

Africa on Safari

In this riveting extract from their upcoming book *Africa on Safari*, Perth photographers **Kym** and **Tonya Illman** reveal the lengths they went to in order to capture the continent from a unique perspective.



1. Buffalo meet buggy: 5DMkIII; 400mm lens; 1/2000sec; f/6.3; ISO 500. 2. Enquisitive lion close-up: 5DMkIII; 300mm lens; 1/320sec; f/8; ISO 1600. 3. Kym and Tonya Illman, enjoying life's great safari.



Everyone remembers their first game drive. For Tonya and me, it was in Kenya's Nairobi National Park some years ago on a one-night stopover en route to Tanzania. We set out from the camp as the sun peaked above the horizon, excited and with high hopes.

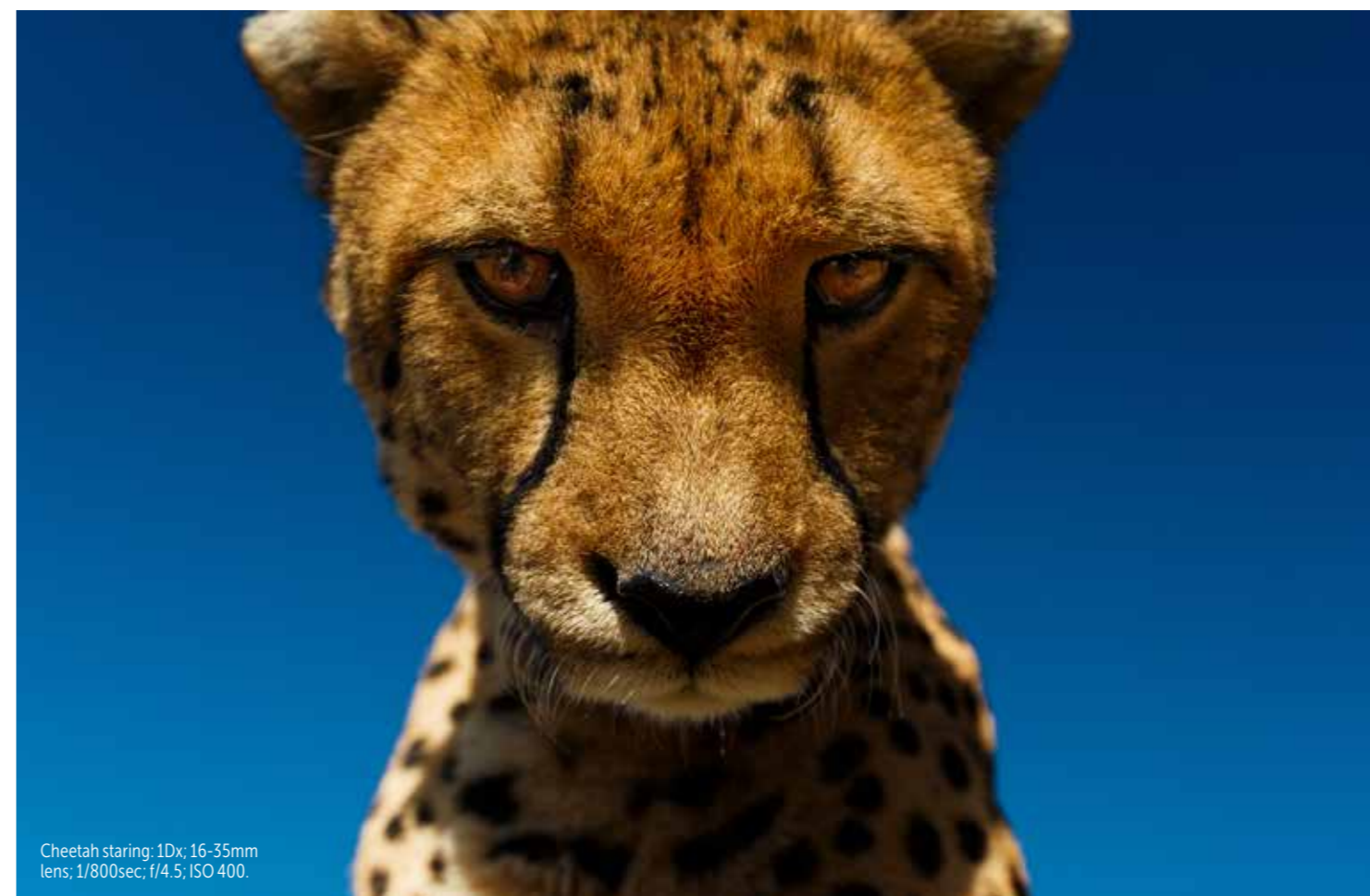
I have to admit, I was not always fascinated by safairing. In fact, Tonya had spent the best part of 20 years trying in vain to get me to join her on a safari. She had done one in South Africa as a 21-year-old and thought I would love it, but for decades I declined the offer. Then one day, she called me at work and said, "I've decided we're taking the boys (then aged ten and 12) on safari in South Africa. I've booked flights for the four of us; you can book the accommodation."

