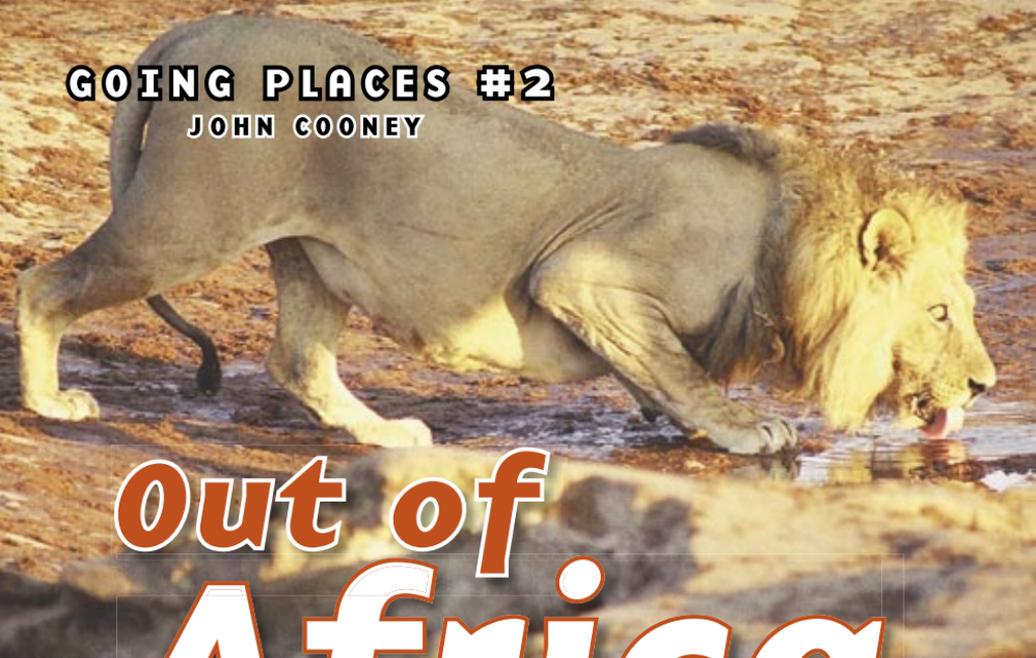
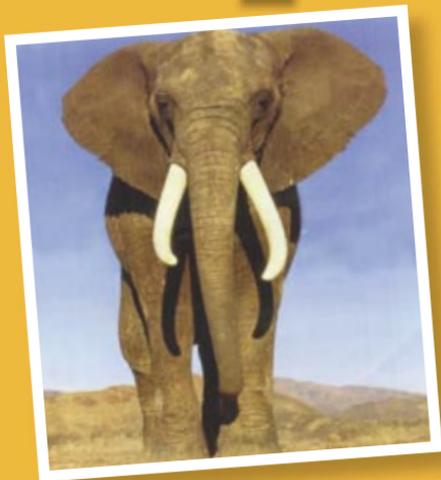


## GOING PLACES #2

JOHN COONEY



# Out of Africa



Imagine lying on a bed, in a tent, in the evening. The wildlife park is quiet. Birds have quit singing, and monkeys are no longer leaping around on the canvas roof. Imagine staring through the open flap at a triangle of darkness. And imagine, suddenly, in the silence, a roar. A short, sharp, close, explosive roar. And imagine the hair standing up on the back of your neck as you realise: it's (gulp!) a lion!

**W**e'd seen several that afternoon on our game-drive. And when this one roared a second time, I realised it probably wasn't so close. And it had probably already scored a hot meal.

Probably ...

But half an hour later, as I nervously followed a path through the trees towards the smell of steak cooking on the smoky barbeque, my heart was still beating faster than usual.

"Hear that lion?" I asked casually. And they had, of course. "But don't worry," assured Jack, our Kenyan guide. "Lions never come into the camp." Although, just the week before, two angry males had staged a grand battle on the opposite riverbank.

"My parents taught us what the lion's call means," explained another African boy. And he gave a fair imitation of a deep, prolonged roar (in English!): "*WHOSE LAND IS THIS? WHOSE LAND IS THIS? MINE ... MINE ... MINE!*"

**I**'d kicked-off my 'sample-safari' in a wildlife reserve north of Nairobi. It was a stunning location – oozing atmosphere, with large luxury tents set on separate decks under trees – and I had time for a doze in my deckchair before the scheduled game-drive.

There were birds everywhere (weavers, hornbills, doves, brilliant-blue starlings) ... tiny squirrels foraging in the grass ... cheeky monkeys, daring me to leave my tent unzipped.

A sign on the river's edge warned: "Beware Of Crocodiles!" And, on the far side, several big male baboons got into a screaming match. I never found out who won, however – it was 4pm, and our Land Rover was waiting to go.

**I**n the cool of late afternoon, Africa's wildlife wakes up. And we'd been less than 10 minutes on the bumpy, rutted track when Jack spotted a leopard, a big specimen, just sitting there in the shade. This cat had an attitude, and couldn't care less about our vehicle – or the seven humans dangling cameras out the open roof.

Another windy half-kilometre, and Jack stopped again – this time for four healthy lionesses, stretched out in the open, sisters by Jack's guess, and probably planning what they'd have for tea.

From that point on, as we bounced and ground along, the thrills came thick and fast. Plump zebra, demanding right-of-way. Graceful impala, flicking up their white tails as they pranced off. Cute, knee-high dik-diks doing the same. Towering giraffes, looking for all the world like Sky Towers. A rare kudu with massive, upright, curly horns. And several ugly vultures, silhouetted on the very highest branches.

