



News & Views

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Two weeks in the life of Fred Higgins: Personal account of The Great Walk.

Introduction by Iain Allan

I met Roger Higgins at the Mountain Club of Kenya in 1967. He'd just arrived in Nairobi to take up a teaching post at the Kenya Polytechnic as part of a Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) involvement. The VSO is (was) a UK equivalent of the American Peace Corp.

I was 19, he was 23, and I'd never met anyone like Roger; to say larger than life would be an understatement, his London humour and street-smart intelligence were a fresh experience for me, and we became close friends. We also made first ascents of some pretty edgy climbs, and I was glad to have someone of Roger's strength holding the rope when I took a 90 foot fall off a climb at our local crag. (We later completed it and it still gives modern climbers food for thought.)

Three years later our paths split: Roger moved to the US, and I went to UK to complete my studies. We next met up in Yosemite in 1977 for a brief climbing trip, but apart from that occasion we didn't meet until this year, July 2008.

Last February I was climbing with some old friends in Spain, and I was told of the bad year Roger had just experienced in the US: a diagnosis of bladder cancer, followed by punishing chemotherapy, had laid him pretty low.

I wrote to him, told him that if he felt like a change of scenery, why not fly over to Kenya this summer, and join me as my guest on our Great Walk of Africa safari. He replied immediately, told me he was very interested, but had an important six-monthly check-up to go through; if all proved clear, he'd join me in July. Everything turned out to be fine.

While the will was obviously there, Roger had some concerns regarding the physical side of the safari. His surgery had been thorough, and there were necessary resultant changes to his lifestyle. He worried about access to clean washing water for his various bags and tubes each day, and he was concerned about left leg swelling owing to the removal of lymph nodes. His emails were humorously unemotional, the problems were reduced to the purely mechanical, and I could tell this old extrovert still had a lot of fire in his soul. I knew he'd handle the Great Walk, and he did: he walked every yard of it.



When Roger sent me the journal he'd kept on the Great Walk I knew instantly that it had to go on our website. Why? For years I've been trying to find the words to convey to people the importance of this wonderful journey, but I've never been able to; I guess I'm just too close to it. It's more than landscape and wildlife, there's an indefinable atmosphere that profoundly affects many of our visitors. Several years ago, a close friend of my wife's and I joined us on the Great Walk. Wendy had lost her 18 year old son only a year before - killed whilst taking part in an elephant riding safari in South Africa. At the end of the walk she told us that it had made her feel different about the pain she'd been through, that she'd taken from it a feeling that although she still dearly loved her son, and would never cease to miss him, she'd realised that she could live without him.

Roger captures this in his journal, and he describes it with infectious humour. Read it and enjoy it as much as I did.

A GREAT WALK JOURNAL BY ROGER HIGGINS

The flight from London to Nairobi was uneventful - except for the persistence of the little bastard howlers. I thought the cabin crew was a cut above the average, and their older, more hard-bitten US counterparts could take a few pointers in attitude and vitality. I duly coughed up my \$50 Entry Visa Fee and found my bag waiting for me. The Customs official was a large colorful lady who beamed widely and said, "welcome, welcome, welcome", and that was that

It is great to see Iain and meet Lou, his wife, for the first time. Their sons are in school still and won't appear until next week. They have lots of help and the place is old but cared for, and exudes the charm of a bygone era. It has that essential patina of old Africa - nothing too nice because the termites might eat it, or the floods ruin it, but lovely all the same. Sitting talking to Iain, I see several very colorful sunbirds outside the window. We remind each other of all the old friends "...what happened to so and so?" " " are you still in touch with him or her?" "... and all those steamy trysts of yesteryear. " "...what was her name?" "Oh she was a hot one...!" It is not called Happy Valley for nothing. It's the same as the English and gin. - They didn't invent it but they perfected it. Happy Valley was rolling along before we were here but we did what we could... I'm not sure we perfected anything, but it wasn't for the want of trying! We both marveled at the fact that we survived it.

After dinner we talked about the upcoming Safari. But now I must stop as I'm nodding off and that's a good thing.

I awoke at first light and contemplated getting out of bed for over a millisecond before rolling over again. The next surfacing was much later. I showered and performed the ceremony of the bag in silent reverence. It all went well and I'm still fairly confident I will handle it all okay on Safari.

On the subject of swelling, I was a touch uncomfortable on arrival but walking and elevation seem to be working. My left leg looks good. Overall I am in great shape. I feel rested, relatively fit and eager to start the walk.

There is a reason journals fizzle. Too damn much going on and too much fun to stop and write about it.

Take last night for example. Iain's colleague Alex was at a loose end and his girlfriend had been sent to Rwanda and he did not want to "be alone". Hell it was Saturday night in Nairobi !! My old stamping ground, the Sombrero Club, had long been closed (for health reasons?) So where to go?

A quick questionnaire:- Meat? - Goat? - Music? - Mayhem? - no-brainer... Club Vibro! Club Vibro turns out to be everything-yes everything-an old Volunteer could wish for. Things were pretty hot when we arrived, the cover charge of \$1.20 was proffered and the table front and center obtained. Maggie our waiter had a little English and a great smile. We connected immediately. Tusker beers were ordered and the scene started to unfold. Men and women saw no reason not to dance together - or alone necessarily and all were just groovin'. To the jaundiced eye of an old womanizer the pelvic gyrations of these ladies was just mesmerizing. Their feet hardly move, arms almost immobile, but the bit in between - my oh my! The band seemed to thrive on the pulsing of the dancers and vice versa..

Our roasted goat, ugali and spicy spinach-expertly ordered by Alex-and more Tuskers than I care to admit to came to a total cost of less than \$20 including a goodly tip for Maggie. Since eating is a hands only affair, we were invited to wash hands while seated at our table before and after eating. Maggie poured tepid water from a large plastic jug into an even larger plastic bowl. No towels provided.

At no point did I sense the slightest whiff of being unwelcome. Many smiled and clasped hands with a slight bow. All grins and smiles.

The band was hypnotic. Lights flickered. Bodies pulsed. Memories were rekindled. And dreams were fulfilled.

Whether it was just an intermission or the end of the evening I do not know, but the stage cleared and people were milling around in the glare of slightly too bright house lights. Alex and I stood up to leave only to be confronted by the rotund figure of the closing act singer. He greeted us like long-lost brothers, clasping our hands and slapping our backs. Out we staggered into the sudden darkness of an African night. We weren't too alcoholically challenged, but the roughness of the sidewalk and the sensory overload of the club so suddenly ceased, found us stumbling and groping our way home.

We made it. It was fun. There was no journal writing.

Iain got me up early today by request. I performed the ceremony of the bag, washed socks and split luggage into two piles. The smaller pack stays with me on the flight to Tsavo. The larger one heads off by truck and will be in camp when we arrive. Iain says Americans travel too heavy and the plane cannot be overloaded (I second that) so he and I will do all we can to keep it light.

There is a tremendous amount going on and I am the proverbial fifth wheel. Iain is handing out guns, Alex is supervising the loading of trucks and Lou is shopping for supplies. I am resisting the temptation to gloat, but it is all so heavenly. The luggage is on the truck.

