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It Was Dawn, We Were in Africa

by Bob Riel

Any trip to Kenya is going to result in an intense patchwork of experiences, from the dreadfully frustrating to the sublimely beautiful. This, at least, is the conclusion I reached after a visit to Kenya with my wife, Lisa, for a wildlife safari. During our time there, we encountered a crumbling infrastructure, inefficient airlines and a constant pleading for money, but also incredibly friendly people, astounding landscapes, and rich cultural encounters. In the end, we wouldn't have traded in any part of the experience and we returned home with a collage of lasting memories from our journey to this fascinating country.

The safari began early on a Sunday morning when our guide, Ben, picked us up in Nairobi. We had a six-hour drive ahead of us on this day and we would be in this vehicle every day for the next week, crossing the equator twice and bouncing along more than 1,000 miles of Kenyan roads.

"So, we will be together for six days?" I said to Ben. "That means we will become friends."

"We are already friends," he said, smiling, in a comment typical of the friendliness of the culture.

Before long, we were out of Nairobi and off into rural Kenya. Only occasionally during the next week would we run into a small city, at places like Nakuru or Narok. We drove north through rolling foothills of green trees and red soil. My lasting images of Kenya. Just I will forever associate Greece with the colors of blue and white, Kenya evokes vistas of green and red.

One of the biggest things I noticed as we drove were the number of people on the streets. Everywhere, even in what seemed to be the middle of nowhere between towns, we passed people walking or biking. Our drive took us past banana trees and coffee plantations, past vast wheat-colored fields lined by acacia trees, past goats and cows wandering the sides of the road. And everywhere, there were people. On long stretches of empty highway, where in the United States you would encounter nothing but other vehicles, in Kenya there were dozens of people just going about their daily lives. We saw women walking with huge loads of wood tied to their backs, young boys tending herds of cows, a person steering a donkey-driven cart. Near the tribal areas, there were local tribespeople tending their cattle, or doing laundry in a stream, or just out walking with a spear in hand.

We drove past small towns, or sometimes small concentrations of shops along the way. The shops tended to be a bit ramshackle, with tilting wood frames and tin roofs, all lined together and marked by hand-lettered signs. We passed an open market, with food and clothing laid outside on carpets, surrounded by hundreds of people shopping for goods. In the cities, it was more of the same, although the buildings and stores were bigger and more sturdily constructed. Wherever we stopped, people descended on the van. Knocked on the windows, flashed souvenirs and postcards, begged us to buy something from them. At one stop, children set upon us. "Please, can you give us a pen for school? A watch? A shirt? What about just 20 shillings?"

Two other things were quite noticeable as we drove. One, were the matatus, which are Kenya's version of public transportation. Big vans, with enough room to squeeze in 12 or so people shoulder to shoulder. They are very colorful vehicles, all individually decorated and named, and were ever-present along the roadways. They are a cherished part of Kenyan culture, even though the drivers are known to be somewhat wild and dangerous.

The other feature was the prevalence of Christianity, and of spiritual messages in general. Many of the matatus were decorated with spiritual signs – "Lover of the Lord," "God is the Answer." Then there were churches, and Christian centers, which were ubiquitous throughout the country. I became accustomed to seeing the word "miracle" a lot, and "miracle centers."

It was actually good to have so much to occupy our eyes on the trip, because the road was so rough it became impossible to write more than brief notes. Sometimes it was even difficult to read. I joked that it wasn't even reasonable to call these roads pothole-filled. Really, they were just a series of potholes that were sometimes surrounded by pavement. The drivers constantly veered from the left to the right sides of the road, and sometimes drove on the dirt shoulder for miles at a time, to avoid the worst potholes. And it's not just the potholes, but the dust. When we drove on the dirt shoulder, or on one of the many dirt stretches of road that we encountered, we were plagued by dust, blowing in through the bottom of the van or through small openings in the window.

There was such a string of these contrasts all along the way and all throughout the week. We were frustrated by the crumbling infrastructure, the potholes, the dust. But we were enthralled by the landscape, the culture, and the richness of the land. We were annoyed by the constant begging and selling of souvenirs whenever we stopped. But when we weren't besieged by people who wanted our money, we were delighted by the friendliness of the people, their smiles, their easygoing nature. We couldn't separate one from the other, so we just took it all in. It's all part of the mosaic that is Kenya.

