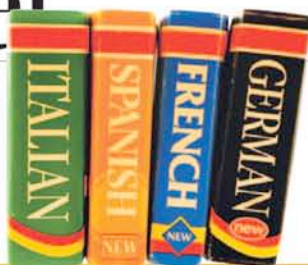


Travel

SECTION T
SATURDAY
JUNE 6, 2009
thestar.comTHE NEW
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EAST AFRICA

Magic
of the
Maasai
MaraA stunning array
of wildlife — from
crocs to cheetahs
and wildebeest
to zebra — roam
the landscape
of Kenyan
game preserve

MARK SISSONS PHOTO

A female cheetah surveys the grasslands of the Maasai Mara game preserve in Kenya. Cheetahs generally track the abundant prey by day and leave the night shift to the lions.

MARK SISSONS
SPECIAL TO THE STARMAASAI MARA, KENYA—Without
question, this is love at first sight.
Nature, in the embodiment of fe-
line perfection, crouching atop a
terrace hill barely 10 metres away.In my imagination, she's here to
greet me after my flight from Nairo-
bi landed on one of the Maasai Ma-
ra's grass landing strips.As dusk descends on the cheetah's
palette — the Mara's tall savannah
grasses, woodlands and tree-lined
rivers — the fastest, most gracefulcreature on Earth locks her car-
mel eyes onto mine. I wonder what
she makes of me as I stare back at
her.She breaks the spell to rapidly
scan the horizon, alert to any hint of
movement and its promise of nour-
ishment lurking beneath the sway-
ing sea of sunset rusted green.For the next three days, my Ken-
yan guide, Elphas Njuki, and I have
one of Africa's most famous game
reserves virtually to ourselves.Partly because it's the traditional
low tourist season, when the Mara'sgrasses are high, often obscuring
game from being easily spotted.But also because tourists have
been slow to return to Kenya since
last year's political and ethnic strife
left more than 1,000 dead.Njuki, a powerfully built man in
his mid 40s, possesses an encyclo-
pedic knowledge of the Maasai Ma-
ra and its inhabitants."No troublemakers would dare
enter this park with its legions of
predatory guardians," he says as we
track our spotted sentinel. "It will
always be peaceful here."For me, peaceful doesn't begin to
describe the privilege of roaming
this 300-square-kilometre wild
kingdom."She must be still searching for
her dinner," Njuki whispers as we
creep closer to the cheetah."It's getting late and very danger-
ous for her to be out. Cheetahs nor-
mally hunt by day, leaving the noc-
turnal shift to the lions. If they
catch her, they will kill her."

We leave my new-found love to fo-

MAASAI continued on T10

It was 65 years
ago that
thousands of
Allied soldiers
rolled up on
the beaches
of Normandy
in one of the
decisive battles
of World War II.

CHERIE DELORY PHOTO

NORMANDY

D-Day beaches . . . and
memories of a father'Vibrant red poppies
sprouting out from
golden-coloured
stalks of wheat'CHERIE DELORY
SPECIAL TO THE STARJUNO BEACH, FRANCE—Sometimes,
the best souvenir doesn't cost a
thing. As I peer into my little honey
jar, now filled with sand and what
looks like tiny specks of fool's gold
amid dots of blue and rust-coloured

D-DAY continued on T11

What's on the Web

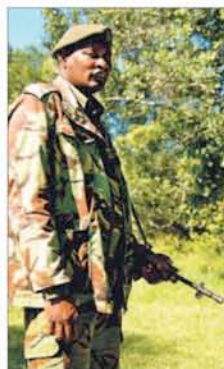
Dozens of tall ships will invade
Halifax in mid-July for an annual
festival. You can find details at
thestar.com/travel. We also
have a story and video on visit-
ing the Seattle-area gravesite of
legendary guitarist Jimi Hendrix
and a story and video on the air-
bus A380's visit to Toronto this
week. Star photographer Rich-
ard Lautens also offers his latest
travel photo tips, and we have
Travel Editor Jim Byers' regular
blog. All at thestar.com/travel.

thestar.com

TRAVEL



MARK SISSONS PHOTOS



Creatures great and small, dangerous and delightful inhabit the Maasai Mara, including herds of wildebeest, zebra and giraffe, which are fodder for predators such as lions, cheetahs and hyenas. Because of the proximity of wildlife, visitors are escorted to their camps by armed guards.

JUST THE FACTS

AIR KENYA operates daily flights aboard De Havilland Dash 8s and Twin Otters from Nairobi's Wilson Airport to landing strips in the Mara and other Kenyan parks. Flying time is approximately 30 minutes. See www.airkenya.com

HERITAGE HOTELS runs several boutique luxury properties throughout the region, including Mara Explorer, their flagship camp in the heart of the Maasai Mara, and Kenya's most famous tented camp, Mara Intrepid. See www.heritage-eastafrica.com

MICATO SAFARIS offers a wide range of custom luxury safaris. See www.micato.com

FOR information, contact the Kenyan Tourism Board, www.magicalkenya.com

Plenty of beasts surrounded by beauty

MAASAI from T1

cus on feeding her family and drive the final couple of kilometres to Mara Explorer, a permanent tented luxury camp on the thickly forested Mara River.

At check-in, manager David Le-wayanna delivers a sobering introductory briefing.

"Under no circumstances," he informs me, "are you to leave your tent unescorted after sunset."

Instead, I have to call the main lodge by walkie-talkie to summon my well-armed escort.

"It's because of the wildlife," he explains. "There are no fences surrounding this camp and predators sometimes wander through at night."

"A couple staying here once discovered a pride of lions camped out on their tent's porch when they awoke early to go ballooning. But such encounters are rare."

Not entirely reassured, I follow Samuel, my personal butler, along a

winding trail to my lodgings, an enormous canvas tent with permanent attached bathroom.

An antique claw-foot bathtub graces the spacious deck overlooking a bend in the river where a group of snorting hippos splashes in the shallow water, occasionally wandering ashore directly beneath me to forage.

A crocodile, its jaws gaping open, sits motionless on a sandbank among them.

As I drift off to sleep amid a comical nocturnal symphony of belching hippos, laughing hyenas and shrieking monkeys, I wonder if the cheetah managed to catch anything for dinner.

Over the next three days, I go on twice-daily game drives with Njuki and encounter dozing lions, grace-

ful giraffes, herds of nervous zebras and wildebeests, roving bands of baboons, and even an elusive leopard stalking its prey by the riverside as giant crocodiles bask in the equatorial sun.

I watch, awestruck, as a family of elephants emerges from the foliage right across the river from my tent. I enjoy elaborate bush breakfasts, champagne sundowners on the hood of our land rover, and sumptuous multi-course dinners, animated by Njuki's lectures on Maasai culture and wildlife.

But the most memorable private Mara moment comes during my first game drive just after dawn the morning after I arrive.

It's chilly, with mist rising over the river, and the reserve's waist-high grasses are still wet with dew.

As we slowly climb a winding track along a ridge, Njuki taps the driver on the shoulder and whispers something to him in Swahili. Then he hands me his binoculars and points toward a thicket three metres away.

"She's there," he says breathlessly. "Watching us. Waiting for you."

And so she is, the cheetah that had so elegantly introduced me to the magic of the Mara, nestled deep in the underbrush with her two stuffed-toy-like cubs nuzzling up against her.

We inhabit utterly different worlds, yet on this morning as the sun rises over her magnificent East African home, I find myself under her spell again — a beast humbled by the face of beauty.

Mark Sissons is a Vancouver-based freelance writer. His trip was subsidized by Heritage Hotels, Micato Tours and the Kenya Tourism Board.



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