

Witt's Wanderings

by John W. Witt

Farewell to the Tanzania safari experience included two important events: a visit to a Maasai village and a quick drive through one of the most important big game hunting grounds in the world. We left the Serengeti, stopped at the Maasai village and headed toward Lake Manyara.

A beginning-of-the-end highlight was when we saw two cheetahs, one large, the other small, probably a mother and her cub, atop a huge kopje. As we circled the great rock, the mother kept moving, just enough to keep herself between us and the cub—interesting, subtle defensive moves.

Our next stop was at the “Maasai village,” perhaps an actual dwelling place, but probably a pretty authentic reproduction of the real thing. I’m somewhat suspicious that its location was intentional, to attract tourists. For a rather substantial fee, we were welcomed into the compound.

The Maasai are a war-like, semi-nomadic people that originated in the southern Nile Valley and eventually occupied most of a long area from northern Kenya to central Tanzania. They are immediately recognizable by their typically tall, slender stature and colorful clothing. They’re certainly stars in *National Geographic* magazines and films and a clear favorite of the tourist industry, useful in luring westerners to East Africa.

The village is surrounded by a wall of dried, thorned acacia. It seems an almost impregnable barrier, unless, I mused, an attacker uses a flamethrower, or even a Zippo lighter, as a weapon to breach the wall, thinking like the Marine infantryman of my younger years. The whole thing, probably including the village, would go up in flames in a couple of minutes.

We were escorted by two groups, one male, the other female, into the center of the village, where we were serenaded by each group, singing traditional Maasai songs. Then we were shown into one of the low, loaf-shaped houses, where, after our eyes grew used to the darkness, we had a conversation with a young, English-speaking “warrior.” His Christian name, he volunteered, is Paul. The religious genesis of the Maasai is monotheistic and many of them are now Christian. That accounts for a Maasai named Paul.

All adult males are “warriors,” he said. As with most East African cultures, wealth is measured by the number of cattle, goats and sheep each family owns. Poaching is a huge problem, so all adult males are warriors and their enemies are the poachers, Paul explained.

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After our introductory lecture, we were taken to the school where Maasai children, at about age five to nine, begin their formal education. There were 16 students in the rudimentary structure. One, a girl about six, was instructed to go through the alphabet and numbers, identifying each letter and number on a blackboard in the process. She did a good job.

Though the stop seemed designed to attract tourists and their money, it was interesting. It’s one way the government has managed to permit Maasai participation in the otherwise sparse Tanzanian economy.

Our last overnight safari stop was at the Serena Lodge just outside Lake Manyara National Park. Before Tanzania became conscious of the need for conservation, particularly of its unique animal population, the land around Lake Manyara was a favorite area for big game hunters, one mentioned being Ernest Hemingway.

We spent the afternoon at Lake Manyara, on our last safari drive. The Park is relatively small (330 sq. km./127 sq. mi.). Its eastern border is the lake itself. It serves as home to a multitude of freshwater fowl, which cover the lake while feeding.

The Park's western border is the Rift Escarpment, the geologic limit of the Rift Valley, which stretches 6,500 km. (4,030 mi.), from the Dead Sea in Israel/Jordan, in the north, to central Mozambique, on Tanzania's south. If you're as old as I am, you've heard about the Rift, because of the Rudolph Valentino movie, "The Sheikh," popular with your parents' generation. Teams from my preparatory school alma mater, Hollywood High, are still called the Sheikhs, as far as I know.

Leaving the lake, as we began the turn-around to return to the lodge, we finally spotted the elusive leopard, this one apparently asleep on a sturdy limb of a large tree. Our driver/guide, Ami, told us that leopards only hunt every three to four days. Once the kill is made and the victim is devoured, the big cat repairs to such a tree and stays there, digesting dinner and sleeping, until hungry again. Then the process is repeated. The leopard sighting more or less completed our safari dance card. We'd seen all the most exotic of East African animals.

The trip to join others going to Archbishop Mokiwa's Enthronement will have to wait till next time. We saw some pretty unique things and experienced wonderful events in that process. I'd like to tell you about them.