

My Thrilling African Safari  
Fr Varghese Paul, SJ

My joy at seeing a mighty lion at a touching distance was great during an undreamed of African safari in Kenya. The hair-raising experience happened by chance. Kenya was not in my original travel schedule to Africa. I was going to attend an International Meeting at Harare in Zimbabwe on “the Impact and Challenges of Globalization in Africa.” It was organized by the International Catholic Union of the Press (UCIP) and I was invited to attend the meeting in my capacity as a Council Member of UCIP.

I had told my travel agent to include Eritrea in East Africa in my travel programme as I wanted to meet my sister, Celine Paul working as a Missionary nurse in that country. My agent booked my air tickets in Kenyan Airways which did not have connecting a flight on the same day from Nairobi to my destination. So I asked for and got a break in the journey at Nairobi to meet my two old friends Fr Eric Condillac, SJ who was the Principal of St Xavier’s Loyola, Ahmedabad and Fr M Devadoss, SJ with whom I studied in the Gregorian University at Rome.

I not only got to meet a number of my friends and acquaintances at Nairobi but, thanks to my host, Fr Eric, I also got an unexpected chance to make a short safari trip to Nakuru National Games Park and Lake Nakuru.

The day after I landed at Nairobi, on India’s Independence Day morning I found myself in a private tourist car on the way to Nakuru National Park. At 7 AM my driver and guide Mr Kennedy Mbugua pulled the car to the road side to have a packed breakfast and also to have a breath taking view of the Rift Valley which runs through several countries. The morning sun lighted up the Rift Valley and at 8000 ft deep below it was a unique sight to see and marvel at. My only travel company was the driver’s teen-aged daughter, Edna Wairmu who served us the hot tea and packed sandwiches and cookies.

Thanks to the excellent A 104 Uhuru highway past Longonot and Naivasha, we entered the Nakuru National Park at 9 AM after two hours and a half driving at 110 mph. We headed straight for lake Nakura inside the park. The Lake is famous for flamingos. The shores around the lake were covered with thousands and lakhs of flamingos which from a distance appear like pink icing over the lake. Edna and I could go very close to the Flamingos. There were also pelicans and storks in their hundreds on the lake shore. Numerous birds were also flying in formation making waves and music in the sky. The sight reminded me of the Independence Day fly past in New Delhi.

After watching the flamingos and pelicans for more than an hour, for the next 3 hours we drove through the dusty roads of the park watching all sorts of wild animals at close quarters. There were gazelles in large numbers. They moved in two types of groups. In one type of group there were one male with horns and with it some 50 females that moved around the park. In the second group there were only horned male gazelles. The male gazelles fight among themselves. When one of them gained strength and experience in fighting, it will challenge and defeat the male gazelle leading the female gazelles and take over the group.

Among the other numerous groups of wild animals were zebras, forest buffalos, waterbucks and

monkeys. We also saw a number of giraffes, impalas, white and black rhinos, baboons and warthogs and ostriches. Two white rhinos were gracing the side of the dusty road in front of us so we stopped for about 10 minutes for them to cross the road.

At one o'clock the three of us sat at a far end of the game park for our packed but sumptuous lunch with a variety of foods, cold drinks, fruits and cake. A friend of Fr Eric, Ms Margerie had packed our lunch. After a good helping with the lunch, the driver remarked that the host knows how to pack lunch for the guests.

He judged me and his daughter Edna as poor eaters. Perhaps he did not know that I had already feasted with the sight of the variety of innumerable animals. Still, there was a great disappointment. We had not seen a lion yet in the game park.

My guide told me that the lions do not roam around in the park like other animals. If they remain hidden in the thick forest of Akesia trees (euphorbia – candelabra) on the west side or in the shade of an isolated tree in the thick grass, it would be difficult to spot a lion.

Still my driver and guide Mr Mbugua was determined to show me a lion in the park where he said at least there is a population of some 50 lions. After driving for more than an hour after our lunch break I saw four legs of an animal in the air as it turned on its back some 100 meters away under the shade of a bushy tree. "Please stop, I think, I saw a lion," I said. Mr Mbugua stopped the car, stood up on the door of the car and he said that there seemed to be two lions sleeping under the tree. I also tried to see the animal through a binocular but the thick growth of grass prevented a clear view.

Then, the driver said to me that he would take the risk of driving fast through the grass to get nearer to the lion to have a closer view. And he drove over the grass and stopped the car very close to a sleeping lion and I had a good view of the lion. It simply ignored our presence. Only when we were moving away the lion got up for a little while and went to sleep again. There was an isolated impala gracing on the grass some 200 meters away. Was the stealthy animal lying in wait for its prey? Who knows?

We drove around the dusty roads of the game park till 3.30 pm feasting our eyes on a great variety of birds and wild animals. The Nakuru Game Park is known also for hippopotamus and leopards, but we missed them.

Though I have seen practically all the wild animals in the zoos in India, Europe or USA, it was a unique experience to see them at close quarters in their natural surrounding, undisturbed by the presence of human beings in their vicinity.

It was also a rare sight for me to see different types of animals and birds grazing close to each other in perfect peace and harmony. Will men ever forget their differences of being high and low, rich and poor to eat from the same table?