A round of hotel-hopping with Iain makes me feel very special. Iain is super-cool, an absolute natural at working the room. We have a little patter already and both feel the nearly 40 years apart never happened. Having been in theater and on the lecture circuit myself, I appreciate his style and showmanship.

Iain's mother, Margaret, is a lovely lady. Her present situation is quite sad however as she lacks confidence in herself due to physical difficulties brought on by broken hips, long hospitalizations and rheumatoid arthritis. But it is not all bad. A couple of glasses of wine put a twinkle in her eyes and a Scottish brogue to her tongue. Her description of her grandchildren (over whom she shamelessly dotes) as " wee Bastards" has us all hooting with laughter. Alex gives her no quarter and she returns the compliment, declaring him "... a mite slippery... '.

Alex was born in the Ukraine and came to the US at the age of 10. This gives him a natural "Borat" accent when required, and the perfect foil for Margaret's brogue. They both play their parts so naturally we cannot help but fall about laughing.

Lots of coffee, then Dark Side of the Moon - "... the greatest bass note in all of rock 'n roll... " Perfection.

Nairobi to Tsavo

A predawn start is necessary to get all aboard for a 7:30 a.m. takeoff. The plane is a Cessna Caravan and has all the panache of a U-Haul truck with wings on. The young East African pilot insists he is feeling much better since his bypass surgery and yes there will just be the one of him. We bounced down the runway with an empty copilot seat.

Why the biggest guy gets shoved up the front in such a tiny plane (the loading doors in the rear) is beyond me, but here I am. The pilot is relatively small, giving me a pretty clear view through the large cockpit windows. As we clear the end of the runway we overfly Nairobi Game Park and there below us are zebra, impala and ostrich.

Soon we are above the thin clouds and I start to scan the horizon for Kilimanjaro and Mwenzi. And just like the first time I looked for them, I completely overlooked them. Staring into the early morning haze for a distant snow-cap nowhere to be seen. Then just like that, the enormity of them comes home. No wonder I couldn't see the snow, it is way above the wing tip. I had to nearly double up to glimpse it. I saw Mwenzi pretty well though and tingled privately with pride and an inner knowing. Yes, that was some climb back then.

The Chyulu Hills are to the left - all volcanic craters, lava fields and chaos. Then up ahead, as if by magic, a thin line of reddish orange dirt-our landing strip.

It only happens in Hollywood productions and to me. A giraffe standing to attention at the end of the runway, barely blinking as we coast past not 50 feet from him. We land and turn to taxi back to the waiting vehicles and here are four more giraffes. Iain insists he sent Alex down last evening to let them out of their cages... .

We walked to Kilaguni Lodge for champagne breakfast, which of course is sumptuous - custom-made omelets, waffles etc. the best (?) coffee of my life. All taken in the most spotlessly clean, luxurious lounge overlooking a watering hole which, on our arrival, was staffed by a team of zebra (they were all wearing the same jerseys). Shortly, the zebra were joined by a family of warthogs - the Impala decided not to participate and remained in the distance. A large old Cape Buffalo bullied them all off and got the place to himself until a huge herd of his relatives came charging in from "stage right". He must've been the black sheep of the family (if that is possible) because one nod from the leader of the new pack and he was off by himself in the bushes. What followed was an orgy of wallowing, mooing, pushing and shoving as more participants came along. I did not count, but 200 to 300 would be conservative. Iain says 600 would be a large herd, this one is "only average."

It must be the same at watering holes in Africa as it is driving in the USA....If it does not say you can't, you can. There is no sign saying "...no peeing in the water hole..". They need one...

We load up four and five to a vehicle and head off to the first camp. The other passengers are invited to stand up in the back. Iain invites me to the front passenger seat and, between stops and comments for wildlife, we discuss a variety of friends and fill in the blanks in each other's memories.

Iain is an official Game Warden in Tsavo and this gives him considerable clout and discretion. There is no doubt he knows his Fauna and Flora "... There are 27 types of Acacia tree ...". His knowledge of geology and geography is underscored when he pronounces then spells the names of various hills, mountains and animals.

The first few miles are punctuated with stops for the zebra, giraffe, baboons, warthogs, dik dik, lesser kudu and fringe eared oryx. One of our number repeatedly greets each animal like a long lost school friend and it was starting to bother me. Iain tactfully and rightly put a stop to it. Actually on that subject he stressed-single file and silence as the preferred formation. Quite a military man our Iain. Apparently hippos are the main threat and over the years a total of nine have been shot in defense of various groups.

The ladies have the usual anxiety about peeing in the bush, and at night - well, peeing in general. Funny thing, we have just watched buffalo pee in their own drinking water and nobody cared about that !

The mature ladies confide they wish they had flaunted it all when they had it - and now they don't. They don't? I would encourage them to.

The only other mature male besides me is a teacher. He is an economist really but doesn't get to teach that. He is also a singer, but does not sing informally. On a previous trip to Kenya he sang for Jomo Kenyatta and nine of Jomo's

closest friends. His wife Annie, the animal greeter, is a minister in a church of some sort and a hospice worker. She seems very compassionate and very nice. She has that aura of boundless goodness, which is so necessary for helping those in deepest distress. I think calling her an Old Soul would be a compliment – like Mrs. Harris in *A Passage to India*.

Nancy is quite straight-laced and somewhat serious. Iain has had dealings with her however, and says she has a great dry wit. I've taken to calling her "duchess" and will do so until she objects.

Peter wins the prize for the biggest telephoto lens in the group, by the way. Matthew, the older of the two young men is clearly adored by his mother, whose name I haven't locked in yet.

Regina is an easy person to like, pleasant and easy-going. She is a little twitched at present because son Ben is failing to thrive. Jet lag.

Iain is right to push hygiene hydration and nutrition. He makes a good point- which is, sickness or failure is not in the interests of the group as a whole, as everyone would suffer in the end.

That about covers our gang so I think I'll give it a break.

The shower is charged with warm smoky smelling water and in I go. Fresh clothes, a cool evening breeze, a sip of Genmorangie and Dylan- Heaven! Each tent has its own hurricane lamp and lighted candles mark the way to the tents.

Dinner awaits us - great chunks of Nile perch. It is white and flaky and delicious served with chips (the English sort-you work it out) and a tangy, zesty mango salsa. Dessert is an upside down pineapple cake with fresh fruit. I acquit myself fully.

The group discovers the African sky at night and I hold forth on what few constellations I recognize. Thankfully the plow is there to start with and we established that the Pole Star would be "around the bend" because we are at the equator.

Iain invites me for a nightcap and we watch as more stars rise in the East. There is not a breath of air and I'm running a little hot, but then this is Equatorial Africa.

There is a bit of commotion at our end of the camp due to the presence of a large animal - Hippo we think, but never confirm with a sighting. All quiet now.

Day One.

I took a walk in Africa from the head of the Tsavo River..... It began at first light. As we left camp the workers were already tearing down the tents - the shower stalls had gone the night before. Our daypacks are mainly for water. Lejori is the tracker - a small, agile Samburu warrior who carries a spear characteristic of his people, and a panga (machete). I find out later that his backpack contains Iain's few necessities.

Our first detour is to the springs which give rise to the Tsavo River. The river is strewn with concrete structures attributed to the British in World War I. I note that the concrete work looks neat and is in excellent shape, it's sheer bulk probably foregoes any notion of removing it. It is a bit of an eyesore though. Likewise the rusting metal structures we see from time to time along the banks of the river. It is obvious mankind has been attempting to assert himself around here but ultimately failed.

