

A LONGING TO MOVE

Think back to last year.

At any given moment, there were about a million people up in the air on a plane. Many more would have been on the move at ground level, in cars, buses, boats and trains, or on foot, whether commuters, refugees, business travellers or holidaymakers. It was a time of the greatest recorded movement of humankind.

By MICHELLE JANA CHAN



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But that was last year, and the years before last year.

This is this year.

I'M IN THE Serengeti in northern Tanzania. Around me are tens of thousands of wildebeest, an animal with surely one of the best names. Though it looks less savage than it sounds. As individuals, they are not markedly impressive with their elongated jaws, scraggly beards and modest horns. But collectively they cut a striking herd. En masse, as they are now, kicking up the dust around me, they become wild, beast-like; a stampede of speed that feels dynamic, dangerous. One individual accelerates suddenly, another follows. Some mosey, meander. But most move at a pace, head-down, doggedly focused. This cyclical migration of two million wildebeest—circling from Tanzania up to Kenya's Masai Mara, in search of greener pastures, then back south, always pursuing the rains—is one of the world's greatest continuous journeys.

It turns out that while many of us are standing still, many others are still moving.

I love the wide open spaces of the Rift Valley, its dearth of landmarks, the feeling you can become easily lost. I also love it for its cradling of the history of humankind, the interring of some of the oldest known specimens of hominins. Our early ancestors perhaps also felt the sense of freedom that this land gives me, when they hauled themselves up from all fours, stood straight, and with extra height stared out at the horizon.

The allure of the Serengeti is profound, yet some travellers have long written off this place, particularly at certain times of year when tourists were coming in droves to watch the megaherds of wildebeest confront the fast-flowing Mara River, facing off crocodiles, lions and other predators. The crossings make for serious wildlife action—and opportunities for powerful photography. But swing the camera around and hundreds of safari vehicles can be seen jostling on the banks, the guides under pressure to secure the best vantage.

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This is this year. It is deserted now.

On my first day, I was the only vehicle on the banks of the Mara. My guide Hamza Visram and I had staked out beneath the shadow of an acacia tree, a few hundred metres away from the river, on an incline, so we had height to study the direction the herds were moving in. The ritual of waiting for a crossing is like war. Nothing much happens, until it does.

From a distance, we sat patiently, studying through binoculars the wildebeest swirling below, tentatively approaching the water, then billowing back. They are perpetually hesitant. Even their lowing sounds of two minds, hemming and hawing: yeah, no, yeah, no, yeah, no. To or fro. To or fro. Indecisive to a point. There might be an unprompted sprint, before they stop abruptly, inexplicably, before circling and retreating. It feels impossible to get into the head of a wildebeest. But perhaps the animal's reluctance is not so odd, given crossing the Mara is a matter of life or death.

Then I tilt my head, as I hear the noise escalating. At first, the sound is like the strings section of an orchestra warming up, but that has now morphed, accompanied by snorting and grunting and honking. So much so that the churn of the Mara's rushing water has been drowned out. Something's happening. We fire up the car engine and accelerate down, as the scene becomes frantic. The animals are funnelling down the steep banks. Some are already in the water. I watch them leap, witness the splash. One after another. I can smell pungent wet hide, like wet dog.

This section of the river is deep and they swim awkwardly, carried by the current, making an S-shaped route to reach

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the other side. In the commotion, hippos rise up, bellowing, agitated. If too threatened, they have been known to snap a wildebeest in half and eat the grass contents of its stomach. All around, crocodiles cruise sentinel, forming a wake with their speed, even in this white water. Amid the pandemonium, on a sandbank, two Egyptian geese stand rooted to the ground, seemingly in shock.

On the opposite side, the wildebeest swarm on to the muddy shallows, too many arriving, too few able to clamber up the sheer edges. In spite of colossal effort, some tumble backwards as they attempt to ascend, their bodies smashing upon the previous, breaking their backs, done for.

Time to time, I become invested in one particular animal. Perhaps it is slightly smaller or older, more vulnerable. I zone in on one now, gunning for its survival. Somehow it makes it across, past the expectant crocodiles, but when it reaches the shallows, I worry it will be crushed in the

CURRENT AFFAIRS
Wildebeest attempt to scramble up the steep bank after crossing the Mara River

GEORGE TURNER (WILDEBEEST, OPPOSITE AND PREVIOUS PAGES)





SHADOWS OF *clouds pattern*
the crater floor. THE SOLITUDE is acute.

fray. It jostles, re-entering the river, washed downstream until it lands at an easier exit point. It's got lucky. I privately cheer, as it joins its brethren, their wet backs shining with success.

And then strangely—you couldn't make it up—one swims back towards me. It's unclear why. Perhaps a mother separated from its young? But that wouldn't explain why large breakaway groups of several dozen also make the muddled journey back. Risking their lives again. And then once more, as they realise their error. As if one crossing wasn't hard enough, they do it three times. Statistically, that's hard to survive.

