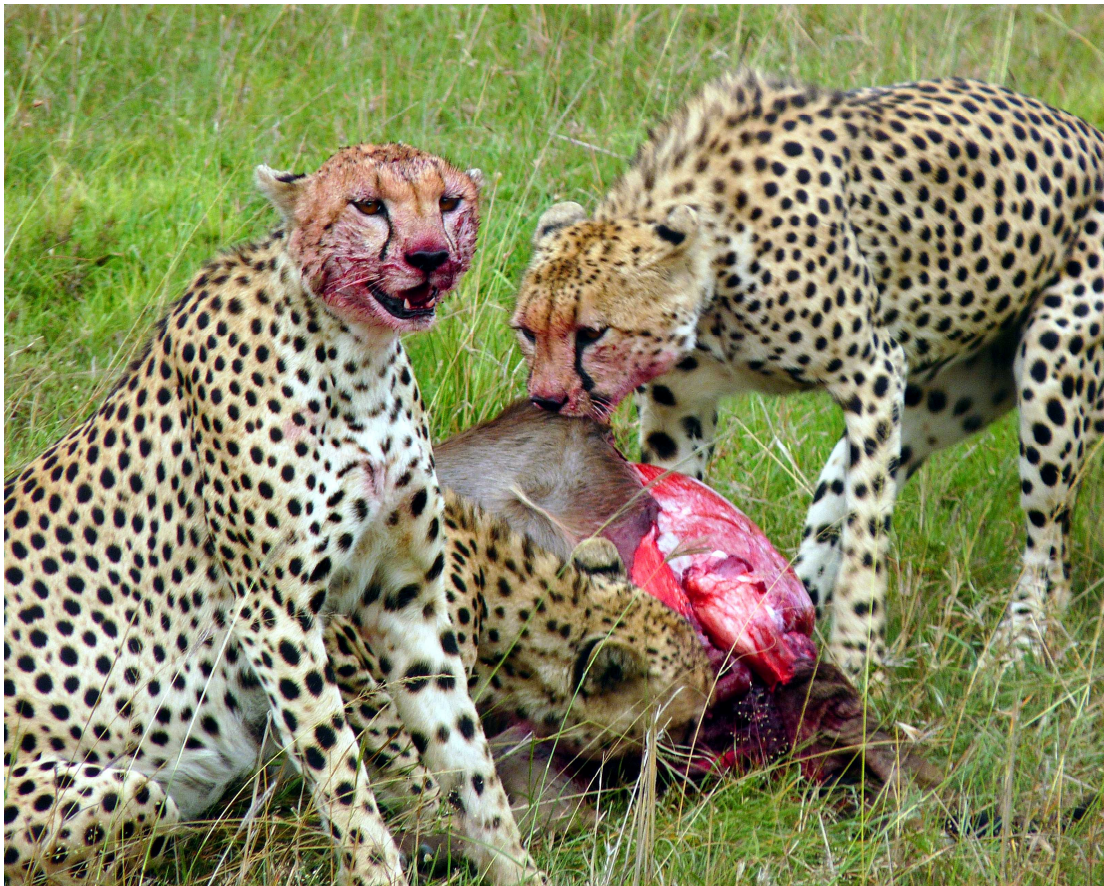


Kenya Master KATS conference Dec 1-16, 2008
By Kristina Trowbridge, WinWin Vacations, Seattle WA USA

Imagine my excitement when I spotted Honey's three cubs, re-named Honey's Boys by Jonathan Scott of BBC's Big Cat Diary fame. There they were, all three nearly grown up cheetah male cubs and healthy. My heart was racing 70 miles an hour, as fast as a cheetah can run. My emotions were running as wild as they are; I started to cry. I was thinking of their difficult beginning when their mom Honey, made famous by BBC, accidentally died and left them orphans. They were only 9 months old and totally incapable of hunting for themselves. They depended on Honey for everything. Now they had only each other ... and the Kenya Wildlife Services.



