INTO AFRICA

my journey to the Maasai Mara

a travel memoir by Vihaan Gayathri

You cannot leave Africa. It’s always with you, there inside your head.

(Bridget Dore)

Foreword

By the time we made this trip in 2021, Vihaan had already been to Africa twice before. As you'd expect for a child however, his memory from some of these experiences had faded. Africa and particularly the Mara has a special place in our hearts and we want Vihaan to remember some of the moments we've spent together in this beautiful place, when he's all grown up.

So as part of this trip, we asked Vihaan to write a diary; especially since he's recently learned to read and write. We've exercised very little editorial control over his writings though it's fair to say that we helped him recap the events of some days. Of course, his writing is embellished with photos from his dad and we've helped him layout this book.

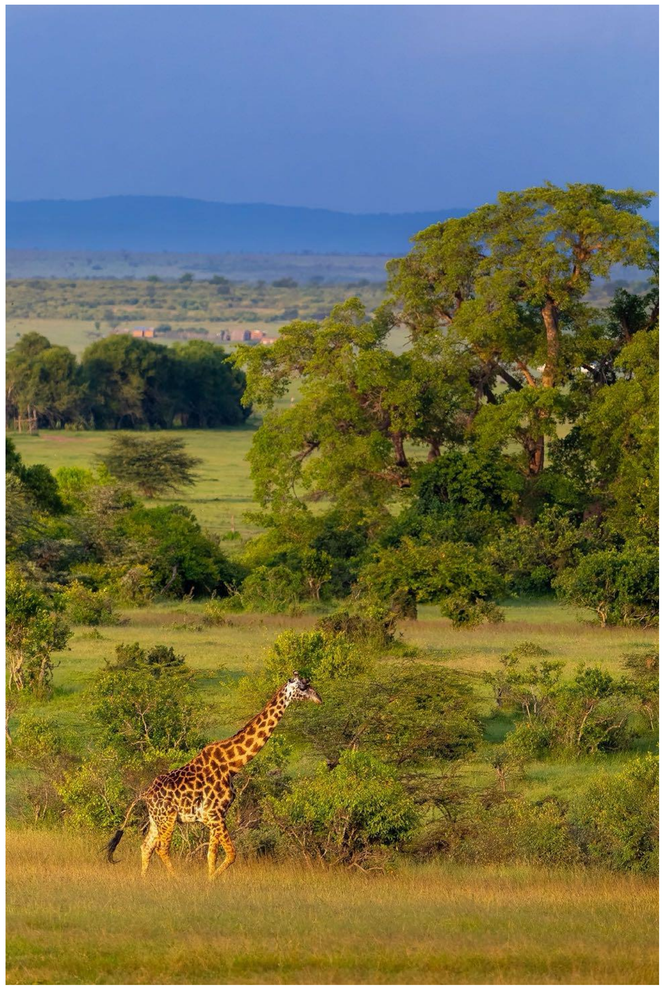
If you're reading this book, we hope you enjoy seeing the Mara from the eyes of an eight year old - full of amazement, joy and wonder. Just as we wish for these emotions to endure for our son, we hope it makes you curious about this beautiful patch of African wilderness; and that you can feel our family's love for it.

Gayathri and Sumeet
(Vihaan's parents)

