

Mathews Safaris 2003 Mind Year Update

Hello everyone and greetings from a "wintery" Nairobi. I just returned from a magical trip to Tanzania with guests from California. It is time, once more, to relax by the fire in our old stone cottage and let the images of the past weeks fill my head. Elephants and giraffe drift through my thoughts and mingle with the crackling of the fire and the lilt of familiar voices. Jared and Christian are out applying various wrenches to the Range Rover and our visitors are editing their photographs while I attempt to get a letter off to you in the few hours before our next journey.

The theme of our most recent adventure was, simply put, "elephants and volcanoes" and from the very start we knew we had a charming combination. The first stop on our journey was the lush swamps and open plains of Amboseli National Park at the foot of Kilimanjaro, the grandest of all African volcanoes. On a chilly "winter's" morning we left Nairobi and made a quick trip through the mist of central province before pointing the Land Rover Discovery south towards the Tanzania border. Small gatherings of giraffe and gerenuk dotted the bush outside the park and a grand parade of ostriches greeted us just inside the gate. They appeared almost regal as they promenaded, barelegged, at the roadside but that was before a pair of Giraffe joined in and put them to shame with their slow, elegant, stride. I hadn't been in Amboseli since our safari over September 11 and, as we stopped to gaze at the giraffe strolling wistfully along the dusty lake bed, I couldn't help but think how much the world has changed in these last few years. As I thought, Kilimanjaro remained hidden in the distance, all but its gently curving waist covered by a heavy cloak of bruised and angry clouds.



Elephants striding across the lake bed in Amboseli

Cool springs and rivulets reach out across the Amboseli basin, fed by Kilimanjaro's icy peaks and sprinkled with an iridescent array of herons, crowned cranes, jakanas and ibis. We traced one such leafy fringe south and into a land of smooth volcanic cones, zebras and grand tortillias trees. This quiet place between the plains and the mountain would be our home for the next few nights. Tortillias Camp is renown for its stunning views across to Tanzania and up onto the smooth slopes of Kilimanjaro but we saw little evidence of this as we shook off the dust in comfort of our thatch-roofed promontory and bundled back into the Land Rover to track down pachyderms.



It wasn't long before we found the elephants nibbling on the moist fringes of Lake Amboseli. Then again, a vast herd of a hundred or more elephants is a hard thing to keep hidden on the open plains. The entire herd was full of the joys of spring with the young ones splashing in puddles and jousting noisily for our entertainment.

The older set mingled, greeting each other gracefully; trunks entwined and ears unfurled to catch the cooling wind. Many of the little ones were less than a year old and we watched as they launched clumsy ambushes against their older siblings before retreating, hurriedly, between their mother's legs. A few calves were too little to have sorted out the true use of their trunks and they remained locked in concentration, attempting to capture the high grasses with their whirling noses or just trying to keep from toppling over altogether. Gradually, the entire herd surrounded us to play and socialize around the open Land Rover. The herd flowed slowly past, trumpeting, grumbling and sniffing the air as they went. I was admiring a huge bull elephant at the far edge of the herd when the clouds swept away from the high slopes to reveal an awesome display of clear mountain air and long distance vistas.

Kilimanjaro suddenly stood as a towering backdrop of rock and snow, dwarfing the elephants that frolicked and fed on the plains down below. Our guests, at first, could not see the mountain! They had simply set their sights too low and I watched smiles spread across their faces as their eyes raised to the glaciers atop Uhuru peak.



Kilimanjaro shows reveals itself

Photo Ray George

Cool evening air spilled onto the open plains and elephant mothers, aunts and older sisters began the slow process of extracting the young from the mud baths and swimming holes. I thought of my own three-year-old as frustrated elephants tried to lift stubborn toddlers who seemed to instantly turn to jello, using their deadweight to slide off their mother's trunks and drop, headfirst, back into the mud. Groups of exasperated mothers teamed up to help with the most stubborn toddlers as others rambled around behind them and back into the mire. Acacias glowed in the last flaxen rays of dusk as we traced our way back to camp and the somber thoughts of earlier in the day were gradually replaced by the certainty that this is a place which remains pure, untouched and timeless.



