

Walking Through Maasailand

Mike Dias

Writer's comment: I had originally planned to write a basic news story for this assignment for my journalism course—something simple, sterile and strictly from an objective point of view. I had no intentions of writing anything personal. But then again, I did have a funny story to tell and I was in a class that fostered literary freedom. So I want to thank Eric Schroeder, a true teacher in all senses of the word, for creating a space in which I felt comfortable enough to experiment with my writing style and safe enough to work on developing my voice.

—Mike Dias

Instructor's comment: Perhaps the hardest genre to teach students of journalism is the travel article. This might not be readily apparent—most student have done some traveling and all of those who have traveled have stories to tell. But telling others about your travels can be a bit like showing them your snapshots—the experience can lose a lot in the telling so that what was exciting or life-changing for you, can come across as boring to your audience: “The restaurant was quaint and all of the waiters wore fisherman caps and they served the *best* Greek salad....” But travel writing at its best is a different story. Writing of this sort really does let you feel what the author experienced—for better or for worse! Mike Dias does exactly this in describing his walking safari through Maasailand. So put on your hiking boots, plenty of sunscreen, and watch out for lions.

—Eric James Schroeder, English Department

AS WE WERE ABOUT TO CROSS THE DRY STREAMBED—thick with overgrown vegetation—I became slightly nervous. It was late afternoon and this would be an ideal resting spot for lions. I tried to sound unconcerned about gross bodily harm and casually voiced this worry. I too wanted to appear as confident as the three Maasai guides I was walking with. “Yes, of course that could be true,” replied Solomon Sankale, the man responsible for my safe passage through Maasailand. “But it is not a problem. Lions are afraid of Maasai. Every Maasai has killed a lion before—with our hands.” He then crouched low, pantomimed throwing a spear, and laughed until my fears disappeared—until I absorbed his confidence—until I even secretly dared a lion to mess with us.

This was only the first day of my walking safari, and I was already picturing myself clubbing a rushing lion smack on the head. What was I thinking? Could the heat have cooked my brain so quickly? Maybe my imagination was working overtime, compensating for my city upbringing. Maybe I was jealous because my guides looked so powerful in this wild landscape—their red *shukas* contrasting so vividly against the earthy greens and browns. They dominated the visual landscape. But no, it was something else, something more subtle. I was walking through the African savannas without the protection of any modern technologies. I was totally immersed in the landscape. Primitive feelings were taking root. What I was feeling was instinctual.

I was walking over trails that had been in use for thousands of years. I was in the southwestern regions of Kenya, and I was slowly moving from the Maasai Mara National Reserve east towards the Great Rift Valley. I would be crossing open savannas and scrub bushland—the same savannas that provide habitat for 80% of East Africa’s wildlife. I would walk through the Loita Hills and the Nguruman central plateau forests—some of the last pristine dry-land forests of Eastern Africa. And I would continue walking until I stood at the cliffs overlooking where the African continent is ripping itself apart. Every year the Rift Valley opens about an inch wider. Then I would descend the Nguruman escarpment into the cradle of civilization—into the Great Rift Valley itself. In total, the journey would be about seventy kilometers spread over a five-day period. I had absolutely no idea of what to expect—I had never even heard of a walking safari before.

Kenya contains more than 400 mammals, 400 reptiles, and 1200 birds, and the country has developed an extensive tourism network

that showcases these natural wonders. It is home to over twenty-three National Parks and twenty-nine National Reserves. But when in a National Park, the law states that you must remain within your vehicle at all times. This was not going to work for me! I craved a more complete experience. I wanted to be immersed in the ecosystems. I needed to move slowly, to hear the different birdcalls, to see the sun set and rise, to observe the subtle changes in vegetation as the elevation changes. I longed to sleep under the equatorial stars and to stand on land that has been unchanged for more than 550 million years. I had to walk.

So when the tour operator in Nairobi suggested a walking safari through Maasailand, I immediately signed on. Maasailand is a place where man and nature still cohabitate. It is a semi-sovereign area that encompasses parts of both Kenya and Tanzania and is home to roughly 400,000 Maasai. Here the Maasai continue to live a semi-nomadic lifestyle, grazing cattle and goats. Here is where I could walk unfettered.

While walking safaris are not as well known as the ubiquitous game drives, they are an excellent alternative for travelers seeking a more natural experience. They are economically comparable to a standard Kenyan National Park game drive tour and most tour operators offer the whole gamut of services and luxuries. Walking safaris can be as basic or opulent as you desire. This is ecotourism at its finest. Walking safaris are intimate. They are slow paced. Guides who are skilled in tracking and animal and plant identification explain what is happening on a hyper-detailed level. And walking safaris arrange for food and shelter during the journey. OK—at least 99% of all walking safaris arrange for food and shelter—mine had a slight miscommunication.

Small Tent—Many People

No one is really sure as to what happened to the guy who was bringing the food, tents, and supplies. He had left a note with Solomon to meet at a designated spot, but he never showed up. Naturally, I felt a bit stranded out in the bush—left out in the middle of nowhere in the center of Africa. But this is so far from the truth. This area was the home of Solomon, Jackson, and Quela—the three Maasai who were traveling with me as guides. This was where their people have lived for over 4000 years, where they had grown up, where they graze their cows and goats, and where they now were raising their own families. So instead of following the predetermined typical safari route, they said we would

just go the Maasai way. We would stay with their friends and family members along the way. I would just tag along as we moved from one group of friends' houses to another. So without further delay, we headed off to Jackson's house for dinner.