Honey's Boys with wildebeest feast

“What’s the matter” asked Ledama, my driver-guide at Little Governors Camp. “Are you sad for the wildebeest”? he asked. No, I was happy. The Boys were devouring that wildebeest they killed in front of me and their bellies were growing rounder by the minute. Those were tears of joy.

I came to Kenya to attend the Master KATS (Kenya Agent Travel Specialist) conference. I needed to visit camps that I had not seen before. Travelling alone, I was able to arrange my own program with help from the Kenya Tourist Board in Nairobi. My

preference is to stay 2 nights in one camp whenever possible. This gives me a feel for how the camps function; I have a chance to get to know the staff and the guides, who make your safari a lifetime experience.

Kenya Airways was on time at 6:30am to Nairobi from London; getting my visa was quick. Yes, there was my bag on the carousel and Gibson was there waiting for me with a great big smile. Kenyans are the happiest people I know, along with the Fijians.

Gibson is the lucky guy, who got to drive me from Jomo Kenyatta International Airport to Wilson, Nairobi's domestic airport. Soon, I was on my Safari-Link flight to Chaffa, with stops at Nanyuki, Lewa and Samburu in between.

When we landed at the Samburu airstrip, I was ready to off-load my fresh salmon that I had carefully packed for the long trip from Seattle just for Tom Oguma, the super "hmmm good food" executive chef at **Samburu Intrepids Lodge** inside the National Park.

I had promised 6 months ago to bring him some salmon from Alaska. The last words Tom had shyly expressed before I left last August were:

"Kristina, please don't forget my fish!"

How could I disappoint? My husband says that I signed up for this conference just so I could deliver that fish!

When we landed, sure enough, there was Jelly, my guide, to meet the plane. His real name is Petroleum Jelly. His mom loves the stuff and used it often while pregnant with him, so that's what she named him. Big hugs hello, a quick photo, big hugs goodbye, back on the plane and I'm off to Joy's Camp.



Jelly with box of fish

John was there waiting for me at the Chaffa airstrip. At these remote gravel airstrips, there's no airport tower or terminal, just a windsock. There may be a tree for shade ... if you're lucky!



Duty Free Shop

At the more popular airstrips, like Samburu, there may be a few "duty-free shops" consisting of a wooden table loaded with local crafts and a pushy salesman or two, their arms hanging heavy with seeds and colorful beads strung into jewelry, shouting:

"What your best offer, ma'm"?

They are always polite, even if obnoxious!!!

Joy's Camp is located where Joy Adamson spent her late years hoping to release Penny, the leopard, back into the wild. Joy Adamson reached her goal of many years in 1976 when a ranger acquaintance of the Adamson's found a leopard cub, eight weeks old. Penny had a litter of two cubs before Joy published "Queen of Shaba: The Story of an African Leopard", which was Joy Adamson's posthumous and final book.

I was the only guest at Joy's Camp that night; I received the undivided attention from the managers, Jamie and Lara. They related their joy at living in such a remote area, where not many tourists venture. My tent #4 is named Kamanga after the mountain visible from the verandah. The tents are huge with marble bathrooms; the water is solar heated.



The dining area is open as is the bar. It never gets really cold here and only after the rains will there be any bugs. I was there right after the rains, but bugs don't bother me! There's a lovely pool and from here you can often observe breeding herds of thirsty elephants observing you. Anne came to my tent and gave me a massage!

Joy's Camp is in **Shaba National Reserve**, bordering **Samburu and Buffalo Springs National Reserves**. Game drives are done in all three areas. The Ewaso Nyiro River draws the animals to its green banks for water, creating an oasis in this arid landscape as it flows through this savagely beautiful wilderness.

This is the home of the Samburu people, cousins to the Maasai, who live south of the equator. They both adhere strictly to their age-old customs of the rite of passage and nomadic cattle herding existence.

Further north is the **Kalama Conservancy**; here I stayed two nights at **Saruni Samburu Camp**. The camp is spectacularly located on top of a steep rocky hill with vistas to die for all around you.



