

1981 TANZANIA AND KENYA

When I was a travel agent, I was able to arrange trips for myself at cost. I had made arrangements to go to East Africa with Abercrombie and Kent, the leading tour operator in Africa. A Representative from Percival Tours came into our office and offered me a better deal if I would go with them. Since Percival was also a prestige tour company, I decided to take them up on the offer.

Friday, August 14, 1981. I caught a KLM flight to Amsterdam. Arriving the next morning, I had arranged a day room in order to get some sleep.

Saturday, August 15, 1981. I caught another KLM flight overnight to Arusha with stops at Vienna and Cairo.

Sunday, August 16. Twenty-nine hours from Atlanta, and having spent two nights in the air, I finally arrived. Because of the cloud cover, I didn't get to see Mount Kilimanjaro. No one from Percival was in Amsterdam, or in Arusha. Clearing customs, I found four other ladies who were on our tour. Millie Fraser and Denny Williams were retired army nurses. They had traveled with Percival before. Denny had been at Bataan and was captured at Corregidor. Millie is a docent at the San Antonio Zoo and acted as our "guide". Lorraine Munter and her daughter, Carol, were from the Bronx. Carol has never been anywhere. This was her first airplane ride.

The agent took us to the Mt. Meru Hotel and told us that someone would come to talk with us to about our program. It was eight hours before Shakir Moldina of Ranger Tours came to explain that we were a "hosted tour". Not enough people had signed up for us to have an escort. So we were five ladies without an escort in Africa. Not a good idea!

The Mt. Meru Hotel was a luxurious hotel built for the tourists. At reception, in the well-appointed marble floored lobby, the clerk checked us in using candlelight. We were informed that there would only be electrical service a few hours each day. Hot water might not be available at all, or only from 8-10 PM. I was handed a light bulb to use during my stay!

Tanzania was first settled 100 years ago. The area was known as German East Africa. After the First World War, it was ceded to the British and renamed Tanganyika. In 1962 it achieved independence, and joined with Zanzibar to form a socialized state renamed Tanzania.

Third world or developing countries are a study in incongruities. The socialized government's priorities are that the country's hard money be spent on other goods, rather than soap. All paper products, including toilet paper, and light bulbs were not considered essential. On the other hand, everyone was promised a free education and medical care. Outside the large cities, the people are still living in thatched mud huts. They suffer from malnutrition and a reliable source of drinking water. Modern medicine has spawned an enormous population growth so that more and more of the land has been opened for development. This is depriving wild animals of their habitat. The land is only marginal for farming use because it is at a high altitude with rocky volcanic soil. Only 20 years ago, you found game everywhere. Now it is only found in the animal parks. Hunting has only been banned in the last ten years. However, poaching is an enormous problem. Elephant ivory and rhinoceros horn (thought to be an aphrodisiac, are smuggled out of the country for a ready oriental market. There are still vast numbers of animals in the parks but their future is uncertain.

President Julius Nyerere closed the border to Kenya rather than pay a debt Kenya was claiming. It was also necessary to control the economy. Kenya retaliated and closed its borders as well. Capitalism is thriving in Kenya. In Tanzania there is an official exchange rate of 8.5 shillings to the dollar, but the black market rate is 25 to one. There is a thriving black market where goods can be found not available elsewhere in the country, but only if you have hard money, such as dollars.

Monday, August 17. We were picked up early by Ranger Tours and driven to Ngorongoro Crater, a huge game preserve known for its animals. Our driver was Hussein Anan. It's a four-hour drive from Arusha to Ngorongoro. The first part of our trip was rough pavement but then it switched to a rutted dusty dirt road! A lot of the dust has been caused by the over grazing of the native Masai cattle which have destroyed the natural pasture. The dust invades closed cars and even camera bags!

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There was a scheduled stop at a market of some sort, but Hussein told us it was not safe to stop there. He just didn't want to bother with a bunch of women! The stop was probably as much a bathroom stop as anything else. Regardless, we did not make it. We finally got to the Crater Lodge. Hussein checked us in and left, promising to return in two days. On future days we insisted on a restroom stop but that first day remains an agonizing memory.

The lodge was a perched on the edge of the giant Ngorongoro crater. Our separate cottages looked very nice but they were dirty, cold and damp. I don't do wet beds! There had been no electricity to dry the sheets since gasoline costs \$8 a gallon! Fortunately my blanket was dry and I slept curled up in it on the floor like a cocoon, Minimal hot water and soap caused the dirt.

