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Safari in the Sky Ballooning over the Serengeti

Sat May 5 2007

By Mark Sissons



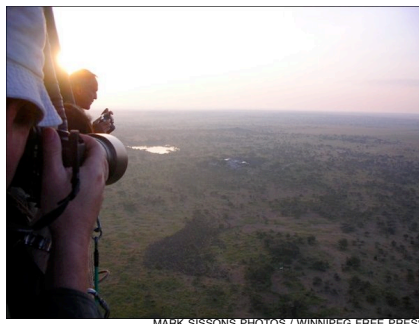
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MARK SISSONS PHOTOS / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS

A view of Serengeti National Park from a balloon.

the wildlife to the trees, is constantly morphing."

Since it began flights in 1989, Tanzania Serengeti Balloon Safaris has been able to fly almost daily (only 10 flights were cancelled this year due to high winds). The company also boasts a perfect safety record, unlike the ill-fated Kenyan operator who took my former elementary school teacher, 77-year-old Gwen Hogue of Portage la Prairie, for a dawn ride over the famed Masai Mara Game Reserve on Feb. 10th of last year.

In the only reported fatal balloon crash in East Africa in over 30 years, Gwen and her fellow passengers, including her husband's sister-in-law, Gwyneth Hogue of Edmonton, plummeted to earth after a gust of wind blew the British pilot out of the basket. Two of the 12 people onboard the balloon, the pilot and a Belgian tourist, were killed in the 60-metre free-fall. Gwen suffered multiple fractures and spent three weeks in a Nairobi hospital intensive care unit before being airlifted to Winnipeg's Health Sciences Centre for another six weeks of treatment. She continues to receive rehab treatment at Portage District General Hospital. Her harrowing story was featured in a recent edition of *Readers Digest*.

I think of Gwen as we take off before dawn from our launch site, a grassy field, and rise with the sun to over 1,000 feet, floating wherever the gentle morning wind takes us. From this height you can see a hundred miles in each direction, enough to appreciate the enormity of the Serengeti Plains, home to the greatest concentration of wildlife on earth.

Directly beneath us, the annual Great Migration is already underway. Each year over a million wildebeest and about 200,000 zebras follow ancient migratory routes through Tanzania and Kenya in a continual search for forage and water. Enormous herds of them scatter like ripples in a pool at the occasional blast of our whisper burners as we float, otherwise completely silently, overhead.

Because Captain Sparkes can precisely control the balloon's altitude, we are soon able to drop to treetop level, literally eye to eye with vultures high up in their acacia tree nests. Giraffe, waterbuck, Cape buffalo, and antelope look up from grazing as we cruise past. In one direction, hippos yawn in the Seronera River. In another, a pride of lion is on the move in the distance. This is turning out to be the most exhilarating morning of my life.

All too soon this hour of weightless bliss is up and we must prepare to land. We have been airborne for just under an hour but already winds have carried us as far as we can safely go this morning. Captain Sparkes radios the chase crew to report our expected touchdown point, and then orders us to take our landing positions. Crouching two by two in tiny sub compartments of the giant wicker basket, we hang tightly onto safety handles as the enormous balloon hits the ground hard, then rises a few meters off the ground again as Sparkes makes a couple of attempts to land. Finally, the basket flips on its side and the rapidly deflating balloon drags us through the grass for several meters before we finally come to a halt.

A quick check - everybody's fine. I feel very fortunate indeed as I think of how differently this flight might have ended.

The chase crew soon arrives, and after our champagne toast, they whisk us away in land rovers to a lovely shady spot beneath a huge umbrella tree where a long table is laid with bone china, linen cloths, King's silver, and champagne flutes. We're soon digging into a full English "bush breakfast" of eggs, sausages, beans and toast cooked over the balloon's burners, and served by solemn waiters in traditional Swahili costumes. More champagne flows as we enjoy the afterglow of a magnificent morning spent on safari in the sky over what the Masai call "the place where the land moves on forever."

"A toast to our survival!" proposes Captain Paul Sparkes as we enthusiastically raise our champagne glasses toward the sun rising over East Africa. Twelve newly minted hot air balloonists, we're still trying to absorb what we've just experienced - over an hour of silently floating over the infinite expanse of Tanzania's Serengeti National Park.

Our celebratory post-flight bubbly, a ballooning tradition ever since French scientist Pilatre De Rozier made the first ever flight in 1783, makes me even giddier. I've just realized a dream come true - walking on air and drifting through space on the ultimate safari in the sky.

"If you've ever wondered what it's like to be a cloud, flying a balloon is exactly the same feeling," says Zimbabwean-born Sparkes, who has spent the past 16 years piloting balloons all over Africa and Europe. He now flies for Tanzania Serengeti Balloon Safaris, the only commercial ballooning company allowed to fly in the Serengeti, one of the oldest ecosystems on earth, where the essential features of climate, vegetation and fauna have barely changed in the past million years.

"Here in the Serengeti it's not four seasons of the year, it's 365," explains Sparkes. "Every single day this fascinating ecosystem is changing with different wildlife moving in and moving out. Everything, from the grasses to

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