But there is a problem here. I will call it "bush politics" (nothing to do with the peckerhead back home). We need to stay tightly together sandwiched between Iain and Lejori, our nose guards and the tall black dude behind us, the spelling of whose name I need to confirm before recording. Anyway the tall dude is nice enough, he carries the other gun and being the last in line, he is the tail gunner. Neither of these trackers has any English and are mutes apparently, but smile readily. The tail-gunner wants nothing to do with dallying, dawdling or pauses for photography. All he does is gesture to "close ranks and be right quick about it!"

As a guest in his beautiful country one naturally wishes to oblige, but here comes the conflict. Some of us seem to lack the first notion of our physical dimensions. Some of us move like Jesus on the cross only holding ski poles. Some of us are physically thin but are made that much wider by our backpacks, So if we turn sideways to slip gracefully between opposing thorn bush threats, the result is to engage both bushes to maximum (de)effect – Duh!

Then there is this Caucasian preoccupation with manners i.e. holding the door open for the lady to pass through. Dude! This is the African bush! We are in Africa, not your country club back home! Old habits are, well-old habits, and he means well. The point here is that each unsatisfactory encounter with a the bush results in the offending limb being displaced to a maximum extent, thereby storing the maximum amount of energy for dissipation against the hapless follower-on, whom, of course, has been harried into place to receive said "maximum force" by the tail-gunner.

Tioko - there I found it – is our tail-gunner and is indeed implacable. I think he would zip us all together in one long woollybug, if he could. He is tirelessly kind and accommodating with a charming smile-except if too big a gap in the ranks develops - then he tends to the Uber Gruppen Fuhrer side of things. He and Lejori have been with Iain for many years and both seem totally dedicated to him. Furthermore, each has that solemn rectitude which seems to say, "don't make me lay down my life for you, because you know I will - if I have to".

We take a number of breaks each day for hydration and peeing. During these periods the Samburu sit a short distance away from us in apparent silence. I keep checking out of the corner of my eye and never see a lip move. If they become aware of being observed they break into smiles. They are routinely pressed into service as "foreground figures" in photos and only break into smiles AFTER the shot has been taken. Before that they are all business.

Iain leads us along the banks of the Tsavo most of the day, but we leave it occasionally and hike inland to rejoin the river after it has taken one of its frequent wide meanderings. The bush bash uphill is generally not too bad and being on higher ground for a while is good for overlooking the surrounding hills.

The descent back to the river is usually tough love. It is easier to pick a route going up, but gravity and all the details blend together on the way down, making our descent more tiresome. Often the river is darkly shaded by thick palms and it is noticeably cooler down there. The game trails we are following tend to bring game in and out at right angles to the river's course, but there are thinner trails at various distances from the water running parallel to it. It is Lajuri's job to string these thoroughfares together in a coherent enough way for us all to be able to make progress.

One might suggest to Iain that in his application details he adds the additional question - "do you Limbo?" It would certainly help at times for negotiating tight spots – I, of course, do not!

My second pen has expired and Kim, the last person I needed to name, has donated one. She is a very kind person but, sadly, suffering at every turn as this adventure is far beyond anything she has ever been exposed to before. She

is terrified of the African night and the various noises that punctuate the blackness with their supposed threats. Her son, Matt, does a great job holding it all together for her though, and together they are going to be OK.

Returning to bush politics for a moment. For me moving through the bush is something learned long ago, but not practiced recently. My philosophy is based on the notion that the paths are made by the repeated passage of certain sized animals. Therefore, if one adopts as nearly as possible the frontal shape of the animal that did the work (or not!) things should work out. Imagine then my surprise, to find I am dubbed "the Bear" by all who have had the (mis) fortune to follow immediately behind me - Oops! And there I was imagining myself "twinkle-toes incarnate"- how the mighty are fallen!

I did recover some sense of dignity however when Iain reported that Tioko had been impressed with my scrambling ability when we negotiated a tight rocky gorge to take some hippos by surprise. For an old rock climber it was not all that serious, though to the ladies it was a big deal-Kim especially, and Annie somewhat. It is true - any slip would have delivered one into the torrent below, thence to the grumbling hippos beyond. From the conversation at dinner, one would think we had traversed the Alps. To the right of our camp is a dried-up tributary, which is clearly a major access point to the river. Iain and I sip Scotch and watch a troop of baboons try to figure out if we are a threat or not. Iain has their mannerisms down pat and further confuses them by ducking and bobbing the way they do.

The dry riverbed is crisscrossed with trails made by hippo, elephant and others that walk single file to the river's edge.

Before dinner is served we register the presence of crocodiles by the reflections of flashlights in their eyes, which form a semicircle of rubies in the water beyond our campfire. This will do nothing to improve Kim's sleep patterns, however, nor will the occasional grumping of hippos close by. Chairs are arranged along the bank with the fire between them and the river. Don't go beyond the fire! Cold beer and hot samosas -I am in paradise.

Day Two

The dinner tent is now the breakfast tent and is bathed in the first rays of sun. Another day has begun.

I am having some difficulty washing and drying and packing my bag paraphernalia and nearly missed breakfast. Several times in the morning I regret this. I'm amazed that all this forced hydration still results in only a modest yield of the darkest vintage it has ever been my pleasure to bag. What? More water?

We see hippo caught napping in the bushes and all scurry back to the sanctuary of the river, which only serves to emphasize their embarrassment at being caught out (literally). From the steaming piles of droppings and wide array of difference spoors, we can assume we are disturbing many a normal morning ritual.

A variety of rich, pungent odors assail our nostrils - who did that?

There are numerous fleeting glimpses of elephant and buck as they hasten off. Baboons and monkeys dart about with screeching chatter, and barks when we happened upon them unexpectedly.

Iain pulls an old one by announcing we are just coming up to the half way point of the day (we are ready for this to be over), when in fact we are about to enter camp. And quite an entrance it is. We must ford the river, which is shallow at this point, but fast flowing and quite wide. After several sightings of crocodiles and disturbing countless hippo, Iain's reassurances are somewhat hollow, but we wade in and are rewarded by a refreshing and uneventful crossing. A couple of the ladies are quite unnerved by the prospect, but Iain assigns the trackers to be individually responsible for them and all is well.

Tioko and I are the last to cross and I am made to wait midstream while cameras click and clack. A peal of laughter from the Africans follows some crack by Iain. I am no longer "bear", I am now "Mzee Kiboko" – Old Man Hippo, I wear my new name well!

The tents follow the bend of the river and mine is the last at one end. A hippo is sending up alternate dust clouds and splashes of water as it tries to exit the river. Our camp straddles the river at a crossing place made by elephants but convenient to all. Obviously our being there has thrown the hippo out of whack.

Sorry pal! It will all be back to normal tomorrow.

Day Three

I get to breakfast early and am in good shape at the start of today's section, which required a re-crossing of the river.

Iain tells a Tarzan joke and ladles it on thick. There are those amongst us still who believe his every word. There must have been a death in the Acacia, a-c-a-c-i-a – Acacia – family, as there are now only 26 varieties!

We catch a large pod of hippos napping. The bull cannot charge us up here, so he dives into the bushes on the other bank of the river. He follows us for some distance.

