

HUNTING the *BIG FIVE*

Experience the many natural wonders of the African continent

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY CECILY MABASA



WHILE I WAS PLANNING MY FIRST SAFARI, THE TERM "BIG FIVE" CAME UP SO MUCH IT BECAME ONE OF MY GOALS: find the lion, leopard, rhinoceros, elephant and cape buffalo.

The term Big Five was coined by hunters, who based it on the animals' fierceness when driven to a corner or provoked. Unfortunately, the demand for ivory, rhino horns, buffalo parts, leopard and lion fur has led to a dramatic decline in these species' numbers. The rhino remains to be the most critically-endangered of the bunch. Poaching remains a major issue, especially in parts of Africa where there is political instability. Given these unfortunate circumstances, spotting a leopard or a rhino on safari is never guaranteed.

I couldn't help but wonder, why not the giraffe or the hippopotamus? What about the cheetah? They are similar to the leopard in terms of speed and ferocity. On my very first safari in the Serengeti, finding this

out became my end all-be all goal. As the days went by, I found myself enamored by the giraffes and zebras, and waited to capture on film the iconic hippo yawn, baring its fangs.

Safaris are no longer synonymous with hunting; the only shooting that now happens on a safari is with a camera. But a safari still requires a predatory instinct for where to find the creatures you hope to see, a kill you want to witness. Several factors come into play: being at the right place at the right time, the weather, and a cunning, experienced guide. All these things came together for me to see the Big Five in one afternoon on my very first game drive in Africa.



The African Bush Elephant is one of the most regal creatures in Africa.



ANIMAL PLANET

Africa is home to some of the most exotic and diverse wildlife on earth



THE AFRICAN BUSH ELEPHANT

Scientific Name:
Loxodonta Africana

The elephant is undoubtedly the largest mammal in the natural world, yet amazingly, it is also one of the most adaptable. They can live in woodlands, forests, savannas, and deserts all over the African continent—all safari goes are guaranteed a sighting. They live in herds, led by the matriarch or the eldest female in the family. Herds can have as much as a hundred members, and that's probably the



ELEPHANTS IN NUMBERS

- They have 40,000 muscles
- Their skin is one inch thick
- They spend 16-18 hours per day for eating
- Their daily water intake is 30-50 gallons
- They consume about 375 lbs. of vegetation

WILDLIFE SIGHTINGS

- Kenya: Masai Mara and Amboseli National Parks
- Tanzania: Serengeti, Tarangire National Park, The Selous, Lake Manyara
- Botswana: Chobe Park, Linyati, Okavango

reason why these gentle giants are social and affectionate animals.

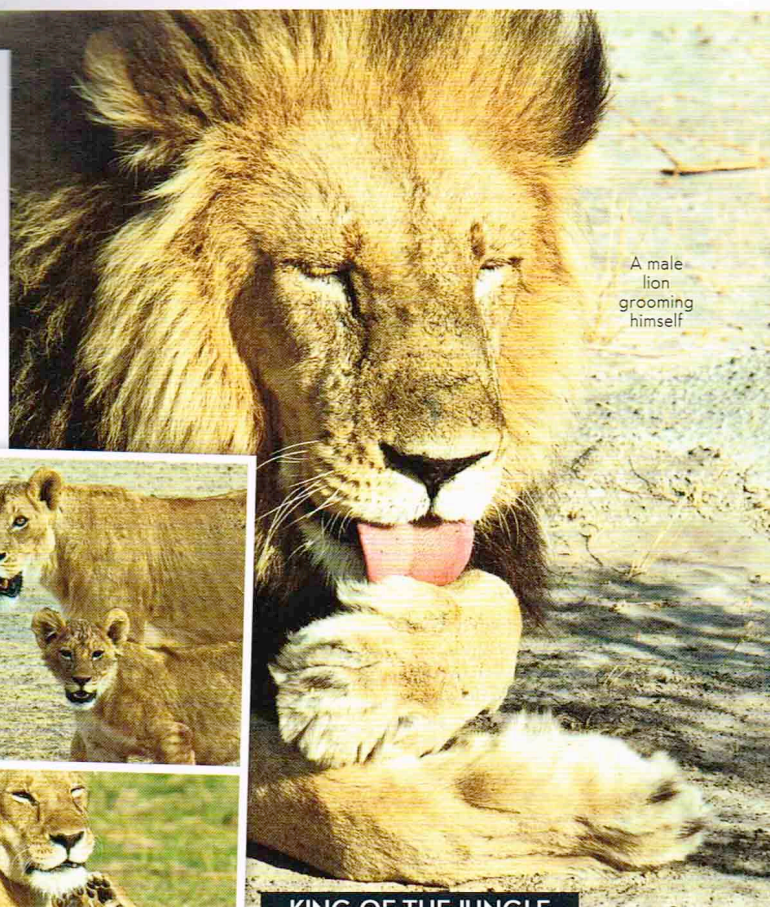
Elephants are quite peaceful when left alone, but when provoked, a ferocious side comes out. Lions may hold the King of the Jungle title, but elephants can definitely overpower them when threatened. Weighing 12,000 lbs. and over 14 feet tall and 30 feet wide, these vegetarian creatures make it difficult for predators to hunt them.

