

» special moment, but the magic was slightly diminished by the huddle of vehicles stuffed full of chattering, camcorder-wielding tourists that had descended upon the scene.

But that's not to diminish the experience too much, because if you come to places like the Mara and the Serengeti then you know what you are getting – lots of animals, but quite a few people too. It's a good introduction to African wildlife, while a more hardcore safari experience is for another day, and possibly another country.

“WE’RE HEADING FOR THE MARA RIVER, FAMOUS FOR THE CROCODILES THAT SNAP AT THE HEELS OF THE WILDEBEEST HERDS THAT CROSS HERE”

The next day we're heading for the Mara River, famous for the crocodiles that snap at the heels of the wildebeest herds that cross here in their thousands. The drive takes a few hours during which our eyes are peeled for signs of lions, giraffe, and buffalo. Every now and again Dan slows down and picks up his binoculars. “See the bull elephant over there,” and as we scan the landscape our eyes finally settle on the magnificent animal.

It's amazing how guides like Dan can spot animals while driving, which even with total concentration we don't pick out ourselves. A great example of this is when Dan spots a cheetah sitting behind a bush, with only her motionless head barely visible as she watches some gazelle down below in the valley. As we go in for a closer look, we can hardly believe Dan has managed to spot her. After watching this beautiful creature for a while, the inevitable crowd of vehicles begin to gather and we move on.

CROCS AND HIPPOS

Reaching the Mara River, we are given a guided tour along its banks by one of the armed wardens that are hired to keep visitors safe. The river is home to not only enormous crocodiles, but families of hippo, who constantly ruck with each other to protect their part of the river. “The hippos are extremely territorial - if you fall into the river, they will kill you,” explained our warden, adding that the hippos' massive jaws will crush a man's skull in an instant.

The knowledge of the guides and wardens out here make the experience so much more fulfilling.

Dan, for instance, tells us that the zebra and wildebeest herds mix together because the zebra have a great sense of smell, while the wildebeest have great eyesight (or is it the other way round?), so between them they have a great chance of spotting potential danger from predators. Or that buffalo sit with half the group facing one way and half the group facing the other way, so they can smell the wind in both directions. We also find out why the big five are called the big five. “They've no natural predators,”

explains Dan. “The lion, buffalo, elephant, leopard and rhino can't kill each other, only if they are injured or infants, so they are all top of the food chain.”

On the way back we come across another cheetah lying lazily on top of a big mound of earth, and we feel privileged as this normally shy creature seems to pose for pictures while it yawns and stretches.

Another top moment came when Dan spotted a couple of lionesses stalking a herd of gazelles. The predators pass literally feet away from our vehicle, and as they

