Attention of Fiona Ness....Out of Africa Sky Safari....as arranged

By Isabel Conway

“There is something about safari life that makes you forget all your sorrows and feel as if you had drunk half a bottle of champagne – bubbling over with heartfelt gratitude for being alive” wrote Karen Blixen in her famous memoir ‘Out of Africa’. That quote on a velum card in a Rolls Royce version of a bush tent catches my eye listening to a mini earthquake outside.

Booming snorts and grunts are drowning out the familiar barks of baboons and the rustling and scurrying of night creatures. Squinting through my webbed bathroom window a receding mountain looks suspiciously like the rear end of a Hippo.!

An African safari is exciting, often unpredictable but it lets the mind play tricks. That tree stump becomes a watching lioness. Dark boulders morph into rhinos on your Game Drive. So I toddled back to bed and predictably dreamt of Big Cat Diaries.

“Yes, that was a hippo up from his pool to graze at night” a patrolling Masai security guard next morning confirms. Close up wildlife encounters are not unusual in unfenced game lodge terrain. Those of a nervous disposition should know that here in safari land security guards accompany guests everywhere after dark and there are radio phones in your tent for an SOS.

Visits to three of Kenya’s iconic diverse national parks and reserves in less than six days beckon. Amboseli national reserve, dominated by snow capped Kilimanjaro has one the world’s great mirages that shimmers behind a dry lake and over 1,000 resident elephants.

Less visited Meru, Kenya at its most alluring and emptied of its elephant and rhino populations by poachers is now thriving again with one Africa’s most successful rhino protection projects. Elsa the lioness star of Born Free was released to the wild here.

Masai Mara where the amazing annual wildebeest migration takes place and where the Out of Africa movie starring Robert Redford and Meryl Streep was filmed, almost guarantees a sighting of the ‘Big Five’ (lion, leopard, elephant, rhino and Cape Buffalo) ranking among the continent’s top five places for wildlife.

Thanks to a limousine service in the sky we visited huge swaths of these famous areas in under a week, an arrangement that well suits time strapped safari adventurers. SkySafari ([www.skysafari.com](http://www.skysafari.com)) already in Tanzania for some time recently launched its programs in Kenya. Fabulous wildlife viewing in diverse eco systems and accommodation in boutique style game lodges each with their own character and back story is the big attraction.

Our journeys on executive Cessna Caravan aircraft between the parks were adventures in themselves. Kenyan Peter Wachira our personal pilot with vast experience confesses that he has encountered the odd jaywalking zebra and straying antelope on airstrips, though not during our flights thankfully! Zigzagging across Kenya we flew over wild empty landscapes, lush forest, immense savannah plains on which a Noah’s ark of animals roamed and mountain ranges with superb views of Mount Kenya, Kilimanjaro and the Rift valley which is visible from the moon.

At Masai Mara’s Keekorok airstrip a handsome Masai warrior wearing the tribal red checked garment toga style bedecked with multi coloured beaded bracelets wanders across as the luggage is unloaded. Whipping out a mini tablet he takes a couple of selfies with the plane.

Arriving at dirt airstrips where coffee and biscuits and land rover transport awaits we have instantaneous wildlife viewing en route to our next game lodge. Our final night was at Sand Masi Mara lodge so close to Tanzania’s famous Serengeti annual migration that confused wildebeest and lost zebras occasionally stray into camp looking for directions.

By mid June the first trickle of migration has begun. Noisy wildebeest are galloping nervously back and forth on Serengeti eyeing lush Kenyan grasslands beyond. A crafty old lion concealed in the reeds awaits the inevitable crossing. Numerous vultures hang in all the surrounding Fever trees for their share of dinner.

At a spot known as Lion Rock a near relative of the MGN roaring lion poses like a matinee idol on his rocky throne while cameras click constantly and rifle sized tele lenses are aimed from roof hatches. Two lionesses are high up in a tree, shifting restlessly on its crooked branches. The plight of the long haul economy passenger trying in vain to get comfortable in cramped in flight conditions came to mind.

Our king of the jungle by now has left the rock cliff to snooze in the undergrowth right beside our open sided vehicle. “Don’t stick your arm out because he will take it if you do” Daniel warns. “He has been mating with the females of the pride every 20 minutes for four full days nonstop”.

In less than an hour after stepping off our international flight in Nairobi we are watching a darling baby elephant rolling in the red dust of Amboseli, herds of elephants and hippos wallowing in its swamps, a hyena carrying off a chunk of dead wildlife and nine lions racing after a antelope on the horizon.

Tortilis Camp in Amboseli and Elsa’s Kopje at Meru, conceived and built by passionate visionary conservationists Stefano and Liz Cheli are eco friendly beautifully located game lodges, their delicious Italian themed lunch buffets no doubt inspired by Stefano’s Italian ancestry.

Two wildlife encounters stood out in my crammed notebook of wonderful sightings of animal and birdlife that make Kenya such an outstanding safari land. At Meru a dark cloud across the far horizon turned into an advancing line of more than 70 elephants. Led by the matriarch we heard them communicate with one another in a low rumble. Within a few feet of our 4 by 4 the massive wall halted and looked in surprise at us before parting and continuing the procession behind our vehicle. It brought tears to some eyes including mine.

On the last morning of the trip another stand out moment comes when Daniel the guide spots a cheetah far away in the Savannah making what he interprets as a mating call. She is in fact anxiously searching for her two cubs. We witness the joyful reunion with lots of cuddles, somersaults and grooming. Then one cheeky (rather large!) cub wanders over, licks our rubber tyres, has a look behind the fender and then tries a couple of times to leap up on the bonnet.

On the 50 minute final flight from the Masai Mara Karen Blixen’s beloved blue Ngong Hills appear. A champagne cork pops at the back of our plane, charming Tina from Germany passes up a glass to me sitting in the co-pilot’s seat and we all raise our glasses to Blixen and wonderful Out of Africa memories.

Ends...

Fact file

Getting there: Isabel Conway flew London Heathrow-Nairobi with Kenya Airways ([www.kenya-airways.com](http://www.kenya-airways.com)) from £701.86 return. She was a guest of newly launched SkySafari Kenya ([www.skysafari.com)](http://www.skysafari.com)) staying at boutique lodges Tortilis Camp ([www.tortiliscamp.com](http://www.tortiliscamp.com))Amboseli, Elsas Kopje([www.elsaskopje.com)Meru](http://www.elsaskopje.com)Meru) and Sand River Masai Mara([www.sandrivermara.com](http://www.sandrivermara.com)) Elewana ([www.elewana.com](http://www.elewana.com)) award winning camps and safari lodges reached by executive class Turbo jet with private direct transfers. Prices for an eight day SkySafari Kenya itinerary from US$6,520 per person, including internal flights, full board accommodation with drinks, game drives, bush activities, a butler service and bubbles on board. SkySafari is rated one of the top African safari experiences.

Top Tips: Insight Guides Kenya has useful illustrated sections about animals, birds and plant life. Your GP can advise on shots and anti malaria pills. Essentials: strong insect repellent, loose long sleeved clothing, a good camera and binoculars. You must have $50 cash for the entry visa . Credit cards widely accepted but take cash for tips to guides and lodge staff, preferably US dollars.

When to go... Kenya is a year round destination. The Green season April and May and late October until mid December are when prices are lower and parks are prettier if you don’t mind the odd heavy shower.

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