



# Time and Change

## On Safari

Lesson ole Levilal could spot a hot prospect a mile away. He found me at the Thorn Tree Café, a well-known Nairobi watering-hole and tourist gathering spot, outside the New Stanley Hotel. Lesson knew all about safaris, every sort of safari: safaris by foot, minivan, plane, horse or camel, even by hot air balloon. I pictured myself floating across African plains spotting elephants from a multicolored balloon. The image was vaguely disconcerting, an alluring idea but somehow unseemly, too progressive too modern, too touristy.

A balloon is probably the least invasive mode of transportation that has been introduced to African wildlife during the past 30 years, but I did not want to delve too deeply into the impact of tourism on a delicate ecosystem. I wanted to go on safari. And Lesson ole Levilal, former Masai warrior turned tour tout, was the man to get me started.

Tenting safaris are in vogue. I had a choice of a deluxe tent with electricity, flush toilets and servants waiting with iced drink in hand, or something more rustic. Rustic it was since my travel funds were fast dwindling, and after seven months of wandering I felt equal to the rigors of intrepid travel.

For round \$250 I got a tent (two-man crawl in variety) to myself and three square meals a day, the company of two grizzled but energetic safari leaders and half a dozen other "guests." For six days we traveled the byways of Kenya, hurtling over hill and dale in a dust-laden, badly abused minibus.

We guests got a feel for the real Africa by pitching in setting up camp, foraging for firewood, and partaking in kitchen duties, everything from



peeling potatoes to chasing off carrot stealing monkeys. Dust was plentiful, drinking water scarce, bathing was infrequent, and toilet facilities were primitive.

David, the cook, directed proceedings around camp, doling out chores and hearty meals with maximum cheerfulness and minimum English: "Eat, Mama eat."

James, our driver, found the wildlife. He wasn't much of a naturalist, couldn't tell you much about the intimate habits of the gnu, hadn't much to say about the vegetation, but he could find the whereabouts of elephant, rhino or giraffe. All James needed was an inkling, a sniff of the air, a stray comment from a passing safari leader, and we were off in hot pursuit with a chorus of "We want lion! We want leopard!"

With the van bellowing like a whipped ox we went plummeting over grassy plain and rough hillock, bypassing potholes and boulders by a hair's breadth. I don't recall that any of us gave a thought to the smaller flora and fauna we were riding roughshod over. It was yahoo! and ride'em cowboy! all the way.

In Kenya the big game keep to huge reserves, huge enough that it takes some doing to track the animals down, so the chase is not entirely without skill, and certainly not without thrill. James found hippos at Lake Baringo and crocodiles in a steamy river at the edge of the vast Serengeti. On the plains of Masai Mara, he deftly dodged multitudes of herd animals so used to passing vehicles they hardly bothered to move aside as vans passed, sometimes in procession as the words "cheetah with a kill" filtered from one party to another. Grazing rhinos and elephants ignored us veering by, and a pride of lions merely yawned and flicked their tails when faced with yet another van full of camera-toting tourists half crazed with excitement. They cared nothing for their value as souvenir memorabilia.

One afternoon we set up camp at Lake Nakuru, hoping to visit with its population of one million flamingoes. "But don't be disappointed if they've gone off to Lake Bogoria for the day," James said.

Luck was with us, the birds were at home, and prodded by our "oohs" and "ahhs," James edged the van onto the mud flats skirting the briny lake to get closer to the birds. Suddenly we came to a squelching, tilting stop.

"Uh, oh" Tittering and snickering passed through the guests. Unperturbed, James descended from the van to inspect the situation.

“Wheeeeuw!” whistled James from without when he saw the right front wheel mired up to the axle in a soft pocket of muck.

Hoots of laughter blared from within. We were a merry lot. “Ha! That’s a good one. Well, let’s get busy and dig ‘er out, eh James? Say what? No shovel? No nothing?”

As we stood pondering this development, we were joined by another safari party, curious at our predicament. There followed a raucous consultation in English, French, German, Dutch, Flemish and Swahili, during which it was decided that James and Walter (the other safari driver) should go in search of rescue equipment.

“No problem,” said James, still unperturbed.

While James and Walter went to secure our rescue, the rest of us were left standing in the black ooze, encircled by a million disinterested flamingoes and one impertinent Marabou stork that flew in to have a look see and stood about staring with a comical smirk on its beak.

Much later, after a chilling, rain threatening wind had replaced the heat of the day, dusk had risen on the horizon, the tourists had repeated each of their life stories, and all were well and truly filled with the sight of one million flamingoes, James and Walter returned. In tow were four locals and a large dump truck equipped with a bundle of frayed, wispy cable and one – hallelujah! – shovel. The guests set to clearing the mired wheel, taking turns with the shovel. While one dug, the others amused themselves by discoursing at length on previous misadventures and remarking sarcastically on the style and vigor of each shoveler in turn.

Meanwhile, the safari leaders and friends held earnest and graphic discussions on the scraggly ball of cable and how it might possibly be used to get us out of the mess we were in.

At last, the digging was done, and now wispy bits of wire were being attached to certain dangling protuberances on the respective undersides of the dump truck and the van.

The drivers boarded the vehicles. The guests, sniggering skeptically, lined up on both sides of the van ready to push at the heave-ho signal. The other Africans directed proceedings from front and rear.

“Push!” they shouted. We pushed. The dump truck pulled. The van heaved. Engines roared. And the mangled cable popped as if it were a piece of thread. Variations on this theme continued with progressively shorter pieces of wire until the lark had gone well beyond fun. Darkness had fully settled and some of us held that it would be dangerous to proceed.

“No problem!” said James emphatically, and sent us back to camp with Walter.

Sometime after midnight the van wheezed into camp. Taking heed of James’ expression, no one chose to speak of the incident again.

After that trauma, the van lost heart in the expedition and had always to be persuaded into any further participation. A push down the nearest hill (not always that near) imbued some life into the disheartened vehicle. With a coughing start, it would begin lurching headlong downhill as if gaining a certain diabolical satisfaction in leaving the panting band of campers to give chase and clamber aboard as best they could.

As safaris go, this was a long way from the champagne variety, but it certainly brought me as close to the Africa of my imagination as it is possible to get in these changing times. We had three days camped by a trickling river in the Masai Mara Game Reserve where we relaxed into a routine of eating and idle contemplation in between game drives. One afternoon, I sat on a rock under a tree musing upon time and change. The sun streaked through a splendid cathedral-like cloud formation and splashed golden hues across the grassy, undulating plain. A group of shaven-headed Masai girls with beautiful white teeth appeared from nowhere. They’d come to show off their beads and pegged earlobes. Seeing me with pen and paper they demanded a turn at writing, then growing bored with that they sat for a time stroking the hair on my arms.

Later that night, inside the little tent, I thought to myself: You’ve come a long way since Vancouver, my girl. As I lay thinking about time and change, I could hear Masai donkeys and cattle calling, jackals yipping persistently, and not too far away a lion coughing. I felt safe and secure under the protection of two hired Masai men who cut a dignified stance despite the oddity of their dress. One wore traditional, handmade sandals and a shoulder cloth with factory-made shorts underneath, the other, safari shoes and socks, a buttoned-up raincoat and on his head, a plastic derby hat. Armed with spears and wooden clubs, they stood guard by a flickering campfire watching the night tick by with the aid of their digital watches. And I felt oh, so adventurous.