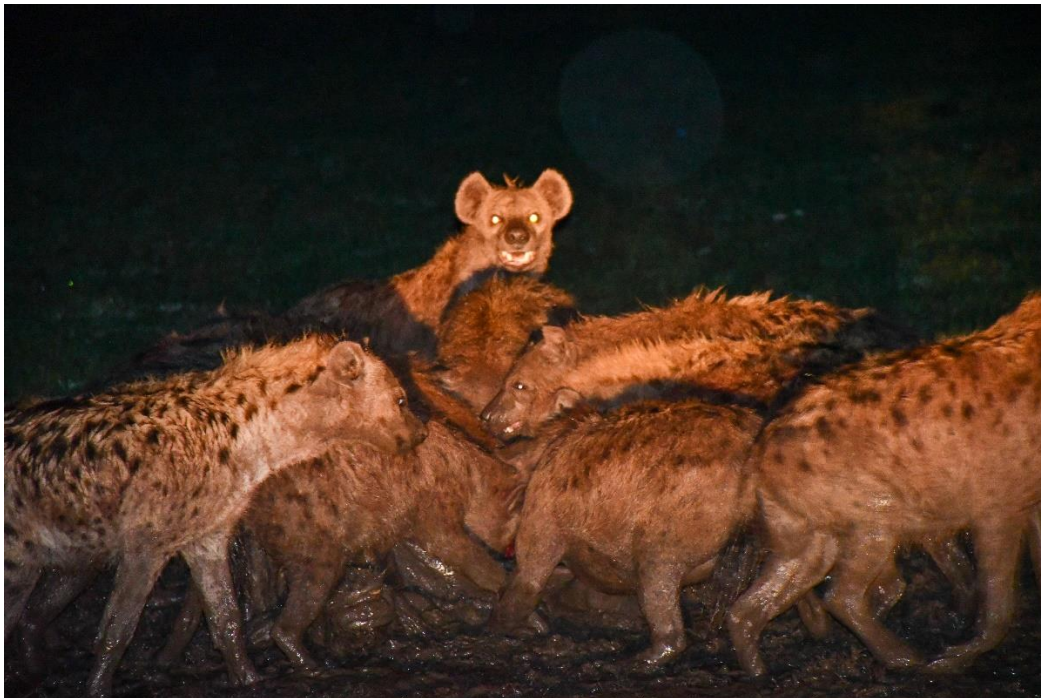
After another large lunch we asked if we could walk to the area where the lion kill had been made last night. Chris walked with us and showed us the tracks of the hyenas. Not a bone or morsel of flesh could be seen, just a pile of grass that had been the contents of the zebras stomach as hyenas are less discerning in their diets than cheetahs. As much as Lisa doesn't love cats she shares their passion and need for naps. While she rested the kids played and I looked at pictures and began deleting the bad ones. When we ventured out for our afternoon drive we found the mother cheetah with all 6 cubs still in tow. Their stomachs had shrunken near normal size with 24 hours to digest their Thanksgiving feast. They were less active than the day before so we pushed on hoping for further viewing luck. In a broad open plain we were told by rangers to look for a pair of cheetah brothers. John didn't let us down and quickly found them. Brothers commonly form coalitions to increase their hunting success and reduce the risk of predation. These brothers were active in the late afternoon hours marking trees and walked through the tall grass. We followed at a respectful distance and then noticed some antelope in the distance. One brother paused while the other advanced. The rain began again in repeat of the day before. We unrolled the flaps again and waited. The cheetahs were clearly not walking for exercise but were testing the awareness of the Tommies. Another car carried passengers likewise hoping for a bloody ending. Rather than trail the cats and perhaps highlight their presence and movement we drove a couple hundred yards ahead to the backside of the quarry to watch the events from another view. About when adrenaline was building in anticipation of watching an active hunt a hyena appeared and the pursuit suddenly ended. There's no pointing in catching something you now you won't keep.



The rain however was not deterred by the hyena and the heavens once again opened. John was on the radio and I heard the word lodge. I thought it meant we needed to head back but John explained that the camp was flooding and they thought we may need to transfer to the Saruni lodge located on a hillside 30 minutes away. We decided to return to camp to assess whether an evacuation was warranted. We had to make several detours as flooded streams made one crossing impassible and the tire ruts were beginning to look like streams themselves. Just short of the camp we saw a pair of lions in the last light. I joked with John that I had always wanted to visit the Okavango Delta but not expected to find it in Kenya. The kids stayed in the car while Lisa and I checked the tents. Water was pooling inside and we agreed it was better to move now then risk sleeping in wet bedding or worst yet being unable to leave the camp in the morning. The staff had already moved much of our luggage to the dining area so we did a quick walk through to find anything else and we loaded up. The littles were crying when we got back to the car, the cumulative effect of too little sleep, rain, darkness, uncertainty of what was going on, and mom and dad having left as soon as we arrived. The rain didn't care that we were missing our last chance for a night drive. We crossed our fingers and drove. There would be no spotlighting and we had to keep the flaps down to stay warm and dry. The headlights picked up various antelope species as we careened through the muddy ruts and enjoyed what John called a safari massage being jolted against the frame of the vehicle. We sang loud silly songs to lighten the mood.