DAY ONE

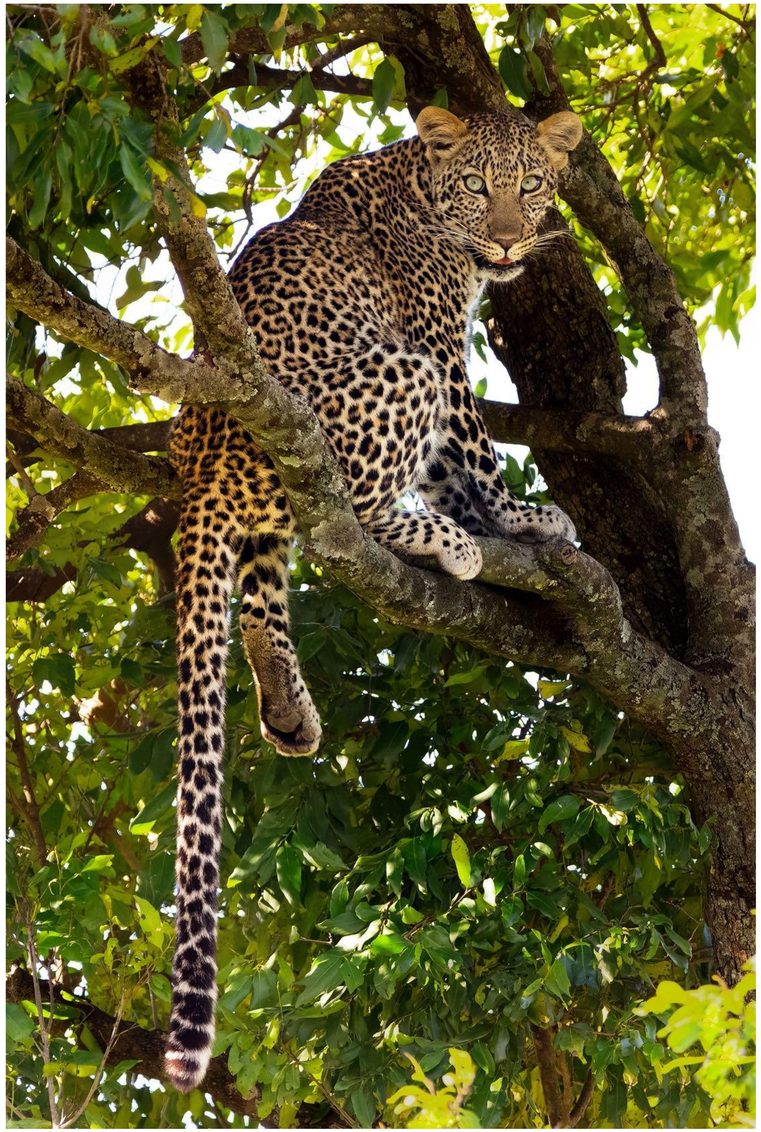
sleepy leopards, playful lions

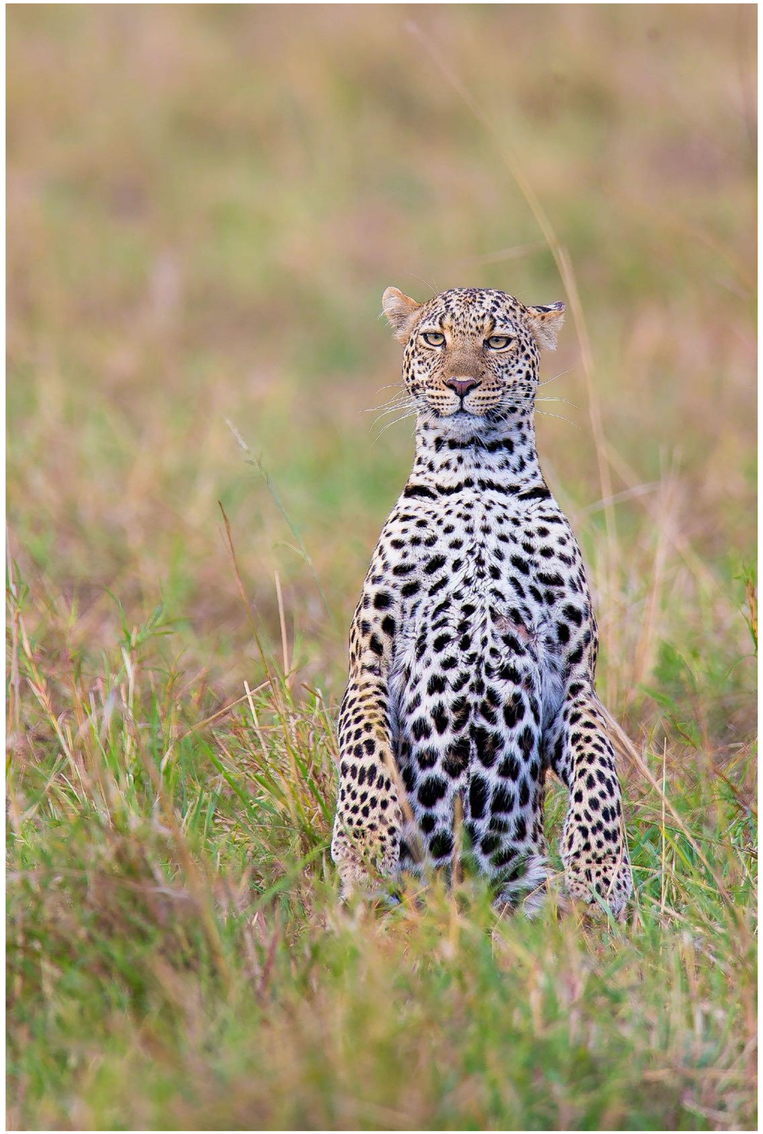
Juniper



I'd been counting days for this trip to the Mara. I couldn't wait to be in the bush again. We landed at Jomo Kenyatta international airport, Nairobi and made the long drive to Talek - a village by the Mara. With me on this trip, were my mom and dad and one of my best friends - Vivaan, with his dad. It was Vivaan's first trip to Africa and he was very excited and looking forward to see all the different animals and their behaviours.

As we were still driving to reach our camp, we saw zebra, topi, impala and gazelle herds. It was a breath of fresh air.





Leopard luck comes good!

Since we'd arrived by lunchtime, we only had an evening game drive that day. The first great sighting was that of Luluka, the famous leopard, by a river bed. Her cub was on a tree nearby. There was a nearly finished reedbuck carcass atop the tree. Luluka's cub was almost the same size as her.