The **Matthews Mountains** can be seen in the distance from your deck. At Saruni Samburu, it is all about the views from your room and from the pool.

I loved it here, where you escape the crowds. With not another tourist in sight, this is your place for romance and serenity. Sitting on your deck in the overstuffed Italian chairs is heaven on earth.

The two family 2-bedroom villas are suitable for couples and friends traveling together, each with separate huge 2-room bathrooms. The 2 one bedroom villas are designed for honeymooners and all lovers. The views from your bed surround your soul with AWE!

An old Africa lover and British reporter Brian Jackman visited Samburu with his wife Annabelle a few days later. They were on my flight from Wilson airport to Samburu. A cute little Italian girl vomited all over Brian and I had a chance to make conversation! The Lord is looking out for me! After many safaris and a long love story with Africa and especially Kenya, Brian still marveled at the amazing landscapes, abundant wildlife, the design of the new lodges and the conservation projects pursued together by the local communities. On Saruni Samburu, Brian wrote after this visit:

“A wildly romantic upmarket retreat with not another vehicle in sight. Saruni opened in June last year on a 240,000-acre community ranch just outside the park. It is only 7 kilometers from Samburu but feels as if you have arrived at the edge of the world, a lonely eyrie perched on a gigantic dome of weathered granite high above the plains. Here, an infinity pool and four spacious villas, each with a sundeck and stunning bathroom, look down on a waterhole where lions and elephants come to drink.”

I can't say it any better (permission to quote obtained).

I suddenly found myself back in **Nairobi** for one night to begin the conference. After I had shopped at the **Kazuri Bead Factory** and the **Marula Studios** in Karen, I visited the **Animal Orphanage** in the **Nairobi National Park**. I always get one of the local guides eagerly waiting (as you enter) to show you around and tell you about each animal in the orphanage. Get one! They make your visit more interesting. I was fortunate to secure Phillip and he was able to get me in behind the public area where three tiny cheetah cubs had just arrived. Imagine my delight when being allowed to hold one of them. It was instant love as Mark closed his eyes and purred loudly while licking my finger. ***Pinch me!!*** ... did I die and go to heaven?



This was a puuuuurfect morning!



In the afternoon, I had a chance to visit the **National Museum** that had just reopened after being closed for several years for extensive renovations.

I hired Tony as my guide to take me through the exhibits. Tony explained everything shown in the museum well beyond what was written on each plaque. Using his knowledge and considerable wit, Tony made even old Ahmed of Marsabit come alive inside the museum!

The flora and fauna of Kenya are also explained in

much detail. I especially loved the collection of birds.

I highly recommend a visit to the National Museum to familiarize yourself with the history of Kenya and the evolution of mankind. Louis and Mary Leakey found important clues to our ancestors in the Great Rift Valley right here in Kenya and also at Oldupai Gorge in Tanzania.

The next day, I was on my flight to **Lake Naivasha and Loldia House**. This is a lovely old colonial manor, beautifully restored, run by Governors Camp. It's located on the shores of Lake Naivasha, a crystal clear lake 6,000 feet above sea level.

The gorgeous gardens surround the manor; the food is gourmet. They grow vegetables on their huge 6,500 acres farm and raise both cattle and sheep. If lucky, you will see lion, eland, bushbuck; hundreds of hippos live in the lake. This is a birders paradise, where 400 species can be seen. I think, this is the very best option on the lake for a great place to rest up for a couple of nights after a long flight, before heading out on safari.

What a surprise! I had not expected to see my very first aardvark here!



Aardvarks are nocturnal termite & ant-eaters, so you will only see them after dark. I managed a quick picture by flash light before it went back into its hole in the ground. What an amazing sight!

