

GOING PLACES

JOHN COONEY



In the jungle, the mighty jungle ...



It is 5:00am, and the sun's not yet up when our alarm goes off. "It's on your side," I mumble sleepily. And as my wife scrambles in the darkness to turn the thing off, she nearly strangles herself in the mosquito net that surrounds our bed.



WE'RE IN THE MASAI Mara Regional Park – one of the most densely populated game reserves in Africa. The 'Mara' lies along Kenya's border with Tanzania, and is centre-stage for the most dramatic wildlife show on earth: the legendary once-a-year migration of vast herds of wildebeest and zebras.

These herds are stalked by predators – lions and leopards, hyenas and jackals. And one way to fully appreciate this drama is from a great height. Which is why the early start!

We Kiwis are about to take to the skies ...

Imagine lifting off in a huge hot-air balloon ... rising slowly above the grassy savannah ... floating gently in the wind-currents ... skimming the treetops one minute, then soaring high the next ... the only sound an occasional roar from the gas burners. Imagine playing spot-the-wildlife, while dawn slowly lights

up the land and a big orange sun creeps over the horizon.

Well, we're no longer imagining it – we're gonna DO IT!

It's hard to think of anything more exciting than an African safari! At least once a day, sometimes early morning while it's still quite dark, sometimes late afternoon when it's cooler, we pile into waiting 4WDs and bounce off along the dirt roads that crisscross East Africa's famous gameparks.

The vehicles' lids (roofs) are up, so we can stand for fresh air and ringside views – and our drivers are experts on wildlife, birdlife, ecology, conservation. They've also got amazing eyesight, accurately seeing some action long before we can!

I wish I had time to tell you about the pair of mud-smothered **hippos** we disturbed on one bend in the road. The banded **mongoose** family, scurrying off to who-knows-where.



The elegant 'tower' of curious **giraffes** that wandered the grounds near our lodge. The parade of **elephants** we witnessed, marching single-file to some distant trees for the night. The multi-hued **bee-eaters** posing for selfies on a nearby branch. The **lion-cubs** we spied, playing tag in the dirt, while their big-cat parents snoozed prior to their evening hunt. The trio of randy male **rhinos** in hot pursuit of a flirty, frisky female. And the **leopard** we lucked upon, dragging a young **gazelle** through the long grass, pausing to warn us with a cold, green stare!

But back to those hot-air balloons ...

We arrived at the launch-site while it was still dark. The giant rainbow-coloured balloons – two of them, stretched out flat on the ground – were being slowly inflated. Then, once they were more-or-less upright, we scrambled into the big baskets. Gas flames and heat roared into the enormous space above our heads, and before we knew it we were airborne!

It's hard to describe the breathtaking panorama that unfolded below. Here, lush plains and undulating hills

... there, jungle outcrops and meandering rivers. Here, a lone **elephant** swaying in the shadows ... there, a lanky **giraffe** nibbling at leafy treetops. Here, a **buffalo** family unsure about the strange object in the sky ... there, a flotilla of huge, hungry **crocs** lurking in the muddy waters. And, off in the far distance, hordes of tiny black specks – **wildebeests**, pouring like locusts into the Mara from the plains of Serengeti. Their goal: the Mara river crossing.

All good things must end, of course. We eventually came back to earth with a bump, thump and tumble. And awaiting us out there on the wide-open grassland was a final balloon-safari treat!

Picture us, if you can, seated under a spreading acacia tree, around a table laid with bone-china and silver cutlery. The delicious aroma of a yummy 'bush-breakfast' is filling the air. And glasses of bubbly are being handed around ...

Karibu, Kiwis!

Welcome – and congratulations! 🍷

WOULD YOU LIKE TO JOIN JOHN & ROBYN COONEY ON A MAD MIDLIFE SAFARI TO KENYA & TANZANIA? JUNE 2023 IS THE DATE, AND WE STILL HAVE ROOM FOR YOU! EMAIL INFO@MIDLIFEMADNESS.TOURS OR PHONE 0800 323 333.

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