



Tanzania!

Alistair Montgomery

Go, Before it's Gone

by

Alistair Montgomery

The Place

“It’s a long time until lunch when you get up at five” someone grumbled in the dark. Lantern lights began to emerge from the row of tents and bob above the grass like fireflies along the path to the cook tent. We were at the NAABI camp on the Serengeti Plain, judged by our guide to be safer from poachers by its proximity to the Ranger Station. We stuffed down the porridge, mangoes, sausage and crepes and washed it down with instant coffee to make the scheduled 5:30 am departure in the Land Cruisers. The hot food was wonderful in the morning chill. It was still dark when we took off into the savannah, bouncing around and hanging on as we rushed to reach our destination before sunrise.

There is nothing quite like a Serengeti sunrise where the shadows are washed from the plains by the rising sun. Nocturnal predators head home. Exotic birds roosting in Acacia trees bathe in the golden glow. Gazelles, wildebeest, zebra and cape buffalo begin to stir, and the big cats start to take notice. On this day we would photograph until we were spent, as we had on all the other days of this great adventure.

I had been in Africa before, many years ago in Northern Rhodesia (Zambia) where I worked in the copper mines. The thrill of the African bush never left me and this year I decided to go back while I still can, and the animals are still there. But I wanted to see the Ngorongoro Crater and the Serengeti Plain that I had read about on a dreary day in

Scotland where I grew up. In his book “Hunter” John Hunter described his first visit to Ngorongoro as seething with game. “The grass was cropped as fine as a lawn by the thousands of beasts. In the distance the herds seemed to melt together into a trembling mass of white and fawn”. The massive herds of yesteryear are gone now, but the animals still remain in sufficient numbers to thrill a photographer seeking adventure.



The Ngorongoro Crater Conservation Area sits on the southeast corner of the Serengeti National Park. The Park is mostly in Tanzania and extends into Kenya to include the Maasi Mara Game Reserve. The Crater is the largest unbroken, unflooded caldera in the world with a floor area of about 117 square miles at altitude of about 6,000 feet above sea level. The rim is about 8,000 feet at its highest point. The combination of proximity to the equator and altitude has made it a paradise for the proliferation of wildlife.

We descended into the crater from the lodge on the rim. Our group of 14 was divided between four radio-connected vehicles that fanned out across the floor of the caldera in

search of game. I sought out “behavior” shots where possible: A Cape Buffalo fresh



from a mud bath; Grey-crowned Cranes in flight; a Wildebeest protecting her calf; a Lion grimacing. The list of animals and birds we photographed was long in species if not in numbers. An old bull elephant in the forest sporting a magnificent pair of tusks would be a

prime target for poachers. Black rhinoceros in the caldera avoided the vehicles for the same reason, which made them difficult to photograph. The Kori Bustard was a magnificent bird, slightly bigger than a large dog. Our driver said they were good eating.



After two days in the Crater we pushed on into the Serengeti to photograph the great migration of millions of wildebeest and Burchell’s zebra that follow the rains and the grass between Tanzania and Kenya. The route that has been followed over millennia was first documented by the Grzimeks between 1959 and 1960 and filmed by Alan Root for the ubiquitous television nature specials that inspired the Conservation movement as we know it today.

At this time of year (February) the wildebeest move northwest from the eastern plains at the end of calving. Much of the dramatic footage shown of the migration is filmed at the

Mara River crossing in Kenya in the September/October time frame during the dry season where a heavy toll on the herds is taken by crocodile. But it is no less impressive in February as the animals move north.



In reality, the migration is a moving grocery store upon which other animals depend. It moves constantly across the savannah resting briefly during the scorching midday heat under any scarce tree cover that can be found. Lapet-faced and Rupell's vultures continually circle the herds waiting for drop-outs and the big cats gorge as the beasts pass through their territories. Sometimes a wildebeest will drop out to give a late birth. We watched a calf being born. The mother nudged it to its feet and licked it to encourage it to stand when it kept falling over. Within 7 minutes the calf followed her on wobbly but strengthening legs back to the main herd. While this calf survived, many of the



newborns fall prey to spotted hyena and other predators. Such is the reality of life on the Serengeti.

