

MINDFULNESS IN THE MARA

ANTHOLOGY

It's only when you forget about yourself that all the wonders of the African Savannah reveal a magic that reigns eternal.

BY **CHARUKESI RAMADURAI**

It was a slow morning at Masai Mara. Well, the zebras and giraffes, impalas and Thomson's gazelles were out by the dozens, getting their fill of breakfast on the open grasslands. But where was the big cat? The mighty lion, the undisputed king of the Mara, was unusually elusive and reluctant to make an appearance.

It was our second excursion to Masai Mara, day-long safaris driving through the now-parched, now-soggy tracks of the African Savannah. Like all novice visitors to Masai Mara, we had the Big Five in mind — elephant, rhino, buffalo, lion and leopard. We had been incredibly

lucky on our very first safari, driving alongside a pair of lionesses engaged in a languorous catwalk. We had sighted a herd of elephants in the distance, with three cheetahs sunning themselves in the foreground. We even had an excellent sighting of a leopard — considered the toughest to spot — eating its prey high up on a tree. It was a meal that lasted for a good 20 minutes, ending with the leopard licking itself clean. But what I really longed for was an encounter with lions.

Our guide Isaac drove us through the grasslands, pointing out birds and animals that we had never seen before. With his wry sense of humour and

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unwavering faith in the bounty of the landscape, he had won us over from the get-go. “Isaaaaac”, I whined every few minutes. “Yes, yes, soon, soon,” he would reply, unperturbed by my plaintive voice.

All of a sudden, the jeep’s radio that had been crackling on and off, acquired a new energy. This radio — connecting all the safari jeeps within a specific area of Masai Mara — was the 21st-century version of jungle drums, spreading news and updates like the proverbial wildfire. A family of lions had been spotted a few kilometres ahead! I sat back and clung on to my seat, fully expecting Isaac to zoom to the spot. To my dismay, he continued coasting along, stopping to show us this and that.

Urge him to hurry up, I pleaded with my husband. Isaac continued, stoic and silent, communicating only with the radio. I fretted and fumed, refusing to take an interest

in anything on the way. I was certain that we would find no lions by the time we got there. After what seemed like an interminable drive, Isaac finally halted near a clump of bushes, turned to us and waved his hands with a flourish.

Sure enough, there they were: an entire pride consisting of a lion, a couple of lionesses and seven cubs. My husband and I watched in fascination as the male walked away into the bushes, even as the cubs ignored him and played with each other in the manner of best buddies. One of the matriarchs got up and followed the leader into the thicket while another lay back contentedly, keeping half an eye on the frolicking cubs. Initially, I could hardly stop taking photographs — single, group, zoomed in, landscape. A few minutes later, as I put my camera away to just enjoy the scene, Isaac said: “I told you it is not going anywhere.”

Isaac, of course, was talking about the lions, but

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that was my aha moment. The African Savannah is endless and eternal. Masai Mara has been here long before any of us, and it will continue to be here long after any of us. And nothing that was part of this spectacular ecology was going anywhere.

Giddy from that epiphany, I took a deep breath and shifted my attention away from the lions.

On the other side of the track, a pair of crested grey cranes made a graceful landing. Further ahead, we spotted a couple of topis — endemic antelopes with distinctive brown and grey bodies — locking horns in what was described as “a friendly fight”. Lone acacia trees stood tall in the distance, conveying the unique “Africanness” of the landscape more effectively than any

other natural feature could. The grey-headed kingfisher and lilac-breasted roller made periodic appearances, flashing their colourful feathers to grab our attention.

These were the small, beautiful, perfect wonders that made our Masai Mara experience truly magical. And by rushing towards a scene that I imagined would give me the most joy, I had shut off my senses to all of this. At that moment, my delight came not just from seeing the lions, but also from placing them within the larger context of the landscape — the animals and birds, the sights and sounds, the entire ecosystem of Masai Mara. Remove the safari jeeps and human presence, and this scene could have represented any point in the existence of the Savannah.

That moment — when I began to enjoy the infiniteness, the timelessness of my surroundings, when I made an effort to see with all my senses, when I began to think about my own insignificance in the larger scheme of things — was my first practical lesson in mindfulness. It is a concept I’ve been grappling with for many years in trying to tame a wandering mind, an overactive brain. I was deeply attracted to the idea that practising mindfulness can reduce stress and promote a feeling of physical and mental wellbeing, so I had started meditating.

However, every time I closed my eyes to meditate or started to observe my breathing, a kaleidoscope of thoughts and memories would flood my mind and distract me. But far, far away from the familiar trappings of home (where I usually struggled with my meditation practice), I had chanced upon mindfulness.

My spell was broken only by the arrival of a few jeeps and the animated chatter of small children. On our way back to camp, I found myself incapable of small talk or even photography. With my mind in a restful mode, I chose instead to focus on the constantly unfolding marvel that was Masai Mara.

Early the next morning, when Isaac drove up to our luxury camp to pick us up for the safari, I noticed his T-shirt slogan, which read, “I don’t need therapy. I need more Magical Kenya.” I took a picture of that on my phone and sent it to my therapist. While he did not respond at the time, I knew that he would have approved. ^A



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