

# AFRICAN ADVENTURE



**ON** my most recent trip to Africa, I didn't mind sharing a tent with slugs, scorpions and ticks. I didn't mind that the only heat available during the cold nights was a small hot water bottle to hug. I had no issues with nature's "outdoor bathroom" when on safari. But there were a few things in Kenya I DID mind. I minded that people were illegally killing endangered rhinos to sell their horns. And I minded that kids don't get much food or education. Those are the things I really minded – and want to help change. Come along on my journey (Island Sun Times has kindly removed the bugs and bathroom issues for you!)

## MUCH TO LEARN

Last February, my husband Steve and I were thrilled to be invited to join a Kenyan Safari by a zookeeper friend, Maureen O'Keefe, caretaker of Eye Pro's

donated Canadian Lynx that lives at Point Defiance Zoo in Tacoma, WA. Sponsored by the AAZK (American Association of Zookeepers), our group was comprised of 24 people from around the world who were zookeepers, or friends and family of zookeepers. We visited four camps throughout Kenya, which were vastly different.



For example, the Masai Mara region of Kenya looks like the manicured lawns on a golf course. It's just open fields with very short grass and no place for animals to

hide (from us or each other). It makes for great game watching and photography. In one camp near Mount Kenya, we found it very tough to spot game, as tall, parched grass spread for miles in all directions. We learned to watch for a tiny white movement above the grass ... that would be a cheetah's tail flicking as it approached its soon-to-be-dinner.





## THE MARVELOUS MASAI



A highlight of our trip was spending time with the fascinating and colorful people of Kenya's Masai tribe.

I'd been to Africa twice before on safari, but never been in Kenya, where the Masai tribes live in rural areas. I really enjoyed these people! They love beading, and both men and women are adorned in beaded necklaces. This isn't just "show" for tourists, it's how they dress every day. Red is everyone's favorite color, and they wrap themselves in red blankets to stay warm for the cool mornings and evenings, and strip down to much less clothing as the day turns hot.

The Masai still live in *manyattas* – huts made of mud and sticks. They cook goat meat inside the huts on small fires, making the dwelling very smoky and breathing difficult. Every two weeks, the women daub

the huts with cow dung to waterproof the roof. They store goat's milk in gourds, which they "sanitize" every day with smoke. It really was a stretch to comprehend this is how they live, and not a reenactment of century-old African life. I thought, okay, our tent "rustic" is looking pretty good now!

A highlight of our time with the Masai was watching the men do amazing dances for hours at a time, jumping vertically and making hypnotic, grunting chants that echo across the Mara. We all tried it (think shin splits), and found out it's much harder than it looks. I also realized that the resonant sound the men create with this ritual activity ... **it is Africa.**



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## ◀ POACHING STILL A PROBLEM

*Let's talk about poaching for a minute, and then I promise to tell you an amazing leopard story. And a crazy wild dog story. And you won't believe the bull elephant ... so many stories!*



Our group spent time with the rangers at Lewa Wildlife Conservancy in central Kenya, and observed their efforts to stop rhino poaching.

A couple decades ago, elephant poaching was huge and the African elephant population was dramatically depleted. We all know the story: the elephants were killed and butchered for their precious, ivory tusks. Thankfully, some very strict laws were put into place and selling ivory is now illegal. It was reasonably easy to catch the poachers, as it takes a lot of people and equipment to kill a massive elephant with big ivory tusks. Elephants travel in herds and their force is unbelievable. Poachers need big guns to kill them and big electric saws to cut the ivory out of their skulls, so if anyone tries to buy this kind of equipment, it's a big tip-off for the conservation officers. And poachers are trying to do this while the herd is trying to kill them! The ivory tusks are extremely heavy, so it takes several men to carry and load them. And, six-foot tusks are hard to hide and hand off to the next buyer. Oftentimes, someone squeals on the poachers – for a reward, of course.

As for the rhino, killing them and selling their horns doesn't involve the problems associated with selling elephant tusks. The rhino's horn is very valuable in Chinese medicine, particularly thought to treat sexual dysfunction. Unlike elephants, rhinos are mostly solitary animals or travel in pairs. Poachers rig snares near the rhino's favorite type of tree, so the animal's foot gets caught and it can't get free. A single poacher can then easily shoot the rhino or wait for it to starve, and then cut off its horn with a handsaw. Small enough for a walking poacher to carry by hand, the horn is much easier than an elephant tusk to hide and hand off. With just one person and no big equipment involved, rhino poachers easily go undetected. And of course, everyone thinks elephants are wonderful animals and want to protect them – it's harder to get folks interested in saving the poor rhinos.

