

Maasai Mara masterclass



Like Augusta for golfers and Hawaii for surfers, Kenya's Maasai Mara National Reserve is a must-visit destination for any wildlife photographer worth his telephoto lens. It falls within the ecosystem that includes Tanzania's Serengeti National Park to the south-east. The highlight of a visit to The Mara is, of course, the annual wildebeest migration between these two reserves.

For Isak Pretorius, business consultant and part-time photography guide, the sheer number of animals was astounding. And when they started hurling themselves into the river, well, that's when thousands of shutters started clattering.

"To us humans, the wildebeests' behaviour sometimes doesn't make sense," he says. "We think they act stupidly, without logic. But the reality is that as a species they are thriving. Whatever they're doing, it is working just fine for them."

While he was there, Isak also got

to photograph some of the other members of The Mara Show.

"There are so many animals," he says. "We'd drive out of camp in the morning past sleeping lions and leopards because we knew we'd find other predators doing something more interesting."

But how do you take pictures that are different to the millions of others snapped by legions of tourists from Luxembourg to Japan?

"Use a wide-angle lens when everyone else is shooting on zoom," Isak says. "Or vice versa. I also try to show the animal in its habitat – a lion in the Maasai Mara is not the same as a lion in the Kruger. And learn the basics: Nothing beats good light and solid composition."



ISAK PRETORIUS
On my bedside table: *Born Wild*, an autobiography by Tony Fitzjohn
In my CD player: *In Good Company* by Iron and Wine

◀ LEAP OF FAITH

"To see a herd of wildebeest crossing the Mara River is quite something. It takes one courageous animal to make the first move – and after that it's a frenzy as the herd follows. Some wildebeest enter cautiously; others throw themselves into the water off the steep river banks.

"We were fortunate to see a massive crossing at a photo-friendly place near a bend in the river. I tried to keep the shot wide enough to give a sense of the chaos of the crossing, with the leaping wildebeest as the focal point."

HOW? Nikon D3s, Nikkor 200 – 400 mm lens, shutter speed 1/640 second, aperture f8, ISO 800, aperture priority mode (+1/3 EV).

▼ THE MANE MAN

“When the wildebeest migration reaches the Maasai Mara, it’s a time of plenty for the predators. Very little effort is required to get a meal and sometimes no effort at all because so many wildebeest die on the plains from broken legs or from swallowing water during the river crossings. As a result, the lions are usually in prime condition during this time.

“This young male was no exception. Instead of doing a typical portrait, I included a lone tree in the background, typical of the plains. I love his haughty expression.”

HOW? Nikon D3s, Nikkor 200 – 400 mm lens, shutter speed 1/250 second, aperture f4, ISO 400, aperture priority mode.



⬆ PRIME LOCATION

“I stayed at Entim Mara Camp on the banks of the Mara River. One morning, a few hundred wildebeest started massing at the water’s edge. We waited for about two hours, but nothing happened. The camp manager volunteered to keep an eye on proceedings while we had our lunch. Halfway through the meal we got the call that the wildebeest had started moving. It’s the fastest I’ve ever seen a group of people clear a table!

“A crossing can be tricky to photograph. You either have to go in close with a zoom lens and isolate the action, or you have to go for a wide-angle view that shows the scene unfolding. The wide-angle approach only works at a few places along the river, where you can see both river banks in a single shot. It’s no accident the camp is positioned where it is.”

HOW? Canon EOS 5D Mark II, Canon 16 – 35 mm lens, shutter speed 1/160 second, aperture f10, ISO 400, manual mode, polarising filter.



◀ WHAT GOES UP...

“Six cheetah cubs can be quite demanding on a mother. She had to take down a Thomson’s gazelle almost every day to satisfy their ravenous appetites.

“We grew quite fond of the cubs and at the end of our trip we could almost tell them apart by their individual personalities. Two of them were very adventurous and climbed into nearly every tree they walked past. Maybe they thought they were leopard cubs.

“This tree was a little too high for them. Going up was easy, but coming down was a little more difficult.”

HOW? Nikon D3s, Nikkor 200–400 mm lens, shutter speed 1/500, aperture f5.6, ISO 500, aperture priority mode (+1/3 EV).

▲ CHEETAHS ON PATROL

“It’s quite difficult to create an image of a cheetah that stands out from all the other photographs that have been taken of these animals.

“I was in luck when we positioned the vehicle about 300 m ahead of a cheetah mother and her cubs walking over the plain. I quickly set up my camera on the ground with a remote shutter release. Then I retreated and waited to see whether or not the cheetahs would come closer.

“Mother and cubs were very curious about my camera contraption and came to investigate. I blindly pressed the remote shutter button and was ecstatic when I saw the results.”

HOW? Canon EOS 5D Mark II, Canon 16 – 35 mm lens, shutter speed 1/640 second, aperture f11, ISO 400, aperture priority mode (+ 1/3 EV), fill flash.

▶ WET BEHIND THE EARS

“A successful wildlife photograph is one that makes the viewer feel something. Going the ‘ah cute’ route is sometimes an easy way to achieve this.

“When this cheetah mother started licking her cubs clean after feeding I went for a tight shot to emphasise the special moment.”

HOW? Canon EOS 1D Mark IV, 600 mm lens, shutter speed 1/400 second, aperture f8, ISO 640, aperture priority mode.



▶ STANDING TALL

“Each afternoon we found this tower of giraffes at the same spot, just outside our camp. The scene was always the same and so typical of the Maasai Mara: big skies and wide open grassland with a few animals breaking the line of the horizon.

“They just looked like they were meant to be there.”

HOW? Canon EOS 5D Mark II, Canon 16 – 35 mm lens, shutter speed 1/320 sec, aperture f8, ISO 200, aperture priority mode (-1/3 EV).

To see more of Isak's photographs, visit
🌐 www.isakpretorius.com

