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I've found the secret to avoiding the crowds on safari

Stay well ahead of the human herd, with a camp that moves with the Great Migration in Kenya's Maasai Mara



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Every year 1.5 million wildebeest make the arduous trek from Tanzania to Kenya, drawing many tourists to witness the spectacle Credit: iStockphoto/Rixipix



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Sitting beneath the open porch of our large, canvas tent amid a small cluster of trees in Kenya's Maasai Mara, I could see zebra milling about in the long grass beyond, tails flicking, heads down and round bellies rising and falling with every breath. It's easy to understand why so many travellers fall in love with Kenya; the air is warm and still and there is little sound beyond the gentle lilt of bird song and the soft rustle of leaves.

"It's the original home of safari," our guide Nigel Archer told us. "Just look at those landscapes; they're beautiful."

We had travelled to the Mara with one intention – to see the Great Migration – but had decided against a luxurious lodge. I have long-loved camping and hold the unpopular opinion that it can be

one of the best ways to go on holiday. So instead of opting for vast modern beds, hot running water and a swimming pool overlooking the plains, we chose the newest venture of Nigel Archer Safaris: the mobile camp.

We had bounced down on the Ol Kiombo airstrip in a cloud of dust, and been met by Archer himself and Lolo – a Samburu guide with endless anecdotes and a constant smile, as though he and the bush shared a private joke.



Penny and her husband Ed land at Ol Kiombo airstrip to start their safari experience

“The camp moves with the migration,” Archer told us as we hopped into the 4WD, our game vehicle for the next few days, and set off across the reserve. “It means we can scout the area before any guests arrive and make sure we are in the best possible position for wildlife viewing.”

We passed a couple of lodges and could just make out a handful of people standing on decks or relaxing by the pool. “There aren’t many lodges around where we are going,” said Archer, “and the beauty of the mobile camp is that we can get out early before the crowds arrive and stay out later.”

Tents – with trimmings

We turned off the barely beaten track, down a small rocky hill, and the canvas became visible amid a small group of trees. It was more impressive than I had anticipated – a little rustic, perhaps, but far from basic. Our tent was kitted out with a plumbed toilet, a comfortable double bed, a basin, lamps and a bucket shower – a far cry from camping on the Cornish coast in a windswept three-man tent with a gas lamp, shared toilets and a shower costing £1 for three minutes.



Nigel Archer Safaris offers a mobile camp, with the location changing day to day

The communal area – a large gazebo-style tent with thick wooden poles – was clustered with mismatched armchairs, bookcases stuffed with wildlife guidebooks, a large dining table and a bar that consisted of a cool box filled with everything from ice-cold Sprite to Amarula liqueur – a safari staple. A generator provided a small amount of power at night for lighting and charging, but everything else ran on solar or battery power.

Impressively, there was hardly any plastic in sight – a challenge when you are deep in the bush and need provisions for days at a time. But fresh, clean drinking water was on hand to fill up the flasks we were handed on arrival. I dunked my dusty hands into the bowl outside and, for a fleeting moment, found myself transported to West Yorkshire – to the step outside my grandma's house with a damp cloth softly scraping a scratched knee. It was the unmistakable aroma of Dettol, added to the water as a clever but relatively simple way of ensuring it was safe for washing.

Having seen more than my fair share of David Attenborough documentaries, I naively expected that watching the Great Migration would entail sitting by a river all day, waiting for a wildebeest to leap unsuspectingly into the jaws of a patient crocodile. But I was pleased to learn that I was wrong; the joy in the migration isn't in the river crossings, it's in the sheer enormity of the spectacle.

An implausibility of wildebeest

Our first sighting was of a somewhat bedraggled hyena taking a break in the midday sun. As we watched, a trailing line of wildebeest sprung into view, moving in a long line across the landscape like a string of worker ants.

“Let's take a look,” Archer suggested, his ample years of guiding experience kicking in. He anticipated the herd perfectly and as the lead wildebeest bounded into view along the road just ahead of us, it stopped dead in its tracks, those following piling up behind it.



'The beauty of the mobile camp is that we can get out early before the crowds arrive and stay out later' Credit: Ed Woodger

“Road crossing!” Archer laughed. “They seem to think it’s water. Who knows how long it will take them to move?” It quickly became clear why a group of wildebeest, renowned for their slow-wittedness, is called an implausibility. The animals seemed to have completely forgotten what they were doing and where they were going.

Eventually, they were saved from themselves by a small group of impatient zebra. “It’s like the zebra have decided that the herd can’t just hang around here all day so they’re giving them a nudge,” Archer said, as the wildebeest set off once more, streaming around us in a thunder of hooves and a cacophony of grunts.