From the steaming dung hills and foaming pee puddles we are again disturbing many a morning ritual, but fail to catch any in the act.

Another river crossing brings our day's exertions to an end earlier than usual. Today we take the first game drive and, since we won't return until after sundown, I must do some bag maintenance before leaving. Drying time is only one consideration, trying to do anything in the pitch black of an African night is useless.

The terrain is opening up and movement is now somewhat easier. I think about Liz and her decision not to do this. Remembering the rock gully and some of the tight thorn tunnels, I think she chose right. I confess my tiredness to other members of the group and am relieved to hear that many are struggling at least as hard, if not harder. The youngsters are going well, but the rest of us have bits that are chaffed and sundry sore spots to minister to.

There was a gratifying thorn bush incident today. Regina was in front of Nancy and me, and had become desperately entangled in a particularly vicious thorn bush. Her efforts to free herself resulted in the thorn bush limb being stretched to its max before she finally broke free. Nancy and I ducked the inevitable whiplash, but Kim was not so lucky. A thorn at the end of the end of the twig hooked her nose like a trout to a well cast fly. It may sound unkind, but "... bled like a stuck pig..." comes to mind - poor woman, and it had to happen to her!

Anyway, revenge is a dish people of good taste like to be cold. Score a big one for the Bears! I almost feel sorrier for Regina than Kim and am terminally grateful it was not caused by me.

We are all bearing cuts and scratches, but we wear them with an element of pride. Iain went to great lengths to identify the worst type of thorn bush, it is known as "wait a bit" thorn. A more profane name has been proffered – "where the fuck do you think you are going?" thorn bush. You can take your choice, but the latter gets my vote.

My recent near-submersion was eclipsed by Nancy. It was one of those slow motion nothing she could do about it things. A long branch became snagged in a shoe lace and the higher she raised her leg to free it, the worse the situation became. In the end she was virtually pole-vaulted into a thorn bush - dignity shattered, but otherwise okay. There was another river crossing at the end of today's march-steep and deeper too, but made without mishap.

There was an evening game drive, and a return to camp in the dark, I went with Iain and was treated to a great dose of rock 'n roll from across the years. His taste in music is as good as his taste in Scotch, which I also sampled before turning in.

Day Four

If there was doubt whether we should be allowed to graduate from boot camp, today should have dispelled it.

We are now a slick bear/fairy of a group. We are quiet and disciplined and are rewarded by incredibly close encounters with hippo. Unfortunately they are not in the water at the time. The trackers move around frantically and we are signaled to retreat. This Kim does like she is trying out for the Olympics. The idea is for us to mass like a flock of sheep and be led to safety by the trackers, not take off at great speed for the four points of the compass. Eventually the danger subsides and we continue more or less uneventfully.

Today is different than the others in that we continue trekking after lunch. All is well until once again we are too quick for our own good. But this time it works in our favor. A hippo spots us and crashes back into the river. This ruckus momentarily distracts a family of elephants just long enough for us to gather together on the riverbank not 100 feet from them. There is a slightly tense moment, but gradually they settle back to drinking and we are allowed to photograph them at our ease.

On this occasion we head for the bushes first and attempt a suitably wide pass, but our scent is carried to them on the wind. Caught with their backs to the river, the elephant crash about looking for an escape route. Once again, we are herded together by the trackers. I have tried to make it a practice to study people's expressions during crises. The trackers and Iain are electrified - quickly forming a defensive perimeter, checking each other's positions, pointing, speaking softly, falling back to reform the defense perimeter. There is no doubt they take this very seriously - guns to shoulder, spears en garde. The incident passes and there are wide smiles all round. We have handled it properly.

Soon we arrive at a long high ridge of rock, which juts from the hillside. The approach gives no indication of the drop-off on the far side. We all sit in single file and scanned the vast area of Africa that stretches before us. I think Iain was expecting to overlook a herd of elephant, but the whole event ended abruptly when one of us decide the situation was just too unlike anything she'd ever experienced before and broke into tears to prove it. Poor Kim, she is a wonderful trooper and is trying so hard to make a go of things, but by her own estimation, she is "way outside her box...!" Some of our situations and circumstances have been a great challenge to her, but she keeps on keeping on!

Our walk has ended at the Nairobi-Mombasa Road which separates East from West Tsavo. The vehicles are here to meet us along with an ice box full of beverages. Tusker, of course!

Day Five

Today promises to be, thankfully, shorter than yesterday. I was done in by dinner time. I think I found a cure for plantar fasciitis –It is simple, walk in Africa until every part of you is either sore or aches so bad you forget about P. fasciitis. It works for me.....

I'm happy to note that my bag ring is still in good shape and I'm wondering if a preemptive change is in order. If tomorrow's program is anything like today's, there should be time in the afternoon.

Our walk brings us to Patterson's "Man-eater Bridge." We also spend a delightful time at the Tsavo railway station. Apparently this is the beluga caviar of train stations as far as train-spotters are concerned. It certainly is authentic. Roofing tiles from India date to 1895. Ironwork from Barrow date to 1896. We were invited to the signal box and we watch through binoculars as the signalman pulls levers to change the last visible signal way up on a hill. I would like to be able to describe my present situation, but the enormity of the scene and the number and variety of details overwhelm me. Plus I am here to enjoy myself, and as much fun as it is to write like this, there are more pressing things to attend to – like preparing for a game drive at 5 p.m. And Annie has just ambled by on her way to tea and I am intending to join her. I've taken photos of as much of this as I can for now and you'll just have to believe me when I write: this is perfect.

Something is disturbing the hippos and I must investigate over nice hot cup of tea and a couple of cream wafers.

The game drive is fantastic. A huge male lion is flushed from the bushes close to the riverbed. He sniffs and sprays every bush he passes. Clearly he is looking for a date. Hartebeest, Peter's gazelle, impala and, of course, lots of elephant, all highlight our drive. The evening light is breathtakingly beautiful and is truly the photographer's Golden Hour. I certainly try to take full advantage of it.

There is a large family of elephant gathered behind our camp. Clearly they expect to march right down to the river but our presence has thrown the matriarch off her game momentarily. The trackers shepherd us to the downwind position so as not to disturb them with our scent. They do not see very well but their sense of smell and hearing are quite extraordinary. Iain says it is all a result of the devastating poaching wars which have only recently been settled, but with memories of those harrowing times, these matriarchs have survived, cause them to become frantic at the sense of human beings. They are so loving towards their families - especially the very young - one almost wants to beg forgiveness, or at least apologize.

I'm quite sore, and tired after the last two days' exertions and would just as soon sit by the fire and suck Tuskers, but Chui appears before me to ask if I have showered yet. " Pleazi go now " he orders and I dash off to comply. The camp helpers have obviously been keeping tabs and know one of their showerees has gone missing. Also, they cannot strike the shower tents until all of us have been sanitized, and I am compromising their well-oiled routine.

It is nice to be last and I linger through a whole bag of hot smoke-scented water. The night sky is brilliant with stars and a gentle warm breeze is blowing. Fully rinsed of soap and shampoo, I head for my tent to find some evening clothes. In all the hustle and bustle I've misplaced my light. The light itself is no great loss but the jeweler's screwdriver I have been using as a tool will be sorely missed-it has done a great service as a thorn remover from my boots and Crocs.

