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FOUR SWISS KIWIS ON SAFARI IN EAST AFRICA

by Vitus Acherman

Some time ago Hans Vetsch told me that one of his ambitions was to climb **Mt. Kilimanjaro (5895m)**.

As one of my long time dreams has been to climb a mountain of over 4000 m, I had no hesitation in saying "when you do go, let me know and I will come with you." So early this year we started planning and decided that since we were going that far, we might as well do a safari first.

We left New Zealand on the 10th July via Singapore and Dubai where we spent two very interesting days. Hans and I, with Vreni (his wife) and Rae (my wife), spent the first morning walking along the Dubai Creek, an arm of the Gulf of Oman, which runs through the city.

Very interesting looking characters are loading and unloading the many *dhow*s that are tied up along the waterfront - washing machines, computers, picks, bike frames by the hundred, are all handled by hand. The weather is very hot and humid and even the locals try to find a shady place to sit, be it a palm tree or a piece of canvas on a *dhow*. We wander the narrow streets and alleyways, discovering the world-renowned gold, spice and cloth *Souks* - markets. The gold in the small shops is eye-dazzling, none of your cheap 9 carat, this is all 18 and 22 carat and interestingly the jewellery is actually manufactured in Italy and only sold here. The fish, fruit and vegetable markets are also very interesting but we definitely were not tempted to buy anything there.

- In the evening we take the 'Sundowner Dune Dinner Tour'. On the way we stop at the camel race-course where hundreds of racing camels return to their stables after training and most of the animals are ridden by very young boys. We then drive out into the desert and there the excitement begins with our 4WD vehicles racing up and down the steep sand dunes and not surprisingly, some did get stuck. We visit a camel farm, stop to photograph the now rapidly disappearing sun in the haze, then arrive at the Bedouin camp setting for our barbecue dinner, Arabian style. Huge carpets are laid out in the sand and we sit on



Rae and Vreni on lunch preparation duties. Photo by Hans Vetsch.

cushions at low tables to watch the bellydancing that follows.

- We leave Dubai and fly to Nairobi and the culture shock hits you at the airport after Dubai's super modern facilities. We get stung for \$US50 each for visas - welcome to Africa!

- At our hotel we meet up with the rest of our safari group - our English tour guide is Roz, driver Kimani and Migwi our cook are both Kenyans; four Australians and seven English make up the rest of the group. Our mode of transport is a huge Leyland truck going by the name of "Big Bertha".

- We leave Nairobi and head north to the shores of Lake Naivasha where we stay in the comparative luxury of 'motel' rooms - after this it is tents for the next 14 days.

On the animal sanctuary of Crescent Island we see where the film "Out of Africa" was shot. Here we are able to wander for 3 - 4 hours among the animals, seeing many zebra, various types of antelope and many birds and as there are no big cats or other predators, we can walk in safety. We could get quite close to giraffes and to see a 3-day old baby is quite a thrill.

- We travel further north on some atrocious roads; in fact the majority of roads are bone-shaking and vehicle-shattering and the trucks really take a battering so the odd breakdown isn't surprising. At Nakuru National Park we see our first lion, ostrich, buffalo, white rhino

and millions of flamingos create streaks of pink on the lake.

We arrive at our campsite late and have a tent-erecting demo in the dark, while Migwi cooks our dinner over the charcoal fire.

- We now head south and spend two nights camping in a clearing in the bush near a Masai village. The Masai guides take us on a walk up into the Loita Hills. And this proves to be a very interesting experience. The tour company pay a sum of money to contribute to the welfare of all the villagers, so we are allowed to freely photograph our Masai guides. We drive through isolated grazing land where big herds of sheep and cattle are tended by Masai, colourfully wrapped in their bright red blankets. We enter the Masai Mara National Reserve which has an abundance of animals and we drive close to elephants feeding, a rare sighting of a cheetah with three cubs, large herds of zebra, wildebeest, antelopes, giraffes. One of the game drive highlights would have to be watching three lionesses with four cubs tearing their zebra kill apart just a few meters from our truck.