The mountain dropped in to check on us several times over the next few days and, as we left for the Tanzanian border, Kilimanjaro stood bathed in bright sunlight beside her 14,000ft sister, Mt. Meru. The drive south into Tanzania was as spectacular as always with bizarre volcanic forms and long vistas waiting for us around every corner. Swala Camp in Tarangire National Park was a new destination for us and we were amply rewarded with two elephant-filled days. The park's undulating valleys cradle a lazy river brimming with wildlife and there are opportunities to walk along its wooded banks with guides from the camp. My most treasured memories of Tarangire remain the ethereal image of elephants high on the horizon, gliding majestically past the broad and mottled trunks of ancient baobab trees. The baobab's smooth silver skin capture and hold even the most subtle hues from the earth and sky around them. At sunset, these giants glow from indigo to pink and, lastly, gold until they extinguish altogether and turn to black, their limbs upraised as if to lift the night sky.

After two full days at Swala, we followed the sun west to Manyara National Park, tucked at the foot of the Great Rift Valley escarpment.

Manyara's "groundwater forest" is fed by springs which filter down through sheer volcanic cliffs, thrusting thousands of feet up from the lakebed. Moisture and nutrients well up from the soft green floor of the valley to support rich undergrowth and nourish towering groves of wild fig and mahogany. Cool forest air greeted us

at the gate and dappled sunlight twinkled in through the open roof hatches, growing to a warm glow as we emerged onto the plains and towards our private camp at the lakeside. The lake was too low for boating amongst hippos and giant Nile crocs but I don't think that our guests minded all that much. We stuck to solid land and explored the park to its southern tip. Our dauntless spirit of exploration was rewarded back at camp with sumptuous chilled avocado soup and other treats, crafted by our very attentive chef. We rose the next morning to see what trouble the lions stirred up overnight amongst the giant fig and mahogany trees, before heading off towards Ngorongoro.

Ngorongoro, as always, was the star attraction of the journey. The drive to the outer edge of the volcano begins with a charge up the escarpment wall, followed by a steady ascent to the shoulder of the mountain. As the slope grows steeper, lush vegetation closes around the Land Rover, concealing the numerous switch backs (and perhaps a leopard or two) in a rich cloak of green. The Land Rover carried us dutifully to the crest of the caldera and deposited us before a vast spectacle nine miles across, nearly 2,500 ft deep and bursting with some of the most exquisite animals on earth. Some have described Ngorongoro as a garden of Eden or a land lost in time but, for me, the experience cannot be captured in words. You will have to come see it for yourself. Our base was the famous Crater Lodge, perched at Ngorongoro's western edge. The stately old lodge has just been refitted and now ranks as one of the World's Best Small Luxury Hotels with cliffside suites fringed with floor to ceiling windows looking East over the caldera. However, the place is as eccentric as the characters which have graced its halls over the years and it's quirky decor has led some to refer to it as the "Masai Versailles". Our guests had a different theory and speculated that the decor must have been the handiwork of an inebriated Ethiopian architect. Whilst not basking in the glow of purple, beaded, chandeliers we enjoyed two full days of game drives in crater which yielded an embarrassingly rich display of hippos, rhinos, lions and other plains game.

If the clanking and the sunburnt legs extending out from under the Range Rover are any indication, we are nearly ready to take our guests North to a private game ranch near Mt. Kenya (another big volcano) and then on to see the lions of Meru National Park. Lastly, we will retire with our guests to a house on the coast to wash away the dust and test Jared's more outrageous seafood recipes.

Mathews Family News has been as exciting and diverse as our travels. Terry continues to produce wonderful bronzes, several of which seem to be heading towards the States as I write. Terry and Jean have been active traveling internationally and locally as well. They divide their Kenya time between the coast and the family home in Kitengela. Glenn and Karen have started a new business, a special off-road college which trains people how to handle their SUVs, effortlessly in the most extreme conditions. Denis continues expanding and improving his bronze gallery and we plan to attend the latest opening over the weekend. Phil and Nadia are engaged and they are very busy working on a variety of projects (besides the helicopter, the wedding and the new house) including the launch of Indian Ocean cruises on a traditional wooden dhow. News from Lorne and Fleur is that they survived another British winter, most likely protected from the English chill by the foundry furnaces.

The Mathews Safaris Team have been going from strength to strength, fine-tuning their skills in the bush and even running a private camp for Joy Kiano's big wedding bash in Nairobi. Successes from the kitchen crew have ranged from several spicy spit-roasted pigs to lighter-than-air brioche. The omelette duel continues to intensify between Jared and Paulo but Daniel has made good use of the occasional cease-fire to perfect his own savory eggs benedict. The pasta machine suffered at the hands of our Masai Mara El Nino but this hasn't stopped Christian from demanding linguine nearly every night. He helps though and we may be forced to seek a career for him which involves furious cranking.