Note: Leopards are notoriously elusive wherever you go. The Serengeti Mara ecosystem has a very high density of leopards and as our guide Simon put it, *"there's a leopard in every river bed"*. That doesn't make them much easier to find though. In the Mara, there are a few leopards who've become tolerant to human presence and afford patient sightings. We were especially lucky to tick off this big five predator on our first day on safari.

It was a day of big cats, so next up we saw the Black Rock pride with a big male and a female and little cubs. Their meal for the day was a buffalo. The cubs were jumping on the carcass and playing around. It was almost the end of the day and we headed back straight to the camp after this sighting.

DAY TWO

warming up to the Mara

Revisiting Luluka

Since we saw Luluka and her cub the previous evening with their tummies full, we knew they wouldn’t have moved much. So we decided to head back to the same place first thing this morning. The mother and cub were on the ground, sharing a few tender moments and then they both climbed up the tree and settled there.

Cat tip: A satisfied predator will rarely leave its spot unless disturbed, especially if it has food around. So if you leave these cats for the night, you’re mostly likely to find them in the same area the next day. Always a good idea to pay them an early morning visit!

As we were moving away from them in search of the next game, we spotted a serval cat in the grass. It was a brief, though rare sighting and we drove on. A little further ahead, we saw a solitary cheetah walking around with a purpose. We knew she was looking to hunt as she kept scanning the grassland while walking. A long wait with her paid off as she hunted down a gazelle. I missed the hunt as it was over in a matter of seconds and I broke down, crying inconsolably. My mom comforted me saying there'll be more to see on the trip and to not lose heart. As the cheetah was polishing off the kill, a hyena strode past but luckily didn't see the cheetah with the kill, so the meal was the cheetah's to enjoy.

Brekkie in the bush

Soon we stopped for bush breakfast and it was so much fun to have the buffet laid out on the car's bonnet and to eat our meal in the wilderness. Vivaan and I enjoyed our time together, this being a new experience for him.

Hot tip: The open plains have active wildlife late in the mornings as well. So don't waste time heading back to camp for lunch. Instead pack a picnic breakfast; tuck it in quick and get back on the game drive. In the bush, hot breakfasts are overrated!

Our lucky day continued with another sighting of a serval cat. She was as active as a cat can be. Before we knew it she’d made three kills of cane rats and she wasn’t even eating them all. She was stashing some of her kills for another day.

Nearby, we encountered a tower of giraffe. One of them was sitting on the ground. He was quite tolerant of us getting close to him and taking photos. Only later did we realise his leg was injured and it made sense as to why he was seated.

Later in the evening, we saw a pride of six lionesses that chased down some warthogs unsuccessfully. The warthogs lived to see another day.

DAY THREE

life, death and play in the open plains

The morning colours in the sky just before sunrise are a photographer’s delight to capture some beautiful silhouettes. We did exactly that on our second morning with a zeal of zebra and a topi on the horizon.

We then moved around to the territory where Neema, a cheetah with her 3 cubs, was an active hunter. She waited her time to get an impala but it was a missed hunt in the end, as the impala had enough time to escape while she had to run uphill in the chase.

Snack time with a croc

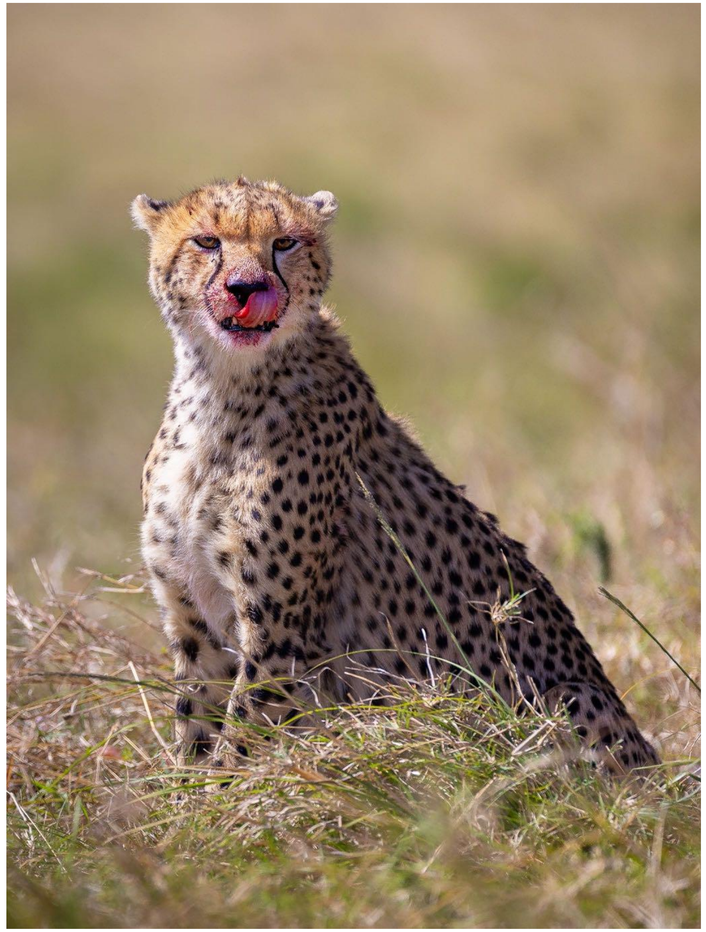
Breakfast that morning was in a beautiful grove by the river where a croc was basking in the morning sun. My dad thought it was a good time for us to snag some photos of human beings, for a change.