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The safari experience itself was extraordinary. We were able to do game drives in three national parks. Our memories of several of the drives are still vivid.

Our first full day on safari, when everything was new and fresh and exciting, Ben took us to the Buffalo Springs Reserve, which adjoins Shaba. We left at 6:30 a.m., which is when many of the animals are out feeding and therefore more visible. We were tired but exhilarated. How could we not be? It was dawn, we were in Africa, the air was fresh, and we were on the lookout for animals.

We drove through central Kenya that morning, as the earth broke open on the horizon and the first blue light of morning painted the sky. The acacia trees were still silhouetted as they stood sentry over the landscape. As dawn seeped over the mountains and lit the sky, we saw our first animals. First a zebra, then a giraffe. The giraffe nibbled from the top of an acacia tree. We were so close, we could hear it chewing the leaves. Later, we saw a pair of gazelles lock horns; then four lionesses as they meandered into some bushes and took cover from the sun.

I noticed, though, that it wasn't just the animals that transfixed me. It was the whole setting, the entire situation. There was something primal about being out on the African plain at dawn. As if we'd been there before. Africa is in all of us, in our blood, in our soul. Is it the collective unconscious of humanity, I wondered? Our genetic inheritance? Remembrances of past lives? For whatever reason, it's all hauntingly familiar. We all come from here on some level, I suppose. It's the birthplace of humanity and, deep down, we seem to be aware of this. Being out there in the crisp morning air, seeing the blue light of dawn move slowly across the sky, feeling a strange kinship with the African landscape, watching a giraffe nibble from an acacia tree, observing lionesses and gazelles and elephants...it is primal, there is no other way to describe it. When we are there, Africa rises up from the depths of our being and bursts forth so that the entire environment seems to connect with us, seems to become one with us.

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At Lake Nakuru, we went for a game drive in the rain. We saw two rhinos from very close range, and had a medium distance sighting of three leopards. Both of these animals were relatively rare during the safari, at least when compared to elephants, giraffes and zebras. Also, the leopards enabled us to complete our sightings of the Big Five (lion, tiger, elephant, rhino, buffalo).

We asked Ben why these particular animals made up the so-called Big Five. After all, they weren't necessarily the five most popular safari animals. He explained that it had nothing to do with safari popularity, but with toughness. These were the five "toughest" game animals. So, Lisa and I decided that maybe there should be a Big Ten, just for safari purposes. The Big Five can retain their importance, of course – who are we to argue with

them? But then we decided that we should include giraffes and zebras on our Big Ten list, since they are so fun to look at and popular with tourists. Also, gazelles were Big Ten worthy, since they are tremendously graceful and beautiful to watch.

For the ninth member of our Big Ten, we added the wildebeest, which are a popular attraction at the Mara reserve during part of the year and are well-known for their annual migration to and from the Serengeti plain in Tanzania. Then, we rounded off the list with the pink flamingos, which are found at several lakes in central Kenya, most prominently at Lake Nakuru.

It was our experience at Lake Nakuru that prompted us to include the flamingos on our Big Ten list. We had heard that they were an interesting sight, but we were not prepared for the full impact of seeing tens of thousands of pink flamingos strutting around the perimeter of a single lake. This was one of the most visually interesting spectacles we saw on the entire safari. From a distance, it appears that the lake is ringed with stretches of pink sand. But as you approach, it becomes apparent that this is an illusion, caused by the presence of more pink flamingoes than you ever knew existed, all living together on the edge of this lake. It seems that the birds are attracted to the algae at the edge of the water and so make Lake Nakuru (and a few other nearby lakes) their home.

This was the only time that we were allowed out of the safari vehicle to approach animals. We walked along the beachfront and gaped in amazement at the thousands of pink flamingoes squeezed together in front of us – feeding, walking, flying, landing. And the noise. It's remarkable, the volume of sound that can be produced by all of these squawking birds. Interestingly, as we walked towards the birds, who formed a ring perhaps 10 or 20 feet deep along the edge of the lake, they edged away from us. They moved calmly, and not in panic, but they moved in unison. There was a giant pink wave that would form opposite whichever direction we walked. If we walked straight towards the water, the birds in front of us would disperse into a semicircle. If we walked left or right, the wave would move in that direction. We felt like flamingo conductors.