THE AFRICAN LION

Scientific Name:
Panthera Leo

The lion pride has always fascinated man for its elegant beauty and unwavering strength. Lions live in prides with females, their young and one male. That's the unspoken rule, at least for us humans that is—to have just one King in one pride. They can easily hunt by themselves, but when it comes to handling stronger prey, like the buffalo, they go as a pride. It can be regal yet frightening to observe.

For me, they are the most captivating creatures to observe on a safari. These beautiful, large cats are known to be vicious predators but on most of the safaris I've taken, I saw them sleeping with their bellies full and the female lions guarding the carcass of their kill. My favorite scene has got to be of the cute little cubs playing with each other and climbing onto their mothers and fathers. It was such a heartwarming scene that, for a moment, you forget how savage these hunters can be.



A male lion grooming himself



PRIDE LIONS

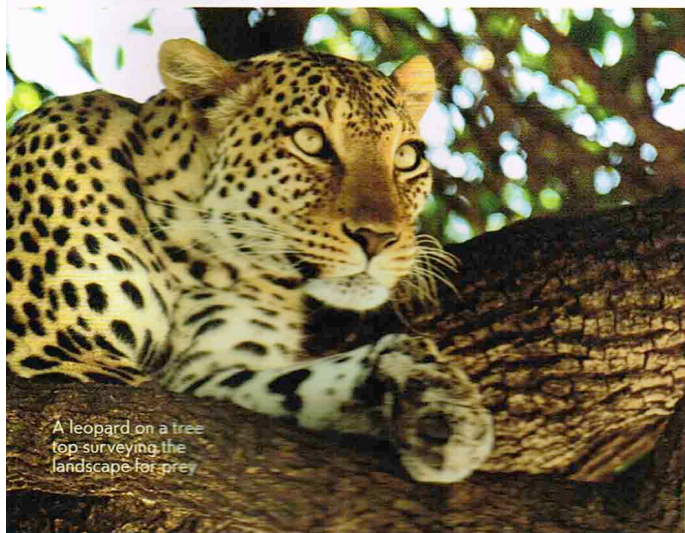
A family of lion unwinding after a day of hunting

KING OF THE JUNGLE

- The color and size of a lion's mane reveal to other male lions how powerful and fit he is. The darker the tresses, the stronger the lion is.
- Lions can be territorial. They mark their territories by spraying a mixture of scents from their tail and urine.
- Lions rest around 20 hours a day.

WILDLIFE SIGHTINGS

- Kenya: Masai Mara and Amboseli National Parks
- Tanzania: Serengeti, Ngorongoro Crater, Lake Manyara
- Botswana: Chobe Park, Linyati, Okavango, Chitabe, Vumbura Plains



A leopard on a tree top surveying the landscape for prey

LEOPARD

Scientific Name:
Panthera Pardus

Next to the rhinoceros, the leopards are the hardest to spot out in the open African plains. The few times we did get to see them, they were perched on tree branches or resting behind bushes. Leopards use trees as some sort of fort for protection or a platform for observation, so

remember to look up to see this oft-solitary cat though they also seldom stay in the same area for more than a few days. They move about their range, with their spots offering excellent camouflage.