Day Six

"... What day is it today?" This is a sure sign of a good time being had by all, when a group of North Americans have to hunt and backtrack to remember the date and day. Good for us!

We are spared the morning wade across the Galana River by the presence of a causeway. We arrived at the end of the Tsavo River yesterday when it joined the Athi River.

The new River is very much wider and the whole terrain has now opened out into a flat plain, the Athi Plain. The saltbush by the river's edge is still dense however, and we play the usual "surprise, surprise!" game with a Cape Buffalo. He takes a fairly dim view of our presence and we are rounded up and hurried off by our guardians to avoid any more serious confrontation.

The open country makes game spotting so much easier, but there is trouble in Bootville. Pinky toe on the right foot is threatening to turn black and gangrenous if something is not done about the living space in the downtown area. The right sock is very defensive, wishing to remind all concerned that it essentially came along to provide an element of comfort during down times and had not anticipated being pressed into continuous service. It also wishes to have it noted that it was a single sock from a Costco six pair packed, and was not actually matched to his neighbor on the left foot. The orthopedic inserts are smug in their belief that the mentioned P. fasciitis would ensure their continued employment. But they were overplaying that hand, forgetting that other considerations were advancing rapidly, and are in fact, about to trump their P. fasciitis ace. Edema and neuropathy in association with the aforementioned threat of pre-gangrenous changes to pinkie will win the day and the Ortho inserts find themselves reassigned to the task of quieting the empty water containers in the dark recesses of my backpack. There is some grumbling from the P. fasciitis faction and the odd callous, but overall the new arrangement is determined to be an improvement. I am relieved Pinky toe on the right has dropped the gangrene threat.

Our new camp is across the Athi River, which we will have to wade once more. We are all exalted to keep together for the crossing. The guards and guides clearly believe this is a significant step towards safety and they abandoned their usual two or three steps ahead, or aside, in favor of a single tight bolus of humanity, paying special attention to the weak in spirit (Kim especially) and the weak in legs (me especially, and Annie). The camp overlooks the river and its large sandy floodplain. Numerous sightings have convinced us of the presence of crocodile, hippo, elephant and at least one fairly testy buffalo. We are more than happy to bunch together and are relieved to make it across without mishap.

After lunch Iain asked me to look into the malfunctioning sound system in his vehicle. The evening game drives are split between two vehicles, one with music for the drive back to camp, the other silent.

For no reason that is apparent to me, my stock amongst the group, and staff, is already high. Chui, the camp manager, for one thinks I am a film star! I consolidate my undeserved celebrity by fixing the stereo on the first try (better to be lucky than good-again!) Muthama and the camp mechanic are exultant, and many of the staff shake hands and high five me. Of course, it is great to be able to repay Iain, even if in only such a small way. I think his crew is genuinely happy to know he has his beloved music again. And corny as it may sound, I truly think that they love him.

For the first time the flies are being a nuisance and I'm giving up the book and looking towards the Mess Tent for signs of tea, which will proceed this evening's game drive and "Rock" concert.

The game drive was enthralling as usual with plenty of excitement around the elephants. The evening light is perfect and the sunset better than usual.

For the drive back Iain selects a variety of songs by Dylan, a sort of now-and-then compilation. Excellent stuff!.

He and I sit together after dinner sipping scotch and listening to Wimbledon. Enthralling as it may be, my eyes are sliding shut, so I take my leave before the great Final is settled.

Day Seven

One too many scotches and the peace of Africa conspired against me. When reality finally asserts itself over my reveries, it is broad daylight. The customary stumbling around in the twilight has been avoided, but now I am late for parade. I know I will be in trouble on the walk if I don't get something inside me. Some mango juice is gulped and cereal crammed in my mouth.

Everyone else is mustered on the parade ground, which is the perfectly flat sand that marks the edge of the river's floodplain. Luckily the first order of business is to wade the river, which means I don't have to wrestle with socks and boots just yet.

The wade across is uneventful and we gather in the gully we left from last afternoon. As I plopped down to dry off and boot up for the day - no socks! Damn! In my rush to catch up, I left them on the washing line outside my tent! There is a very short moment of panic and a feeling of stupidity flashing through me - but wait! Reprieve! The Ortho inserts are still in my sack and as luck would have it - so are a compression stocking and two-YES-count them - TWO-dress socks. Why they are there is a mystery I am delighted not to have to solve.

The Ortho inserts are back in favor, Pinky toe has room to breathe, and life in Bootsville is peachy once again.

The whole walking thing has now changed completely. The limbo is passé. There are gentle rises and falls as we cut across the inside bends of the river. The outside bends are usually associated with steep drop-offs to the water. Views from up here are spectacular and, yes, I really do see Kilimanjaro some 200 miles away-still way above the clouds.

We dropped in on a pod of hippos for elevenses. They grumble about the lack of notice, are embarrassed not to have fixed their make up yet. Our vantage point is very close, but on top of a rocky outcrop, so an untoward reception is out, and they mill about muttering and fanning excrement over each other with their toilet bowl cleaning brushes they call tails. After the shit -in is over they fall back to sedate languishing and we continue on our way. The sky is cloudless and the sun hotter than before. My feet are both well and the rest of me in good shape, nevertheless I feel grateful when the march is over. Another river crossing, this one in full view of a pod of hippos and much longer than any before it, brings us to the vehicles, the icebox and Tuskers. It is 11:45 a.m. local time and I pause to reflect that it must be noon somewhere - So, here's to noon, where ever that may be. Cheers!

Lunch is a Tuna Nicoise salad with fresh baked bread and watermelon. Totally delicious! My compliments to the kitchen staff once again! Lunch and a steamy hot tent have made this entry a labor of love. I've fallen in and out of consciousness and am now going to willingly succumb. Wake me for tea please.

Teatime is heralded by the arrival of fresh water in the washstand outside my tent. Splashing face and neck and drying off has a delightfully indulgent feel - dare I say, colonial decadence? There is no doubt it is a great way to present oneself for a nice hot cup of tea. Here we go.

The evening game drive is nothing short of spectacular, again. From views of Kilimanjaro to lion cubs at play, it is all right out of Hollywood, except we really are living it.

Iain's son James has arrived and he and his dad make a great pair. He is tall and handsome and gives as good as he gets from Pa, making the evening meal even more laughter-filled than usual.

Dinner is delicious as always and followed by scotch at Iain's tent.

Day Eight

Today started inauspiciously with a forced bag ring change, but I got it all together and manage breakfast as well. I have taken to snagging two bananas for the walk. They are small and came from Uganda originally. At about half the length of a regular banana they would be an instant hit with the airlines!

Our walk today must set some kind of record for number of species seen. The high point is a group of three lionesses, which we approach to about 15 yards. The spell was suddenly broken when one of the lionesses yawned a great wide yawn, revealing huge fang-like teeth and a chasm of a mouth. As she relaxed, her eyes opened and for the first time she realized our presence. With a deep, guttural growl that seem to come from within the ground, she leapt effortlessly away, closely followed by her two companions. It seemed they covered 50 yards in just three strides before disappearing like water into the sand.

