

Green Season

in the

by GREG MONSON



Butterflies

Kenya's Masai Mara is one of Africa's legendary safari destinations. The quantity and quality of game viewing is amongst the best on the continent, and even the most hardened safari-goer will find something to delight and surprise. The long dry months tend to attract the most visitors, but the cognoscenti go in the lush months of the green season. In March, June and November, you might get the odd storm, but these are quickly burnt off by the tropical sun. Your reward is watching the bush come to life. In a few days the plains turn emerald green, and tired over-heated animals stretch their legs and head out into the grasslands. Visitors to the reserves have the wildlife largely to themselves, and towering storm clouds make for unforgettable sunsets. Greg Monson owner of Kicheche, one of our favourite camps in the Mara, tells us what makes the green season so special.



Leopard in the Mara

A few months ago one of my partners called me: 'Greg, you spend too long in meetings and behind your desk, get your fat bottom out to the bush; we haven't been on safari together for years.' He was right; it was eleven years since the two of us led a safari and the growth of Kicheche had thwarted countless efforts to team up on the plains again. There was one thing bothering me, it was March and having spent much of the previous day with other camp owners wringing our hands over why so few come in that month and November, this stigma was still nagging me. I should have known better.

My partner at Kicheche brazenly claims there is never a bad time to visit the Mara, moreover he prefers the months of March, June and November as it is lush, fertile and the number of visitors are far less than peak season. I jumped on the plane to see if he was right.

I had not been in the Mara since the dry season months when the drought had left the earth scorched and the some animals suffering. The long rains failed last year and the backdrop had been far from green, so I was thrilled to be welcomed with as verdant a sight as the Mara had enjoyed for a couple of years. Colours ranged from card table baize to olive green but it was more than that. It was already eleven in the evening yet the light was still good for a photograph and the birdlife was simply extraordinary.

That afternoon I joined my co-founder of Kicheche, jumping into the Landcruiser as he bragged light-heartedly to two photographic clients. 'By the end of this afternoon you will have deleted everything you took this morning and also seen the best sunset spot in the world.' Cannily he had spotted the inky build up of cumulus, knowing that this would herald a spectacular afternoon and evening. >>

Masai Mara



Cheetah on a termite mound



Cheetah before a storm



Leopard



Young male lion



Photographing a lion from Kideche Camp

▶ He and Daniel, Kicheche's head guide, drove for several miles quietly before stopping next to a dry river valley. Already we had seen an immature martial eagle performing the last rites on a white crane and a lioness sashaying across her territory, but what I wanted was a leopard without a posse of high season vehicles clustered around her.

A few moments later Daniel cut the engine and listened, the distant sonorous call of a emerald spotted dove blended with the mantra of the bull frogs but were silenced by the screech of the guinea fowl. I followed Daniel's finger pointing at a leopard scaling an olive tree. They are arboreal by nature and after lounging like a corpulent MP after yet another tax payer's lunch it descended and vapourised into the flowering oat grass. Her belly was half full, she probably had a kill somewhere, and do you fancy an all-dayer tomorrow?' My reply was an emphatic yes; already the photographers on board had filled memory cards with alacrity, exhilarated by the sighting and desperate to replicate it the following morning. The promised sunset was delivered as a perfect maroon orb framed some contented wildebeest and we returned to a typical sumptuous Kicheche dinner taken al fresco with the lament of nearby lions punctuating each course.

My coffee and biscuits the next morning were taken at a waking hour reserved for milkmen but Daniel's smile was contagious as he welcomed the four of us. My Kicheche partner was already cajoling and chiding his charges about ISOs, apertures and other such nonsense. I was more enchanted by the dazzling false dawn and even with such a seductive spotted grail, we still stopped for sunrise as a herd of elephants obligingly shuffled across the empty plains in front of the amber early rays.

No other animal raises the pulse like a leopard but we soon had an agonising decision, as Daniel spotted what he thought was a cheetah standing sentinel a mile ahead. I offered my binoculars which he glanced at with disdain. 'A female, hungry, what should we do Greg?' This embarrassment of riches was exacerbated by the fact that his colleague Mika had already found the female leopard from the evening before. The cheetah won, just, and we waited for an hour, enjoying the sun picking out the amber flecks in this lithe female's eyes before retreating as she began her advance. I know I am milking this but we were alone for an hour in the most prolific park in the world. The cheetah is marginalised by the bigger predators and struggles to bring up her young. Slight in frame and vulnerable to disease she possesses one unique faculty: speed!

Within minutes her body extended into a searing sprint which took our breath away. Seconds later she tagged a young gazelle in the long grass and began her meal. Not wishing to interrupt her we zeroed in on Mika's other spotted quarry.

I have seldom seen the Mara look more beautiful, the early sun was still caressing the olive bark of the fever trees and backlighting the 'waste-paper' flowers that had blossomed during the recent showers. The leopard bisected the plains, her profile captivating and as she ambled virtually under our bonnet I heard the stifled sob of one of the photographers, her camera down, just enjoying the mesmeric gaze of this, the most stunning of all Africa's cats. It was not yet breakfast time!

I generally like short breakfasts in the Mara, keen to maximise the cooler early hours but that morning our meal was protracted. Taken under a gnarled Boscia tree it went on for an hour as each person enacted their extraordinary morning. We had actually seen more spotted cats than vehicles and it was only just nine. There was little reason to drive into the reserve as the grass was so long there so we stayed in the same area near Leopard Gorge. Around mid afternoon the sky turned from cobalt blue to an ominous slate grey. Even the myriad butterflies sought shelter and before long the first engorged rain drops splattered the vehicle. We kept up the canopies on the sides and roof for as long as we could but when Daniel remarked gently that if we did not retreat to camp we may be spending the night here we fishtailed off. However Mara weather is a capricious mistress and within half an hour the storm moved towards Tanzania and the sun returned, illuminating what was now a potently rich canvas that was beyond cameras. I have seldom seen such an intoxicating sight as the animals, seemingly energised by their afternoon shower, were putting on quite a matinee: zebra stallions fought a mock battle, two topis chased each other relentlessly, the migrating Eurasian roller males called their harsh cries attracting females, and an impala was giving milk to her spindly infant. This was all watched by the benign gaze of two indolent male lions who were content to leave their own 'wet work' to the night time hours. Just when it could possibly get no better a different leopard jumped onto a fallen tree and dried off a mere fifty metres from us.

A thirteen hour game drive is long by any stretch of the imagination, but broken by these sightings and two glorious al fresco meals it proved that if anyone is prepared to do the time in the Mara they will be rewarded. Do it in off season and it appeared to me the rewards are even greater.

FACT file



- The time difference with Kenya is three hours, so it is ideal for a ten day break. As the light rainy period only means occasional storms followed by glorious sunshine, we'd recommend combining a stay in the Masai Mara with some time snoozing on the East African coast. Audley and Kicheche have teamed up to create a special offer for the November and March green seasons.
- Four nights at Kicheche Mara Camp, followed by five nights at Asha Cottages, a guesthouse on the Kenyan coast, costs from **£2,680 per person**.
- For more information, please call our Kenya specialists on **01993 838 510**.

www.audleytravel.com/kenya



Cheetah brothers



Greg Forbes

