

Mathews Safaris Update- New Year 2003

Hello all and greetings from sunny Nairobi

It took a while (five days) for me to break camp and dig my way out of the bush after the holidays so sorry for the delay in getting back to you. Happy New Year, by the way.

My 2002 came to a close with friends in the Masai Mara. It was a magical year which found us cloistered in a chapel of Westminster in July and wandering amongst the elephants in December. We were lucky enough get a late booking and hosted a honeymoon couple from NYC for Christmas. Our flight from the highlands brought the first rays of sunshine amidst a mini el Nino which transformed the plains into a verdant green. Besides sunshine, the lovely couple seemed to attract big cats and elephants and we had a lot talk about as we settled down to a huge Christmas dinner of turkey (with all the fix'ns) under an indigo African sky. Days of game walks, sunrise ballooning and picnics followed and we were very sad to see them go. Camp had become home.



Sunrise lift off



And a predawn flight

The New Year brought more magic and surprises. For this holiday we hosted an extended family and entourage spanning three generations from America's East Coast. One of the greatest joys for a professional guide is taking families on safari. Whilst I love treating my contemporaries to the magic of the bush, youngsters add a special element and bring their own wonderful mix of naivete & insight to our timeless environment. The "Three-to-Seventy-six Safari" (thus termed from the age range) reminded me of this special joy and strengthened my resolve to lead more safaris for extended family groups. Needless to say, it was a most lively time in our little Mara camp especially when two of our guests absconded with a Land Rover and a cache of champagne to return an hour later, grinning and engaged.

As the new year took shape our guests grew into the bush and nearly took over. Luckily, they escaped to the North of Kenya just as the rains returned in earnest and our supply vehicles sank into the scenery.



Curious cat

My favourite experience of 2003 thus far was an early morning game drive which brought us upon a majestic lion and his cortege of two lionesses. We first saw them as we emerged from the thick bush and mounted a grassy ridge. The sun had just clambered sleepily over the escarpment to illuminate the misty glades when a rambunctious cub bounced by the front bumper in misguided pursuit of a massive hyaena. Menacingly, and without warning, the hyaena spun to face the fuzzy toddler and they froze in a nose to nose standoff. I was sure that we were about to witness the cub becoming a breakfast snack but instead, the little lion growled, puffed his chest and pushed closer. This, I could not fathom, until I followed the hyaena's gaze into the low bush several metres away. The gaze was answered by the most formidable eyes of ochre and gold, set firmly atop the most beautiful lioness I have seen in years. The hyaena was completely disarmed and reduced to joining the hapless jackals in being target practice for the young cub.

The blanket of mist melted from amidst the high grass to allow the early rays of morning to reveal a male lion on kill of Thompson Gazelle and a second young lioness. We watched for over an hour as they bathed in the flaxen light and taunted the hungry hyaenas. What a great way to start the year.



Photo Doug Mason

The last day in camp began in the usual way, I slipped out of the tent before light and joined the whispering in the kitchen as the steam from fresh baked cinnamon rolls and croissants lifted and dissolved in the lamplight. The heat from my first cup of coffee radiated up my arms from the worn tin mug as I waited for the caffeine to inspire me. Meanwhile staff, laden with breakfast trays, slipped off towards the guest tents, the aroma of coffee and tea intermingling in their wake and infusing the predawn air. There seemed to be a sombre note to the

ritual as I selected Ethel May, our old 1967 Land Rover, for the drive through the river crossing and up the broad hill west of camp. She came alive faithfully on the first turn of the key and burred quietly past camp with just the marker lights defining the grassy track. It was the usual routine, I thought, as we pushed through the deep brown water at the lugga and parted a sleeping herd of zebra on the far bank. I'll head up the hill, scout for wildlife, glimpse the weather, assess the prospects for the morning game drive and be back in camp before the guests have stirred.

Ethel May and I ascended the long grassy slope until the first light of morning made the whistling thorns glow a chalky white. I found a level spot, circled off the track to point east, switched off the engine and waited for the sun to put in a better showing. The staccato clunk of Maasai cow bells took over where the engine had left off and Wildebeest "hmmmed" and "honked" around the car in awkward competition. I sat much longer than usual and watched my camp twinkle and come alive down below. Lanterns swung briskly along narrow paths, tent windows took on a soft glow and flashes of red reached me as the Maasai night guards exchanged with the day shift and retreated hastily to the kitchen. It was obvious that I would be expected back in camp rather soon.

Yet I stayed still and tried to reason with my tardiness, theorising that I just liked the vantage point that the old Land Rover provided - once described by a client as being "like Grandma's back porch, big and roomy with broad bench seats and that odd, timeless, feeling". But that wasn't it and my Grandma's porch certainly lacked roof hatches, four wheel drive and furry neighbours with large teeth. It came to me as I reluctantly slipped Ethel May into gear and coasted down the shallow slope. Camp had become home and another wonderful safari was at an end. I knew that by the next day the tents would be folded, the supply trucks would be packed and the laughter and memories would be lost in the bush only to return on the pages of photo albums and letters from far away.

Now we have a lot of work to do, not the least of which is to repair damage inflicted upon vehicles and equipment during our long muddy escape from the bush. Nairobi is brilliantly sunny and the awning off the front porch provides the ideal place for me to reflect the last year and dream of adventures to come. The possibilities seem endless with major changes in government and the appointment of an excellent cabinet. We are greatly pleased to see one of Kenya's most avid conservationists (previously a thorn in the side of government) appointed to the position of Minister for the Environment. Hopefully, the new appointments and anticipated increases in international funding will raise the level of the tour industry even higher.