LORDS OF THE RIM
Ringfenced by its geology and unfrequented by tourists because of the coronavirus, Ngorongoro Crater abounds in roaming animals

On my side, the outpouring of wildebeest suddenly stops in their tracks. Perhaps they're spooked. Or a maverick breaks with the herd mentality and halts. Arrested, the front row stares down at the rough water below, as if summoning courage. Hours pass. This kind of wildlife viewing is about time, which becomes even more distilled when alone; we're still the only ones here. We've almost lost the light when a brave individual bolts, and the rest copy. Thousands make the leap, mostly victoriously, but not always.

I watch a robust adult wildebeest carried downstream, probably injured, with seeming resignation in its eyes. Then, more predictably, a baby is taken, releasing a yelp as it's pulled under by a crocodile. Simultaneously I see another snapped up further downstream. I think about these juveniles being born earlier in the year in the southern Serengeti, learning to walk miraculously within minutes of their births, with jackals and hyenas hounding them. After all that, this.

We all know travel has its risks.

THE NUMBER OF wildebeest carcasses is piling up along the river, in the nooks of rocks, heaps of dead bodies, their angular legs sticking up in the air. Some float past like driftwood; there is one with a Rüppell's griffon vulture riding on its bloated belly, pecking through the thick hide. Flanking the river, hundreds of birds congregate, the hooded, lappet-faced and white-backed vultures, in a flap to pick up the scraps.

Although many come to the Serengeti for the drama of the Mara crossings, I still prefer the wide open plains. The next day I'm up before dawn, Venus still bright in the sky. We drive east, the low sun straight in our eyes, squinting in the dust and the cold wind. Ahead, in the distance, there are bands of wildebeest inching along the horizon; nearer, sometimes single-file as columns, or messy sporadic herds with their lolling rise-and-fall motion. Up close, their posture is low-slung, their gaze inscrutable; the collective noun is rightly an implausibility of wildebeest. All around, dust devils swirl, before blowing themselves out.

There's nowhere else I'd rather be than here. But I had heard, distractingly, that Ngorongoro Crater was devoid of tourists, too; visiting now was like a throwback to the 1960s, when few knew about this extraordinary site: one of the world's largest intact calderas. Because of the altitude and limited passes over the rim, many of the animals born here, stay here. It's like the game is on tap.

Over the last few decades, as travellers learned about this place, they came in increasing numbers to see the ringfenced

30,000-odd hectares. "In recent years there were probably twice as many vehicles than there should have been," Hamza says. "Sometimes there were 20 cars on a lion sighting."

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OURS WAS THE only vehicle in the crater. Looking across the expanse of greens, yellows and beiges, soft undulations, layers of haze, a shrunken lake shimmering, the land wobbles in the heat. Shadows of clouds pattern the crater floor. The solitude is acute. Pausing by zebra, I notice I can hear them chewing, their teeth grinding. From a distance, there is the clunk of horn on horn as two wildebeest rut. There's the buzz of a bee, as I separately smack a tsetse. There's something sweet smelling in the air, wild mint or basil.

We drive through a copse of fever trees, where great white pelicans, yellow-billed storks and sacred ibis are congregating in marshland. A handsome bat-eared fox peeps out of a burrow, darts back in, emerges again. Alongside the vehicle there is a flash of the white wings of the northern anteater-chat, flying with effort into wind. Pairs of grey crowned cranes stand tall among the swaying grasses, seemingly uncomfortable with their own beauty. I spy a green pigeon, fluffed up in the crook of a ficus tree.

On the dusty road, because of the few cars, tracking has become much easier; there are no tyre tracks except our own. We pull over to inspect: the four-toed webbed prints of hippo, beside signature porcupine with their tell-tale striation patterns in the sand, then the clawed pugmarks of hyena.

The safari experience has changed in other ways, too. When we come upon three lionesses, they tear off. "They're more skittish than they used to be," Hamza says. "They've become unfamiliar with tourists." We find a family of hippo out of the water in the late morning, still grazing; usually, they'd be back in their pools. "Without disturbances, they feel safer," Hamza says. "Life is simple now for them, nobody is coming."

We spot three rhino; it turns out it's easier to see rhino than another safari vehicle.

That afternoon, I take a hike with Peter Saruni, a local Masai. Usually he conducts cultural tours around his village of Nainokanoka but all that is on hold because of the coronavirus. Together we climb Olmoti Crater, before trekking down to the falls of the Munge River.

The armed ranger who walks with us, Edna Kitatung'wa, hasn't joined a hike like this since March when the virus halted nearly all travel to the region, but she remains sanguine. "I hope the tourists come back next month," she says. It felt like I was watching a film, knowing something the protagonists don't.

Before we part, I watch a lesser striped swallow in a tree, its distinctive rounded head, its pert beak, its forked tail flitting to stay balanced on a twig. These petite birds are big travellers, even mightier migrants than the wildebeest, flying distances from Sierra Leone to South Africa. So fragile, yet undeterred. Listening to their instinct. Wanting to fly. Unable not to. ■

Asilia Africa (asiliaafrica.com) offers a six-night safari, including three nights at The Highlands Ngorongoro and three nights at Sayari Camp in the Serengeti, from £5,262 per person, based on two sharing, full board, including internal flights from Kilimanjaro, activities and park fees.

TOM PARKER (CRATER, GIRAFFE)