An uneasy romance

As we were driving along, we saw a lioness with a baboon in her mouth. A male lion was chasing her to get a part of the kill but the lioness kept running all around to avoid sharing the baboon. They kept going in circles for a while and the male lion couldn't catch up with the lioness, who finally settled down to eat the baboon by herself.

Hot tip: First rule of wildlife spotting. "You've got to be in it, to win it." They say everything goes quiet once it's sunny and hot. This incredible sighting however happened almost at high noon. When you're out in the wilderness, maximise your opportunities to be out in the bush. You never know what surprises it'll throw you. Sleeping in, sit down meals and other creature comforts can wait till you get back home.

We didn’t have to wait long for Neema to hunt again. This time it was a herd of topi with a very small calf amongst them. The herd was unaware of Neema’s presence and the little calf pretty much walked into her, making her task easy.



Neema and her three cubs happily fed on the little calf for a meal. We left them with bloodstained faces and full bellies.

The evening treated us to a big pride of lions that had 11 cubs. There was a buffalo carcass too, which the lions had almost finished off. The cubs were wrestling with each other in the tall grass and were very playful. We had a great time watching these cute little fur balls all over the place though my dad didn’t shoot all that much. I wonder why - it’s tough to figure out these adults.

DAY FOUR

of parents, little ones, and family fun

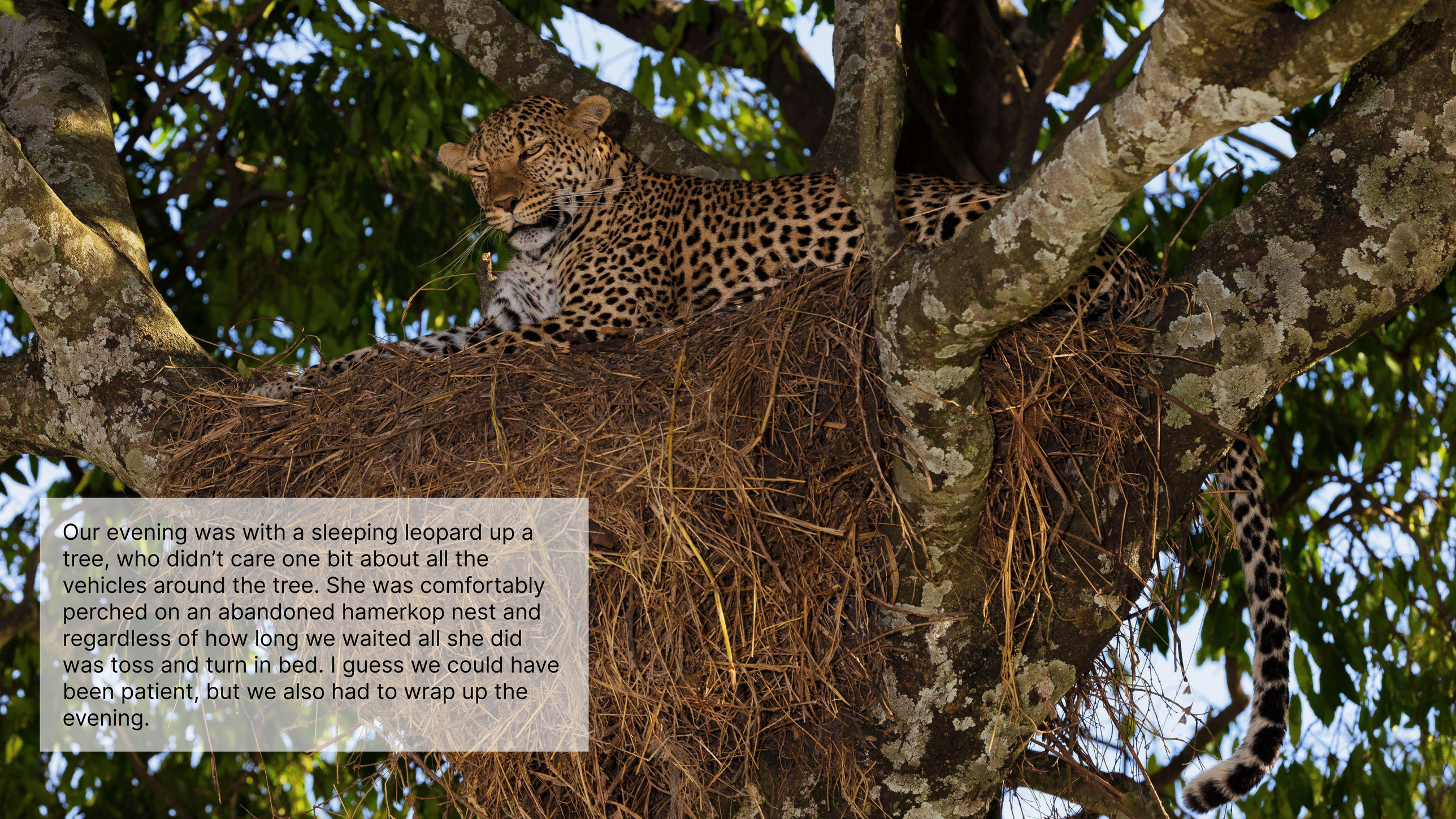
The morning was just like any other in the endless plains of the Mara. A brilliant sunrise, with silhouettes of animals lining the horizon. The first few minutes of that morning drive were with a journey of giraffe.