I checked out the nearby Wildlife Lodge and found it much better. When we asked Hussein why we hadn't stayed there, he would only say that that hotel had troubles. They could not have been as bad as the Crater Lodge.

Tuesday, August 18. However, the crater was magnificent, living up to all that I had heard about it. We spent the entire day in a Land Rover with our heads sticking up through the roof. The animals paid little attention to us and often came within just a few feet. We saw huge rhinos, thousands of flamingos in the lake, lazy lions sleeping in the sun, herds of zebra and hartebeest, Thompson and Grant gazelles, and Cape buffalo. The highlight of the day was to find two cheetahs with their baby hartebeest kill. A hyena appeared and drove the cheetah away. They made several abortive attempts to drive the hyena away but were no match for the hyena who ate the kill. The cheetahs, like all good cats, cleaned the blood off each other. This all happened within a few feet of us! It is so exciting to be on safari.

Wednesday, August 19. Hussein reappeared and we headed north toward the Serengeti. We climbed from 5000 to 7000 feet. The high altitude keeps the weather in the seventies during the daytime, and cool enough to wear a sweater at night. We are just south of the equator.

We stopped at Olduvai Gorge where a two million year old skull has been found. Dr. Mary Leakey recently found footprints 3.6 million years old. The site where the footprints were found is not yet open to tourists.

The Serengeti is a vast plain formed of lava from the ancient explosion that created the Ngorongoro crater. Several hundred miles of land from Ngorongoro to the Masai Mara in Kenya are all protected parkland for the animals. No one lives here. Unfortunately, if the animals sometimes migrate out of the park they are killed.

We stayed at the Serenera Wildlife Lodge, which is lovely. It is of contemporary design built around a rock outcropping. It was clean and dry and had hot water for a few hours each night!

Behind the lodge were the inevitable Marabou Storks and baboons that picked over the garbage. The baboons cruised the garden and ran across the roof.

After dinner we had to have an escort back to our cabin to protect us from the dangerous animals.

Thursday, August 20. Hussein, our driver was very good at spotting. He found a leopard in a tree. They sleep in trees by day and prowl at night. We startled a cheetah that moved away from her kill of a gazelle and the vultures moved in. Within minutes there was nothing left of the gazelle but the rib carriage. It was somewhat gruesome.

We saw herds of zebra and beguiling giraffes that live on the leaves of acacia trees. We found ostriches: the males are black, the females white.

Then Hussein found six lion cubs under a tree. He suggested we wait to see the lioness return. Forty-five minutes later we saw the nearby herd of giraffe stiffen and soon the lioness came out of the bush ... empty handed. There was much mewing and nuzzling right next to the car, but she had to tell her babies there was no dinner that night. The pride then moved off into the bush.

We also saw hippos in a pool and a fish eagle.

Friday, August 21. We drove south for four hours over dusty gravel roads to Lake Manyara in the Great Rift Valley. The geologic fault of the Great Rift starts at the Sea of Galilee comes through the Dead Sea and so forth down through Africa. Lake Manyara is one of the lakes formed by the fault.

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Perched on the rim of the lake was the Lake Manyara Hotel, complete with electricity all night long and Coca Cola!

Lake Manyara's lions are known for their habit of sleeping in trees. We did see one climb down out of a tree. There were yellow-billed storks. We saw black-faced Velvet monkeys and Calvert's monkeys. There were the inevitable baboons that hang around hoping for garbage.

Saturday, August 22. We drove back to Arusha and one last chance to buy the makombe tree's ebony carvings. "Just have a look lady." "It doesn't cost anything to look." But of course you find a treasure and dicker for some low price. Soon your suitcase weighs as much as you do. It is inevitable that on a trip to East Africa, you to come home with a suitcase full of wood.

We were given one room for the five of us so we could only rest taking turns. When the driver returned to take us to the airport, we found he had been given no money to tip the porters.

Sunday, August 23. The border between Tanzania and Kenya is closed. There are three ways to get there. You can fly to the Seychelles and change planes. You can fly to Ethiopia and change planes. Or thirdly fly to Zambia and change planes. This last is what Percival had scheduled.

So we flew to Dar es Salaam. Here we were scheduled to spend the night, have a sightseeing tour and then fly through Zambia to Nairobi.

