

# THE MASAI MARA

## A photographic safari adventure

Finally... I could feel the runway gravel crunch under my safari boots. After many months of waiting and many hours of travelling I was finally stepping off the tiny propeller plane, down onto one of the many landing strips in the Maasai Mara. For all of you that have ever complained about a bumpy landing, I suggest you try landing on pebbles and you will complain no more. But I wasn't too bothered. I was finally here and my awaited African safari was about to become a reality.

The Maasai Mara, or "The Mara" for short, is a huge game reserve in southwestern Kenya. It is named after the Maasai people who are natives

of the region. To a large extent they still live by their old culture and traditions, herding their highly valued livestock on the savannah with only a spear as a protection.

My travel companion and I were picked up straight away by a purpose-built Toyota Land Cruiser 4x4 from our camp. Yes I said camp... We opted to stay in a tented camp to experience first-hand the true feeling of the African bush. The Hemingway way of visiting Africa, as it was advertised. We had a 45 minutes drive from the airstrip to the camp and although I knew I was going to see plenty of animals on my trip, this was beyond all expectations.

Animals everywhere! We encountered zebras, birds, antelopes, and hippos, all in this short arc of 45 minutes. I want to clarify that these animals are wild and not fenced in or tame in any way. The Maasai Mara is not a park, but a reserve where animals are free to roam as they please.

Once at the camp, the manager greeted us in the lounge tent and explained a few practicalities and safety measures. We were given our tent number and we quickly settled in. I knew we were not going to stay in a conventional tent but this was just amazing. We had all normal amenities such as shower, sink, toilet, proper beds, lights, storage space for our gear and, last but not least, the glorious African Savannah with its wild flora and fauna just outside our canvas door. No fences or barriers of any kind whatsoever. This being a photographic safari meant that we were not going to be lying about. We wanted to

squeeze in as many hours on the savannah as possible to maximize our chances of getting the best possible shots. So at around 3pm we had our first game drive.





Daniel, our Maasai driver, showed our photography guide and us the way to our vehicle and we loaded up the gear. To improve our chances to get the proper shots each of us had a whole row of seats. This meant that we could photograph in either direction of the vehicle that also had a removable roof so that we could also shoot from the top if necessary. We were advised on some safety issues and off we went. Putting it mildly I can say I was a bit excited.



The next 3 hours were spent driving around photographing cheetahs, giraffes, zebra, impala antelope, wildebeest and more.

We headed back to camp around 7pm and arrived just after dark. Because of the darkness and the potential dangers that come with the African night a Maasai warrior with his spear and fine-tuned senses escorted us to our tent and waited patiently for us in the dark until we showered and got ready for dinner. He then got us back to a three-course dinner in the dinner tent. The food that evening, like all the following evenings, was just terrific. We were always surprised how they could prepare such delicacies with the basic equipment they had to their disposal out there in the middle of the African bush. After dinner, some interesting conversation with our fellow guests over a whiskey or two, we were again escorted back to our tent for the night.

Once in the tent we noticed that it had been cleaned, the beds had been “opened” for us, a warm water bottle had been put between the white sheets and a small evening chocolate had been placed on the fluffy pillows. The first night in the African bush was to begin. And what a night it would be... The sounds, the smells and the knowledge that there could be a massive male lion just outside the tent opening

turned this first night into an unforgettable one. I woke up numerous times due to the various animal sounds that practically sounded like they were inside the tent, if not between my sheets...

Against all odds we survived the night and the next morning our Maasai warrior, which we later realized had incredibly been sitting outside the tent all night, woke us up around 5am and waited for us to get ready for an early breakfast. It was surprisingly cold during the night and the warm water bottle really worked wonders. It was still very dark when we woke up, but the cold air was fresh and I was looking forward to the first complete day on the savannah. Our light breakfast consisted of tea or coffee and some biscuits. A proper take-away breakfast was prepared for us in boxes, which would be consumed under a tree or on a hilltop somewhere on the savannah. Half an hour later we were loaded up in the vehicles again, for the morning game drive – just in time for the sunrise.