From left to right a trio of sopping hyenas sprinted across our headlights' path. There were very few reasons to be running full speed in the rainy night so we veered off course in pursuit. After several seconds we lost sight of them and paused. John turned off the engine and we lifted the flaps in hopes of hearing what we could not see. Far ahead and to the left I heard faint noises so we sped off in that direction. When we found our hyenas the noises were loud like from our tents the night before. A swarm of hyenas had converged on something, but just what was hard to see. We stopped 25 yards away a watched in stunned silence as the hyenas played tug of war with a recently killed wildebeest.

John had to leave the Land Rover running or we would have lost our headlights. In the heavy rain 20-30 hyenas jostled and fought over a steaming carcass. The ground at their feet had turned to a muddy mess and only the head of the wildebeest identified its species. After watching for a few minutes the volume of the hyenas increased and their attention was pulled away from the gruesome feast. Another hyena clan had found them and wanted the remains for themselves. The carcass was quickly left behind and the hyena packs engaged in fratricidal combat. The invaders were driven off and the feeding frenzy continued. A pair of jackals cautiously poked around the edge of the circle alert for any crumb that may be missed in the wet, muddy, near wrestling match. A lone hyena emerged on the back of the stage with a leg in its powerful jaws. It backed slowly away, one step at a time. The enraged clan failed to notice the stealthy retreat and it gleefully disappeared into the dark to feast alone. I stood in the front to take pictures and videos above the windshield but beneath the protective tarp. As I leaned at times over the edge of my door I realized there was nothing to stop a hyena approaching from behind to tug me into the melee. That was a bit discomfiting, so I stood erect again. The carnage was a bit much for Lily and Emily but the rest of us could not look away however gruesome it may have been.



At length there was little left to fight over so we continued our drive out of the plains and up the muddy forested hillside until we reached the Saruni Mara Lodge. Wow! We were fortunate they had room for the Saruni Wild refugees. The staff made hot chocolate for us while we waited for our turn at the main dining table. What a crazy end to a crazy day! We had plenty to eat as usual but the kids would have been glad to never learn what creamed spinach tasted like. On an earlier drive John had introduced us to the Ugly 5 of Africa rather than the traditional Big 5 of Elephant, Rhino, Lion, Leopard, and Cape Buffalo. The Ugly 5 of Marabou Stork, Hyena, Warthog, Vulture, and Wildebeest inspired the kids to come up with the 5 Best and Worst dishes from our trip during our last meal. After much deliberation and multiple rounds of voting the 6 of them (Kate and I weren't eligible to participate because we

willingly tried everything) established the 5 worst in ascending order Fishcakes (I only ate half of mine so it looked like someone tried it), Broccoli Quiche, Creamed Spinach, Eggplant Lasagna, and Mushroom Risotto. The 5 best were grilled pineapple, chocolate salami, a bean salad, steak, and some scrumptious garlic potatoes. Wait, that doesn't include the mangos, pasta, bacon, banana pancakes, hot chocolate...it's always a good thing when the tasty list is longer than the nasty one.

The next morning I awoke to see an impala grazing in the clearing at the back of our family suite. We started a bit later as is traditional on the last morning so we could pack up and be ready to go straight to the airport after our morning drive. Emerging from the forest we were in a more settled part of the conservancy with several residences and signs of agriculture and livestock. That didn't mean there wasn't wildlife as we soon saw a large Masai giraffe framed in the early sunlight. Rather than taking the road directly back into the plains we turned along the perimeter of the forest found a family of elephants feeding in the trees. After reaching the savannah it didn't take long to find a lion pride. The mothers and cubs were almost always in brush or tall grass on the edge of open areas to keep the cubs from unnecessary exposure and to make it difficult to get clear views and pictures even when only 25 yards away. I think John was content to just have us watch the lions for an hour and take us to the airport even commenting that it was a lucky way to end the trip, but Andrew was having none of that. We had to keep looking for something new or cooler than relaxing lions. His impatience paid off as we came across a large pride of 15 adult lions. We watched two groups come together and welcome each other with playful growls, nibbling and rubbing. Eventually they retreated into the underbrush where we could see some lounging but others appeared to be eating. We repositioned the car and realized that some were gnawing on bones. In a tree overhead we could see the remains of a recently abandoned leopard kill. Despite the smorgasbord of large game in seemingly every direction, life is decidedly not easy on the plains of East Africa. The final highlights of the Masai Mara were a troop of baboons, a couple of vervet monkeys, and an adorable baby giraffe that was still taller than me.