On the way to Lake Victoria our truck has a breakdown, and we are stuck in a semi dry river bed for over an hour while our driver and cook fix the problem which is of an electrical nature. We bounce and rattle through some very isolated villages with friendly children waving and calling out "Jambo" (hello). After

crossing the Kenyan/Tanzanian border the countryside changes and becomes more rugged with small but spectacular rocky outcrops. Our next camp is at Speke Bay Resort on the shores of Lake Victoria which is the second largest body of fresh water in the world. We pitch our tents and make full use of the first-class facilities. We encounter a group of village women going to the lake to collect water and for a small fee, we are allowed to take their photos. They carry at least 20 liters of water on their heads with ease - we could hardly lift the buckets off the ground!

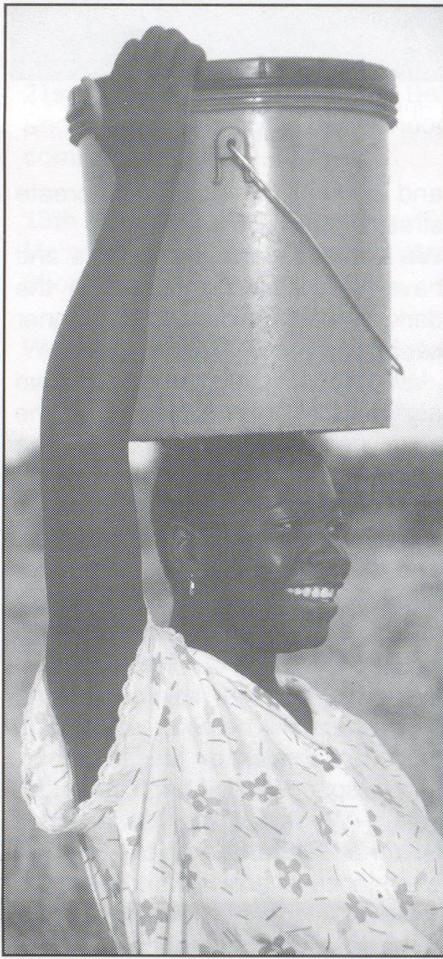


Photo supplied by Hans Vetsch

- In the Serengeti National park we spend two nights at the Dik Dik camp and one evening experience a sudden ferocious storm with the gale force winds and rain battering the tents. In this park a lot of controlled burning of dry grass had been done. The animals are scarce although wildebeest are migrating north to the Masai Mara where there is plentiful grazing. However, we did see a family of lions with the four cubs perched up in the branches of a tree.

- Ngorongoro Crater is another very

interesting place. The road climbs very steeply to the crater rim where at 2300m we camp for the night. As large trucks aren't allowed into the crater, the next day we are transferred into three 4WD vehicles with open tops for game viewing. All the usual game animals live in the crater except giraffes, the drop down of 610m is too steep for them. The Conservation Area covers about 8300sq.km and has a variety of different habitats which support a variety of wildlife - grasslands, plains, swamps, lakes, rivers, woodlands, forests and arid areas with drifting dunes.

- We have two interesting encounters with tribal people. The Hadzabe are a very primitive and nomadic tribe. They live on whatever the forest provides - the women collect plants and berries and the men hunt with bows and arrows. Their houses are merely small stick and leaf shelters, so if they kill a large animal some distance away, they just move and stay there until the meat is finished.

- The other tribe is the Datoka and we are invited into the village chief's house. Through an interpreter, we learn he has eight wives, each with her own house and apparently the chief puts his spear outside the hut he decides to visit at night - such choices for the poor man! He has 22 children and he really couldn't understand when he was told that one

of our group had only one wife and only one child. This tribe live in more permanent dwellings constructed of sticks plastered with cow dung with thatched roofs.

Hans and I are now on our last day of the safari as we drive past Lake Manyara heading towards Arusha. Here we leave the group and go on to Moshi where we prepare for the next part of our African trip and possibly our greatest challenge - the 5895 meter summit of Mt.Kilimanjaro.

(a very interesting report, Vitus! We are eagerly awaiting the second installment in next month's HELVETIA)(Ed.)

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