

Forest Footwork in the Place of Happiness

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Samburu warrior guide at Kitich Camp - *Kitich Camp Kenya*

The Kitich Camp in central Kenya in isolated wildlife-rich forests provides a truly wild safari experience combined with eco-friendly, luxury comfort

At first I didn't notice the chattering. We were walking slowly and quietly under the impressively high canopy of magnificent forest trees to keep down-wind of some elephants we could hear making an occasional roar ahead of us. And I was still absorbing the cornucopia of animals whose tracks and droppings our local Samburu guides had identified since leaving our riverside safari lodge.

With typical studious examination – and much pointing using the ferocious-looking spears each of them carries – they were looking at bushbuck prints on a muddy path. “Running away from the river, being chased maybe” according to Lepekin, a Samburu who has worked here at the remote Kitich Camp in the Mathews Forest Range about seventy miles north of Isiolo in central Kenya for a decade.

But that was just for starters! A few minutes into our walk and they had found forest buffalo droppings, genet tracks, plus porcupine, olive baboon and hyaena droppings. I had been told that the forests hereabouts were rich in wildlife and not fully explored but this was far more than I expected to find evidence of so very quickly!

Rare Bird/Human Cooperation: the Honeyguide

It was Lebite, a N'Dorobo who was born in a forest cave close by “about sixty years ago” (but who reckons he has “petrol inside for another sixty”!) who pointed out the honeyguide. Its loud chattering on a branch just above us didn't at first seem of great consequence. Until the name registered in my animal name-befuddled brain as the only bird that guides tribesmen to wild bee nests! Special indeed.

It's a unique collaboration between a bird and a person. And a human skill that's rapidly dying out. With the others on our walking safari sitting down for a rest, I followed Lebite who, by now, was calling back to this thrush-sized, brown and cream bird with a pink beak.

The honeyguide led, chattering incessantly and flicking its white-edged tail to stay in view; Lebite followed until we reached a huge tree encased in twisted vine stems. The honeyguide changed its call; Lebite's reply changed too, and from high in the tree canopy the loud hum of wild bees was suddenly all we could hear.

But the huge tree with its smooth vertical trunk wasn't safe to climb. So this honeyguide – and this tribesman – were not going to get the honeycomb they both crave but which the bird can't get access to without a tribesman to open up the nest. Reluctantly we left to re-join our group, the honeyguide chattering incessantly until we had left the area, trying its level best to entice us back! It was still calling as we walked out of sight.

Walking Safari with Expert Tribal Guides

If your idea of a wildlife safari is the more typical 4WD tour around a game park where the animals are so used to human visitors that they almost pose for pictures, don't come to Kitich. This is a very different wildlife experience. Here, most of the tracking is done on foot with local tribesmen who are expert at picking up scents and identifying tracks. And here the animals are completely wild.

And you can feel just a little smug knowing that all the camp electricity is solar generated, almost all the staff are local Samburu and N'Dorobo, most camp waste is recycled and part of your fee goes to local community support projects.

Sounds of the Forest Night

Sleeping in your luxury safari tent (there are just six doubles) at Kitich – it means “the place of happiness” – overlooking the Ngeng River(www.kitichcamp.com) and set in a grove of huge fig trees, it will be a rare night when you don't hear the howls of a family of Olive Baboons or the crash of a small tree pushed over by an elephant breaking the insistent chorus of tiny Yellow Tree Frogs.

And in the early morning when the Fish Eagles have stopped screaming, look up at the mist rising from the steep forest slopes as it slides upwards over rocky crags high above. With Kitich located at nearly 5000 feet above sea level, it's another four thousand feet to the very highest peaks here, most of them very rarely visited.

A few days of quiet walking here and you are virtually guaranteed to see the baboons, elephant, bushbuck, much larger waterbuck, one or more of the several species of mongoose and probably much else. With luck maybe a family group of black and white strikingly beautiful Mantled Guerezas, a species of colobus monkey. And you are almost certain to hear the night-time roar of a lion or the repeated growl-like bark of a leopard.

Walking along the Ngeng River, or crossing streams that run into it, prepare yourself for the clouds of butterflies rising up ahead of you the like of which you probably won't have seen anywhere else before. Name a colour and you are likely to spot it; there are well over a hundred different butterfly species here. Many of them like the moist environment around water, especially in the dry season.

The extensive Mathews Range forests are not only isolated; their wildlife isn't fully explored either. They are some of the more pristine forests remaining in East Africa and a place to be treasured. One of the most unusual trees is the Mathews Cycad, a tree that looks like a cross between a palm and a giant fern. This one, though, is found nowhere else in the world. Some of the larger cycads here are maybe thirty feet high and could be a thousand years old.

Forest and Water Birds Bring Amazing Colour

For colour, though, it's the birds that hit the spot. Like the showy Hartlaub's Turaco, a large, noisy, blue, green and black bird usually spotted up in the trees and showing off its burnt-red wing patches when it flies. Or, higher up the forested river valleys, maybe a huge black and white Silvery-cheeked Hornbill. And in the bushes around Kitich Camp you won't miss the possés of little, dishevelled looking mousebirds flying in follow-my-leader fashion from one bush to another.

Keep a lookout along the river too, especially around the camp; black and white Pied Kingfishers hover; small blue and orange Malachite Kingfishers dart past like fighter jets; and a speckled black, white and chestnut beauty is a Giant Kingfisher. Giant? It's almost the size of a crow and one of the largest kingfishers in the world.

After a day's tracking and watching wild animals, the pleasure of relaxing on the deck under fig trees at Kitich Camp with a cool beer by an outdoor log fire with a well cooked meal waiting is almost as great.

Now that's not too difficult is it?

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