We see most improvements to the safari industry taking place in the luxury sector in which Mathews Safaris is situated. The level of guiding continues to improve through the efforts of the association of professional tour guides and Glenn Mathews recently became one of the select few to qualify as a Silver Guide, currently the highest level of certification. Meanwhile the ecotourism movement is sweeping Kenya and many of the new lodges meet or exceed international criteria for architecture, energy use, guiding and water conservation. Jared has been involved in this aspect and encourages the development of habitat-specific ecotourism networks and guidelines. 2003 will also see the development of several new and exclusive safari lodges and camps within private reserves and community conservation areas. We intend to investigate these new developments and assess their suitability for our clients. Adventure tours are also

on the upswing with a wide variety being offered from mountain climbing to, corporate incentive trips and river rafting. We will keep you up to date on options to spice up your safaris.

Our own little company continues to experiment with additional destinations (including Tanzania and Uganda), children's safaris, improved menus and ways to make your adventures in the bush more comfortable. I'm particularly excited about the children's trips - dubbed "Little Simba Expeditions" and you will be hearing more about these in the next month. We are now also experimenting with new itineraries which integrate use of established lodges with exclusive camps, thus cutting costs for you and offering a wide variety of experiences. We will be visiting some of the premier destinations and we will report back to you in the coming month. The last exciting development is the happy addition of a Stateside representative to make communication easier. Sarah Reynard can be reached through: SMReynard@aol.com 60 Delmar Ave, Framingham MA 01701, tel: 508 877 0787.

Other ideas which might interest you include traveling to Kenya via South Africa or breaking up your trip with a hosted visit to London and the English coast. The advent of a new South African Airways route from New York to Jo Burg and easy connections to Nairobi have led us to design some exotic new safari concepts. We are considering plans to meet guests upon arrival in Johannesburg and host them through a variety of uniquely South African experiences including the famous Blue Train, wine country tours, the nightlife of Cape Town and Kruger National Park. The connection onto Nairobi is rather easy and wilds of Kenya can offer an intriguing contrast to the order of the South African scene. Jared calls this the "Downside Up Safari" and we can't figure out why others aren't offering the same. The price is certainly right with the Rand very weak and this double itinerary can provide a extremely varied experience for first time and repeat travelers alike. Stops in Victoria Falls can also be arranged. Let us know if you are interested in us designing such a safari plan for you.

The English stopover idea grew out of our extended stay in London this summer. We thought that some guests might enjoy starting their safari in England where they would be hosted by myself and shown around the best of London. Then, perhaps, a few days at the family beach home in the historic town of Aldeburgh in Suffolk. Once rested and well fed it would be on to Kenya for some real adventure.



Elephants from the Air Photo, Doug Mason

Other important work takes up our "free time". I'm very busy doing census' of elephants in Western and Central Africa whilst Christian (my three year old) is becoming a master at applying stickers to my satellite maps. My maps of elephant distribution and movements are used to help guide conservation efforts and determine how and why elephants migrate. Most of the work involves sending light aircraft out in special formations over the parks so observers can count animals and record the data using global positioning systems. I then evaluate the performance of pilots and crews and incorporate the findings onto computerised maps. Other mapping work involves the use of radio collars and, in some cases,

monitoring of poaching. Tracking elephants takes me to some wonderful, yet remote, places and there is never a lack of interesting people.

Meanwhile Jared continues to track the trade in elephant ivory and he advises on proposals for conservation projects throughout the region. He's particularly concerned with the fact that the poorest of East Africa's people have begun turning to wild animals as a source of protein for their families. Eating wild animals is not traditional with most tribes but overpopulation, inadequate transport systems and the high cost of veterinary care have forced a large proportion of the people to supplement their diets with meat from the bush. Jared believes that this problem, called the "bushmeat trade" should be addressed by a wide variety of organisations before it gets out of control. He's pushing for awareness within the government and for agencies concerned with human welfare to take the lead before wildlife organisations can play their role. It's a big issue, especially with more than 50% of our wild animals living outside of the parks, but we have the potential to stem the tide before the situation becomes as overwhelming as it has in parts of West and Central Africa.

My little family is very well and Christian is growing by the day. Kenya remains a great place for family life and we always seem to find time together amidst all the hustle and bustle. The most wonderful and surreal event of the year was my wedding to Jared (the wonderful new man you heard about in the last letter) in the House of Lords this past summer. Friends and family travelled from around the world for a week of celebration before Jared and I headed of to Thailand (supposedly to investigate new recipes for the company). The pomp and splendour of the wedding still has us giddy, especially given the context of our rather rustic African setting. Photos of the event can be seen at <http://uk.photos.yahoo.com/twiglette22>

We hope to be able to make it to London and the USA this summer but we will have to see what the cards hold. We will keep you up to date on our plans and try to see as many of you as possible. The extended Mathews clan is well and moving from strength to strength. Terry continues to design wonderful bronzes and sent a life size lioness to join the bull elephant in Tuscaloosa. Jean dotes on Christian and continues to provide useful guidance for the business. Glenn still specialises in 4x4 engineering and develops his guiding expertise while Phil flies helicopters and prepares for his upcoming wedding. Denis and Lorne follow in their father's footsteps casting wonderful bronzes in England and Kenya, respectively.

I wish you all the best for 2003 and hope to share some adventures with you in the near future.

Clair

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"Little Simba " at Three