The Tour

A photographic trip to East Africa is not for the faint of heart. The trips are expensive

and arduous. Photographic tours are very different from the regular tourist experience of late morning and afternoon drives with a lunchtime siesta. A camp for at least part of the time is a must to catch the early morning and late evening light. The best light is gone by the time breakfast is served in the lodge. Working from a camp provides better opportunity for wildlife viewing because of the reduced traffic, although some lodges will cater a late breakfast for early-bird clients who venture out before sunrise.

The grasslands of the Serengeti National Park cover an area of about 5,600 square miles. A typical day starts at about 5:30 am driving to a known spot before sunrise, staying for an hour or two depending



on the action; driving over washboard roads at high speeds to the next spot; packed lunch at another camp or on a kopje (sounds like “copy”) rocky outcrop or a point of interest that is clear of dangerous wild animals; back in the Land Cruiser for another dash to a viewing site; then a weary trek home arriving between 5:00 and 6:00 pm. I had the impression that most of the Serengeti has the consistency of fine talcum powder that crept in through all the crevices in the vehicle. Camera equipment was sealed in plastic bags and noses were covered by a bandana or a dust mask during the rush between destinations. But despite the temporary discomfort, the wildlife experience is irreplaceable.

I would characterize these trips as tours rather than workshops. The value provided by the guide is to know the right spot to be at the right time. Photographers should be intimately familiar and practiced with their equipment. There is no time for fiddling or the shot will be gone. But neither is there a need to take photographs. One of our group carried a birding scope and was a wealth of knowledge in identifying birds we were photographing. A photo

tour provides much greater learning experience than a regular tour would in my view. And I’ve done both.

Photography tours should have no more than four

people per vehicle with a maximum of four vehicles. The top of the Land Cruiser is



rolled back or raised and cameras are perched on bean bags. If an elephant swings around, trumpets annoyance and heads for the car, as happened to us, hang on while the driver backs off. There's no time to sit down. Seating should be switched around among the group. Most of the time I shot from the rear seat because there was more room to swing my long lens, but I couldn't hear what the guide sitting next to the driver was saying. Select a guide with an established reputation. I signed up with Boyd Norton who has more than 25 years experience leading tours in East Africa and is a co-director of Serengeti Watch. His knowledge of the area is unsurpassed.

Most of our group used Canon equipment. I used the D800 Nikon (which has superb resolution) with the VR 200 to 400 mm telephoto lens and carried a D300 with a wide angle as a backup. I preset white balance before the trip for sunny and cloudy conditions using a Kodak grey card and took most shots at 400 ISO to eliminate noise. This generally gave me shutter speeds of 1/1000 sec or more for action shots (except when I was doing deliberate blurs) or greater depth of field at smaller apertures. I must say that the 200 to 400 mm. zoom lens (which I've now replaced with the new 80 to 400mm zoom) was a bit unwieldy in the confined space of the Land Cruiser, but the results were well worth it.

The Future

In his autobiography "*Ivory, Apes and Peacocks*" Alan Root describes the "salad days" of filming wildlife in East and Central Africa and the inevitable slide towards the conditions that exist today. Human agricultural encroachment, poaching, disease and droughts have taken a severe toll on the animal population, yet the migration goes on, for the time being. Famous conservationists like Joan Root, Diane Fossey, and George

and Joy Adamson died brutal deaths trying to hold back the encroachment of civilization. Although it is a World Heritage site, the Government of Tanzania has planned a road across the migration path reportedly to provide services to Northwest Tanzania. In Kenya the government plans to subdivide the Maasi Mara ecosystem outside the park into 150 acre parcels. Conservationist organizations (Serengeti Watch in Tanzania and the Hasla Mara Foundation in Kenya) predict the end of the migration if these plans go forward unchecked. To be sure, these organizations are having some effect. Maasi share directly in tourist revenue under the Hasla Mara plan at a level more profitable than farming. That might reduce the poaching since more control will come from within. But resource development in and around Tanzania with a major seaport in Dar es Salaam may ultimately have the greatest impact on the migration.

So, take my advice and go see it. Before it's gone.

References and Reading Material

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