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At the end of the safari, we made our way to the Masai Mara game reserve, which is the most famous in Kenya and has the greatest abundance of animals. During another early morning game drive here I realized that, while I don't especially like *getting* up before dawn, I sort of enjoyed *being* up at that time of day. At least in Africa.

This particular morning was quite cold. I had on two t-shirts and a sweater beneath my jacket. Lisa said her fingers started to turn blue during the game drive, as we sat in our safari vehicle with the wind swirling in through the open top. I actually had never thought of it being this cold in Kenya. Despite the cold, however, there was an exhilaration about the pre-dawn departure that didn't exist in the afternoon. I recall standing outside on this

chilly morning, sipping a cup of hot Kenyan coffee while waiting with other tourists for our safari vans. I watched the steam rise from a half dozen other coffee mugs and then slowly melt away into a misty violet-colored dawn. Remember this moment, I told myself. Ignore the cold, warm your fingers on your coffee mug, remember the violet tint to the sky and the landscape.

We began our drive this day just as the sun became visible in the eastern sky. The morning clouds seemed to be lit from behind, as if they were on fire. Early on, we saw a large mixed group of 100 to 150 wildebeest and zebra, milling about and munching on grass, as though they were at some mixed animal social. "So, I guess the wildebeest and the zebra get along?" I said. "Yeah," said Ben. "Actually the zebra kind of take advantage of the wildebeest." He explained that if a lion attacked, the zebras would have a much better chance of escaping, since the lion could more easily catch the slow-footed wildebeest.

Later on this drive, we got close to a black rhino, which was a bit unusual since they tend to shy away from vehicles. We also saw a large group of elephants, including several baby ones. We searched for lions and cheetahs, which Ben had heard were nearby, but to no avail. We did, however, see a group of vultures picking at the bones and leftover meat of a wildebeest carcass. I guess the zebras did escape, after all.

I took plenty of photographs, as I did on other days. But I wondered if the pictures would ever really be able to express what it was like to be out at dawn, with the morning sun rising over the mountain, and to see two dozen elephants walk past our safari van, almost close enough to touch. Or to feel we could reach up and grab the same tree that a giraffe was feeding on. Or to make eye contact with a zebra or a wildebeest, or with a gazelle just before it bounded gracefully away.

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Our final game drive of the safari, in the Masai Mara, actually turned out to be one of our most memorable experiences. It began when we saw our first cheetahs, three of them just lounging in the late afternoon sun. Then we saw thousands of wildebeest. Thousands of them. Stretched for miles in both directions, as they trudged single file towards the horizon. They were moving slowly, methodically, lined up one behind the other for as far as we could see. How do they get in line, I wanted to know? Who begins? Who brings up the rear? How do they know when to start, whom to follow, where to go? All we know is that they annually migrate from the Serengeti Plain in Tanzania to the Masai Mara in Kenya and back again.

Near the end of the drive, we got a great close-up of some lions. Eight of them in all. They were resting, after having just killed their dinner, as there were two unfortunate wildebeest lying dead just yards away. We didn't see the actual kill, but it was all so fresh that we could almost visualize the lions circling around the meandering wildebeest, sowing

confusion and panic as the animals tried to flee, then cornering two of the wildebeest and pouncing. It was all right there in front of us, the blood-soaked wildebeest, the panting lions. We could see the lions' stomach rising and falling with each breath, look into their eyes, study the details of their faces. They were just feet from our van, but paid no attention to us as they rested in the shade.

Off to the side were the still-warm bodies of the wildebeest, not even eaten yet. The lions had killed their prey and now apparently needed a rest before dinner. Further away was a group of vultures, waiting to dine on the leftovers as soon as the lions were finished. Ben said the vultures might sit there for hours, waiting for the lions to eat, but would never make a move as long as the lions were around. It was an incredible scene. The true circle of life.

On the way back to the lodge, we saw another tremendous sunset. Fittingly, the best sunset of the week. It began with streaks of light shooting down from thick clouds. As if the heavens had opened and hundreds of golden Masai spears were thrust down into the pale green dusk of the plain. Then the sunset exploded across the entire sky in streaks of mango and purple. Ben stopped the van, and we sat there for several minutes, admiring the magnificence of the scene as daylight slipped away on the Masai Mara.