The Adventure of a Lifetime – the African Sojourn

When I was a child , my grandmother insisted that we watch national geography to introduce us to the variety of flora and fauna that roams this beautiful planet. Invariably one or most of the shows on the network concentrated on African wilderness, from Serengeti to the Etosha national park in Namibia , from mountain gorillas of Uganda to the sharks of South Africa . these are some of the most vivid memories from my childhood and it etched in me a deep desire to experience this first hand .

So in order to tick this off my bucket list, I started planning well ahead on how and where to embark on this journey of African wilderness . To start of exploring Africa , I had to plan the quintessential African safari that would not only give a chance to meet the big 5 but also to enjoy the company of incredible people with their vibrant culture and delicious cuisine . The most important consideration while planning this trip was budget . now two things are of utmost importance to enjoy a safari , the first one is a good car . the quality of your trip will be greatly decided by the quality of your vehicle , as you will be spending most of your days in the car either in a game drive or travelling to the next destination for a game drive. The next one is a good guide , as he being the local will take you to the location where sightings are most probable. In this case we were really lucky with our chauffer cum Guide Sammy , who took us on a trip that fulfilled our wildest dreams.

We arrived at Nairobi’s Jomo Keneyatta International airport at night and were picked up from the hotel to stay at Nairobi for the night . Next day early in the morning we started travelling from Nairobi to Amboseli national park which was the first destination on the trip . Amboseli national park is known as the land of giants . Its home to largest number of free roaming African elephants in the wild. It took us about 4 hours to reach our hotel which was located on the edge of the national park. The thing about African wilderness that really startled me was the sheer abundance of it and the ease of sighting them . even before checking in to the hotel we saw herds of Masai giraffe and Common Zebras. For a wildlife enthusiast from the sub-continent , seeing these long necked majestic beasts have always been a dream , and I could not believe that I was seeing so many of the so regularly even before beginning a game trip. We Checked in to our lodge AA Amboseli , had a quick lunch and got ready for the first game drive of the trip. Amboseli in Swahili means “the dusty salt pan “ . It’s a dry salt pan with swamps in the middle . The water in this region is available through out the year as it comes from the Kilimanjaro. This is the region of the sheer abundance of elephants as they have food and water all aroubd the year. The landscape is devoid of large trees and thus the visbility id excellent . we saw many herds of elephants enjoying a beautiful sunset in the swamps with the mighty Kilimanjaro rising from behind. Amboseli also boasts of a the largest concentration of tuskers . I will forever cherish the moment I saw a mother elephant and her small 2 week old child calmly feeding barely 10 feet away from our vehicle . on that evening we saw herds of of ungulates like the Thompsons Gazelles , Grants Gazelles , Wilderbeests , common Zebras and giraffes .the salt pan landscape dotted with swamps and so many sightings along with that of a juvenile lion and two lionesses set the right tone for the trip. We returned to our lodge in the evening and just before retiring to our huts for dinner we saw a pair of Dik-Diks , the smallest of the antelopes right infront of our hut grazing dry grass. On that high note after a scrumptious dinner which was a mixture of Indian , Chineese and local cuisine . the local cuisine is also extremely inspired by indian cuisine as large number of gujrati speaking Indian diaspora has made Kenya their home.

Next day we started early morning for a full day game drive with packed lunch for bush meal. There was an option to take two small game drives in the morning and evening , but we opted for the whole day experience as i wanted to adsorb as much as Amboseli on me as was physically possible . as soon as we stepped out of our lodge premises we were greeted by a group of Eland , the largest of the antelopes found in this part of the world . Its also called cow antelope for its size . amboseli is also home to large number of birds . Serpent eagle , Egyptian Goose , spoonbills , glossy ibis and other water birds are found in abundance . It’s an avian extravaganza , specially near the lakes and the marshy waterbodies . Millions of greater and lesser flamingos can be seen standing on one leg , or searching for food . We saw a herd of Elephant cross a shallow waterbody in a playful manner , carefully guarding the baby elephant in the middle of the herd . The landscape of Amboseli is in itself a wonder to behold .Dust salt pan to small sparsely vegetated semi arid land in large parts dotted with huge lakes and swamps. As noon passed we could see small dust tornadoes in the horizon. We went to the highest point of amboseli and had our packed lunch among a bunch of Superb Sterlings ( so aptly named ). We spent the rest of the afternoon along with a herd of elephants with a deep red sun setting in the backdrop. We came back to our lodge with our bodies sore and tire from the long hours in the vehicle but our heart full with the day spent in African wilderness . the night ended with a relaxing campfire reciting masai stories of valour and displaying their traditional lore , music and dance forms.

Next day morning after a quick breakfast we started driving towards Oi pejeta , which was our next destination . Oi Pejeta is a not-for-profit , private wildlife conservancy in the Laikipia county of Kenya . It is spread over 360 square kilometres of land and lies in between the foothills of Abedares mountain and Mount Kenya . it lies on the equator,beside Nanyuki and is famous for rhinocerous conservation. The last two northern white rhinos are present there along with a robust rhino population. We set off from Amboseli , passed Nairobi and then reached oi pejeta almost after a 6 hours drive , through the varied landscapes of this beautiful country. as it is surrounded by hills, laikipia county is significantly colder than rest of Kenya . We were late in reaching oi Pejeta , and thus after a quick packed lunch we started our evening game drive. Oi pejeta is one of the success stories of African conservation . They understood without significant investment for economic well-being of the locals no long term conservation will be possible . So they entrusted the local community to be the guardians of the endangered . along with that they introduced sustainable cattle ranching in parts of the private reserve to not only boost the local economy also to keep the ecosystem fertile as grazing herds add fertilizers to the soil in form of dung. This vast ecosystem supports a myriad of flora and fauna , but their true success lies in the conservation of Rhinocerous . a multiplying population of both white and black rhinos are found here .The names black and white are misnomers as there are no significant difference in colour , as both are grey. There is a local saying that the word white comes from mistranslation of the word “weird” which was used for white rhinos because of their flat lips which helps this grassland dweller in grazing . Black rhinos on the other hand have hooked lips which help them devour the bushes in which they feel more at home . White rhinos are significantly larger , with the adult male weighing 2300 kg while an adult male Black rhino weighs about 1000 kgs , but is more fierce and temperamental among the two sub-species. True to its promise as soon as we entered the conservancy we found a solitary black rhino in a bush feeding on thorns and leaves. The huge beast looked calm and intune with it surroundings. After a while we saw a pair of white rhinos basking in the rays of the setting sun. A sighting of both the subspecies within half an hour of our entrance to the conservancy was an absolute treat. The landscape of this area is predominantly savannah dotted with some swamps and water-bodies. Though we were late and did not have much time for safari, we got to spend a mesmerizing twilight with a beautiful pride of lionesses , frolicking with each other and having a jolly good time. African sunsets are thing to behold and they just get more majestic if there are a bunch of lionesses enjoying it with you. Oi pejeta has another unique attraction, which may not be present anywhere else in Kenya . They arrange night safari to get to know the nocturnal residents of the savannah. Unfortunately, all the night safari slots were previously booked and we could not avail one. Just one more reason to go back to this beautiful place. We spent our night in Sweetwaters lodge just outside the gates of Conservancy.

Next day morning after an early breakfast we set out for the morning game-drive .