Though leopards are known to be ferocious and cunning predators, they are actually shy, nocturnal and mind-bogglingly fast—they can run up to 35 mph. When they sense that they have been spotted, they will quickly

flee or, more than likely, shoot up the nearest tree as these big cats are excellent climbers. The one and only time I got to see them interacting was during an evening game drive in Lake Manyara, Tanzania. We tracked a pair of leopards, and observed them while they mated and hunted.

LEOPARD TRIVIA

- Leopards can kill prey bigger than themselves and can jump as high as 10 feet.
- Although it moves faster than most animals, leopards stalk quietly before pouncing on its prey.
- At around four months old, leopard cubs learn to hunt with their mothers.



Unfortunately, rhinos are now an endangered species



ANATOMY

- Rhinos have
- Females
- 15-16
- Males
- has been
- Chinese
- century
- help

WILDLIFE

- Tanzania

BLACK RHINOCEROS

Scientific name:
Diceros Bicornis

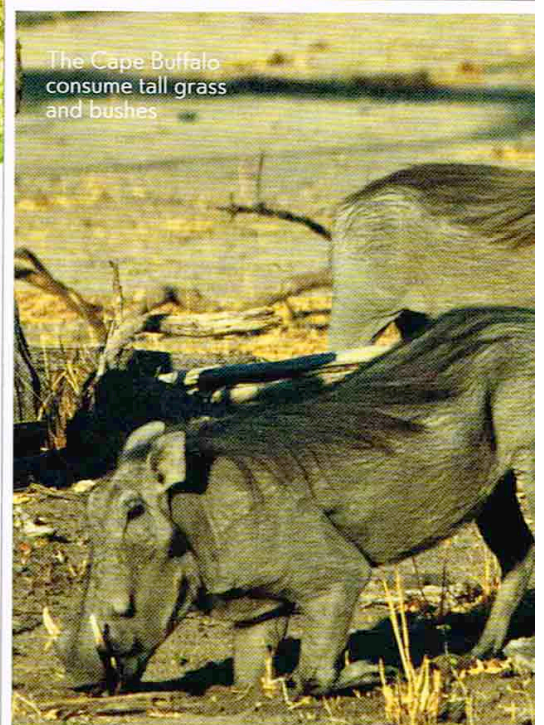
In Africa, there are two known species: the Black rhinoceros and the White rhino. To date, I have only seen the elusive and endangered Black rhino and with less than 4000 remaining in the wild, you could consider me quite lucky. The black rhinoceros live in savanna, tropical

HORN HUNTERS

Rhino horns are a valuable resource, hence the rampant poachers

is used for medicinal purposes. By 2013, rhino horns are valued at \$65,000 per kilo—if each horn weighs about six to eight pounds, imagine how much these heartless poachers are earning. The Black rhinos have suffered the most severe decrease in numbers

The Cape Buffalo consume tall grass and bushes





said to have killed more big game hunters than any other animal in Africa.

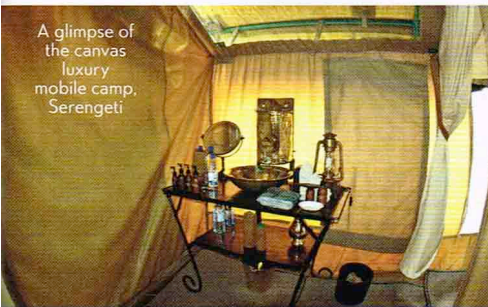
Standing at an average weight of 700 kg, most predators wouldn't dream of taking a bite of this beast unless they have others with them. Buffaloes do not have as much predators or hunters as the rhinoceros, but once wounded or even slightly provoked, these dangerous animals won't hesitate to attack at once.

MOST DANGEROUS ANIMAL

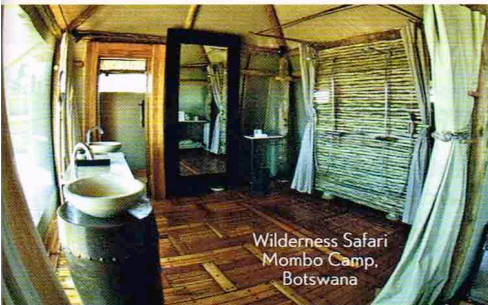
- Buffaloes stalk their hunters, circle around them before charging with their horns.
- Buffaloes have exemplary memory—they would attack their hunter years after it happened.
- While they are the main prey of lions in some regions, buffaloes can defend themselves from lions and can even kill their predators.