Daniel, our driver, informed us that the warriors sit outside the tents all night with just a blanket and their spear. Thinking about this plus the fact that we heard the sounds of leopards, hyenas and hippos close to the tent during the night makes me feel good about giving them a generous tip at the end of our stay. For all the money in the world I would not change position with them.

The following days went about in a similar manner with game drives in the morning, breakfast on the go, back to camp for a few hours in the middle of the day and then out again until sunset. It was hectic but very rewarding.

I was fortunate to witness many fantastic events during this week and it would be impossible to describe all of them here. Some experiences tend to stay with you more than others though, and I believe these are the ones worth telling. Foremost amongst these are my meetings with Olive the celebrity leopard, Malaika the cheeky cheetah and a fornicating lion couple.







Photo: Johan Siggesson

## Olive the celebrity leopard

Leopards are very hard to find since they are elusive and shy. We were therefore very excited when we heard someone calling “chui” on the vehicle radio. Chui (pronounced more or less like “chewy”) is the Swahili word for leopard. Daniel stepped on the accelerator and we had a 10-15 minute extremely bumpy ride over the savannah to reach the leopard, which we later learned was Olive. Olive is a famous leopard as she features in a long-time running wildlife documentary series made by BBC called Big Cat Diary, also known as Big Cat Week or Big Cat Live.

Though it was getting late and the light was fading making it rather hard to capture decent quality images we were still enormously excited at the prospect of seeing a real life, wild leopard. Once we arrived we found her lying low in the grass, crawling a few metres forward every minute or so. This was stalking behaviour. She was hunting! It was quite obvious that a small group of unconcerned impala antelopes close-by was her target.

Leopards are known to be one of the most patient hunters on the plains and we knew we might be in for a long wait. We were sitting about 30-40 metres away with the viewfinders of our cameras glued to our eyes not to miss any sudden action. Suddenly the impala moved and in a heartbeat we found ourselves between Olive and her dinner. She turned her head and stared straight at us with her intense, azure eyes. Not a perfect position to find ourselves in, but the animals of the Maasai Mara grow up with the safari vehicles around, so we knew we weren’t spoiling her hunt. We decided that staying where we were was better than starting the engine and moving around.

Olive quickly changed her hunting strategy and moved towards the impala. She was coming directly towards us and was soon not more than 2 meters from our vehicle. She stopped and peered underneath the car. I am convinced she used the car for cover, just as she would with a termite mound or a bush. Then, all of a sudden she actually crawled underneath the car and got out on the other side. My heart was pumping with excitement. The leopards are potentially

deadly for humans and she could easily jump into our vehicle and take us out, or at least inflict serious damage. Somehow these beautiful animals don’t realize that you are a potential food source as long as you stay inside the vehicle. If you step out, it is a whole different ballgame though.

Back to the hunt. As the light was getting worse by the minute we had to switch to video as it is less light sensitive than regular photography allowing you to stay with the action a few more minutes Olive had made her way very close to her target and stayed low. We knew where she was but could not see her. Like a true leopard she was lost in the thicket. The impala was grazing just a few metres away without noticing her. We patiently waited for what seemed to be an eternity but after another 10-15 minutes without action we gave up. It was pitch black and we couldn’t see anything, let alone catching anything on a photograph or video. We decided to leave Olive and her potential dinner alone.

We had just removed the cameras from their positions and packed up when we heard a commotion in the grass. Olive had made an attack on the impala. Typical! Judging from the sounds though, Olive had sadly missed her opportunity and would have to try again later on that night or go hungry. On the other hand the impala lived to see another day, we bagged a few good images, and were definitely an experience richer.