Douglas is now acting manager of Kuki Gallmann's camp but he is still available to guide for us when we have larger groups. Fred Kayser also remains with safaris but has taken advantage of the lull in tourism to expand his interests. Glenn Mathews continues to build his guiding knowledge and he can't resist making frequent recesses into the bush, such our expedition to help the warden of Tsavo open up new roads into the frontier.

Wildlife conservation trudles along despite the downturn in tourism and I spent a full month this year conducting elephant surveys in the wilds of West Africa. Save the Elephants also keeps me busy mapping elephant movements and distribution in Kenya. Jared has been hard at work developing new safari itineraries, upgrading the equipment, exploring new destinations and expanding our Simba Tracker program for children on safari. He is particularly excited about new lodges and camps in Tanzania and the walking/trekking options available. When time permits, Jared pursues his long-term communications and environmental education work and is hatching a new international project to use cartoons to educate children about the trade in wildlife.

Air Safaris. *A few weeks ago we exploited a tiny gap in the thunderheads to escape Nairobi and fly through the Great Rift Valley. Our friend, Rory McGuinness, wanted to add hours to his Commercial License so we borrowed a Cessna 206 from Wilson Airport and popped over the Ngong Hills at 8,000ft and down to the scorching lake bed of Magadi on the rift floor. I can't remember when I've seen the rift so lush and the swamps at the base of Mt. Shompoli (a name which, I strongly suspect, means "nasty hill of thorns and ticks" in Masai) were awash with fresh water from the escarpment. Once over the thorny shoulder of the mountain, we flew at low altitude along the vast soda lake, it's brim alive with color with wisps of silky white swirled like cream atop pools of crimson and blue. At the south end we encountered the eery satellite cones, volcanic plugs and craters surrounding Lengai, - the last remaining active volcano in East Africa. As we began to climb over the eastern slopes of the volcano we soon discovered that the ribbed backside of the mountain was a succession of false peaks and I admit to lifting myself high against the console to assess how much air remained between us and rapidly approaching thorn trees. Lengai's deeply furrowed cone stood guard at our right and a towering cliff to our left guided us in a slow arc until we topped the last ridge and floated, effortlessly down to the pale lake flats below and up the rift to Lake Naivasha*

That flight was magical and it inspired the thought that private pilots from the USA and elsewhere would love to explore our clear, uncluttered, skies whilst taking in the wildlife. We will now be offering Private Pilots, of any nationality, the opportunity to fly their own safari in a country with stunning views, empty skies, perfect weather and incomparable bush flying into and out of exotic game reserves. Rory McGuinness is a Kenyan citizen and he has been flying around East Africa for over 30 years. He was trained in the USA and holds an FAA commercial licence as well as a Kenya commercial licence. Once out of Nairobi, flight is relatively unrestricted with no controllers routing you from place to place. Rory will serve as safety pilot, advising on flight planning of all segments and co-piloting all flights. It is also planned that Rory will take the discretion to execute the more difficult landings and takeoffs on high altitude grass strips. Rory is qualified to fly multi-engine aircraft and thoroughly enjoys bush flying which, in Kenya, is unsurpassed. Rory knows the country very well and is a senior member of the famous (and colourful) Aero Club of East Africa. He has competed in many air rally's both as pilot and navigator in Kenya and Zimbabwe winning several of them including the 3rd leg of the 1998 Preston International Air Rally between Zimbabwe and Kenya.

Our goal will be to combine the best of traditional game viewing and luxury under canvas with custom designed bush flying itineraries. Air safaris will be personally hosted by me or Jared (in the bush) and Rory (in the clouds). The concept would be to select interesting airstrips at each destination and to build luxury camps where necessary with the aim being to have the aircraft at our "front door" at all times. This plan will be ideal for the families who wish to have the African adventure of a lifetime while the pilot in the family pursues his or her own flying dreams.

We are travelling stateside this summer and would love to see you. We plan to arrive in the USA in mid July and will be around until early September. Key stops planned thus far include New England, Upstate NY, St, Louis and perhaps California but we are desperately looking for any excuse to wander further afield. Despite growing up in New York, Jared remains blissfully unaware of any land west of the Rockies and I feel duty-bound to show him around. We have a few private presentations planned regarding our wildlife conservation work and we plan to bring new materials on Mathews Safaris as well. We would love to share them with you and to hear your stories of the past year.

We leave Kenya on 11 July but can be reached throughout the journey via email at mathews@wananchi.com and in the USA at 60 Delmar Ave, Framingham MA 01701, tel: 508 877 0787.

All the best and have a great summer.

Clair