What followed however, was probably one of the best sightings we've ever had in the wild. We spotted a black-backed jackal den. There were five pups with their mom and dad, play-fighting with each other. They kept going around in circles around a bush, chasing each other, in a game of ringa-ringa-roses. It was such a treat to watch these little pups interact with each other and their mom.

The mom also regurgitated once to feed all the pups, who had all lined up around her to get their meal. We spent a good 45 mins with them but still couldn’t get enough of watching them.

A herd of elephants entertained us next with some antics like climbing on top of each other, trunk fighting, young ones suckling from their mother, playing tag and the like.

We then headed for breakfast at a scenic place by the Mara river, where there were a few reedbuck, hippos and some crocodiles. Can you spot them all in the landscape?



Our evening was with a sleeping leopard up a tree, who didn’t care one bit about all the vehicles around the tree. She was comfortably perched on an abandoned hamerkop nest and regardless of how long we waited all she did was toss and turn in bed. I guess we could have been patient, but we also had to wrap up the evening.

Meeting the new “Scar”

Since we’d already spent over two hours with the sleepy leopard, we decided to spend some time with the Black Rock pride next door. The cubs were in attendance, but more importantly we got to see a new warrior of the Mara - Olomina. He’d been in a scrap with another lion recently and had beaten him comprehensively. He retained the battle scars of that fight though. From the look of it, he may well be the new Scar of the Mara. The king is dead - long live the new king.

Wildlife superstitions. “When you pay respect to mother nature, she’ll reward you.” That’s what Vihaan’s learned from his dad. Interpret it as being patient and showing interest in the small things. Usually when you do this, you’ll see something great right after. No science to this - just a belief bolstered by experience in the bush. Luluka wasn’t cooperative that night, but we were in the vicinity of a great lion pride, so by the time we’d paid her our respects, it was time for another good sighting.

DAY FIVE

of legends, and family feuds

Face to face with a legend

It was time to meet the grand old lion of the Mara - Morani. He's 14 years old. Despite his age and the many battle scars, he's still an awe inspiring animal. He and another young lion, who's his latest ally, were at a buffalo carcass. The other male lion stopped to drink at a nearby waterhole and his slurping was so loud that it was a bit scary. Speaking of loud - as Morani munched his breakfast, we could hear him breaking the bones of the buffalo he was feasting on. It was a show of real strength.

Lion trivia. Male lions live a violent life and don't live very long as a consequence. Morani - meaning warrior in Maa (the Maasai language) - is quite a specimen to have survived as long. He's been a star on Jonathan Scott's "Big cat diary" and along with his brothers, Scar, Hunter and Sikio was a part of one of most well known lion coalitions - "The four musketeers".

At the time of writing this book he's without a pride and roams like a nomad. He's found a convenient ally in an unsure young male who himself would struggle if he were alone. They are bound to have an uneasy existence in the Mara as they tiptoe their way through the territories of other lions in their prime.

Servals - yet again

We then saw the serval cat family - the mother and three kittens. One of the kittens had lost its tail. They were all roaming around in the grass and we spent a lot of time with them. Serval sightings are usually rare and not much in the open but this time luck favoured us.

Stick with that sighting. To tell the truth, we had such an extended sighting of these cats, that Vihaan was bored. The fact however is that such a sight is incredibly rare. Servals are notoriously secretive and to see kittens for anything but a fleeting glimpse is a privilege. You never know when you will see something so special again, so when you're with a rare animal, stick with it as long as it'll tolerate your presence.

Birds around the camp

We’d usually chill in the camp during the hot afternoon hours, but my father often went walking around to see what birds he could find.