Everybody, including the trackers, were transfixed by the event. To be so close and to feel the vibration of that coughing roar was thrilling. I would not have believed it had I not seen it. Kim turned a purplish color and had goose-bumps all over her arms and legs. She was frightened /exhilarated but still in one piece. One might think the rest of the walk would be anticlimactic but nothing could be further from the truth. I'm sure we saw at least 20 different species not including the birds.

For the first time since starting, today I felt the walk ended too soon. The river crossing to the waiting vehicles was more arduous than any before it, however, and I was glad to reach them in the end.

Boots off, a cold beer and off we go. Our new camp is semi-permanent in a place Iain has managed to lease from the Kenya Wildlife Service. His own motivations were twice blessed. First, he needed a central point for the final days of this Safari. Second, his was a preemptive strike against some glitzy hotelier grabbing the land and mucking it up. And wisely did he choose. The site is breathtakingly African. The site is slightly raised on a sandy tier above an open inside bend of the Galana River. Across the wide, slow expanse of water are several picturesque rocky tiers and a few Doum palms. Wide sandy areas are visible at each end of the panoramic view. At our very arrival, a family of elephants were drinking at one end, while a pod of hippos in midstream on the other hand, grump their acknowledgment of our presence.

The semi-permanence of the camp allows each tent to have its own shower and toilet arrangement. We will be operating from here for the next three days, so packing and unpacking are unnecessary. I really appreciate this aspect, as it allows me more time for bag hygiene, which I am indeed in need of.

Tea has become quite a ritual and those of us who indulge preserve all the niceties. Biscuits (cookies) are served under a lacy covering to keep the insects off. The milk is a full cream UHT type, which makes the whole thing more "ceremonial" than ever. I am a 5 to 6 cup man myself, and have to work at it to get my fix.

The game drive is breathtaking as ever and the sunset even more wonderful than the last. Kilimanjaro is clearly visible but oh so far away. Even the hills and the Yatta Scarp have receded to small features on the horizon. It is quite sobering to realize those same features were once looming large before us.

We really have put the miles on. Suddenly there is screaming from across the water, obviously some teenager in the baboon troupe has crossed the line with an adult. The impala do not seem too concerned though.

Day Nine

An easy and timely start to the day that is more overcast than usual, makes the decision about washing, breakfast or photography way easier than usual. I will skip photography and grab an extra cuppa.

We load up in the waiting vehicles and are driven back up to our crossing point of yesterday. Today's walk will bring us right back into camp with the river crossing starting directly opposite the tents.

A cold beer will be taken before contemplating boot removal. Most people are wading barefoot with pants rolled up as high as thighs will allow. Mohammed our guide is 6'6" tall, and skinny beyond belief - he looks like he is on stilts and barely wets his knees. Nancy, Regina and Kim are nearly crotch deep.

My view of all this is that I was going to wash everything anyway. So it might as well get the first wetting in the river. There is a negative aspect to sand in laces and Ortho inserts etc., but big deal – not!

The morning's exertions are punctuated by water breaks usually in a palm grove. I have taken to eating one of those small bananas at each stop and they certainly seem to help. Adding a dash of lime juice to the water is good too.

The tone of the day is set as a vast herd of Cape buffalo crosses in front of us. There are easily two- and possibly three hundred off them. The rear guard is made up of old bulls that seem to be twice the size of the rest of the herd and sport hugely curved horns with a polished blackness glinting in the sun. They appear totally invincible, and it is mind-numbing to think of the challenge a group of lionesses must face when they contemplate bringing one of these massive brutes down. But lions do take them on regularly and according to Iain, lions are their sole predators. He recounted one incident he witnessed some years ago, where a pair of lions worked out a particularly macabre way of dispatching old bulls. One of the pair of lions would approach the victim from the front and distract him, while the other would slink in from behind and gore the hind legs. This would cause the bull to wheel around to confront his attacker, who would retreat. The first lion would then have the bloodied back end towards him (her) and could leap in and inflict more damage. Inevitably, the bull would find a tree to back up to and face off his attackers, but the damage was done. Severed arteries and veins in the animal's hind quarters would be spewing blood and it would just be a matter of time. The lions would take up a position just close enough in front of the bull that he would know they were still there and he was thereby "frozen" in place. All the lions had to do was wait until blood loss caused the stricken beast to stagger a few times and they then knew it was time to move in. Dinner is served in the convenient shade of the tree....

We jibe our way across the plain. Wind direction is all-important and it is remarkable to be hundreds of yards up wind of a beast and watch it catch our scent and take off. Conversely, we are able to stand within 60 yards of a family of elephant and less than 20 yards from some lions before they detect us, as long as we are downwind of them. Getting close to wildlife and sailboat racing have a surprising number of similarities and as we zigzag about, I cannot help thinking of all my sailboat racing days.

... Come in on port tack, jibe, set at the elephant and bear off to the lions on starboard, but don't, don't, don't forget to check for wind shifts..... got it ? ...Ready about..!

The ability of the trackers is uncanny. Mohammed is a retired sergeant in the Kenya Wildlife Service. He has killed 27 poachers, but sadly, lost over eighty men in those same wars. He is a noble character not given to joking. He seldom smiles but seems to have a heart of gold. Lejori and his brother Washee are our spear bearers. Their game spotting ability has to be witnessed to be believed. Iain says he often has great difficulty picking out their finds even using the best quality binoculars available. This morning Lejori found a lion posing like a sphinx about three quarters of a mile away. I had a hard search and finally found it with my x10 binoculars. Others in the group never did find it..

Tioko and I have a rather simple, but good friendship. He has seen me through some steep gully's and back and forth across the river. He calls me Mzee , meaning old man - but he says it without a hint of scorn or derision. I counter by calling myself Mzee Kiboko-old man hippo-which amuses him greatly, especially when I am floundering about in the middle of a river crossing.

I am writing this by oil lamp under the veranda of my tent. A million bugs, frogs and hippos are putting in their 10 cents worth. The sky is scintillating.

Iain asked me to tell the story of my Atlantic sail all those years ago. It was lots of fun and gave Iain a night off.

There has just been a loud bang - unmistakably gunfire. After much running about and waving of lights, all is now silent again. It appears a hippo wanted to wander through the camp, but Mohammed had other ideas, and fired over its head. I wonder if Kim will get any sleep tonight?

I know I will and am off to prove it. Goodnight.

Day Ten

We start with a river crossing right in front of the camp. The early morning is cool, and cooler yet with wet pant legs. Bootsville remains brilliant.

The first few miles are flat and easy walking. A half-eaten gazelle in a saltbush thicket is clear evidence of a leopard. Iain is certain the animal is close and watching us intently, but none of our trackers can pick it out and we move on.

We beam, reach across the plain, and descend downwind on a family of elephant. We are very close and they can sense something, but never notice. As they amble, so we amble, always keeping downwind.

Elevenes are spent with a new hippo pod that, once again, are not expecting us. Our initial position is one of elevation and we stare down on them. A large male takes exception and mock charges. The huge wall of water he manages to propel in front of him is very impressive but he and his tidal wave are frustrated by the height of the mud cliff we are standing on. He submerges to conceal his embarrassed retreat.

A short distance on the bank gives way to a sandy foreshore, which makes Iain uneasy. It is prime real estate for a hippo charge and he directs us away from the danger.