WILDLIFE SIGHTINGS

- Kenya: Amboseli National Park
- Botswana: Chobe Park, Chitabe, Vumbura Plains



A glimpse of the canvas luxury mobile camp, Serengeti

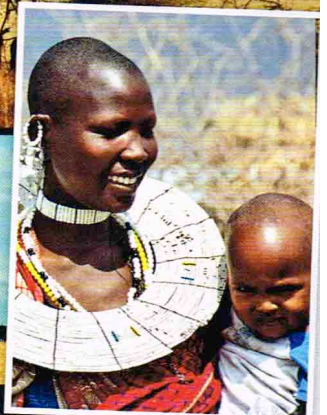
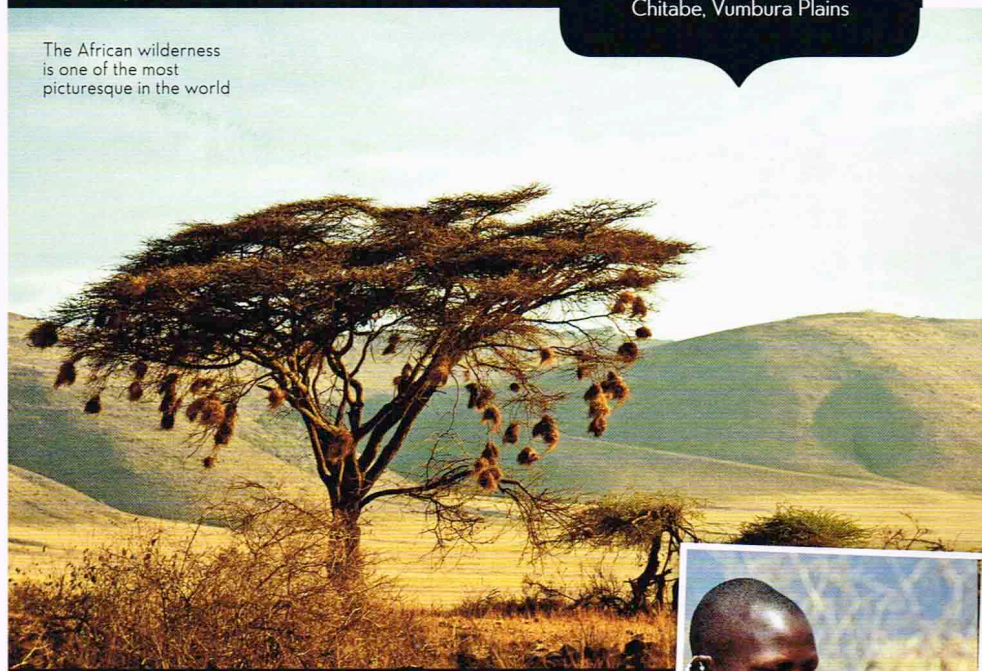


Wilderness Safari Momo Camp, Botswana



Ngorongoro Crater Lodge, Tanzania

The African wilderness is one of the most picturesque in the world



WHERE TO STAY

My favorite camps on Safari for the ultimate game viewing

- & Beyond Serengeti Under Canvas Luxury Mobile Camp, Serengeti
- Klein's Camp, Serengeti
- Ngorongoro Crater Lodge, Tanzania
- Wilderness Safari Momo Camp, Botswana

- Wilderness Safari Vumbura Camp, Botswana
- Kichwa Tembo, Masai Mara, Kenya

HOW TO GET THERE

The writer travelled with the luxury adventure group Sea to Summit Explorations (seatosummitadv.net); +63917 8687971, +632 815

8233, ces@seatosummitadv.net) in collaboration with &Beyond safari outfitters and Wilderness Safari

TANZANIA - Fly to Arusha (also known as Kilimanjaro)

BOTSWANA - use Johannesburg or the picturesque Cape Town

as your gateway. From these cities, take South African Air to Maun, Botswana where your camp representatives will meet you.

KENYA - Fly to Nairobi Compact 4 to 12 seater bush planes are used to fly from one Safari camp to the next within the country. ■