

Africa's Greatest Show

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You can feel and smell the migration in the air, as much as you can see it. Rounding a verge over scattered *kopjes* (small hills), lush rain-soaked grasslands and the distant hills of the Kenyan border faintly scouring the horizon, faint signs of what appears to be black humps scatter as far as the eye can see. On closer inspection, those black humps become millions of blue wildebeest walking in unison across the Serengeti.

A humble wildebeest, or gnu, is an animal so populous around my home in South Africa that it has almost become an expected sighting under every thorn bush on every corner of a park. But trust me when I say that the sight of millions of them moving across the plains along with other notable wildlife species is a sight to behold. One of the largest mammal migrations on the planet and listed as one of the Seven Wonders of the World, the migration is of huge ecological and economic significance to the great plains of the Mara and Serengeti National Park, which cover some 30,000 km².

The Serengeti can be divided into three areas: the Southern Grass Plains, the Western Corridor and the Northern Serengeti National Park, with a small corridor partly into Kenya known as the Masai Mara. Zebra, Thompson's gazelle, eland, and impala migrate along with the wildebeest in a clockwise fashion over 1,800 miles each year, followed by prides of lions and thousands of tourists who descend on the migration in the hope of witnessing one of the famous crossings of the Mara River. Witnessing a river crossing might seem like a guaranteed opportunity, but it can be somewhat of a hit-and-miss affair, depending on the rainfall patterns during the year. As with many things in nature, predicting the migration is not something that can be guaranteed, even by the seasoned professionals.

Although not the brightest or most elegant of animals, the wildebeest still managed to take my breath away. We spent six hours with one group, watching them as they circled around two well-known crossing points, seemingly

reaching the courage to mass up against the banks of the river and at times even standing, one hoof in the water, only to chicken out and resume a frustrated, grunting circular march in the dust. It was utterly fascinating.

When everyone else had left, and all we had was ourselves and the Serengeti, one brave creature stepped to the side of the riverbank and we watched as it set off an instinctual motion that launched the hundreds of other bodies into a mass heave across the Mara River, past the bloated bodies of their fallen compatriots from earlier crossing attempts, and gorged crocodiles lazing in the deeper pools. They crossed leaping, snorting and swimming, and arrived side by side in the greener pastures, somehow leaving us with our own feeling of accomplishment. We had waited for our wildlife, and our patience was duly rewarded.

It can be so disappointing to sit in a safari vehicle and watch as tourist after tourist rushes out to swarm all over a migration crossing, at times blocking



the path of the frustrated and slightly alarmed herd as it tries to make it to the other end of the river. For some, it appears that getting a good shot in as little time as possible has become the most important part of the miraculous process, and this runs the risk of exploiting one of the greatest shows on Earth, altering the landscape and the behaviour of the animals.

When vehicles crowd opposite a potential crossing, park laws dictate that they are not allowed to move towards the riverside until the lead wildebeest has made it halfway into the river. If they do, they run the risk of causing the leaders in the river to abort their crossing and head back to the other side, often causing them distress as they battle fatigue and fear back through the fast-flowing waters. Unscrupulous guests, and I bore witness

to this, would often badger their guides to move closer, ignoring what would be best for the animals in favour of being at the front.

In peak season as many as 40 vehicles can be crowded around a crossing at any one time, with little regard for anything more than getting a good photography position. Going to the Serengeti is not a cheap feat by any means, so naturally if you only have limited time and a budget that can only stretch so far, you would want to ensure your sighting. But are we doing this to the detriment of the experience itself - sacrificing our ethics for a good photo?

Do your research and ask ahead about best safari practices. Don't be nervous about reporting any behaviour you are uncomfortable with or which you believe to be unethical. The aim is to use (and to

get others to use) good operators with sound practices, so telling fellow safari-seekers about the not-so-good operators can only be a good thing. If a guide has the backing of a responsible safari operator, he is more likely to ignore any irresponsible requests made by 'snap-happy' tourists, regardless of how much he is "tipped". Work as a team with your guide. Together you can work out what you will be able to accomplish in the time available and, perhaps more importantly, what you won't be able to accomplish.

If you have the opportunity to visit, do so, but do so knowing that no matter what herd you encounter, be it in the hundreds, thousands or millions, you are very privileged. This is not just another box to tick off your 'Wonders of the World' list, so take your time to take it all in.' ■