To get our group more informed about protecting rhinos, we experienced the amazing anti-poaching efforts of Lewa Wildlife Conservancy in central Kenya. Lewa has over 100 rangers on their property, walking on foot searching for snares and places where the fence may allow a poacher to illegally enter. The Lewa rangers use bloodhounds to track poachers, which is very effective. We had a few of our group pose as poachers and hide in the bush (with the rangers' help) and it was fascinating to see the bloodhounds discover them. We were really proud to be involved in this effort, and it's really making a difference.



*Okay, I promised you some exciting animal stories!*





## LEOPARD LUCK



Leopards are nocturnal, but we had the great fortune to find one during the day. She came down from the tree where she was napping and had a meal right in front of us.

The leopard is a very elusive African animal, and their sightings are measured in seconds, not minutes or hours. Leopards are nocturnal, so someone on safari may see them during a night drive, when special lights are used to spot animals. For those who have trouble telling the difference between cheetahs and leopards: the cheetah is the world's fastest cat, lives on the ground and has black spots. Leopards spend a lot of time in trees and have beautiful rosette markings instead of spots. They don't have a cheetah's speed, so they eat smaller game.

As nocturnal creatures, leopards are very hard to photograph; so you can imagine my surprise during our visit to Samburu National Park when I saw a leopard taking a mid-day nap about 20 feet up a tree. What luck! We were able to get quite close and I got all the photos I wanted. After ten minutes or so, our leopard jumped from the tree and walked right past our Land Rover, so close I couldn't get all of her in my camera frame. It got even better ... she then walked into a bush, emerged with carrion and proceeded to have a meal right in front of us!

Leopards bury any kill they don't finish in one meal, and are one of the very few animals that will eat both fresh and rotten food. Our leopard was crouched and eating maybe 30 feet away from us – we could smell the rotting flesh and hear the crunch-crunch-crunch of bones. We had 45 minutes in total with her! Even our driver, a Kenyan who has been doing safari work for years, was so excited ... he'd never had that much time with a leopard in the wild and knew of no one else who had.



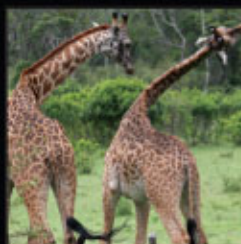
## THE KENYAN KIDS

*I'm going to sneak in a story about the Kenyan kids here, and then I'll get back to my animal adventures.*



At the Lewa school, the children stand in line to get water from a huge tank on school property.

In rural Kenya, many kids don't go to school because their job is to watch the herds of goats and cows their families own. To encourage villagers to not participate in poaching, Lewa Wildlife Conservancy has set up the area's first schools. At first, only a few kids attended, but when Lewa schools offered the students two daily meals, the enrollment burgeoned. The parents just don't have enough food to sustain themselves and their kids. ▶







I'm thrilled to report these kids are super-wonderful with big hearts! They were excited to meet our group and over the moon with the lollipops and soccer balls we brought for their school. Despite wearing torn uniforms, with no heat, air conditioning or books, these kids were happy to be there. We felt really blessed to be able to bring pads of paper, pencils and some basics those kids just don't have.

*Okay, back to the wildlife.*

## PHOTO OPS GALORE!



To our entire group's delight, we got *really* close to lions ... one almost climbed into our Land Rover to eat my husband (ask to see our video on that!) who was very courageous and

stopped filming only when the lion was just a foot away! I'm happy to report that Steve is alive and well, and so is the lion.



I was the only one in our group to get photos of Africa's rare wild dog, which I plan to enter in a National Geographic contest.



We were very surprised when a huge, lone bull elephant charged our vehicle, swinging his trunk, stomping and trumpeting at us.

Our most unexpected sighting was, of all things, dogs. But not just any dogs – WILD dogs. Wild dogs are extremely rare in Africa, one of the rarest animals of all. And once again, yours truly was in the right place at the right time! Twelve members of our group stumbled upon a big rock that housed a den of wild dogs. In a very lucky twist of fate, I was the only person with a camera and a vantage point around rocks and bushes that allowed me a view of the dogs! I took over 1,000 photos that I'm entering in *National Geographic's* photo contest, as *Nat Geo* photogs haven't seen wild dogs, believe it or not. Wish me luck! ■

*An amazing conservationist, Patty Pearthree, organized our trip to Africa. To learn about her tours, check out her photos and conservancy efforts on [pear3.org](http://pear3.org). For more info on how you can help protect rhinos, visit [lewa.org](http://lewa.org). These are but a mere few of the highlights of my fantastic, inspiring and educational experience. I hope you enjoyed them, and that you get to have your own African adventure one day. — Brenda*





..... Photos by: BRENDA & STEVE FISHBAUGH, PATTY PEARTHREE, MAUREEN O'KEEFE.