“It’s normally the same with river crossings,” Archer added. “The zebra end up leading the herd over after some rather anxious waiting on the bank.”

Vast herds from above

The next morning, after rising at 4.45am, we gleaned a better understanding of just how vast the herds of the Mara can be as we drifted over the plains in a hot-air balloon. If the migration seemed impressive from the ground, from up here it looked like an invasion force – thin triangular shapes heading in all directions like a complicated game of Risk or the opening credits of Dad’s Army.



The migration was even more impressive from the air Credit: Rixipix/iStockphoto

One group made a sudden dash for it, spewing dust into the golden early-morning air as a pair of tawny-maned lions emerged from the banks of the shrub-lined river to amble along behind them.

This, of course, is another big draw of the migration: the cats. Where the food goes, the predators will inevitably follow and the migration is a time for feasting. “Lions can go an incredibly long time without eating,” Archer informed us, when our feet were firmly planted back on the ground. “But why would you starve when there is so much food around? Would you say no to a second Big Mac when you know they’ll be scarce in a few months?” he laughed.

Encounter with a shy leopard

The evening game drive provided what I had been hoping for – a good look at a leopard. Beautifully sleek with long whiskers, cool grey eyes and a pristine coat, Archer easily identified Bindi as she prowled past our car. “You’re incredibly lucky,” he whispered. “Bindi is normally very shy – she’s rarely seen walking around in the open like this.”



Bindi the leopard was a rare sighting Credit: Penny Walker

But the sighting proved to be a sign of things to come and over the next three days, we enjoyed another two leopard sightings. Our success rate was largely down to the expertise of Archer and Lolo. Their radios operate on a separate frequency to the rest of the vehicles in the park, meaning that any sightings remain strictly among themselves. They also know this part of the Mara intimately, and with the cats being territorial animals they can often guess where they are heading next.

The nature of the camp meant that most of our daylight hours were spent out in the bush. Unlike more formal lodges, there were no time restrictions and no strict regimes dictated by meal times and game-drive lengths. It was completely flexible; the guides were happy to stay out as long as the sightings were happening.

One morning, we were out for over seven hours, leaving the camp as the sun rose at 6am and not returning until well past 1pm. Breakfast – sausages kept warm in tin foil, tasty local fruit and African meat pies – was served out in the plains from the back of the 4WD. While we never went hungry, using the bush bathroom proved to be an adrenaline-fuelled experience – no one wants to get caught with their shorts around their ankles by a prowling lion.

“What [animals] will be left for you to see?” Lolo joked, with a characteristic grin, after a particularly delicious pasta lunch back at the camp. During our short time in the Kenyan Mara, we had seen more and spent more time out on drives than at any lodge I have ever stayed in. But our luck had far from run out and we were blessed with further sightings – a snake eagle perched in a tree, a cheetah lounging beneath an acacia, a short-tailed eagle wheeling overhead, and a herd of small elephants descending from the forest.



Sleeping and dining under canvas afforded a real sense of privacy

Starry nights

On our last night, as we were led back to our tent by one of the ever-watchful Maasai, Mother Nature put on one final show, filling the skies above with a depth of stars you only see in the wild.

That display exemplified the real beauty of sleeping under canvas in a mobile camp; it's not just the proximity to the wildlife and the ability to make your own timetable, but the most valuable and limited commodity of modern life – privacy. Out beneath that aching, star-etched sky, it felt as though it was just us and the bush.

After three days packed with sightings, we sadly waved goodbye to the camp and headed for the Talek gate. For a sense of contrast, we decided to spend one night in a plush, hotel-style luxury lodge. Here we were brought firmly back to earth with a bump as we found ourselves amid a group of people playing a game of one-upmanship over dinner. My mind drifted from the conversation as it entered the territory of whose children went to the best school, who lived in the best neighbourhood and, inevitably, whose trip had been the most indulgent.



Guide Lolo was from the Samburu tribe, one of the biggest tribes in north-central Kenya and related to the Maasai Credit: Bartosz Hadyniak/E+

I missed the Maasai with their gentle, quiet nature and Lolo with his endless stories that had the whole group in hysterics. I missed the magical, down-to-earth, homely feel of the mobile camp and the soft whisper of the breeze over canvas. I experienced a different side of safari, and it may have ruined me for life.

How to do it

Turquoise Holidays (020 7147 7087; turquoiseholidays.co.uk) is offering three nights at Nigel Archer Safaris Seasonal Migration Camp, with one night bed and breakfast at [Hemingways Nairobi](#) beforehand, from £3,429pp. The price includes all meals, local drinks and game drives, plus all transfers, domestic flights and international flights with BA from Heathrow to Nairobi. Departs July 2022

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