



THIS IS

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE WILDEBEEST

BY ELISA BIRNBAUM

IT WAS JUST AFTER DAWN. THE RED-ORANGE SUN ROSE LIKE A FIREBALL. MOMENTS LATER SO DID WE.

Soaring high above the savannah in a hot-air balloon gave us a unique vantage point from which to witness the breathtaking surroundings and one of the greatest shows on Earth, still to come. But it was hard not to feel exceptionally small, the sheer expansiveness of Kenya's Mara made all the more palpable from my seemingly tenuous perch.

Sunny, warm, barely a breeze and not a cloud to be seen, these were ideal conditions for a smooth-sailing journey. The view from up on high was truly spectacular: a piercing-blue African sky speckled with the colourful stripes of similarly fashioned flying baskets. In them, awe-struck passengers, zoom lenses at the ready.

background: From the vast Serengeti plains to Kenya's Masai Mara, more than 1.5 million wildebeest migrate in a clockwise fashion more than 1,800 miles each year in search of rain-ripened grass.

opposite, top: Nothing compares to the rare experience of Masai Mara game-viewing while standing quietly in the basket of a hot-air balloon.

Elisa Birnbaum



THE SCENE BELOW

But the best place to look was down. For, below our feet, hundreds of thousands of wildebeest—accompanied by occasional zebras and Thomson's gazelles—were following in their ancestral footsteps, fulfilling a biological imperative. Stretching from one horizon to the next, a streaming, ostensibly limitless herd was moving in a singular grey fusion, rumbling hoofs and periodic grunts adding effect to their movement.

It was the first full day of the Great Wildebeest Migration, recently anointed one of the “New Seven Wonders of the World.” The annual event sees more than 1.5 million wildebeest make the trek from the Serengeti National Park in Tanzania to the Masai Mara in Kenya and back again, following the scent of rain and fresh grass.

It's a spectacle like no other. The sheer numbers and complexity of the operation are impressive enough. But the event is made all the more incredible because it's logistically sound, one wildebeest falling in line with the next, as if they each attended the rehearsal migration dinner the night before. What's more, with every step, the precariousness of life is increasingly evident. After all, predators—particularly lions and hyenas—abound in the Mara, waiting in the wings for a wildebeest to slip, fall out of step. For many, this is their final outing.

Though it's mid-June and the wildebeest (also known as gnu) don't typically cross into Kenya before July, this year's early departure is welcomed by documentarians, tourists and predators alike. “You're very lucky,” grins our balloon pilot, Captain Kim—an expat originally from South Korea who calls Kenya “the best place on Earth” for flying balloons. “It's also the best migration I've ever seen,” he continues, explaining the quantity of migrants, all in a few hours' time, is a once-in-a-lifetime occurrence.





CIRCLE OF LIFE

We land with a small yet perceptible thump and are quickly escorted (a lion and her cubs lying not 10 metres from our landing strip may explain the swift manoeuvring) to an extravagant bush breakfast, a white-linen-tablecloth buffet replete with crepes, omelettes, cappuccinos and champagne. As I sip from my crystal flute, I keep an eye out for the Kenyan creatures that keep their pace, minding their own business. They've got things to do, places to go, after all.

I am quickly reminded of our ride early that morning. Expertly navigating the pothole-laden Masai Mara reserve in the pitch-black African darkness, our driver quickly slammed on his brakes and powered up his high beams. Less than a foot in front of us, a family of zebras, magnificent and proud, was strolling across our path. They, too, were minding their business, with purpose and preservation their only navigational GPS. The nonchalance and deliberateness in their footsteps relayed a clear message: "This is our land, you are simply guests; make sure to clean up after you're done." It's a message often repeated in these parts.



Our stomachs full, our palates refined, we rejoin the migratory performance. But now we're bumping along in jeeps, customized vehicles we've come to know well from the many game drives on our week-long safari in Kenya. This time we get up close. The driver pulls up to the banks of the Mara River where many of the wildebeest have now converged. Survival depends on them crossing to the other side where they'll feed for the next three months. Suddenly, the highly organized event is starting to look like a logistical nightmare. The grunting—interspersed with audible shrieks—increases in frequency and pitch. Panic-mode appears to have set in. And who can blame them? The waters are not only deep; they are filled with salivating crocs. Let the predatory games begin.

Despite understandable ambivalence, some wildebeest finally push ahead, braving the elements. Others start but quickly turn back, searching for loved ones and trampling their brethren in the process. I now appreciate the expression “herd mentality” in non-metaphoric terms. I watch helplessly, yet strangely mesmerized, as a crocodile swims furtively toward the melee, in pursuit of those who've taken the courageous leap. He submerges his head only to reappear a moment later, clamping down hard on a young wildebeest. Our jeep goes silent then breaks into a cheer when the calf breaks free of the croc's stranglehold.

But we know it's only a matter of time before a fatal strike. Sure enough, with another snap of the jaw, the hungry reptile is successful in his second bid. The victim had no chance. We're captivated. In the background, the guide speaks of the “circle of life” and I know he's not referring to the song from *The Lion King*. I feel like I'm watching an episode of *National Geographic*, only it's in 3D and the smells, sounds and emotions are so raw you can practically taste them, survival instincts eerily tangible.

This is survival of the fittest in its purest, most natural form. This is Kenya. ■


opposite, top: Our guides expertly navigate the pothole-laden turf of the Masai Mara Reserve. Elisa Birnbaum

opposite, bottom left: Following our hot-air balloon experience, the table is set for breakfast. Larissa Buijs

opposite, bottom right: Lions were spotted less than 10 metres from our landing spot. Elisa Birnbaum

TRAVEL PLANNER

For more information on Kenya and hot-air balloon rides, visit magicalkenya.com. For information on safaris, visit pawsafrica.com. For accommodation in Masai Mara, visit the Fairmont Mara Safari Club at fairmont.com/marasafariclub.




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