Pale chanting goshawk

White browed sparrow-weaver

Barn swallow

Crowned lapwing

That afternoon, Neema the cheetah was due for another hunt and she did bring down a gazelle fawn, at some distance from us, after using some safari vehicles as a convenient distraction.

It was too small a meal though and predictably, fights broke out at the dinner table even as the cubs started to help themselves. Before we knew it, one of the cubs wanted to keep a tasty scrap all to himself.

The antics of the cubs were so much fun to watch that they lit up what was otherwise a gloomy, cloudy evening. Until of course, the sun reappeared for a short while before sunset.

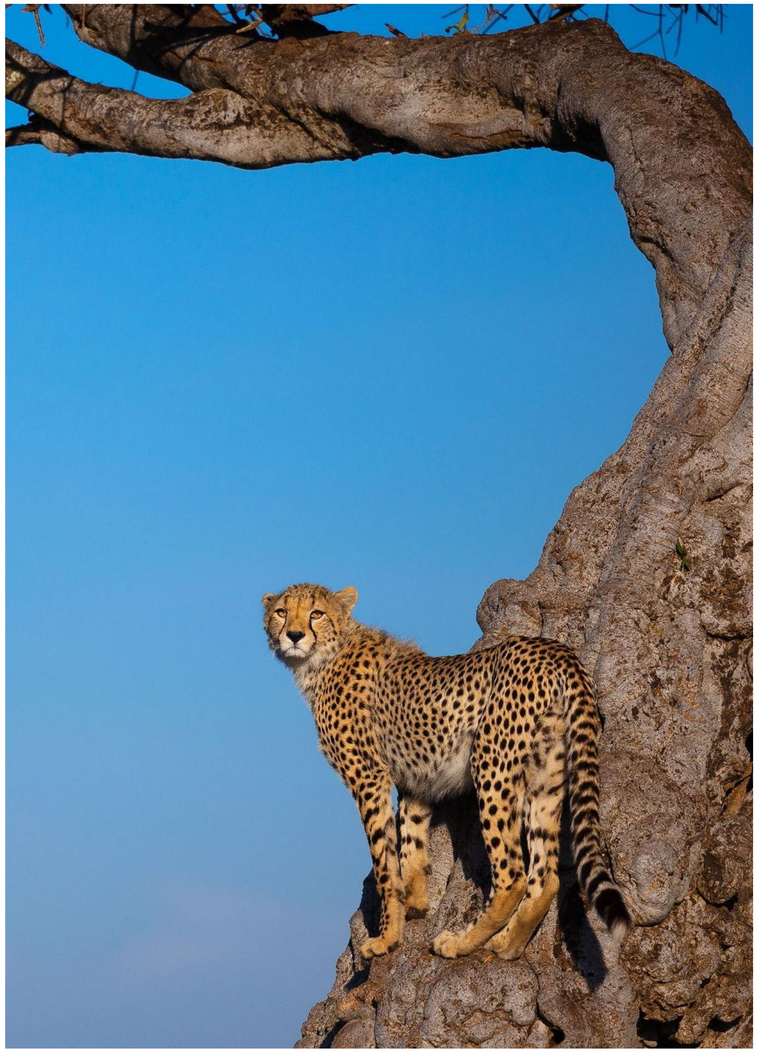
Hares galore!

All through the trip we saw a number of African hares. There was one at the camp that wasn’t skittish at all. When it joined us at the campfire, it even cooperatively posed when my dad wanted to get some shots.

DAY SIX

the day the cats were at play

By the time we reached the pride with 11 cubs that morning, they were already heading to the bush and were soon obscured for us. The sun was playing hide and seek too, so we didn’t spend too much time there.



A comic climb

We knew that after the small kill the previous night, Neema would hunt again. When we got to her, she and her cubs treated us to a funny sight. They climbed a leaning tree to get a vantage point, but as it often happens with cheetahs and lions, once one of the cubs was up on top, she was stuck. It took her some effort to get down and we had a good laugh at her expense. Neema soon spotted a gazelle with her built in binocs. The hapless gazelle didn't know of her presence and walked straight into her. Neema caught it but didn't make the kill herself. She left it to her cubs to get some practice with hunting. The cubs played a bit with it, before finally managing to kill the antelope, eventually earning their meal.

You snooze, you lose. That morning we were a bit late to start. Our guide Simon's car had broken down. And as luck would have it we missed a good time with the lion cubs, who we heard, had been playing out in the open. Thankfully we were still out early and were able to move to the active cheetahs who treated us to a great sighting. Moral of the story, start as early as you possibly can and stay out late. Animals are most active in those wee hours!

Even as the cheetahs finished their meal, a number of scavenging birds descended to do their clean up job. We saw white backed, lapped faced and hooded vultures and also maribou storks.

Hey there, big guy!

