

## Diary of my trip to Lemala Camps - Bharat Shah, Marketing Director, Lemala Camps

29th May

Nina, Jay and I set off in 4x4 for Fairmont Mara Safari Club from Nairobi. The traffic police stop us for no reason and harass us for 20 minutes before waving us off. Meanwhile Matatus with parts hanging off their bodies are waved on with a smile. I would have expected tourist vehicles to be treated with a bit of respect but how foolish of me to assume that. Watch out for the police near Sigona Golf Course.

The road to Mara is dire. The work on the road continues at a very slow pace. The best road is after Narok so expect a bumpy, bone jarring ride until then. We pass several miles of extensive wheat farms which only begin to thin out a few kilometers before Mara Safari Club and the nearby Saruni. After 5 hours we are at the renovated Mara Safari Club. Fairmont has done an excellent job with the interiors. We are the only visitors today in the 50-tent camp. Thankfully, hippos of the Mara River join us for lunch. Lunch is average with more emphasis on appearance than flavour. Dinner is better and the service very attentive. The internet is down and there are no Masai troupes to entertain us so we retire to our room early. Double beds are on the small side and hippos are on top form but still sleep soundly in the beautiful, modern tents.

30th May

The wake-up buddy arrives promptly at 6.00am with some coffee. Shower to test if the water is warm in the morning and it is. Plan was to leave for North Serengeti at 8.00am but hippos on a sand bank, a leisurely breakfast and camp inspection delays the start. Drive through the Ol-Choro Oiroua Conservancy, then Koyaki Group Ranch. It's a beautiful warm day, plains game is dispersed and not one tourist vehicle is in sight. The major trunk road through Koyaki is being repaired so expect better roads around and inside Mara. However, just before the Mara river crossing we experience the worst of the Mara roads. It takes us 50 minutes to cover 10kms to Kichwa Tembo turn-off. We climb the Oloololo Escarpment at a slow pace and head for the Isebania border, passing Masai, Kuria and Luo tribal areas, now heavily farmed. The road is better than the Nairobi/Mara road and in reasonable shape.

4.5 hours after leaving Mara Safari Club, we arrive at the very quiet and civilized border post at Isebania. There are no queues on either side of the border and it takes less than 15 minutes to progress to the Tanzania side. The Namangans could learn a thing or two from the Isebanians.

James from Grumeti Expeditions is our guide. He has the brand new 4x4 vehicle for Lemala camp. I get excited that each seat has a charging socket only to discover that none are working. Hmm. They will be fixed when the vehicle returns to Arusha with us. I learn a few days later that the inverter was connected to the cigarette lighter instead of the car battery! The road is much better than on the Kenyan side and regularly maintained. The distance to our camp is approx 175kms from the border. We skirt Tarime, pass the mining areas operated by Canadians and head for Mugumu, a significant town 20 kms from Taboara B gate. 4hrs after traveling through wonderful landscapes, dotted with villages and kopjes, we arrive at the camp. Smiling staff provide cold drinks and towels, followed by a glass of wine. The camp is still being setup but some tents and the mess are up. Grass clearing is going well and fire breaks being created. Alexandra from Audley Travel UK arrives around 6.00pm for the night having driven from Suyan. After hot showers, we enjoy sundowners and pop corn by the fire before dinner. Sunset in front of camp is magnificent; the sky is lit with hues of orange and purple. After dinner and a post-prandial drink, an armed ranger and 2 askaris with bows and arrows guide me to the tent at midnight just as eles begin to arrive.

31st May

Coffee arrives early morning and soon I am out and about working with Simon, our camp operations manager, re-arranging tents and arrival route for guests. We locate beautiful breakfast and sundowner sites. We also find space for a Private mess tent which we will be offering as an optional extra. The eles are spread around the camp but hidden by the tall grass and bushes so we tread carefully, closely guarded by the askaris. By 9.30am the eles are near the guest tents. There is a pair mating behind my tent! The camp crew have climbed the kopje and are enjoying the show. Minute by minute more eles arrive, I count nearly 60. I too climb the kopje and go mad with the camera - what an amazing opening to the season. We are entertained for an hour before the matriarch marches out of camp, closely followed by her family.

