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Maasai Mara minus the crowds

The migration of the wildebeest is about to begin. Graham Boynton suggests how best view this extraordinary wildlife spectacle.



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It is called the Eighth Wonder of the World and is the single wildlife event that can be identifiably defined by two words: The Migration. This massive movement of wildebeest and zebra and accompanying ungulates and predators from the Serengeti in Tanzania to the sweet red-oat grasslands of Kenya's Mara plains between June and August is wildlife drama writ large.

It is also a noisy, overcrowded and often unedifying gathering of the human species at its worst. For some years now wildlife enthusiasts have been complaining bitterly about overcrowding in the Mara, and especially during the migration. Stories abound of large numbers of vehicles surrounding small groups of stressed, anxious lions and cheetahs; of 70 or 80 Kombis lining the Mara River, their overexcited occupants yelling at the animals as they cross.

For these reasons the Maasai Mara is both the most loved and the most loathed wilderness area in Africa: loved because of its sheer physical beauty and abundance of wildlife; loathed because of the crowds.

Earlier this year I returned to the Mara to find out whether it is possible to achieve harmony with this unique patch of African wilderness without feeling you're on a conveyor belt of jam-packed German buses. And I discovered that it is not only possible – with a combination of a good guide, the right location and time of year, the Mara and its abundant flora and fauna can be as rewarding as my other favourite safari destinations, Botswana's Okavango Delta and Zimbabwe's Zambezi Valley.

The Mara reserve extends over about 580 square miles. Although much of it is uncluttered open grass plains, in the eastern sector, around the Talek, Sekenani and Olumuna gates, there are large hotels that have no place in a wildlife park. On my last trip four years ago I was obliged to stay in the 120-bed Sarova Mara, which was crowded and unedifying. The memory of a line of Kombis and packed Toyotas leaving the camp in a long convoy will remain with me for ever.

Not far away from the Sarova Mara are seven other lodges, including the 250-bed Figtree and the 150-bed Simba Lodge. To the south-east is another cluster of five camps and lodges, including the 150-bed Mara Sopa Lodge. In all there are some 5,000 beds in the Maasai Mara National Reserve; when these are full, the early-morning game drives inevitably involve long trains of vehicles.

Where you will find the fewest vehicles and smallest camps – and they are tented camps rather than lodges and hotels – is in the communal conservancies that lie along the park's borders: Naboisho, Olare Orok, Mara North, Motorogi and Ol Kinyei. Here private operators have done deals with the Maasai landowners and created relatively uninhabited wildernesses, where there is only one tent for every 700 acres.

One of the pioneers of this concept, Jake Grieves-Cook, a former chairman of the Kenya Tourist Board, says the conservancies have achieved three things: "They have added protected habitats right next to the reserve, so wildlife numbers have increased; they allow the Maasai landowners to derive real benefits for setting aside land for wildlife conservation; and they give a more rewarding safari experience to visitors, who can see wildlife without minibuses."

Another key factor is your guide. For my two days at Topi House I was guided by a famous Maasai man of the bush, Jackson Looseyia. He is in demand, not least because he has appeared as a presenter on the BBC's Big Cat Diary and is thus known to a generation of British wildlife enthusiasts. We had a serene two days driving around the central Mara and for the whole time I barely saw another vehicle and certainly not a single Kombi. It was as if we had the Mara to ourselves.

Jackson says that bad guiding is also a major contributor to the overcrowding: "A good guide will plan the day to avoid the crowds, leaving earlier. He will move off a sighting when other vehicles arrive. He will encourage you to get away from the 'Big Five' mentality: 'Go and see the birds. Go and smell the flowers.'"

I was there during what Jackson called the mini migration, the March-April movement of some 300,000 zebra and wildebeest from the Loita Plains. It's not nearly as dramatic as the major Serengeti migration, yet Rhino Ridge and Topi Plains and large parts of the Olare Orok Conservancy were covered in zebras.

My final stop was an area known as the Mara Triangle, in the north-east of the reserve and across the Mara river. This is a particularly beautiful part of the Mara – it was here that some of the most spectacular scenes in *Out of Africa* were filmed – and has the distinct advantage of being relatively free of minibuses. There were more vehicles than I'd seen in the private conservancies but no more than you'd expect to encounter in Botswana or Zimbabwe. The two main camps here, Governors' and Kichwa Tembo, are well designed, with tents tucked away in thickly wooded enclaves so that you get a sense of privacy that is lacking in those massive lodges-cum-hotels in the east.

The final word on how to avoid the crowds came from Stefano Cheli, owner of the 16-bed Elephant Pepper Camp in the Mara North private conservancy. Cheli suggests that travellers should avoid August and September because it's the most crowded and expensive time. The best months for viewing over the past six years have been October and November, "when there are fewer tourists, the grass is short [best for game viewing] and the migration is still on".

The Ultimate Travel Company (020 3603 9351; theultimatetravelcompany.co.uk) offers packages to the Maasai Mara that include stays at the camps mentioned here (and right) and economy-class international flights with Kenya Airways and airport taxes, all internal flights and transfers.

All accommodation is on a full board basis and includes local drinks and scheduled activities. Six nights at Kichwa Tembo costs £2,668 per person, sharing; a package of two nights at Mara Toto and two at Topi House costs £2,749 per person, sharing; and a package of three nights

each at Kicheche Valley and Kicheche Mara Camp costs £3,269 per person, sharing.

When to go

Although it varies year to year, the peak migration period is from July to September: lodges are full, the prices are high and the Mara River is lined with vehicles. In the “shoulder months” – May, June and October, November – the Mara is relatively free of tourists and thus much more pleasant. You may not see the wildebeest crossing, but the game on the plains is plentiful.

Where to stay

Topi House is on the border of the Olare Orok conservancy and looks across a seemingly endless plain filled with zebra, wildebeest and all the other ungulates with barely another vehicle to be seen. It has three generously sized bedrooms linked by a veranda and is thus ideal for a large family.

Within a few miles radius of Topi are three excellent camps: the delightful, but quite expensive Mara Plains camps (Mara Plains and Mara Toto), owned by the National Geographic film-makers Dereck and Beverly Joubert, with 14 beds; the more rustic and less expensive Porini Lion Camp, with 20 beds, set on the Ntiakatiak river; and the 12-bed Kicheche Camp. A few miles away, in the neighbouring Motorogi Conservancy, Richard Branson’s 24-bed camp has just been completed.

In the Mara Triangle the camps are larger than those in the private conservancies, but they are tented rather than hotels and there are no minibuses. I stayed at the 18-bed Bateleur North camp, owned by the & Beyond company. With the similar 18-bed Bateleur South camp, a short walk away, and the main 80-bed camp it makes up the Kichwa Tembo complex.

Some distance across the bushveld, the Governors’ Camp complex also has three distinct camps with a total of 120 beds. All of these camps are on or near the Mara River, where the wildebeest cross during the migration. NB North of the Mara River (the Mara Triangle) there are some 500 beds, whereas south of the river there are almost 5,000.

All properties mentioned here can be booked through Ultimate Travel (see above).

Inside track

The best guides in the Mara believe that even during the peak of the migration they can find you vantage points away from the minibuses – although they admit these do not include the narrow passageways across the Mara River that are the subject of famous documentary footage.

However, the good guides rise earlier, leave sightings when crowds descend and, most important, can take you off the beaten track. Jackson ole Looseyia is the most famous, but equally adept are

Paul Kirui, who is one of the great teachers of young guides, and Salaash ole Morompi, one of Jackson's partners. Among the best young guides is Pink at the Mara Plains Camp. A good tour operator will be able to connect you to a quality guide.

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