Talk about better-than-advertised! I honestly couldn't believe my eyes ...

**W**ednesday saw us on the road again, motoring across flat, rolling savannah into another of Kenya's game reserves: the Masai Mara. I'd read about this vast place, but nothing quite prepared me for the dense mobs of wildebeest we were soon driving amongst.

Every year some 1.5 million of these odd-looking gnus trek from the depleted grasslands of Tanzania in search of fresh grazing – driven by instinct through predator-infested bush and crocodile-infested rivers!

We'd slept the previous night in perhaps the most famous game-viewing lodge in the world. Although 'slept' is an

overstatement. *Treetops* is a rickety-looking structure built on stilts overlooking a floodlit waterhole. And who wanted to sleep when you could sit upstairs in the animal-spotting lounge?

Giant owls swooped out of the darkness to perch on branches only metres away, staring at us staring at them. An enormous buffalo appeared from nowhere to steal a drink and show-off his wicked horns.



Three big bull elephants fought over salt-licks on the ground directly below us, swaying, swishing their trunks and dumping football-sized 'doos' into the mud.

"*Karibu!*" Welcome to Africa!

**T**he following evening as the sun went down, we watched a family of giraffes feeding on the highest, tastiest branches of acacia trees. They may seem ungainly, Jack warned, but when the need arises they can gallop at 60kph – and kick in the skull of a predator!

Two hours earlier we'd stood with our heads sticking out the open roof of our 4WD and watched two lions (a big old male with a black mane, and his younger

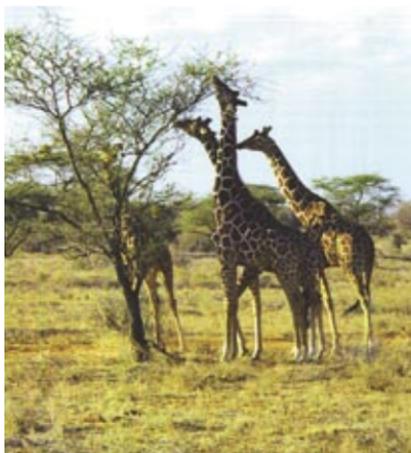
girlfriend) engaging in their two-week-long mating ritual, totally unbothered by a human audience.

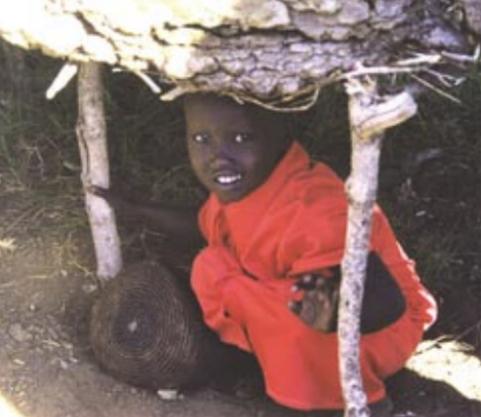
Jack quietly explained: the lioness will probably have a litter of six cubs ... only three or four are likely to survive ... she'll hide her cubs, especially the males, from their daddy ... raising them with the help of her sisters ...

**O**n our return drive to Nairobi, we stopped off at a roadside Masai village or kraal. I'd seen some of these proud nomads in the distance, dressed in bright red blankets and carrying a fistful of spears, driving their scrawny herds in search of feed.

Their low, roundish huts – made from sticks and cow-dung – were grouped together and encircled by a fence of thorny branches, to keep lions and hyenas away. Their precious animals spend each night in the compound – and any baby goats or calves sleep indoors with their owners.

I stuck my head inside one of the huts – very cosy, very smelly, too smoky and claustrophobic for me!





The Masai culture is impressive, ancient, primitive. And I felt strangely moved as the men showed us how they make fire from sticks, the women showed off their colourful beads, and one shy wee barefoot girl with chocolate skin showed off her orange shirt and waved at me from her hiding place in the goat-pen.

**M**y closing hours in Africa were spent, appropriately, at Nairobi's famous Carnivores Restaurant. The meat-menu featured zebra, crocodile and eland – and I sampled them ALL! (A bit tough, a bit rubbery, and a bit dry ... in that order.)

I would've tried some ostrich, too, but that had all gone.

As my aircraft lifted off later that evening, I recalled that unique meal. What better way to end a wildlife safari? If the animals haven't eaten you, you get to eat the animals! ❁

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WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE AFRICA FOR YOURSELF? JOHN & ROBYN COONEY ARE INVITING LIKE-MINDED ADVENTURERS TO JOIN THEM IN AUG/SEPT 2006 FOR A SPECIAL TOUR OF KENYA & TANZANIA: 'MIDLIFE MADNESS ON SAFARI' – INCLUDING A STOPOVER IN EXCITING DUBAI (SEE AD ON THIS PAGE). FOR A FREE INFORMATION PACK, PHONE TOURS DIRECT ON 0800 868 748 – OR EMAIL [info@toursdirect.co.nz](mailto:info@toursdirect.co.nz).

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(plus a Dubai bonus)



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**HIGHLIGHTS INCLUDE**

- daily game viewing from open-top 4WDs
- the Masai Mara & Serengeti national parks
- the spectacular Ngorongoro crater
- accommodation in exotic luxury lodges

*If you're in your middle years ... and you've always dreamed of seeing Africa's amazing wildlife up-close ... why not come too?*

**ESTIMATED ALL-UP PRICE: \$10-11,000**

(includes airfares, safaris, meals, tips, etc)



SOME MISTAKES ARE TOO MUCH FUN TO ONLY MAKE ONCE.