Breathless from the close encounter, we set off with James for W3 to inspect our permanent camp concession where we are drilling for water. We turn off the main road into our concession and James suddenly points to a young leopard on a tree, it is well camouflaged by the shadows and the branches. We think James is incredible. A few meters ahead James spots another leopard resting on a branch, a huge female with an enormous head. She is relaxed so we edge a little closer. She retreats to a lower branch and we spot yet another leopard, a cub no older than 6 to 8 months. This is awesome and we think James is even more incredible. Get some great shots as the mother and cub pose for a minute before disappearing into the tall grass.



We collect the ranger guarding the drilling equipment and drive to our site, a magnificent Kopje full of mature trees and superb views towards the Lamai triangle and the escarpment beyond. We are surveying the next hill a few hundred meters ahead when James spots another leopard glide down a tree and disappear toward a kopje. On the kopje he sees a male Impala with his tail up and barking warning calls.

A truly amazing location, W3!

We visit Kogatende Ranger Post then onto Sayari to say hello and discuss inter-camp communications, community involvement, etc.....Later we drive to the Mara River nearby which is only half full after the long rains. The bridge to Lamai can be crossed today but we decide to return to W3 to locate the leopards again and enjoy a sundowner. Where the first leopard was, we spot a carcass of a male impala but no sign of the leopard. Nevertheless, open a bottle of wine and toast to a wonderful day. Return to camp as the sun is setting, take a few more photos. More popcorn, samosas by the camp fire before dinner - dinner is just lovely. Dramatic thunderstorms and lightening surround us but the rain never arrives.

### **1st June**

In the morning, the ranger announces a leopard has passed through camp and rested on the boulder by the site for the Private Mess before disappearing into the night. We decorate the coffee table with fruit from the sausage tree, buy a bow and arrow casing together with a couple of Kuria knives in red sheath from the askari to adorn the mess, and introduce tea, coffee and hot chocolate in each tent. The honeymoon tent is set far from the mess so this would be a welcome addition in the tents.

At 9.00am we depart and head for Bologonja junction near Kleins gate. It is already hot but we keep the hatch open. We pass vast rolling plains interspersed with acacia woodland. There is plenty of plains game including big herds of zebra and eland, we stop to take several photos. This area would be great for cheetah and lions, especially when the migration arrives.



The Bologonja turn-off is 40kms from Lemala camp on a good road or 2 hours with a game drive. We drive past Lobo Wildlife Lodge (30kms from the junction) and tsetse flies, Kempinski to our right and stop at Mbuli Mawe for an inspection (50kms from the junction). We continue towards Seronera but then decide to enjoy our yummy picnic lunch at Retima hippo pool. When driving from Lemala North Serengeti via Bologonja allow 4.5hrs to Seronera including game viewing. There are a couple of dodgy culverts along the route which may cause problems in the rainy season, otherwise the road is 200% better than the one from Nairobi to Mara. After Lobo the vehicle count goes up exponentially.

After lunch, we drive to Naabi gate on a recently graded road (allow 1 hr), past turning to Olduvai (1hr on top), Seneto entrance into crater (20 mins on top), View Point junction on the rim (45 mins on top), Lemala Camp (40 mins on top). In total allow 8.5 hrs from Lemala North Serengeti to Lemala Ngorongoro including game viewing and stops. The drive is like a full-day game drive across varied terrain and glorious landscapes.

On arrival at the camp, we are greeted with towels and fresh pineapple juice with crushed ice. Wine follows at the camp fire. We are tired so retire to the tent immediately after dinner which includes an outstanding Mango Fool. The heater has been turned on in advance and 2 hot water bottles have been placed under the duvet - it's very warm. I decide to catch up on sleep, cancel the wake up call and eventually fall asleep to hyenas' whooping calls.

## 2nd June

It's 10.00am when I exit the tent. At the mess, the Masai askaris are watching a herd of elephants a few hundred meters away. I decide to have the breakfast outside under a tree and watch the eles. A group of eland arrive and settle down to graze a few meters from the eles. They stay near the camp the whole day. I spend a couple of hours taking photos of birds and vegetation. Later some agents pop in for an inspection. Grumeti Expeditions staff members on an inspection trip arrive a little later. We enjoy a few beers and sodas and discuss finer points before a barbecue dinner. Early to bed.



## 3rd June

I am woken up by the excited Masai askaris who want to show me a huge male ele by the kitchen tent. The light is beautiful so I rush to the sighting. The ele stays for an hour and then lumbers into the forest. We depart for Arusha after a full English breakfast, as another herd of eles are just arriving. Lemala Ngorongoro it seems is a special place for everyone.