

Kenya honeymoon proves a roaring success

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The guard appeared out of the night and blocked our path as we left the dinner table at Governors Camp, in the Masai Mara.

"Wait here," he ordered, holding his rifle in one hand and a torch in the other.

Ginny and I had been on honeymoon for three days, after ignoring Foreign Office advice not to travel to Kenya due to the post-election violence - had we made a bad decision?

"You must wait here," he smiled. "An elephant is passing through."

In the darkness, we spotted a mudspattered grey flank .

As if on cue the elephant snorted, waded further into the lush swamp by the Mara river and dumped its enormous belly into a pool of water. "You may come now," smiled the Masai guard, who escorted us to the veranda of our luxurious tent before resuming his silent vigil by the bar.

It was our only brush with danger during five wonderful nights in Kenya, where we enjoyed a thrilling safari and a relaxing stay in Lake Victoria.

We saw no sign of the recent unrest.

In truth, the hospitality of the ordinary Kenyans we met allayed our fears within hours of landing.

Regardless of their tribal origins, they were united in disappointment at the British Foreign Office advice. Bookings were cancelled and hotels emptied - not least because the FCO statement invalidated nearly everyone's travel insurance.

When we took off from Heathrow on a Kenya Airways overnight flight, not one tourist had been attacked, let alone injured. But the flight was almost empty.

The stunning sunrise across the east African plain as we came into land, after enjoying a good night's sleep on the new flatbeds by splashing out on business class, brushed away any lingering doubts.

Kuoni's representative in Nairobi arranged a transfer to Wilson airport, from where we flew to the Masai.

Within minutes of taking off from Wilson we were enjoying the experience of soaring over hills, plains, rivers and marshes.

The hour-long flight was an appetiser for the next few days, as our pilot pointed out herds of zebra and elephant.

It was a welcome distraction as the air sickness bags were not placed on each seat for decoration.

The flight landed at an airstrip where helpful camp staff were waiting in ex-British army Land Rovers to pick us up.

As we bounced along on the dirt tracks, animals appeared out of the grass - zebra, giraffe and water bucks.

The drivers at Governors were happy to stop for photographs - as long as we didn't get out.

"All they see is a moving green block. They do not look inside," our guide Fred would later tell us.

"They do not know what it is but they know they can't eat it. So as long as they do not think we are a threat we will be fine, even very close."

"What happens if we get out?" I asked.

"Then they will see you as an individual animal... that could be more difficult," he laughed. On arrival at Little Governors Camp (the main camp was closed due to lack of tourists) the routine was explained.

"We serve you coffee, tea and biscuits of your choice in your tent before dawn, then out for game drives."

Lunch and dinner were served outdoors near the campfire or in the bar and restaurant during the occasional rains.

Camping on honeymoon doesn't sound ideal but Governors' idea of a tent is rather grander than canvas and sleeping bags. Our tent, with a veranda overlooking a swamp teeming with animals, included an ensuite bathroom with shower, piping hot water, marble sink and wetroom.

The main tent had wood floors and was the size of a large double room in a good hotel.

From the veranda, we watched elephants, water buck, giraffes and warthogs wandered in and out of view barely 30 yards away.

Of course, the best way to see the animals is on an early morning game drive - or a balloon safari, which we did on our first morning.

Even a few hundred feet up, you appreciate the size of the elephants and lions but nothing beats watching them closely from a few feet away in a Land Rover.

On our first morning game drive, we spotted a herd of 10 elephants and drove over to say hello. They ignored us, the only sound was the ripping of chunks of grass by their trunks.

For serious thrills, the lions are the highlight of any trip and Governors is the perfect location. Fred, who advises the BBC's Big Cat Diary team during their three-month stays near Governors, knew just where to look. "Don't worry," he assured us as we parked 10ft from three watchful kings of the jungle. "They only see the moving block..."

During our stay we saw lions every day - including one jealously guarding a half-eaten zebra as hungry vultures circled.

Fred knew about every aspect of the lions' lives - including sex. "The male must serve the female once she is fertile every 20 minutes for 24 hours. If he doesn't, she will attack him. Afterwards, many male lions are so tired they cannot hunt for food or defend themselves. That is why many die."

After three nights, we flew from the Mara to Mfangano Island in Lake Victoria. Mfangano is a tranquil beauty spot, perfect for fishing and birdwatching.

Our room was one of six at the camp, a stone hut with en-suite, at the top of a path through the lush gardens tended by Governors staff. Breakfast was on the jetty watching king-fishers dart out from the rocks, and lunch was freshly caught Nile perch. The camp has its own pool, plus boats for guests who fancy trips on to the lake where crocodiles are reputed to thrive.

Our last evening in Nairobi was spent at the luxurious Palacina Apartments. It is a boutique hotel with a fantastic restaurant which deserves its reputation as the city's best.

We spent our second week enjoying the white sands of Zanzibar, staying at the Breezes Beach Club on the Indian Ocean island. Breezes is a four-star resort with pool. It also has private access to a beautiful beach, with a shallow sea out to the coral reef.

Zanzibar is an Islamic society with an African feel to it. Alcohol is served in most bars and cafes by locals who are happy to make tourists feel at home.

Stonetown is worth a visit if only to see Freddie Mercury's birthplace - a house on a crumbling but charming quiet street.

But the real pleasure on this former spice island is simply soaking up the sun then cooling off with a refreshing dip in the gentle turquoise waves by your hotel.

GETTING THERE..

We flew with Kenya Airways (www.kenya-airways.com/01784888222) from Heathrow to Nairobi (www.kuoni.co.uk/01306744444).

Create your own package or book a Governors camp at www.governorscamp.com Flights from Nairobi to the Mara were booked through www.safarilink-kenya.com Breezes Beach, Zanzibar (www.breezes-zanzibar.com) and the Palacina, Nairobi (www.palacina.com) can be booked through agents or direct. For more information, visit www.magicalkenya.com

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