We then followed a big solitary tusker for a while, watching him so closely for a long while. He was very calm and came very close to our vehicle many times. He went to a nearby muddy pool and splashed some water on himself, enjoying a mud bath.

By the way, can you spot a predator in the photo?

Staying busy with ellies. Elephants are amongst the most fun creatures to observe. For one, they're always active. Being as large as they are, they have to feed for 16-18 hours a day and they keep moving as a consequence. If you find them in a herd, you'll see them interact in their complex social structure. Even solitary bulls will put up a show; like this one who used the mud as a natural sunscreen.

Later in the evening we returned to the Topi pride which had the 11 cubs and four lionesses. It started raining suddenly and the cubs had much fun playing in the light drizzle before heading back to the bush when the rain got heavier and it all got really dark. The cubs were climbing and jumping on each other, tugging at their mums' legs and climbing on their backs, mock fighting and playing with the lionesses' tails. As the light faded, a rainbow appeared behind us to bring the curtains down on a fun evening.

DAY SEVEN

the day we met the magnificent four

Our day started with a visit to a hyena den. There was a female hyena with her two little pups and another hyena who was probably a daughter from another litter. The hyena cubs were very dark as compared to the mother. As we were watching the pups, we witnessed the uncommon sight of the hyena picking up her pup in her mouth.

The Moniko pride with eight lions (mostly teens and tweens) were in a playful mood this morning as they were chasing each other, play fighting, climbing on fallen logs and troubling their mums.

Cuteness overload!

We were to switch camps today and Vivaan had decided to sleep in. So we'd planned to head back to camp for a sit down breakfast for a change. Yeah, yeah - I know. The drive back had many interesting sights. While on one hand we saw an ostrich displaying its feathers, it was an elephant with a very cute calf that caught our attention. The calf was so small that he barely knew how to use his trunk to pluck grass and eat. Neither he, nor his mum wanted to leave each other's sides. We love watching elephants - the bond between them is so much like our own. Probably even stronger.

After breakfast we headed to see Mara’s most famous cheetah coalition - the *Nne Bora* (magnificent four). These are my favourite animals in the Mara. I’ve seen them when they were known as the fast five. They’ve since separated from one of their mates, but they’re still just as amazing to watch. My dad calls them the show stoppers of the Mara, because when they’re on the move, everyone’s around to watch. After a half-effort chase with some warthogs, they hunted down an impala fawn.

An unusual encounter

The four then went to drink water at a waterhole which was fully red, where they encountered a Nile monitor lizard. They were scared of the lizard and didn't dare to go very close.

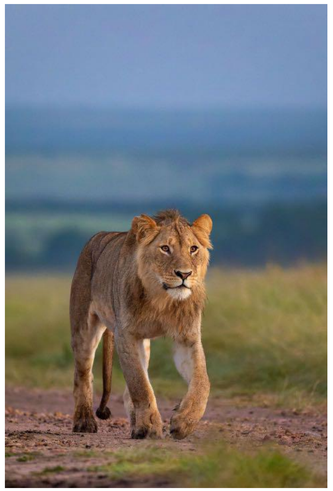
All through the nine hours that we spent tracking them, they kept moving from one tree to another and scent marked every single tree. Scent marking is when animals pee on a tree, leaving their scent behind.

Stick with the hungry cats. The *Nne Bora* are an unusual enough coalition that you should spend time with them. A coalition this size is quite rare. Don't believe us? Ask every filmmaker that's featured them on TV. That said, it's a good idea to be around hungry cats. They're usually very active and you can learn a lot from observing their behaviour and that of the animals around them. In the wild, it's often the predators that set the pace.

As the sun was about to set on what had been a very wet, overcast day; we felt the four might be looking to attack a herd of topi and hartebeest that was beyond the horizon. The sudden presence of lions behind them however, made them forget their prey and run away. That brought a swift end to the day for us too; having spent most of it with *Nne Bora*.

DAY EIGHT

the action never really stops, does it?



The nomads

As the *Nne Bora* didn't hunt the previous evening, we thought they might be looking for a meal, so we headed straight to them. They didn't seem to be actively looking to hunt though.

So we went to group of young, nomadic lions, who had their eyes on two buffaloes that were around. The lions did come close to some buffaloes, but they lost their nerve the moment the bulls spotted them. That was that.

It was our penultimate day in the Mara so we had to take a break and get our RTPCR test (for Covid) done before flying out. We were able to get the test done in the Mara itself; while on the safari; as the lab guy drove down to the Mara from Nairobi.

A tiny gazelle fawn, probably just a day old, was roaming all alone. It didn’t last long as a hyena spotted it and chased it around. The fawn did well to dodge the hyena for quite some time before it was finally caught in the jaws of the hyena.

On the other hand, Neema the cheetah, hunted down an impala stag and she, along with her three cubs enjoyed their meal. She had enjoyed a successful run during our time in the Mara. Just imagine - a young topi, a gazelle fawn, a full grown gazelle and today, a big impala!

