

Amboseli Horseback Safari, Kenya 2011

Amboseli – Kilimanjaro Horseback Safari, KENYA 31 July–6 August 2011

After the impressive Masai Mara horseback safari, I spent two days relaxing at the comfortable Nairobi Tented Camp, located in the middle of the famous Nairobi National Park (i.e. I was on the go the whole time, game drives, elephant camp, excursions, etc. – always following the motto, don't miss a thing!) and was now ready for my next big riding adventure: Off to Kilimanjaro, off to Amboseli National Park, famous for its abundance of wildlife and huge herds of elephants!

Early in the morning, Wilson Airport in Nairobi was already bustling with activity, and I was glad to find the Air Kenya check-in counter amid the hustle and bustle. Once I had taken my seat in the small plane with about 20 other passengers, we were told to disembark again – the pilot said there was just a minor problem with the electrical system, nothing serious with the engine or anything like that – we were so relieved.!? After 15 minutes, we were all allowed to board again and off we went! After a 45-minute panoramic flight, we landed in Amboseli National Park surrounded by zebras and antelopes. Nicola was already waiting for us in his jeep and welcomed us with coffee, tea, bananas and freshly baked biscuits – delicious! And then we were ready to set off for the camp, which would take an hour by direct route, but was immediately turned into a proper game drive, because no sooner had we left the small airstrip behind us than we were "surrounded" by countless wild animals: large herds of white-bearded wildebeests crossed our "road" (the dusty track in front of us), lots of zebras grazed at the "roadside", and the mighty backdrop of Kilimanjaro on the horizon – by now, it was clear to me that I was really in sub-Saharan Africa! Amboseli National Park thrilled us not only with its abundance of wildlife, but also with its striking contrasts: on one side of the track, deep, emerald-green swamps stretched out with lush vegetation and rich flora and fauna, while on the other side, a vast, dry, dusty, desert-like landscape began, with swirling dust tornadoes. I also found the peaceful coexistence of so many different animal species impressive – a bit like in the Garden of Eden! A hippopotamus grazed peacefully among zebras, wildebeests and waterbucks, while a large herd of elephants passed by quietly... A mighty, curious bull elephant, surrounded by white clouds of dust, came particularly close to our jeep and provided a great photo opportunity against the white dome of Kilimanjaro!

At the camp, we were greeted with a refreshing welcome drink, and after a three-course lunch, we were able to saddle up for the first time at 4:30 p.m. I was given a Boer horse, a handsome, medium-sized chestnut named Katchumbari with powerful gaits, which took me two days to get used to. South African Boer horses are descended from Dutch settlers and are characterised by their robustness, toughness and strength of character – all excellent qualities for proper bush horses – so I immediately felt I was in good hands.

With fresh horses, we galloped straight into the golden evening sun. On the way, we encountered some gerenuk gazelles. When these graceful creatures...

When these elegant cloven-hoofed animals stand on their hind legs, their long necks enable them to reach not only grass but also fresh leaves from trees up to 2 metres high, giving them an advantage when searching for food. This is why they are also called giraffe gazelles. Armed with this knowledge and many other wonderful impressions, we return to our camp, where a campfire is already burning and cool drinks are waiting for us – all against the impressive backdrop of Kilimanjaro on the horizon – pure holiday bliss!

A friendly wake-up call and fresh coffee brought us to our feet at 6 a.m. the next morning – typical Africa. We fortified ourselves with a light breakfast of fresh fruit, porridge and cookies before saddling up at 7 a.m., ready to go on a game drive, as the best time to see animals is in the morning and evening hours, as they usually hide in the bush during the midday heat. The ground consisted of fine clay and was now very dusty due to the dry weather. At times, the rider in front of me disappeared in a large cloud of dust – nevertheless, we made good progress on our sure-footed horses.