Resigned to the prospect, I scoured the net and, being a passionate photographer, bought a number of African wildlife photography books. I quickly became aware of the awe-inspiring photographic opportunities that a safari offered and decided I would embrace the trip. I'd bought Nick Brandt's book, *A Shadow Falls*, and was captivated by his black and white images of elephants on the open plains. The wide open vistas that he had so brilliantly captured just did not exist in South Africa, so I decided we would all head further afield to East Africa for our first foray into the world of safairing.

As we headed back to our tent in the Nairobi National Park on that very first game drive, we were a little disappointed we'd failed to spot any lions. Then, within sight of the camp, we rounded a bend to see ahead of us a lioness standing proudly atop a stone road sign. She turned her head towards our vehicle and gazed at us for some time. We all raced for our cameras, which we'd



Reaching elephant: Canon 1Dx; 70-200mm lens; 1/6400sec; f/4; ISO 800



Cheetah staring: 1Dx; 16-35mm lens; 1/800sec; f/4.5; ISO 400.

“We realised our images had to be different. We needed to find fresh, unique perspectives in order to tell the tale”

foolishly packed away, thinking the drive was over. Thirty seconds later we started photographing her, and then my youngest son spotted another eight lions lying on the road to her left. It was a lion bonanza, and on our first game drive. Much like a punter who has a big win with their first bet, I was hooked on safairing.

The moment we returned to Australia, we started researching our next trip – and less than six weeks later a Safairlink Cessna Grand Caravan delivered us back to Kenya's Masai Mara for three more weeks of safari photography. Since then we've spent around 12 weeks a year photographing this most amazing continent, staying at more than 34 camps in six countries – and we've only covered a fraction of it.

Initially our photography was only ever intended for our eyes. We viewed the time in the safari vehicle as a great opportunity to hone our photographic skills while enjoying all that a safari has to offer. Neither of us had any formal photographic training, so we were forced to learn from our own mistakes – and there were plenty in the early days. As with any pursuit you immerse yourself in, you improve and given we were

spending nine or ten hours a day, 12 weeks a year photographing around Africa, our improvement rate was dramatic.

A unique perspective

It's fair to say that the vast majority of wildlife safari photos are taken from the top of a vehicle looking down on an animal. This is because it's the easiest and most comfortable way to shoot. We, like most others, took the same easy route on the first couple of safaris and ended up with the same sorts of shots most people come away with. Of course, if what we were photographing was amazing – such as a gazelle giving birth while being chased by a jackal – the angle would be insignificant. But when faced with a simple shot of an elephant or lion going about its daily routine, we realised our images had to be different. We needed to find fresh, unique perspectives in order to tell the tale.

After a few safaris, we gained enough confidence to try new angles. We left cameras packed in elephant dung near dead animals and programmed them to fire off at one-second intervals. We attached remote-controlled cameras to tree trunks

and operated them from a distance. Cameras were mounted on quadcopters for overhead shots and we even had a remote-controlled camera buggy custom-built to house a top-flight DSLR. Moving beyond shooting from the roof, trying new angles and getting close enough to use wide-angle lenses had a profound effect on our images, turning good into great in many instances.