There are fringe-eared oryx on the horizon. These are some of the most impressive animals in my opinion but they are timid, alert and very fleet of foot, so good close-ups are rare.

Our walk this morning will end with another river crossing, but our first attempt is put off by the arrival of a family of elephant. We head further along the bank and pause briefly to allow the animals time to gather further upstream. They do and to our surprise more and more continue to pour out of the saltbush on to the riverbank.

We watch as mothers fuss over tiny infants, and teenagers in the rear flap and crash about in playful mock battles, causing annoyance to all who must suffer their behavior.

Realizing that our river crossing had only been documented from the rear, I ask Iain to let me go ahead of the main group and set up to photograph them from the far side of the river. He agrees.

Tioko and I are once again brothers-in-arms, and, taking up position on a midstream sandbank, we signal for the rest to follow.

As the main group set off so do the lead elephants just upstream from us, and we have the extraordinary scene of two sets of beings fussing and marshaling themselves across the water.

We stop mid-river on the sandbar and marveled at the size and length of the parade passing before us - squabbling adolescence bringing up the rear. Our first landing point on the new shore takes us into thick salt bush. Mohammed freezes us in place, while Iain and Tioko pulled us silently back down the bank. We have arrived at the same place as the elephant parade. The mother elephants stand under a shade tree, snoozing like old ladies under umbrellas at a cricket match. Two babies are playing a lazy game of tag around the back legs of their mum. I managed a quick photo before being hauled away. We had been incredibly close - no more than 20 to 25 yards, yet miraculously unnoticed. The real problem was a second family directly to our left (downstream), so any retreat from the first group would have driven us into the second. It was very exciting and the very high point of the walk.

We swung silently along the foreshore shielded by a low sand cliff. Soon Mohammed and Lejori were all smiles again and we turned inland once more.

Despite Iain's insistence that we should all live in the moment and not contemplate coming events, it is very hard not to recognize we are coming to the end of this amazing adventure. I start looking around the camp drinking in the sounds and smells. I try hard to get pictures that do justice to the grandeur of a situation. I am torn between a straight documentation, which might reveal too much to any of my friends who may yet come to take the trip, and keeping the secrets, which would mean foregoing my own sweet memories in photo form.

The evening drive would be a perfect example of this dilemma and I'll simply say I will never forget it, and say no more... but I am glad we decided to go back up river.

Day Eleven

This is to be our last full day of walking. It starts with a ceremonial "Kwa heri" to all the camp staff. They have been nothing short of super. I have several of them nicknamed and address each accordingly "Karibu, karibu sana" they reply. (you are welcome, you are very welcome). It is a touching ceremony - short and poignant.

Our day's goal is a small cinder cone on the horizon not unlike Pilot Butte-it makes me think in the future again, which I am trying hard not to do.

We re-cross the river and play the sailing game - beam reaching and beating - never running. At one point we turn through 120° and bear away from a large family group of elephant. Eventually we can harden up and come to the downwind mark of the course. It is incredible to be so close and be able to watch every detail of their social interplay. There is a silent communication between them that we can only guess at. Their lack of awareness of our presence is captivating, but we have serious goals today and must step lightly out of their lives for now. Kwa heri Ndovu!!

An appalling stink assails our noses and a scuffling hyena confirms something up ahead is dead. It turns out to be an old bull elephant with huge ivory. It is very difficult to view this fallen monarch without emotion - to reconcile this grotesque mass of rotting flesh with what was once a masterpiece of evolution. We are reminded of course, that this is the inevitable fate of every living thing. We pay our silent respects and move on.

As the heat and oppression of midday bear down on us, we cross the Galana for one last time. The cinder cone is now behind us and the last mile is stepped off.

Here at last, more sadly than could have been imagined at the outset, our walk is finished. Iain is not a man to miss an opportunity however, and our spirits are soon transformed by the liberal application of champagne – Cheers!

A brace of tour buses pull through the gates and we are suddenly the objects of their attention – momentarily we are their new game sighting. And what a vision we must be! Staring back at them as indolently as I can, I see bored little white children, plump oily wives and harassed patriarchs with terrified looks of "... how much is all this costing me?".

Our red, dust-streaked faces, and sweat stained clothes, spears and guns present a scene they cannot fathom. The presence of champagne glasses and multiple bottles further confound them. They may try to look superior, hiding their wonderment behind masks of makeup and Gucci sunglasses. But ours is the real victory. We have done the real thing. I can sense the pride of accomplishment that I feel, is being experienced by our whole group. And it is now so much more than just a group. We have all had our moments of difficulty - some more serious than others, but we have made it together.

For my own part I have seen myself acclimatize and flourish once again in the African bush. I was searching for a word or simple phrase that would encapsulate my feeling. When talking with Iain about it over Scotch one evening, he told me of a mother who could not stop grieving for a lost 18-year-old son. He was killed in South Africa by the elephant on which he was supposed to be riding. The mother completed the Great Walk and, at the end of it, realized she could go on with life without her son. She had healed finally. For my part I felt that I had taken myself back for me. I don't mean it in selfish terms, but rather a clearing picture of who I am, who I always was and have wanted to be.

My talks with Iain were intimate and detailed and I felt no desire to hold anything back. After all I have had a good life and, if Iain is correct, there is still plenty more to come.

I teased the Duchess and I think she enjoyed the attention. I became closer to Peter than I thought I would, and was surprised he let me. I tried to mentor the youngsters by telling them stories of my cleverness gone awry. I steadied Kim and supported her through her, at times, harrowing growth spurts. Regina was the easiest to deal with, she is nicely grounded, straightforward and open.

The surprise of the trip for me was Annie, Peter's wife. She started out the crucifix with ski poles and ended up a wise and insightful friend. It did not hurt her because she never missed a chance to compliment me on my good disposition and what she thought was a remarkable achievement for a person with my recent medical history. We talked about

hope and the opening of portals. On two occasions she jotted down a word or phrase I had put forth. I think the one I like the most, and took her the most by surprise, was when we entered a dark, cool grove of Doum Palms. The palm trunks were massive and were polished by years of elephant rubbing. The air was still, slightly fragrant and the group paused momentarily in silence. I whispered to her "just like entering a church". One never knows what part of it the reaction comes from, and I don't particularly care in this instance, but the payoff for me was when she lifted her face, the kindness of her smile and the gentle way she repeated "it is, it is....".

I think for the briefest moment she looked at me in a new way - sort of ".... and how on earth would you know that...?" We bonded.

Saying goodbye to Mohammed, Lejori, Washee and Tioko was particularly touching. I left Tioko till last. At the very moment I turned to him and he stood. I put my hand over his heart then over mine. I snapped to attention and saluted him as smartly as I possibly could. Although we had so few words between us, I really liked him and I genuinely believe he was fond of me. I really wanted to give him a gift, but Iain had counseled against this and in retrospect I am glad I resisted the temptation.

One thing I was very glad of though, was the sharing of water with these men. At every break they would station themselves on the dangerous side of the group (we were allowed to stray backwards – for peeing – but never forwards). They carried nothing but guns and spears, whilst the group would pull forth bread rolls, fruit, water bottles etc. Sun creams and lotions were slathered and attire adjusted. I just thought it was a nice gesture to at least offer them a sip of water. A mixture of surprise and gratitude greeted my action and they all nodded sincere appreciation, seeming to register this one was not their usual "mzungu". I hoped, in this almost insignificant way, to be able to express my respect and admiration for them.