Peter Njoroge is your gracious host and manager at Loldia House. We sure hit it off right-away; I had the best time here. He introduced me to a grumpy old Maasai chief riding a moped; the cattle caretaker on the farm. Everyone else has to peddle a bike! He doesn't like it when Peter brings old white people to his house, but he sure took a liking to me. I addressed him in maa (the maasai language) with a simple "sopa pi" (hello) and viola, I was immediately accepted. He nick-named me *mama-masaa'i-muzungu* (the old white maasai mother). Being called mama is an honor and implies respect. Mamas have

wisdom that only comes with age!!! Peter says that I'm the only muzungu (white person) that he ever invited to his house. I had to take a raincheck! I will be back.



Cape buffalo with flamingos at Lake Nakuru

The next day I took an all day tour to **Lake Nakuru National Park** (meaning Dusty Place in the maa language) to see the flamingos before catching the afternoon flight to the Masai Mara and Little Governors Camp. Lake Nakuru National Park is best known for its thousands, sometimes millions of flamingos that nest along the shores when the water level is just right for them. The mass of pink keeps shifting as the flamingos fly this way and that way at will to delight and to confuse the photographers it seems. At times, the surface of the shallow lake is not even recognizable due to the continually shifting mass of pink. The number of flamingoes on the lake varies with water and food conditions and the best vantage point is from Baboon Cliff or the Out Of Africa Picnic Site up on the escarpment. The views from up there are truly magnificent. I had my breakfast at Out of Africa!



Today the flamingoes were few and far between, but I really enjoyed watching the pelicans land in the water in front of me. They are so graceful and clumsy all at once!!! The park has recently been enlarged to provide a sanctuary for the endangered black rhino, white rhino and the Rothschild giraffes. The giraffes are relocated here from Giraffe Manor and research center in Nairobi.



Baby calf with mom White Rhino

After lunch at Loldia House, I was on my flight to the **Masai Mara**. Governors Camps offer 4 different choices of accommodations, based on your budget and comfort level: Main, Little, IlMoran and Private Camps.



Little Governors Camp is across the **Mara River** from the other camps. Game drives are usually conducted in the same area for all camps and the vehicles are based here.

The river crossing is done by a private human propelled ferryboat and a simple rope pulled by hand. The access to the river from Little Governors Camp is by steep and some very long steps up and down the river banks. Little Governors is located next to a lagoon where “ellies” will join you for lunch and warthogs seem to think that you are their guest!

They wander freely anywhere they like as do the big bull elephants. Little Governors is a special camp.

Governors Balloon Safaris is based here. It's not cheap, but I always do it when I have a chance. It's worth every penny!

There's nothing that can describe the feeling of drifting along, above the Mara River at daybreak and see the animals rising through the morning mist.



Governors Camps were first made famous by the BBC's Big Cat Diary's soap opera TV programs. I know all the cats followed by Jonathan Scott, Simon King and Saba Douglas-Hamilton.



I have a soft spot in my heart for cheetahs. Therefore, I couldn't wait to meet Shakira and her three cubs, featured live in October 2008 on BBC. Would we find her and her cubs? I was out of my mind with anticipation ... Ledama took me to her the first morning out.

All three cubs are still alive!!! What a miracle! Those cubs are as cute as can be! Shakira sure is an amazing cheetah mum; The Best.

These cubs were 5 months old in December 2008.

From Little Governors, I moved over to the **Talek River** and the **Mara Explorer** camp just an hour away. This is one of my favorite camps anywhere in Africa. It's perfectly positioned in a bend of the Talek River where hippos can be heard grazing, grunting and laughing all night.



Spoil me rotten!

I was the only guest in camp on my last night; a stormy, rainy evening, especially appreciated by the hippos in the shrinking Talek River! Finally, some rain had come to The Mara to refresh the air and settled the dust. My dinner was set up on my verandah that night, served in courses by my own butler. The wooden walkways back to the dining area were dark and slippery; I didn't have to tackle that walk! My butler drew a nice warm bubble bath in the tub sitting on my deck; here I sat listening to the hippos coming up for air and laughs. I imagined all the dirty jokes they were telling under the water!!! What is there not to like? These are the sounds and smells of Aah-freeeh-kah!

