

Kenya

By: Dominick A. Merle

MOMBASA, Kenya--Two days of beach time on the Indian Ocean was just what the doctor ordered during the halfway point of our Kenyan vacation. Or perhaps Kenyan "adventure" is a better word.



Yawning lion

So far:

A wild and very hungry animal was sniffing my tent at 3 a.m. in the middle of the jungle.

I shared an afternoon bath with a hippo while a crocodile eyed us curiously through slit eyes.

Our safari van got stuck in the mud-- practically straddling the equator-- and we rocked it back and forth between the two hemispheres to free it.

I "saw" my first mirage, a glistening blue lake, that vanished as suddenly as it appeared on an open plain.

"We hear these kind of experiences all the time," said the man at the concierge desk in the Safari Beach Hotel where we would spend the next couple of days between wildlife safaris. "Kenya is no walk in the park--it keeps you in suspense."

The hotel is about a 30-minute drive from the port of Mombasa on the 300-mile coastline where Kenya meets the Indian Ocean. This is the part of Kenya that has been mostly ignored by North American tourists who tend to "safari around the clock" until they depart. The trend is changing, however, as more and more tour operators are incorporating a beach stay in their itineraries as a welcome and needed break between wildlife expeditions.

But make no mistake about it, the animals will always be the

star attraction of this exotic land often referred to as the cradle of mankind. And the main "theater" will always be the mysterious Masai Mara at the southwest corner of the country bordering Tanzania. That was the setting for the tent-sniffing and hippo bathmate

We stayed at the Mara Explorer, a relatively new camp in the middle of the wildlife reserve. There were 10 well-spaced tents, each with its own private deck overlooking the Talek River. An elegant Victorian-style bathtub adorned



Pair of lions on the hunt



my deck and it was there that I took a midday bath while the hippo took his in a watering hole less than 20 yards away, while the amused crocodile looked on. Okay, so we didn't actually bathe in the same tub, but it was close enough.

But there was no mistaking the sniffing incident in the middle of the night. Armed guards patrol the campsite around the clock, and one said he spotted a stray warthog in the area and that could have been the mystery sniffer. Perhaps, but, I was under the impression it had been a lion at the very least.

Generally, you take several safaris a day in a wildlife reserve, one before breakfast, one between 10 a.m. and noon, one between 4 p.m. and 7 p.m. and perhaps a night safari using only a large floodlight from about 9 to 11 p.m.

At times the plains are strangely silent and barren, but will suddenly explode with wildlife--giraffes, zebras, impalas, baboons, cape buffaloes, jackals, hyenas and often wildebeests for as far as you can see. They dash about with blurring speed, and then, in a blink, freeze in their tracks like a

still-life painting because of an obvious danger sign in the wind; perhaps a pack of hyenas or lions on the hunt.

We are able to approach lions, elephants and rhinos from as close as 10 yards away in our van, taking photos and observing the life-and-death drama that plays out here every day. And always overhead from the treetops, the vultures await their turn.

The next morning we drove to a Masai village near the Tanzanian border. The Masai are nomadic herders who travel

between Kenya and Tanzania. They are tall and slender and were known to have been fierce warriors. On our last visit to Masai Mara some 20 years ago, it was difficult to photograph members of the tribe without paying exorbitant amounts of money.

There was no haggling or the tensions that often go with it during this visit. We were simply required to pay a flat fee of about \$20 to enter the village and take an unlimited amount of photos. Civilization has come to the jungle.



After our two-days of sun and surf at the Safari Beach Hotel, we headed by small aircraft to Lewa Downs at the foot of Mt. Kenya, a private reserve that features safaris by van, camel and horseback. We viewed much the same wildlife as in the Mara, although not in such great numbers. There are also far fewer safari vans here than in the Mara, which makes it seem more like a private viewing. The 40,000-acre reserve at Lewa Downs has been operated by the Craig family since 1924.

Our final reserve was less than 25 miles away, but it took more than two hours by van over a dirt road that had turned to mud after an overnight rain. This, too, was part of the Kenyan adventure. Finally we arrived at the Il' Ngwesi reserve and its hilltop lodge.

The lodge was built in 1995 by the 6,000-member local Masai tribe. An amazing transformation has taken place here--big game coexisting peacefully with livestock. First the elephants began entering into this area and

X marks the crossing giraffes



Masai bride



intermingling with the cattle. But the biggest surprise of all was when the lions--traditionally the Masais' most reviled enemy--began showing up.

Operators of the lodge know that the future is with wildlife, not cattle, and are reintroducing giraffes, antelopes and the prized black rhino back into the area.

If ecotourism can be pure, Il Ngwesi comes as close as possible. Practically every building material except the water pipes and showerheads comes from the land itself. The walls are made of dried mud, the beams and furniture from dead trees. Water is transported by camel and heated by solar panels. And the 180-degree view is magnificent.

On my final night in the capital of Nairobi, at a well-known restaurant appropriately called Carnivore that features many cuts of wildlife, the sights and sounds of the game reserves kept running around in my mind. Odd, because before I arrived here, I was determined to write

about something other than the safaris.

So much for good intentions. The animals had the last word.

Masai warrior scout

