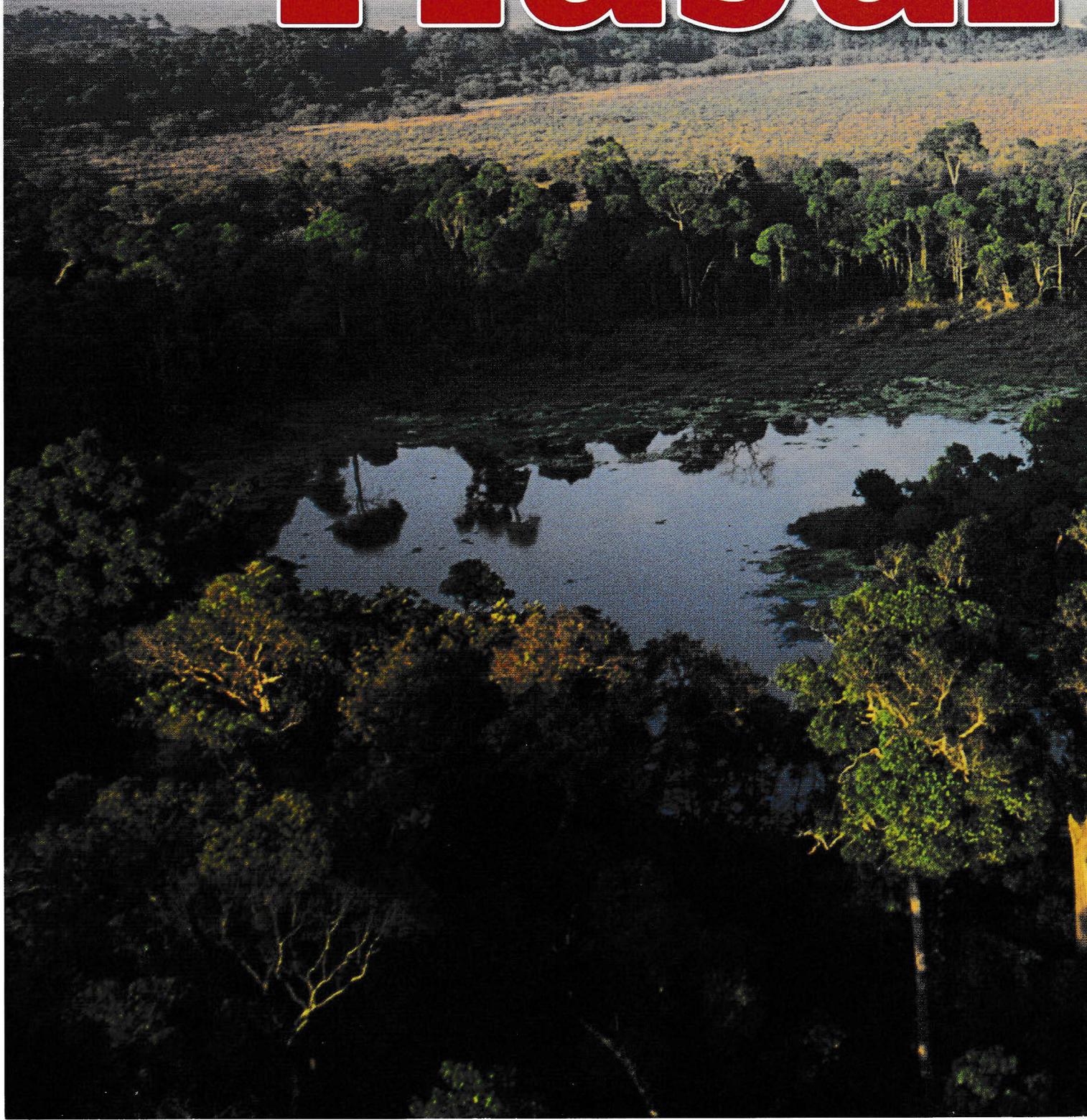


@travel

Hot air ballooning **Masai**



over the

Mara

For most travellers the idea of floating in a hot air balloon over the Kenyan wildebeest migration is but a distant dream. But the migration lasts

for several months, so if you time it right, you could make the dream come true. **Carrie Hampton** tells you how.



Our pilot pointed ahead and shouted, “Wild-e-bus approaching”.

as the two gigantic red, blue and yellow candy-striped balloons took the shape of giant lollipops and rose from the ground, so did the sun. “Gee, look at that sunrise, isn’t it beautiful,” expressed a middle-aged American lady. “Yeah, and it’s totally natural,” added her

friend. While I was pondering this statement we were commanded to climb into the shoulder-high basket straining at its tether.

As we clambered into the padded interior – three in each of the four compartments and the pilot in the middle – a fellow passenger asked if I was afraid. Far too excited to contemplate fear, I felt only elation as we lifted up and floated over the gently undulating Masai Mara.