The long haul

The four cheetahs were still walking around, covering a great distance but not really in the hunt mode. They were really looking weary and we were losing hope about anything exciting happening. They kept dropping under trees to snooze and so did we.

Experience is what you get, when you don't get what you wanted. Sometimes the long hours in the wilderness can be without reward. It can definitely get frustrating after a while, no doubt. To quote an overused cliché, "the experience is the reward". By observing animals animals closely, you'll learn about their behaviour and will be able to predict what they usually do. And that can often be the knowledge that leads to a great sighting the next time you're around similar species.

And finally, the payoff!

Suddenly, a lone wildebeest caught their attention and the leader of the four started chasing the wildebeest. The others joined him and they were able to bring down the wildebeest, in much lesser time than we'd imagined. They polished off the kill in quick time. After a long wait of following these four over two days, we were rewarded with the sight of a relatively big kill.

Towards the end of the day, we saw a lioness stalking a small herd of zebras near the river but as she got closer, the zebras spotted her and ran away to live another day. Can you spot the lioness in the photo?

We didn’t expect any more action that day. Even Vivaan and his dad had left the scene and headed back to Simon’s house. As it turned out though, we found a black rhino grazing on the horizon. The fun part of the surprise was to find not one, but two of them as one more emerged from the nearby woodland.

An unseasonal river crossing

Guess what? We had one more gift from the Mara for that evening. A wildebeest herd had made up its mind to cross the Talek river. Most of the herds would have crossed over to the Serengeti by this time, so river crossings are less frequent. The river beds are also dry by October - which is when we visited - so the crossings are less dramatic. That said, an unexpected crossing did make me imagine what it may be like at the peak of the great migration - something I want to come back for, some day.

Stay till last light. There's always something happening in the bush. If you're lucky, you'll see it, but for that you've got to be out there as long as your vision will allow you. Which is, at least till last light. Remember, you're out in the wilderness only for a few days. Make the most of it. You'll have creature comforts waiting for you back home. You'll want to enjoy those with the best memories from your time in the wild.

DAY NINE

goodbye Mara, you were brilliant!

We started our last day with a lot of anticipation, and some sadness because the adventure was coming to an end after all. A herd of impala caught our attention. They seemed to be spooked by something in the woods. Turned out it was the blonde Moniko lion.

The Moniko brothers

The blonde male wasn’t interested in the impala. As is the case with lions, as the sun was going up, he was getting set to go down. He needed to patrol his territory though, so he just moved from one patch of woodland to another.

Nearby, his brother was on his honeymoon with a female from the Moniko breakaway pride. That male is far more good looking in my opinion, but he was glued to the female and eventually went into the bush for some privacy.

In the meantime, the blonde male settled for the day in one patch of bush as he overlooked his territory.

Since we weren’t too focussed on the big predators this morning, we paid attention to the birds in the savannah. On one hand there was a Kori bustard displaying its plumage, and on the other a pair of crowned cranes strutted beautifully. Did you know cranes pair for life and often pine to death when they lose their mates?

A serval reprise

Almost as if to bid us goodbye, we saw the serval mom on her morning hunt. She looked very busy, but gave us a good sight. I wonder when I'll ever see serval cats this way. Soon, it felt that she wanted to head away from the cars, so we left her to her business and decided to not crowd her.

Sometimes it's ok to let go. Animals in frequently visited parks can get quite habituated to vehicles and it seemed this season that the serval cats weren't an exception. That said, it's worth keeping an eye on their behaviour to ensure you're not being a nuisance to them. Most animals will give signals that we can read. For example, the serval was quickening her pace when cars got near. She was flicking her tail and moving around in a rather erratic pattern. So it felt right to give her a little extra space.

The morning still had one more goodbye for us. We came across two more male lions - familiar ones. It was the grand old lion Morani and his hunting partner. They seemed like they had a rather strong bond as they rubbed their heads together and showed each other much affection.

Herbivore interactions

As we headed back to Simon’s house, we noticed a dazzle of zebra. They were in their typical crossing poses and doing all sorts of things, but a foal and its mother caught our attention. Nearby, a pair of male impalas were grooming each other with a lot of love. Just as we were to head out of the park, we came across a herd of elephants and we couldn’t resist being with them for some time.

And, that was that

Much as we didn’t want it to, the safari had to end. So we got back to Simon’s house and as my parents packed, we spent some time with his youngest son, Junior, who is really cute.

I should say a word of thanks to Simon, Alex and Ken who drove us all through the trip. Had it not been for their effort, the holiday wouldn’t have been the same. Ken was off guiding another group in Amboseli, so we snagged a quick group photo with Simon and Alex before heading back to Nairobi to take our flight home.

“If I have ever seen magic, it has been in Africa.”

John Hemingway

Photos: Vihaan’s dad | Editor: Vihaan’s mum