On the way, we encountered a herd of elephants, but they preferred to stay with us. We played "hide and seek" with a single, powerful bull elephant who showed little interest in our riding group. We continued across a wide, open area at a flying gallop over deep red earth – on the horizon I saw my first mirage: mountains were actually reflected in a huge, glittering lake! But there were neither mountains nor lake, only the endless red earth of Africa stretching to the horizon. After about two hours, we took a short break for riders and horses with a small snack from our saddlebags: biscuits, eggs and apples, which we riders naturally shared fraternally with our horses. Back at camp, we enjoyed a hot shower in our comfortable safari tents, a sumptuous lunch and a two-hour siesta!

At tea time, our spirits were revived with oven-warm banana cake and fresh coffee. The subsequent hour-and-a-half horse ride (or alternative game drive) was a wonderful end to this exciting safari day. After showering, we were treated to an excellent three-course meal worthy of a fine dining restaurant: a festively laid table, pre-warmed plates and outstanding cuisine – every detail was taken care of to pamper the guests.

The next few days brought athletic rides (one day's stage covered 50 km), brisk gallops, small and voluntary larger jumps over fallen trees, and constantly changing landscapes: vast, golden-brown savannah, metre-high elephant grass through which herds of elephants moved in the distance, deep, lush green swamps with voracious hippos, endless plains – perfect for long gallops, interrupted only by solitary acacia trees, deep red earth scattered with large, abandoned and bleached white agate shells, and the picturesque hills of Chyulu Hills National Park at the end of the tour. During the week, we also visited a Masai village and went on several game drives, where we were able to take great photos of large herds of buffalo and elephants at close range.

At lunchtime, we usually took a break under an inviting acacia tree, where colourful Masai blankets had already been laid out for us with soft cushions and a delicious picnic buffet awaited us (and fresh water and oats for the horses). However, the highlights were not only the heavenly food and service, but above all the wildlife encounters on horseback: galloping with a herd of zebras, the large herd of buffalo galloping away in front of us, the mighty elephants and numerous antelopes and gazelles, including the noble Grant's gazelles with their elegant heart-shaped curved horns and the dainty Thomson's gazelles. We didn't spot any big cats such as lions and leopards during the week, but such encounters are nevertheless possible – and that's not the only reason why this ride is only suitable for experienced, confident riders... The ride through an extensive thorn forest of so-called "whistling thorn acacias" was also impressive. These trees get their name from the high-pitched whistling sounds they make when the wind blows through their mighty thorns. The acacias also have an interesting symbiosis with ants, which defend the tree against herbivorous insects and even giraffes and elephants, for which they are rewarded with nectar and a protected habitat.

We spent the last few days in the Chyulu Hills, the youngest mountain range on earth, with gently rolling, grass-covered volcanic hills. Before us lay the wide, open savannah, with good, firm ground, which we used, among other things, for a race with two giraffes – which brought tears to our eyes. Were they tears of happiness or just the "wind in our hair"? Probably both – in any case, it was an unforgettable experience to see these large animals galloping alongside us in slow motion!

The Chyulus were also home to large numbers of mighty eland and oryx antelopes, both of which are among the largest antelope species. The dense forests at the foot of the volcanic hills are also home to some of the oldest elephant bulls in East Africa with enormous tusks, which had found refuge and protection here in this rugged, remote area, as well as the rare black rhinos that live in the rugged, almost inaccessible lava flows. During a visit to the luxurious Kenya Safari Lodge, where I would have loved to stay a few more days, we had the opportunity to observe some of these impressive giants at the waterhole in peace and quiet.

But even the most beautiful ride must come to an end. After a brisk final stage, we reached the stables, which are located about 10 minutes from the Kenya Safari Lodge in the middle of the bush. After unsaddling, showering, feeding and checking the horses, we simply opened the stable doors and our horses were just happy: they rolled around in the sand, played happily and then disappeared in a large cloud of dust into the African bush. There are no fences here – the horses now enjoyed a week of freedom until they go on their next safari. Bye bye Africa and see you again soon – Kwa Heri Kenya!

Information about the trip is available from PEGASUS Reiterreisen at <http://www.reiterreisen.com/amb008.htm> and about Kenya Safari Lodge at <http://www.reiterreisen.com/donsta.htm>.