When we reached the airstrip our luggage was there waiting, at least most of it. We quickly realized that only the bags the big kids had brought to the dining room that morning had been brought even though we had mentioned that our bags were still in the room. Oops. This was not the time to lose our luggage as we would need it the next day in chilly Paris. A call was made and a vehicle sent with our remaining bags from the lodge 40 minutes away. We waited anxiously and watched the clock, knowing that schedules were only suggestions in the African bush. On our way to Samburu we had picked up a couple of passengers in Loisaba who had been shocked when the plane arrived 40 minutes early. A plane appeared on the horizon and began its descent but it was not ours. The kids laughed and played while the parents worried about the luggage. The vehicle arrived in time. This was a much larger plane, with carrying capacity more like a traditional regional jet. We stopped about every 5 minutes for the next half hour picking up and dropping off tourists in the Masai Mara's many airstrips. Eventually we reached the urban sprawl of Nairobi where high rises towered on the left and Nairobi National park stood as a vast green oasis in the city on our right.

Our guide was waiting for us at the Wilson Airport and waited patiently for us again when we stopped for lunch at a very slow fast-food joint. The main entrance has some sort of a petting zoo and/or rescue center and there were hundreds of school kids in the parking lot waiting to go in. My expectations were plummeting as I shelled out another \$250 for our entry fee. However, once we were in the park I could never see more than 2 other cars at a time. The animal density certainly didn't compare to our previous stops but the diversity was impressive given the proximity to a city of more than 4,000,000. In less than 4 hours in the park we saw 11 mammal species. Beyond filling our afternoon somewhere other than a big metropolis my main objective was to see rhinos—the kids had never seen one in the wild and I had never seen a white rhino. We had two fabulous sightings of white rhinos but struck out on the black rhino. We managed a few photos with the city in the not too distant background.



A controversial elevated railroad is just about completed that bisects the park. Other than being the shortest distance between two points, I bet that build through the park is to avoid having to purchase any land for the route. Though the train isn't running yet, the animals didn't seem too disturbed by its presence high overhead. We saw many impala in its shade and then a flock of ostriches with numerous young ones. In our last hour in the park Lily finally conceded, "I think I'm done looking for animals." She kept her enthusiasm for nearly the entire safari—after all, she is an Easton. When we exited on the east side of the park we passed the massive inland container port that would send containers through the park and then across the continent. We were dropped off at the EKA Hotel where the kids were excited to reconnect to the internet for updates on friends and the Premier League.

The early Sunday morning traffic was sparse so our drive to the airport was only 15 minutes. We unloaded in a final rainstorm leaving all of us wet as we waited in line to check in. We thought we were plenty early but in the end I barely had time to grab some breakfast for everyone before our flight was called. I took a deep breath as I settled into my seat, exhausted after going non-stop for 5 days and elated that no one and no things were missing and the kids had loved Africa as much as I had hoped. I had told the kids some nightmare stories of the Paris airport but the boys couldn't have been happier to kill the time playing FIFA on the free PS4 kiosks. I won't miss handling 8 passports through multiple inspections and the boarding process. After our second straight full day flight the last thing I wanted was to sit down again but I had to drive 5.5 hours from Salt Lake back to Boise.

Species List (38 identified):

Lion	Bright's Gazelle
Leopard	Grant's Gazelle
Cheetah	Thomson's Gazelle
African Wildcat	Topi
Black-Backed Jackal	Coke's Hartebeest
Bat-Eared Fox	Eland
Banded Mongoose	Bohor Reedbuck
Dwarf Mongoose	Kirk's Dik Dik
Spotted Hyena	Gunther's Did Dik
African Elephant	Common Waterbuck
White Rhino	Defasse Waterbuck
Hippopotamus	Beisa Oryx
Cape Buffalo	Gerenuk
Masai Giraffe	Eastern Warthog
Reticulated Giraffe	Lesser Kudu
Grevy's Zebra	Impala
Burchell's Zebra	Olive Baboon
Western White-Bearded Wildebeest	Black-Faced Vervet Monkey
Spring Hare	Unstriped Ground Squirrel

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