The Constant Traveler: Angama Mara, Kenya

Steve Bergsman, Special to Tribune | Posted: Wednesday, September 16, 2015 12:14 am

The promontory at Angama Mara, overlooking The Mara. [Steve Bergsman/Special to Tribune]

One of the most famous opening lines of a book reads: “I had a farm in Africa at the foot of Ngong Hills.” The book is Out of Africa, written by Isak Dinesen, which was a pseudonym for Danish writer Karen Blixen. It was written in the 1930s and the Academy Award-winning movie from the book was filmed in the mid-1980s. The very handsome couple, Meryl Streep and Robert Redford, starred.

The director of the award-winning film was Sydney Pollack, who had to overcome a significant obstacle when filming on location in Kenya. The once rural Ngong Hills was, even in the 1980s, a populated suburb of Nairobi. So he needed to find a location to substitute for the original Ngong Hills and he found a stunningly beautiful site in an area of the country called Masai Mara, about a 45-minute, bush-plane ride from Nairobi.

The Serengeti grasslands stretch north from Tanzania into the Mara Triangle of Kenya until it meets the Oloololo Escarpment. The unusual word, “Oloololo” is Masai for zig-zag because the escarpment runs erratically along the topography of southwestern Kenya. The escarpment is distinctive but not a true wall, because at some points the land simply rises not dramatically but in a perfectly gradual slope from the plains to the top of the escarpment as if the Creator decided the migrating beasts of East Africa needed a pathway from the lowlands to the highlands. Indeed, if you are lucky enough to be in the Masai Mara, you will see all means of animals migrating along the slopes of the escarpment, from the grazing impalas and elands to the bulky elephants and ungainly giraffes.

When Sydney Pollack and crew arrived, they found a perfect location atop of a rocky promontory, where the view of the plains below was clear, unobstructed and seemingly unending. Not all the movie was filmed there, but many key moments. For example, when Blixen’s paramour, Denys Finch Hatton, died and was buried near the Ngong farm, that scene was shot atop the promontory under a tree that still stands. Broken cement marks the setting of the cinematic funeral. In addition, the famous poster for Out of Africa, featuring Meryl Streep and Robert Redford, was shot here in a bridge between two koppies. My wife and I thought we would capture that moment anew and sat in the very places where Meryl and Robert posed some 30 years ago. It was a great photo -- and it was such a surprise to me that no one mistook us for that original couple!

We were there at the point on the escarpment because a lucky, South African couple, Nicky and Steve Fitzgerald, had gained the lease to the Masai land and built a beautiful camp – I would call it a resort – called Angama Mara. I had run across Nicky and Steve many years before when they were in the process of building out a chain of glamorous safari camps across Africa and India. They retired, but upon hearing the property was available for lease decided to go back into the tourist world because this was the location Steve most desired in Africa.

Safari camps of Africa come in all types of flavors and I've tasted a few of the best over the years, but Angama Mara is the endgame for Nicky and Steve and they put all their dreams and desires into it. Now I could rave about the beautiful, semi-tent accommodations of the architecturally significant common buildings, but the truth is Nicky and Steve had something few other safari camps have, the most stunning location atop the escarpment with nothing but the endless African plains below.

Our safari driver, a cheerful man named Sammy, would tell us when he drove the precarious road down from the escarpment and came out of a ravine onto a rise to see the vast plains ahead of him, it would make him happy. I thought it was odd phrasing until I took breakfast every morning at the veranda, perched at the edge of the rocky pinnacle. I would sit, having my first cup of coffee and just stare at the world of Africa ahead of me and I would be happy.

I should tell you that those aren't sea-level plains, but the interior continent consists of higher elevation lands and when you reside at Angama Mara, you are over 6,000 feet. The days may be hot, but when that sun goes down the evenings cool down wonderfully. You sleep very well, that is if you don't mind the sounds of Africa outside of your window, from buzzing insects, to trekking mammals, to unusual bird calls to bellowing elephants. Oh yes, elephants, as it turns out are good climbers as are other mammals, as there is plenty of wildlife abounding around Angama Mara, especially wandering dazzles of zebra -- they seem to be everywhere.

There are a handful of places in Africa where the wildlife is so generous that you are almost guaranteed seeing all the animals of your imagination – and some more. The Masai Mara is one of them. When we arrived at Angama Mara and looking down over the savannah, Nicky and her daughter Kate pointed at little dots on the horizon, saying those were elephants or look there are giraffes or in that dark area in the distance are a group of water buffalos. I grabbed my binoculars and scanned the far places and sure enough they were right. After a few days at Angama Mara, I could make the same distinctions without binoculars.

Of course, the main activity at game camps are the safari drives, where you get to see the wildlife up close. I started to keep a list of all the different creatures we spotted, but I think I quit at about 25. It seemed no matter where you turned in the Masai Mara, there was another animal.

Everyone wants to see the majestic ones: elephants, giraffes, zebras, buffalos, lions and leopards. But, I was just as thrilled to see the hyenas, jackals and crocodiles.

All the animals had their watering holes, and we did too, at the bar at Angama Mara, which we visited daily after a long day in the sunshine of Africa.