However, the notion for this book didn't come about until early 2014. By that time we had amassed a sizable catalogue of book-worthy images, and whenever other camp guests saw them (mainly while we were editing the day's images in the camp lounge) we were encouraged by their feedback. In particular, they wanted to know how we got the shots and what equipment was used: the behind-the-scenes story.

Knowing the risks

I speak with a lot of safari enthusiasts and am always keen to find out what it is that brings them to Africa. Many like the rawness of the experience but most tell me it is the thrill of being close to wild – and let's face it – dangerous animals. An unprotected human has little chance against an elephant, lion, buffalo, hippopotamus or leopard. Being just a few metres from one of these animals makes the heart race; you know you're alive.

Spending time on safari is not without risk, and we have had our share of close calls. Tonya was walking back to the tent



Lion selfie: 5DMkIII; 14mm lens; 1/640sec; f/2.8; ISO 500

“We weren’t so lucky with one adult male lion who put his teeth through the rear screen of a Canon 5DMkII”

at a camp in the Okavango Delta one morning when she disturbed a huge bull elephant. She only became aware of its presence when he trumpeted loudly from behind a small shrub a few metres away. She remained calm and moved away slowly but remembers the event vividly to this day.

I could have ended up in a hippo’s mouth one evening in Tanzania’s Selous Game Reserve. My guide had pulled our boat up to the bank of the Rufiji River so I could go up onto the bank for a sunset shot. He scanned the flat, sandy surrounds and suggested it was safe to walk 100 metres up to the point. It was hard going in thick sand, so I stopped halfway. This decision could well have saved my life as a minute or so later a hippo emerged from a sand hollow 50 metres behind me and raced back into the river.

If I’d kept walking I would have been between the river and the hippo. There is a fair chance it would have dealt with me in much the same way one dealt with Musango Island camp owner Steve Edwards; he was nearly bitten in half by a hippopotamus after walking his guests back to their room. The animal picked him up and carted him some distance before dropping him, unconscious, and heading off into the night. His scars tell the tale of his ordeal.

Tools of the trade

In photographic gear alone we take in excess of 70kg on each trip. In fact, according to our guide, Paul Kirui, only the BBC brings more. On a typical safari we use every lens at least once, but rely primarily on just a few. I have a Canon 200-400mm

lens on my 1DX and a 70-200mm on one of the four 5DMkIIIs we carry. Tonya will have a fixed 300mm on a 5DMkIII and a 100-400mm MkII on another.

The final 5DMkIII is fitted with a 16-35mm lens loaded in the camera’s water housing and mounted, ready for action, to a remote-controlled camera buggy we had made by New Zealander Carl Hansen. We have a 500mm lens on a Canon 7D, giving us 800mm effectively, and the remaining Canon 6D has a 24-70mm lens. We carry a handful of other Canon lenses including a 135mm f/2, 14mm f/2.8 and 24mm f1.4 lens for low light and shallow background shots, plus a 100mm macro and an 8-15mm fisheye.

With this many cameras, it’s vital to sync every one of them to the local time, down to the second. We also carry more high-speed

memory cards than we’re likely to use, and for cameras that take CF and SD cards, we set the camera to shoot to the CF card. The SD card has a much slower write speed and will buffer sooner than a CF card. Shooting to the SD card can cost you shots when shooting in high-speed mode.

We carry a tripod that converts to a monopod. The Lion Selfie (above) would not have been possible without the monopod; it allowed us to position the camera in front of a sub-adult lion approaching our vehicle, without endangering ourselves.

Getting amongst it

While most safari photographs are taken from a vehicle, there are some instances when you can shoot on foot. We stayed



Elephant trumpeting: 5DMkIII; 16-35mm lens; 1/4000sec; f/5.6; ISO 500



Gorilla pondering: 5DMkIII; 100-400mm lens; 1/200sec; f/6.3; ISO 800

at a private reserve in Tanzania where we were able to photograph zebras and elands running towards us while on foot using small trees for cover. You know you’re alive when you have a couple of hundred of these animals thundering towards and past you.