In the morning, James, my guide at the Mara Explorer, found another brave cheetah mom with three 5-weeks old cubs! WOW!!!! My heart turned to mush! I could hardly breathe! Who can resist tiny cheetah cubs, knowing how endangered they are and that their chance of survival is so very slim. I feel extremely privileged to have seen these cubs.



Cheetah cubs are born to resemble their prime enemy: the honey badger. See the silvery grey furry coat on the backs of these cubs? As they grow, this fur slowly disappears. James and I were the only people here to see this family. Mum was very protective and we kept our distance. We did not want to stress her.

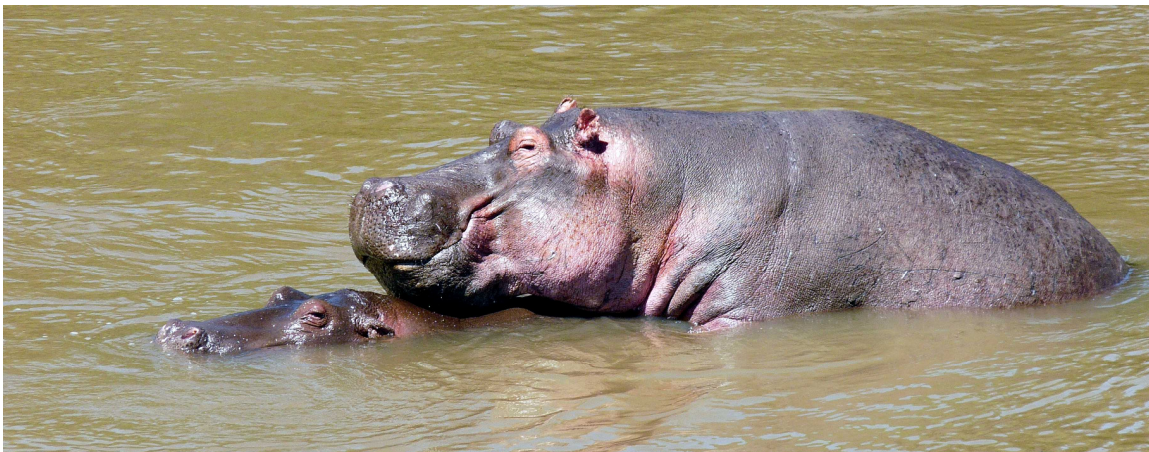
The downturn in tourism to East Africa has been a godsend for the cats that have enjoyed a little peace & quiet, but it's been a disaster for the Kenya economy and the Masai Mara tourism. This situation was caused first by the election riots and now by the world-wide recession.

I firmly believe there is a divine plan. Nature takes its course. I can't wait to return to The Mara, the new 7th Wonder of the World, with my group next July and visit all "my" cheetahs again.

Let me introduce George: he's an American from New York City of Greek descent. He came on safari and fell in love with Africa and decided to move here and build a safari lodge. His friends thought he was nuts!!!! He wanted the best camp in Kenya, so he built the **Royal Mara Safari Lodge** on the Mara River. This is an 8-room luxury safari camp entirely designed by himself and his son George Jr.



Do not confuse his lodge with the **Mara Safari Club** which is part of the Fairmont chain, which is close by and offers 50 rooms. The two camps are totally different. George did the crazy thing - he followed his heart. The result is one of the most unusual and luxurious safari camps in Kenya. The setting is incredible in an oxbow bend in the Mara River, north of the Masai Mara Conservancy in what is known as **Maasai Mara North Conservancy** or MMNC as of January 1st 2009, or simply Mara North. Here you have complete privacy, yet there are no restrictions like in the national parks; night drives and walks are offered. The hippos seem perfectly carefree in every way. They love this part of the river and also each other!!!! I witnessed my very first hippo mating here.



This is a happy guy!!! See the smile?

I returned to Nairobi for the evening gala at the Carnivore Restaurant, before returning back to the US. I'll return for the next KATS conference to learn more about Kenya and all their wonderful camps.

All my pictures can be found at: <http://www.kristinasafari.com/Albums/africa.htm>