Photo: Johan Siggesson

## Malaika the cheeky cheetah

With her razor-sharp claws scraping against the metal bonnet, the agile Malaika leaps up on the roof of the vehicle next to us. She lets her tail fall through the open roof and literally wags her tail in the South African passengers' faces. This is the cheeky signature move of Malaika, the cheetah. She has grown a habit of using vehicle rooftops as a vantage point to spot prey or danger. The vehicle passengers do not always appreciate this behaviour for various reasons. I, on the other hand, would have welcomed her and at first I was somewhat jealous of our fellow camp guests who experienced this "cheeky" behaviour as an added bonus. Later though, we learnt that she sometimes treats the Land Cruiser and its open roof as her private bathroom so perhaps our more distant encounter was preferable!

We learnt that Malaika had given birth to two cubs a few months earlier and that unfortunately one cub fell prey to a hyena shortly after birth so she was left with just one cub to rear. With lions, leopards and hyenas around this is a very

common faith for young cheetahs in the wild. These predators gladly kill both adult and young cheetahs whenever they get a chance and only one in ten wild cheetah cubs survive to adulthood.

We followed Malaika for a good while that day with the hopes of seeing a hunt and possibly a kill. Unfortunately she strayed off with her cub into an area where we couldn't follow her with our vehicle without violating the reserve's regulations.

Later in the evening the same day we found her with a fresh impala kill. After a few shots and some great time spent admiring the beauty of this cat, we said goodbye to Malaika and her little one in the knowledge that she and her cub had survived another day with full stomachs and good health.

Through a fellow photographer I later got to know that they were still alive and healthy a bit more than a month after we left The Mara. Great news!