The peace and tranquillity of drifting silently over a winding tree-lined river course was broken every now and then by an explosive blast of hot air. The powerful burner had to be ignited every couple of minutes, but the intense heat was not unwelcome in the cool early morning. Several more blasts lifted the balloon to more than 300 metres, with magnificent views of smooth golden grass plains in every direction and the purple hills of Tanzania and edge of the Rift Valley in the distance.

Such was the pilot’s skill that one moment we were sky high, and the next skimming the thigh-high grass like a lawn mower. A family of guinea fowl with 13 fluffy chicks darted frantically in our huge shadow. As we rose again and continued effortlessly, our pilot pointed ahead and shouted, “Wild-e-bus approaching.”

Looking for the distinctive lops of migrating wildebeest we saw instead 12 little white safari buses looking like toy cars racing against each other. They were bouncing along the many intertwining tracks, which from above resembled children’s scribbles.

Balloons are inflated and ready for take off in the early dawn. PREVIOUS SPREAD: A hot air balloon ride from Governor’s Camp usually takes you over the Mara River, which is the final barrier that wildebeest have to cross in their migration into the Masai Mara.



The bush telegraph was working well that morning – the tourist buses were homing in on a pride of lions that we'd already spied eating a striped breakfast.

"*Wildebeest ahead.*" The pilot shouted again. "*Really.*"

We were witnessing the beginning of the spectacular million-strong wildebeest migration from the Serengeti Plains in Tanzania into the lush pastures of the Masai Mara. It was early August and the migration had been eagerly awaited for several weeks. Like black marching ants the wildebeest moved in slow single-file lines snaking off into the distance, a lone zebra always at the head of each line.

Vast herds of wildebeest wait for days at the Mara River before plucking up courage to follow a bolder zebra into the raging current. Their migratory instinct takes over from any modicum of sense, and they leap into the water from ridiculous heights and exit at the steepest banks, ignoring a gentle slope just 50 metres further down. In the desperate panic animals die underfoot and the young and weak succumb to soupy mud, crocodile jaws or the overpowering current.

The following day wildebeest carcasses wash up on sand banks and vultures squabble over the pickings. Hippos become agitated at the invasion of their territory and wade about wide-mouthed, trying to see off the vultures. This is a time of plenty for the carnivores of the Masai Mara, and from our floating vantage point we witnessed the ease with which three hyenas brought down a yearling wildebeest. The other plains animals – Thompson's gazelle, topi, impala, zebra and wildebeest – continued grazing in apparent unconcern. They also took little notice when our large and colourful balloon

TRAVEL TIPS

- The Masai Mara is 4½ hours' drive south-west of Kenya's capital Nairobi, or a 45-minute scenic flight from Nairobi's Wilson Airport.
- Transworld Safaris operate balloon flights from several lodges in the Masai Mara. Book in advance or on arrival. They can also arrange light aircraft flights and safari itineraries. Transworld Safari, <http://www.transworldsafaris.com>
- Governor's Camp offers hot-air ballooning from their award-winning camps, with good views over the Mara River. They have several other properties in Kenya. <http://www.governorscamp.com>
- From July to October the Masai Mara climate is dry and the grass is long after the rains. This is the time to come and see the huge wildebeest migration and carnivores like lion, cheetah, leopard and hyena.
- Masai Mara altitude is 1500-2170 metres above sea level and daytime temperatures rarely exceed 30°C, with winter nights not often below 15°C.
- This is a malarial area.
- There is no night driving in the Masai Mara, which is a Reserve rather than a National Park, and it belongs to the Masai people.
- Several lodges are located outside the park's boundaries, but as there are few fences you may not be aware of this, and it won't spoil your safari.

The chef cooks up breakfast wherever the balloon lands.



landed among them.

The basket tipped on its side and dragged a little way in the increasing breeze, and we found ourselves looking up at a clear powdery-blue sky. The breakfast truck, which had been following our progress, arrived within seconds and the crew helped us crawl out. With curved metal pangas they slashed a circle in the long grass right where we landed, and set stools around a low table. The chef laid a trestle table with plates of soft sweet pawpaw, pineapples, chocolate croissants, little round cakes, crispy bacon and sizzling brown sausages. He then stood at the far end in his tall white chef's hat and invited us to order our choice of omelette. Into the deep

frying pan he scattered grated cheese, ham, onion or hot green chillies.

French champagne was uncorked and this delightful, bizarre bush breakfast commenced. It was not hard to imagine what those elaborate 1920s hunting safaris would have felt like, especially since I was sitting right in the middle of the 'Out of Africa' film set. I was literally treading in Meryl Streep's footsteps. I felt like I'd had a full day's worth of new experiences – and both my senses and stomach were fulfilled. Like the carnivores whose active day ends at dawn, I also felt like resting in the shade, but looking at my watch I realised I still had my whole day ahead of me. All this action, and it was only 9.15am. @

@leisure

HOT AIR
ballooning over Masai Mara

KRUGER
with magical music

Winning ideas for
WEEKENDS AWAY

Meet the
MEERKAT MAN

MALAWI

Lush water paradise

Issue 1 R29,95 (incl VAT)



772070 279006