

The bright side of Kenya's lack of tourism – or is it?

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Something good came out of the chaos that ensued after Kenya's 2007 December elections. Game reserves, national parks, and tourist rest stops with their dilapidated dukas (souvenir shops) were devoid of tourists. Mombasa's white beaches, resorts and fine restaurants empty. Nairobi hotels and tourist sites vacant.

February 2008 statistics from the Kenya Tourist Board showed a drop in international arrivals by approximately 53 percent compared to one year ago. Kenya's tourism is now on the endangered species list.

Tourism has long been one of country's top revenue producers. Over the past few years tourists eager for their dream safari migrated to the country in record numbers.

Lodges and hotels were booked up months in advance. Client filled vans clogged rest stops. On the slopes of Mt. Kenya, clients waited in line for photo ops underneath the equator sign. Across savannahs, wagon trains of way too many safari vans circled lions lolling in the grass. And despite warnings from rangers, vans rolled slowly behind cheetahs as they tried to hunt.

This past April, I flew off to Kenya again wondering what I would find. I couldn't envision deserted game lodges and parks, but the thought of viewing animals in solitude had its perks.

Everywhere we went, we heard the same plea, "please go home and tell them Kenya is safe, so please come."

At rest stops that once bustled with frenzied tourists, shopkeepers greeted us with desperation written across their faces.

Even the animal orphanage operated by the Sheldrick Wildlife Trust in Nairobi National Park had become financially challenged. A staff member said contributions were down 50 percent.

Without revenue from park fees, the Kenya Wildlife Service could not adequately fight the war against poaching. This country that I loved, a country that God cradled in his hands, victimized by politics, now writhed in pain.

Animals have an uncanny ability to know when something is amiss. Did wildlife know something had happened? Did they wonder where those odd rolling metal containers, crammed with strange chatter, and click, click, click went? Without intrusions, did they feel more at home?

Amboseli National Park's savannah, fragrant and glazed green from afternoon rains hosted our afternoon game drive. We watched herds of elephants that seemed more relaxed. Teenagers jostled with one another while mothers sheltered tiny babies under their bellies. Finally they plodded toward Kilimanjaro's foothills for the night.

I have never seen such abundance - the wildlife spectacle couldn't get any better, but it did.

We headed for Lake Nakuru National Park and Nakuru town, the Rift valley's provincial capital and major agricultural center. The area had been ravaged by post-election violence, so if hostility still reigned, this would be the place. Instead warm smiles and friendly greetings met us.

Lake Nakuru is famous for millions of pink bubble gum colored flamingos that feed off algae around its edges, but this day the sea of pink had receded. The driver said that most of the birds had flown to Lake Natron on the Tanzanian border to breed.

Besides flamingos, varieties of birdlife and wildlife inhabit the park, as well as rhino and Rothschild giraffe sanctuaries.

Past visits had been all about flamingos and other birdlife and not much else, so when our driver noticed a massacred adult impala wedged halfway up a huge yellow-barked acacia tree several feet from the road, the van careened to a stop.

Since they are nocturnal and very elusive, the odds of seeing a leopard with its prey are about as great as winning power ball. We spotted the leopard sprawled among the top branches, high above the impala. After several minutes he climbed over his prey and plopped down to the ground. He sat surveying his kingdom and staring at us, then casually padded toward a stand of acacias.

Not far from the big cat, and closer to the lake, a herd of 20 white rhinos grazed. Nearby, a troop of baboons groomed each other. We drove past herds of zebra, impala and cape buffalo. A family of Rothschild giraffe plucked leaves from acacias while their stoic patriarch stood guard.

About an hour later, our driver slammed the van to a stop and pointed to something near the road. Among clusters of thick grass, another leopard crouched, intent on a mother impala and her infant a few yards away.

We waited. Minutes ticked by. The cat's muscles tensed. He sprang at the pair and pounced on the baby. Frantic, the mother whirled around and watched, huffing in anguish, as the cat carried her baby into the brush.

The chance of seeing one leopard was ridiculously slim, but two? The park had morphed into a virtual Garden of Eden.

This had been the perfect time to travel to Kenya, but at what cost? The lack of tourism created a superb safari experience.

Kenya banks on tourism. Will it be months or years before the country gains the tourist numbers they enjoyed prior to December elections?

Now is the time to visit Kenya. Go check out one of the new seven wonders of the world: migration in Maasai Mara National Reserve. Watch the rhythm of the African day at Kilaguni lodge's waterhole. Experience Amboseli, her savannah is always dressed in Sunday best. Bask on Mombasa's tranquil beaches. Check out Nakuru's Garden of Eden, and search for those magical leopards. Visit the precious baby elephants at Dame Daphne Sheldrick's orphanage in Nairobi National Park. Just go. Kenya will be grateful you did.

For further information on Kenya go to www.magicalkenya.com
Dame Daphne Sheldrick's orphanage: www.sheldrickwildlifetrust.org