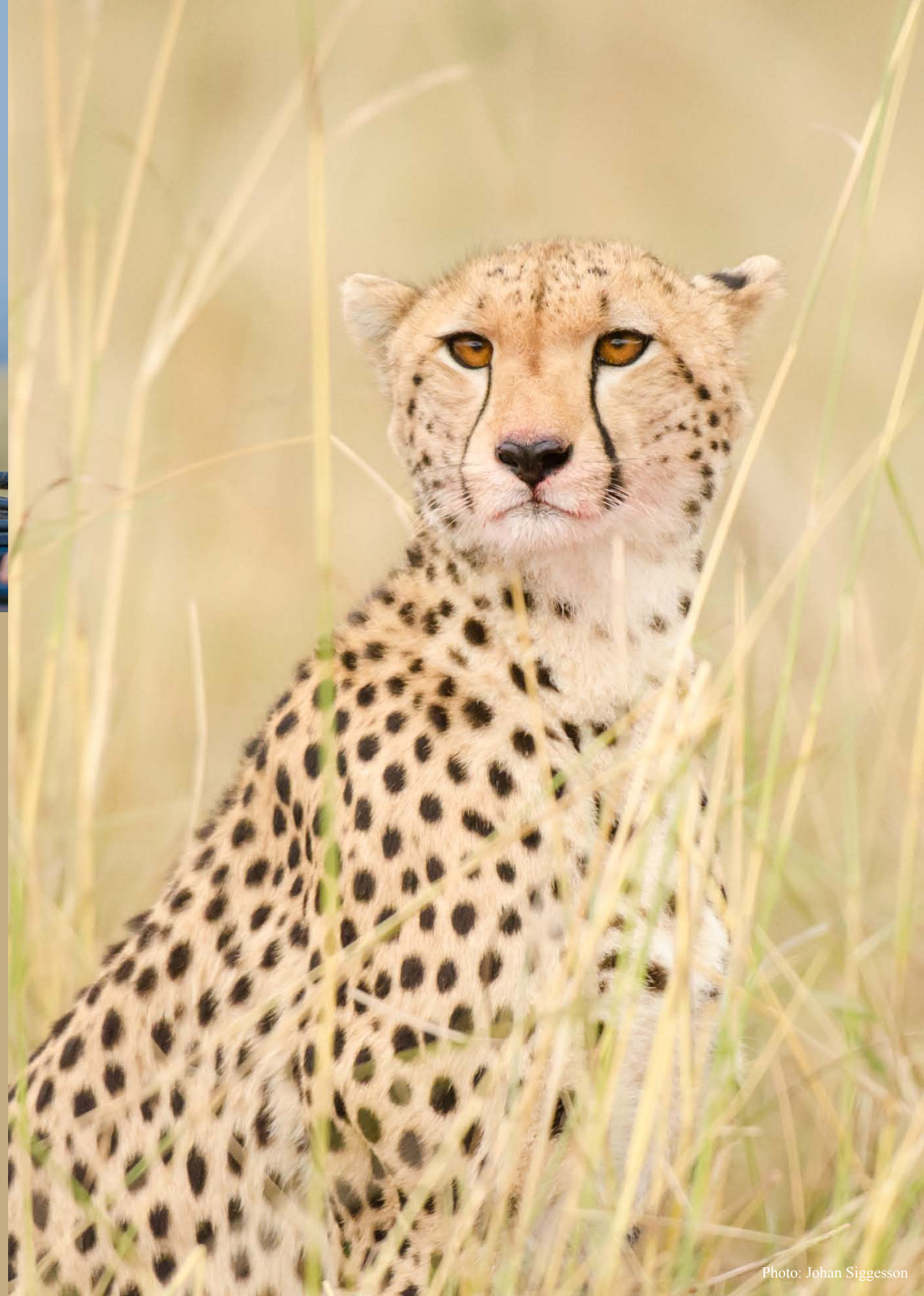


Photo: Johan Siggesson



## Fornicating Lions

It was the last game drive of our African safari. We only had a few hours before we had to head back to camp to pack our stuff and be on our way to the airfield. We set out to find a female cheetah with four cubs that we had spotted a few days earlier. Our plan was to follow her during the morning with the chance of seeing her hunting. Cheetah hunts are normally spectacular with speeds over 100km/h. Knowing that she had 4 cubs, and was bound to hunt very frequently to be able to feed her cubs, gave us a reasonable chance to see her hunting.

Unfortunately, neither we nor anyone else could find the cheetah family. It was decided that instead of wasting our last day driving in a vain search for the elusive cheetah we would try to find a courting lion couple, which had been seen earlier that morning. Daniel knew were they had been seen and it was only a 10-minute drive away. Once there, we found this huge male lion in the grass with his lioness close by. Lions are normally the laziest creatures you can think of and are usually sleeping 16-20 hours a day. One exception to this rule is when lions are mating, as these two happened to be. Mating lions copulate 20-40 times per day for several days. Their mating behaviour is often a fairly rough business with growling, neck-biting and paw-swiping. This behaviour makes for great action-filled photographs.

Unluckily, they were in a spot with tall grass, which makes it hard to focus the camera and the grass also tends to end up in front of the face of the animals, spoiling the photos. Not much to do about the grass but to like the situation and make the best out of it. At one point the lions moved to a more rocky area with less grass, which was perfect for us. The lioness entices the male by walking next to him stroking his body with her head and body. The male gets ready and bites her neck during this relatively brief affair. As with other cats, the male lion's penis has spines or barbs, which point backwards. Upon withdrawal of the penis, these barbs cause a certain amount of pain and this is the reason we see this rough behaviour with growling etc.

Unfortunately the light wasn't ideal this morning but we managed to get some decent shots and a unique experience, which not every safari traveler has the privilege to witness.

With this fantastic experience my safari adventure was over for this time. I was leaving the Maasai Mara with a life changing experience, a bunch of great photos and some new friends. What can be better than that?

On my long flight back to Malta from the Maasai Mara I had plenty of time for quiet reflection. There I was in a plane 10.000 feet up in the air with my insured high-tech gear next to me. Just a few hours earlier I was amongst people who only values their families, their livestock and their way of life. Many thoughts passed through my mind during my trip home but one thought persisted: I have to feel the airfield gravel under my feet once again.

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