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THE WALK HOME

The annual migration from Tanzania's Serengeti National Park to Kenya's Masai Mara National Reserve is one of the world's most wondrous spectacles.

TEXT BY ANGELA SHAH

LEONARD KIVUYO'S SMILE is enigmatic. "There is definitely, maybe, possibly a chance to see a lion," he says.

We look at each other quizzically, wondering about the maybe-yes, maybe-no response of our Tanzanian tour guide. Kivuyo has just picked us up at a gravelly airstrip, a scar in the Serengeti landscape at Kogatende. He wants to know what animals we want to see.

We respond with an All-Star list of the Serengeti: black rhino, lion, elephant. And, of course, we want to witness the main attraction of a northern safari this time of year, a wildebeest crossing of the Mara River.

He nods in agreement at our wildlife wish list. There have been regular crossings, just one this morning, Kivuyo tells us. But whether one would happen today, he can't say. As he unlatches the roof of our jeep so that we have nearly unobstructed views of the grasslands around us, my friend Angel and I exchange bemuse looks at our guide's Yoda-like responses.

We don't have to wait for long. Shortly into our journey along a dirt track, we come across a pair of giraffes. About 20 feet high, the male nuzzles the female's neck as it creeps closer to her. Realising we have stumbled upon the pair mid-romance, we giggle like school children. A few more nuzzles later and the male giraffe has accomplished his mission, walking off towards a tree for a snack.

"Part of the circle of life," Kivuyo deadpans and we laugh heartily.

We continue our drive and Kivuyo keeps an eye out on the horizon. The hum from the jeep's walkie-talkie is on low; the guides at the various camps chatter amongst themselves, exchanging information on locations of nocturnal cats, rare rhinos or the anticipatory swarm of wildebeest gathered on the banks of the Mara.

112-113 Downtown Travel-Tanzania.indd 112 11/25/12 4:32 PM



"ONE OF THE HIGHLIGHTS OF THE ANNUAL MIGRATION IS THE CROSSING OF THE MARA RIVER, WHERE CROCODILES LURK UNDERWATER AND LIONESSES' PROWL ON THE BANKS ALONGSIDE."

Within an hour, the Serengeti's abundance of wildlife emerge. We spot impalas and elephants silently grazing, and hippos submerged to their ears in the river to ward off the late afternoon heat. Skittish zebras dart in and out of clusters of their fellow prey animals.

By evening, however, a crossing hasn't formed and we have to reach camp before sundown. From July to October, about two million animals follow the rains, migrating from Tanzania's Serengeti National Park to the Maasai Mara National Reserve in Kenya. One of the highlights of the annual migration is the crossing of the Mara River, where crocodiles lurk underwater and lionesses' prowl on the banks alongside.

At dinner that evening, our fellow campers rave about the raw power they witnessed as thousands of wildebeest stampeded through the Mara river.

A baby zebra walked into the open yaw of a hippo, which then crunched down on it! We watched a wildebeest taken down, mid-river, by a crocodile!

We have no such stories to contribute to the fireside gathering. I am not worried; we still have a few days left for our safari.

The next day, the walkie-talkies are ablaze with chatter of migration-style critical masses forming along the Mara at several crossing points. We travel from site to site, eventually staking out the one nearest to our camp. The hours tick by but by late afternoon, the first of the wildebeests slide down the steep bank and into the river. And just like that, the migration begins. The zebras' shrieking bark seems to offer directional guidance to the wildebeest, who in two and then three single-file lines half-swim, half-gallop through the water to the greener pastures on the other side. Zebras, we discover, are the bouncers of the wildlife world.

After that first crossing, we begin stumbling on crossings on a regular basis. The next morning we watch a particularly large group of wildebeest for 20 minutes when suddenly a lioness bounds in from the left. We watch, dumbfounded, as she charges the unlucky wildebeest directly in her path. As she wrestles her prey to the ground, the zebras' shriek grow even more shrill and the tide of wildebeests reverses course.

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Where to stay



Olakira Camp
This luxury tented mobile camp sits just off the banks of the Mara River during the migration season in the summer and fall. Olakira has only eight tents and guests enjoy meals in the common dining/living tents. Dinner is preceded by drinks and snacks around a campfire.
www.asiliaafrica.com/olakira

Zanzibar
The island, known as Unguja in Swahili to Zanzibarians in order to distinguish itself from Zanzibar city, is dotted with beach resorts. We stayed at Shooting Star Lodge, located on the northwest part of the island. The inn, which features cozy villas on a perch above the beach, was the perfect setting to unwind after our day-long drives in the dusty Serengeti.
www.shootingstarlodge.com

Stone Town
The House of Wonders and the Palace museums' exhibitions are few but give visitors a sense of the island's place along trading routes between India, the Gulf and Africa. The palace museum served as the official residence of the Sultan of Zanzibar until he was overthrown in 1964 and it includes pictures and history of Princess Salme, the Tanzanian royal whose affair with a non-Muslim German businessman caused her to flee to Europe, where she lived until she died at age 80 in 1924.

112-113 Downtown Travel-Tanzania.indd 113 11/25/12 4:32 PM