We were met and taken to the Kilimanjaro Hotel. Here we were told there were no rooms. I could see the keys so I knew he was wrong. He suggested another hotel. I told him there was no other hotel in Dar that I wished to stay. He told me that Percival wasn't paying its bills. I had kept my travel agent status a secret but this was too much! We had been taken advantage of too many times. In a loud voice I demanded blankets and pillows and told him we would sleep in the lobby. It took almost two hours of being obnoxious before keys magically appeared and we were escorted up to our rooms. My ladies were all huddled around me like baby ducks. "Who is paying for this?" I told them I didn't know but it certainly wasn't us.

Monday, August 24. I didn't know how to bully a city tour out of our transfer agent so we flew to Lusaka, Zambia, and after a four hour layover flew on to Nairobi in Kenya. In Nairobi an actual representative of Percival met us. "How was Tanzania," she asked? And we told her! Five ladies should never go to Africa on a "hosted" tour. We had signed up for an escorted tour for that reason. "Kenya will be different," she said.

Nairobi gave us a cultural shock. The electricity works all the time and you can buy everything you need! The city is modern with tall office buildings.

Tuesday, August 25. It's a four-hour drive from Nairobi to Keekorok. The first two hours are paved roads, but then it became the dustiest, bumpiest, roughest drive I have ever had. Jonathan, our driver, has only one speed: Too fast! He also insisted on driving with the window open. The van was very uncomfortable with no legroom in the rear seat. Jonathan was almost non-communicative. His one effort at guiding was to point out an elephant a mile away.

Keekorok Lodge in the Masai Mara is a delightful oasis. It is near an artificial water hole. Game can be seen from the porch all day. At night we had armed guards to walk us to our cabins and protect us from the predators and Cape buffalo who come right onto the lawn along with the baboons.

Enormous herds of wildebeests are everywhere. They have migrated north from the Serengeti for the greener pasture. Close behind them were the predators, lions and leopards. When the rainy season comes they will migrate back to Tanzania.

We saw topi and impala, hartebeest and the tiny dik dik. The leopards hide in the fever trees (yellow acacia). It is called the fever tree because people thought you caught malaria if you sat under them. Actually the malaria mosquitoes live in the water near the trees. There were giraffe and wart hogs. These last are always running away with their tails straight up. Only a mother warthog could love these ugly animals!

Wednesday, August 26. We drove four hours back on the dusty roads to Lake Navasha. There was a lovely garden at the hotel full of birds. Unfortunately it also had mosquitoes so we had to

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sleep under mosquito netting. Then we drove another four hours north to the equator spotting game along the way.

Our goal was the luxurious Mt. Kenya Safari Club. William Holden, the film actor built the club for his millionaire friends. It has every amenity: golf courses, beauty parlors, saunas, and so forth. Peacocks fan their tails on the grounds. The club has a wonderful view of snowcapped Mt. Kenya. I was assigned a suite. Shortly after I arrived my phone rang. It was Percival calling. "How is everything?" "Well", I said, "it would be nice if my ladies also had suites."

I found and bought a lovely carving of a woman in the hotel art shop. She was a refreshing change to the endless carved animals we see everywhere.

Thursday, August 27. After enjoying the hotel, we drove south again across the equator to the Abadare Country Club for lunch. Then we were loaded onto old buses, with an armed guard, to drive into the Ark. This is a jungle camp with a salt-baited water hole that has artificial light to seem like moonlight. The rooms are basic but we are not here for creature comfort. Our purpose is to watch for game. I dozed in bed only to be awakened periodically by the buzzer that told me game had been sighted. We saw giant forest hogs and Cape buffalo. Elephants came and chased the buffalo away. There was a leopard stalking a bushbuck. There were genet cats, both the spotted and the black Melanesian kind. We even saw the rare Bongo. It was a unique adventure. We are told it is one of the better nights!

Friday, August 28. We drove back to Nairobi for one last whirl of woodcarvings and batiks. We had one dayroom for all five of us. Peter, the agent, wasn't going to give us lunch until we produced the itinerary. Then we were taken, with our overloaded bags, to the overnight plane for Amsterdam.

Saturday, August 29. Martha and Dowell met me at the Amsterdam airport for a visit. John sent me a corsage to say he was looking forward to my return. So I returned home. Despite the difficulties, I had a great time. The animal viewing was extraordinary. Do I need to add that Percival Tours went bankrupt shortly after our return?