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**Masai Mara, Kenya**

The Masai Mara, in south western Kenya, is the eponymous home of the Masai people and the diverse herds of wildlife that migrate between the Mara in Kenya and the Serengeti in Tanzania. It is an excellent place to begin a safari of learning about the land, the people, and the animals of the East African savannah.

Upon entering the Mara, the presence of the Masai people is ubiquitous. The Masai are one of the most tenacious, numerous, independent, and successful of the various indigenous peoples of Africa. The San in Namibia, Botswana, and South Africa are rendered invisible by their nomadic life in the far reaches of the Kalahari Desert. Yet, even with so little in an inhospitable environment, governments push them further, expropriating land, restricting the San’s activities in favour of mining and mineral exploration. By comparison, the Masai are a visible presence in Kenya and Tanzania in towns but especially in the wilderness. They have been able to retain their right to their lands, the right to graze their cattle and to establish their villages….so far. But governments have moved to expel the Masai from the national parks lest their cattle compete with the wildlife and defoliate the grasslands.

Narok is the gateway to Masai Mara. While guides complete the paper work, Masai women surround each vehicle, clamouring and pushing each other as they press intricate beaded crafts against the windows, competing for someone to buy something, anything. Most tourists in the safari trucks stare straight ahead or occasionally gaze impassively at the women through firmly closed windows. It is hard to decide if the European and American tourists are nervous, given that the cacophony can be overwhelming, or if they have hearts of steel as they protect their wallets from souvenirs that they might later regret.

These Masai women are very poor which accounts for their hard sell tactics; every trinket sold will feed their many children. Elaborate beadwork hangs around their necks and from their ears, while they clamour, “please buy from me,” “from me,” “no, from me!” They hurl out prices in American dollars rather than Kenyan shillings, prices that elicit gales of laughter at the exorbitant inflation. And the women laugh along with the laughing customers, everyone recognizing the intercultural nature of upselling. The women all agree that they might sell more goods more easily if they took turns and didn’t push and shove and shout, but then the next jeep comes along and the cacophony begins anew, and sure enough, a tourist buys something, proving the effectiveness of the Masai women’s marketing strategy.

Masai villages accommodate about fifty families. They are surrounded by spiny, spiky, acacia barriers to keep the cattle in and the predators out. The huts – *manyattas* – are round daub and wattle structures. They are uniformly grey from the cow dung that covers the woven frame. Villages move every nine years because termites destroy the wooden supports and the structures cannot be salvaged. It is women who collect the wood and the dung to build the houses, in addition to all their other work, cooking, childrearing, weaving, and beading. The Masai are community-oriented; the whole village shares the income from tourist admission fees and the goods purchased from the village women.

Masai men are first glimpsed across the savannah, standing tall, wrapped in bright red blankets. Each clan has a different pattern on their blanket, not unlike a Scottish tartan, so it is always possible to know the clan of any individual. [The women tend to wear their blankets on formal occasions. Their bulk would impede peforming their myriad chores.] Young men and old, and even young boys, carry a stick, a rod really, wherever they go. It is an essential part of their public identity as Masai, as men and as herders. They care for the animals and, as nomadic herders, they lead their impossibly skinny, bony cattle through the uninhabited savannah. This is their one and only job and it structures everything it means to be a man. Their bright red blankets ensure they are visible from great distances, a critical aspect of safety and communication on the savannah.

Masai men spend their time in dangerous territory, where lions lurk, lean and hungry and ready to pounce on goat or cattle, much easier prey than a gazelle or wildebeest. Although the Masai no longer hunt lions, and are rarely hunted by them, now that the numbers of lions are dwindling, the myth of man against lion endures. Boys undergo rites of passage and extensive training to prove their manhood in which the lion is a potent underlying symbol. The most important initiation ritual is circumcision at puberty; it is an essential step for entry into adulthood and taking one’s place the community. After proving he is worthy to participate in the ritual, a boy is circumcised before the village. This occurs without anesthetic and, to prove he is a man, the boy must not cry out or flinch. As one villager explained, the boy must prove that his bravery can be trusted should a lion attack in the wilderness. Should he writhe or cry out, he is henceforth relegated to the village with the women. After circumcision, the boys spend about five years living in the wilderness, learning survival skills and how to be a Masai warrior from and elder; then fending for himself. In the past, this included killing a lion and even now comprises the warrior skills to defend against a lion are important. After the circumcision ritual, the boys wear black clothing for four to six months, until they heal. Along the road, there are small groups of “warrior boys”, some with their faces painted fiercely white, lounging. This is not part of the ritual; they are trying to capitalize on their recent experience by providing tourists with the opportunity to take pictures for a fee. Their marketing, unlike that of their more vocal sisters, is too low key to attract many photographers, as the safari vehicles rush from one wildlife park to another.