Iain says the Samburu have a saying for the place beyond the trees, where the sky and land come together. They call it "the end". Amen to that.

Postscript "... the outline of the mountain was slowly smooth and leveled out by the hand of distance".

2009 Great Walk of Africa: An African Journey

The first time Tsavo's 8,300 square miles were crossed on foot from west to east, following game trails for 100 miles along the banks of the Tsavo and Galana Rivers, was in 1996 when Iain and a small group of friends did it as a section of their trek from the summit of Kilimanjaro to the Indian Ocean. An expedition that was subsequently written up in Rick Ridgeway's fine book *The Shadow of Kilimanjaro*. The first commercial "Great Walk" took place in January 2002 with a group of American zoo directors, and we have now completed 38 very successful walks.

What makes this walk the greatest in Africa? Our visitors who have done it will each have their own reasons, but we like to think there are some common factors: We become a part of the African bush experience; each day we enter it more deeply, fears of it are rationalized, senses are heightened, and we begin to understand it on its own terms. The pleasures of it are derived from more than just the game seen along the way, it is more about the grand adventure itself. It is an African journey that can only be appreciated on foot.

This past summer has seen more Great Walks than ever before. Between June 2 and October 23 we ran eight full departures, with Iain leading every one of them. Elephant numbers continue to proliferate: we've seen literally hundreds, more than at any time since the mid-eighties. Every Great Walk has had exciting lion sightings, reaching a record 37 seen on our last walk of the season. In early October we saw a single group of 19, which included five full-grown resident maneless lions.

A World Apart our NEW walking safari: Through The Green Hills of Africa.

Mention Maasailand, and we think of game peppered grasslands stretching to the horizon, tourist-loaded safari vehicles, lodges, boutique camps and sterilized villages, with choreographed once-proud warriors dancing for the tourists like Navajo on a reservation.

There is however, a secret face of Maasailand, and we've found it. For years we've been searching for another "Great Walk", a second journey across Africa, which would capture the adventurous atmosphere of the original. It's taken some finding! It's never been in our nature to tread the worn roads and trails of tourist Kenya; in our opinion, what you find there just isn't the Africa we want to show our visitors.

We found what we were looking for on the edge of the Great Rift Valley.

Our new 85-mile walking safari is a journey across game-strewn plains, into the Loita Hills - the spiritual centre of Maasailand, and home of the Laibon, the ultimate Elder - and along the western rim of the Rift Valley, following the Nguruman escarpment. We will be in the company of "real" Maasai warriors, following their ancient trails, and learning their ways of life.

This is the country described, and immortalised in Hemingway's The Green Hills of Africa. We will walk through rich equatorial rain forest and green forest glades, past sparkling waterfalls that plunge from the escarpment edge down to the dry plains of the Rift Valley thousands of feet below us. Elephant, Colobus monkeys, leopard, and Cape buffalo inhabit this country.

We think this is a remarkable safari, as thrilling and fulfilling as the "Great Walk", but different in every way. Check out our new web page for pictures and details.

http://www.tropical-ice.com/it_wrdapart.htm

Kilimanjaro Wildlife Safari: If you must climb Kili, then do it right.

The name KILIMANJARO has become such a cliché that it is difficult to know what to say about it these days. Hemingway placed the mountain on the map with his depressing book, which has little to do with the mountain; it is one of the easier "highest point" ticks for the rich, mostly middle-aged seven-summit fraternity; attaining its summit can still raise the occasional eyebrow at a cocktail party; and it's rapidly melting glaciers has given travel agents all over the world a fresh "get there quick before it goes" marketing angle.

If it is possible to wade through all this questionable hype (we're being quite restrained here), beneath it all stands a fantastic mountain that is very enjoyable to climb. Over 25,000 people attempt it each year and many reach at least the crater rim.

We'd like to say at this point that if your goal is to climb Kilimanjaro as part of a "get up and down as quickly and as cheaply as possible" style climb, please read no further. There are literally dozens of outfitters gracing the lower Tanzanian slopes of the mountain, offering guided ascents at dirt-bag prices - many are so cheap they don't even pay porters wages; they offer them exposure to client tips at the end of the climb! This simply isn't our style.

Over our 30 years of business we've learned a few valuable insights into the Kilimanjaro situation:

1. Climbing it shouldn't be the sole reason for visiting Kenya. It's a long, expensive haul over here, and the mountain takes six days to climb. Visit a few of our outstanding wildlife parks; see some of Africa's most dramatic scenery; in other words, make a two week vacation out of it.
2. Climb the mountain by a route, which keeps you as far away from the masses (and there are thousands) as possible, and offers you plenty of acclimatisation time. We climb Kilimanjaro from the remote Kenyan side, and there is an even chance that you might not see another tour group until the last few hundred yards below the summit.

We've designed our KILIMANJARO WILDLIFE safari in a way that allows you time for a meaningful Africa experience.

(Please note: We don't outfit Kilimanjaro climbs that are not part of a bigger safari itinerary.)

Recession-Busting 2009 prices and scheduled departure dates.

Check out our new "RECESSION-BUSTING" special prices in 2009. By booking direct with us you'll save more than you think; two people booking could save the cost of one air fare.

Make your decision, and think about the adventure that awaits you...

The Great Walk of Africa

USD 6,650.00 per person sharing

2009 Departure Dates:

- February 1 (Arrive in Nairobi) -14 (Evening departure from Nairobi)
- May 31 (Arrive in Nairobi) - June 13 (Evening departure from Nairobi)*
- June 17 (Arrive in Nairobi) - June 30 (Evening departure from Nairobi)
- July 5 (Arrive in Nairobi) - 18 (Evening departure from Nairobi)*
- July 26 (Arrive in Nairobi) - August 8 (Evening departure from Nairobi)
- August 16 (Arrive in Nairobi) - 29 (Evening departure from Nairobi)*
- October 11 (Arrive in Nairobi) - 24 (Evening departure from Nairobi)*

A World Apart

- SPECIAL DEPARTURE: February 8 - 21 USD 6,000.00 per person sharing
- Summer 2009 Departures
- USD 6,750.00 per person sharing

Summer 2009 Departure Dates:

- July 27 (Arrive in Nairobi) - August 9 (Evening departure from Nairobi)
- August 15 (Arrive in Nairobi) - August 28 (Evening departure from Nairobi)*
- August 31 (Arrive in Nairobi) - September 13 (Evening departure from Nairobi)
- September 14 (Arrive in Nairobi) - September 27 (Evening departure from Nairobi)*
- October 18 (Arrive in Nairobi) - October 31 (Evening departure from Nairobi)*

The Kilimanjaro Wildlife Safari

USD 6,790.00 per person sharing

2009 Departure Dates:

- June 14 (Arrive in Nairobi) - June 26 (Evening departure from Nairobi)
- July 19 (Arrive in Nairobi) - July 31 (Evening departure from Nairobi)
- September 12 (Arrive in Nairobi) - September 24 (Evening departure from Nairobi)

The Great Escape and African Game Trails

We are now taking bookings for private (four or more people) departures of these safaris. Please contact us for special tier pricing.

*Please contact us at tropice@africaonline.co.ke for price confirmation for these departures.