I had already seen a nesting crested porcupine. I had walked through herds of gazelle. And to my utter amazement, I even crossed paths with a lone ostrich. All the while, Solomon had explained exactly what each plant was used for, what birds were making which noises, and which animals taste good. "Giraffes taste sweet," he would say in his thick East African accent. Or "this leaf is ground to make the bitter poison arrow," when referring to the Murichu tree. And now we were heading to a traditional manyata to eat and visit friends—like I had graduated from a tourist to a local. I couldn't believe this was really happening.

The landscape softens when the sun sets. The vast panoramas of the plains disappear. Hills fade away. Tree silhouettes melt into the background. Only the tawny grass stands out defiantly against the on setting blackness. It had been a long day and I started to wonder how much further I could walk in the dark. But then, thankfully, as we entered into a clearing, we saw the fire from the Jackson's manyata.

It was difficult to make out all of the details at night, but essentially, a manyata is temporary small-scale village. It is built like a giant doughnut roughly 80 feet in diameter. The edges are constructed of mud and dung dwellings and the interior space is left open to safeguard the cattle and goats during the nighttime. All along the perimeter are branches of acacia tree, so that six-inch thorns protrude everywhere to protect against any predators trying to grab a free meal. This particular manyata had just been built, and it was to be the home to Jackson's age-set for the next three years. An age-set is a division between groups that are fourteen years apart from each other—sort of like a high school class.

So there we were, with all of Jackson's age-set, sitting around the fire exchanging greetings and welcomes. Our arrival was used as an excuse for a celebration. Honey beer and hot tea flowed freely. A procession of children approached and lowered their posture, waiting for us to place our hands upon their shaved heads, as is the customary greeting. "SOBA" we all said, and the rest of the night was spent eating, drinking and telling jokes. (Mostly about how the tour company ditched me in the bush.)

I had brought a North Face pup tent with me—just in case—and Solomon was anxious to set it up. Once it was ready, everyone quickly piled inside. Yes, it is only made for two people, but Solomon assured me that this would keep us all warm and satisfied.

Leopards Cough and Trees Whistle

The next day was more of the same—more walking, more tracking, more sharing stories about family and more laughing. We had passed a small town where we stocked up on food and water. Solomon also bought a small radio, so we could now listen to Destiny's Child and Mary J. Blidge as we walked through the savannas. Here was a man dressed in a neon red floral-patterned outfit, with a red and black-checked cape, golden Elvis impersonator sunglasses (complete with fake sideburns) holding a machete in one hand and a small boom box in the other. This was heaven. There I was in the middle of Kenya—the middle of Maasailand—tens of thousands of miles away from home, and I was listening to American dance music on the radio with an Elvis-impersonating Maasai. What a truly a small world we live in! Sure, this was not the pristine wilderness experience I had envisioned, but who cared? I was having the time of my life.

At night, we set up a camp in the base of the Nguruman forest. I opted out of sleeping in the tent with everyone and instead passed out near the fire. I awoke to the most awful sound—as if someone in the tent was both screaming and vomiting at the same time. When I asked if everyone was OK, they said, "Of course, it is only a hyena." Hmmm, so that sound was not coming from my friends.... It was coming from a spotted hyena, a carnivore best known for its bone crushing jaws, that sounded like it was right outside our camp. Once again, the North Face accommodated all four of us. Then, just before sunrise, there was another new sound for me. It sounded like some asthmatic wheezer. "Hyena?" I muttered. "No no, that is the leopard," they all replied. I was too tired to care.

The next day, after many more heat soaked miles, the soil changed from rich brown to sandy red. We were getting closer to the escarpment. No longer would there be rolling plains of grass. Now there were only a few scrub bushes intermingled with gnarled twisted trees. This was a whistling Acacia forest. These trees have an odd symbiotic relationship with ants. The trees provide sugars for the ants and give them a home in the form of one inch swollen thorn pods. In return, the ants will

viciously defend anything that dares to touch the tree, thereby protecting the trees against grazing animals in an environment without much forage. And when the wind blows, all of the holes in the thorn pods start to whistle—like a field of tone-deaf flute players.

Into the Great Rift Valley

When we finally made it to the rim of the Rift Valley, we did what any normal group of males would do—we marveled at the vast beauty of Africa and then threw rocks and boulders off the cliff. After all, it was a 4500-foot drop to the valley floor. And we sat around and stalled because none of us wanted to climb down this. A walking safari is so much more strenuous than a National Park driving tour, but by putting one foot in front of the other, I learned the landscape. I knew its contours and its smells. I knew its inhabitants.

After we made the descent to the valley floor, we checked into the local guesthouse for a proper meal and rest. A sign on the wall read: “Our Visitors—Feel welcome to this house. What ever little we offer, even if it is a morsel, it is out of our most sincere generosity because it is better a meal of vegetables where there is love than a fattened calf with hatred.” This small dented green sign so perfectly captured the heart and essence of Africa that I could not help what happened next. My heart finally exploded. The pure kindness of strangers was just too overwhelming and I couldn’t restrain my tears any longer. Walking is more than just the physical motion: it is transformative. And as I cried, I thought of the Maasai saying that Solomon told me early one morning: “Mountains may never cross, but people do.”