Another way to shoot low-angles safely is to use a hide. At Mashatu Lodge, Botswana, a sea container has been buried near a waterhole. Instead of searching for animals, they come to you – a much more comfortable way to shoot.

Most people, and many animals, are intrigued by the remote-controlled camera buggy: sub-adult lions love it; adult males are mostly disinterested; lionesses can go either way; and the cubs won’t do anything without Mum’s approval. Wild dogs are interested but approach it warily and

cheetahs pay no attention to it; they simply walk away. Leopards normally do the same, with the exception of a confident young South African female who took a shine to it. Elephants will approach it but quickly lose interest, while giraffes and zebras run away from it.

We use the buggy sparingly, only with animals that are relaxed, only with the approval of the guide or game reserve manager, and never in the presence of other vehicles. The animals you see in the presence of the buggy have generally approached it. We, along with all the guides and camp managers we have worked with, are mindful of not invading their personal space.

For the best photos, we do not use the buggy early or late in the day as it can cast



Impala relaxing: 1Dx; 70-200mm lens; 1/320sec; f/5; ISO 1250

“We used the quadcopter with giraffes on a private reserve; they typically stared at it until it flew too close, then moved away”



Giraffe at eye level: GoPro Hero3; 1/470sec; f/2.8; ISO 100

shadows on the animals. It's also pointless putting it out if the animal is in shade and the sky is too bright. Only a few lions have absconded with it – and in those cases, once they realised it wasn't edible, they abandoned it within a couple of minutes (thankfully, as it's worth more than US\$10,000 when fully outfitted).

When setting up the remote-controlled buggy camera we take into account the height of the grass in the area. We normally use the camera's broad autofocus setting. However, if the grass is high enough to affect the autofocus, we set the camera to manual focus at just over a metre for cats and five metres for elephants and giraffes. We typically shoot in Av mode at f/5 and set the ISO to 500 to get a shutter speed of at least 1/200sec.

Before we bought the buggy, we placed cameras on tripods near lions. They would approach them gingerly but most would just sniff or lick them to establish if they were edible. We weren't so lucky with one adult male who put his teeth through the rear screen of a Canon 5DMkII a couple of years ago. It still took photos but the images could not be seen on the screen.

We've used the quadcopter on a couple of trips, mainly for wide-angle shots of large buffalo herds and for landscape shots. We used it with giraffes on a private reserve; they



Pride examines the buggy: 1Dx; 70-200mm lens; 1/1000sec; f/5; ISO 500



Lion shaking his mane: 5DMkIII; 16-35mm lens; 1/3200sec; f/5; ISO 400

typically stared at it until it flew too close (around ten metres), after which they turned and moved away. The use of these devices in a number of countries, including Kenya and South Africa, has recently been limited.

In Zimbabwe, we knew elephants drank at certain waterholes so we planned for some low-angle drinking shots. Arriving before the heat of the day, we buried a Canon 5DMkIII in its water housing at the edge of the waterhole. We had a remote transmitter that sent a signal to a receiver connected to the camera, and from 50m away we could shoot super-sharp images of elephants from our vehicle without disturbing them.

They could see the glass lens port but while they no doubt recognised it as something alien and sometimes sniffed at it, they were never concerned by it.

Before it's too late

There is little doubt that Africa is changing, and because no-one knows what the landscape will look like many years from now, I would urge you to see it sooner rather than later. Whether you take a Canon 1DX with a 600mm lens or your iPhone, you will see amazing scenery and

wildlife and return with images you will treasure for years because you were there when it happened.

Our journey has been an incredible one and we have seen a multitude of things we never thought we would witness. Perhaps the greatest thing about wildlife photography is that you never know what's around the corner.

It has been an absolute pleasure to share with you some of our most treasured and striking images of Africa's spectacular wildlife. Without doubt, there is nowhere else in the world that puts on a greater show.

For more information and to purchase Africa on Safari, check out kymillman.com/aos