**The Serengeti, Tanzania**

Safari means “long journey” in Swahili. It first entered the English language in the nineteenth century, likely thanks to that notorious imperialist, Sir Richard Burton. Nevertheless, it elicits romantic visions, all sadly based on the vestiges of colonialism and popular culture. For some it might conjure the vague explorations of Stanley and Livingstone wandering through the so-called “Dark Continent” or the privileged entitlement and colonialism portrayed by Hollywood in *Out of Africa*. Or perhaps safari is inextricably linked to the greedy quest to accumulate exotic animals dead or alive, exemplified by Ernest Hemmingway’s bloodthirsty machismo or John Wayne’s ruthless cinematic acquisitiveness in *Hitari*. Thankfully, these anachronistic nightmares of greed and slaughter are mostly a thing of the past, although rogue poachers still spill too much blood and threaten the extinction of too many precious species.

The twenty-first century safari is very different from its troubling precursors. Today it is focussed on education, environmentalism, and sustainability, facilitated by guides who are university- educated naturalists. Yet, the safari jeeps, racing across the savannah, are still filled with big game hunters greedy for wildlife; they have abandoned high-powered rifles in favour of oversized photographic equipment. No animals were harmed on this safari….

There is competition between the various safari companies: Leopard Tours, Kudu Tours, Serengeti Tours, Ngorongoro Tours and numerous others. Some jeeps and four-by-fours are jammed to the gunwales, a dozen heads poking out of the vehicle’s pop-top, telephoto lenses bristling out in all directions. There is little respite from the palpable anxiety to point and shoot and collect. Very occasionally, a more relaxed (less acquisitive?) traveller uses binoculars to watch the game leisurely wander, eschewing the frantic race to capture them on film. Still, it is hard not to fall into the rhythm of this big game hunt. “Have you seen the ‘Big Five’?” [lion, elephant, leopard, Cape buffalo, rhinoceros]. “How many hippos?” “What kind of rhino? White or black?” Thanks to poachers, the black is rarer so more highly prized. And so it goes… the competition accelerating.

The safari vehicles are driven by utterly amazing men (yes, all men it would seem). They are so attuned to the land that they can gaze across a seemingly empty plain or glance into an impenetrable tree canopy and see animals that are confident they are safely camouflaged. Leopard mothers with leopard cubs, a pack of hyenas, a bright green snake no more than five inches long. Without these guides, the savannah would remain an empty plain save for the herds of elephants and buffalo and zebra and wildebeest, all visible even to the untrained eye, because of their large size and larger numbers.

The Serengeti is the site of the largest animal migrations in the world but there is another type of migration that occurs there, as well. When a rare treasure is sighted, there is a stampede of jeeps and 4x4s, responding to information shared by CBs crackling across the savannah. Safari vehicles converge on the spot, desperate to assuage their passengers’ seemingly insatiable thirst for more and better and rarer animals. Trucks jockey for position to assure the best view for their tourist/hunters.

Usually this process follows a protocol: no driving off road; accommodate new arrivals, but of paramount importance, under no circumstances interfere with the animals. At Masai Mara, a bush by the side of the road gave refuge to a mother cheetah, her two cubs, and her prized kill of a Thompson’s gazelle, much needed nourishment for this predator family. But too many trucks too close cause the babies to run away so that their protective mother had to leave her lunch and to ensure they were safe. The guides began to talk to each other by CB and agreed that all the trucks would move away from the cheetah’s spot. In less than ten minutes, mother and cubs were comfortable enough to return and the trucks were carefully rearranged so everyone could see the family without disturbing them.

But not all such close encounters are so well resolved from the animal’s perspective. On in the Serengeti, trucks began racing to where there a lion had been sighted. These creatures are actually quite shy and not easily viewed unless a pride decides to digest dinner near one of the tracks. Then it is possible to find a dozen lazy lions lounging in the sun after a hearty meal. But this time there was no dinner and no pride but there were very disappointing ethics. Some sixteen safari vehicles surrounded a lone lioness walking down the road. She was boxed in on every side, the jeeps keeping pace with her as she tried to walk ahead and presumably escape these steel predators, the only kind she need fear. This was a lion hunt that would have shamed the Masai.

Leaving in disgust, and sickened by the implied violence, leads to reflection on the rapaciousness of safari tourism. Big game hunters still stalk the East African savannah, with the ghosts of the imperialists and big game hunters as their companions.