

Experiences
from
recent travels

BY

Janet Holderness

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Janet Raine

2013

**Members Janet Holderness, Carole Loveridge and Janet Raine,
have, following their recent travels, provided us with
accounts of their experiences.**

**Janet Holderness to Africa,
Carole Loveridge to the South East Asia
and
Janet Raine to Europe.**

**An attempt has been made to present their experiences
in a form that makes for pleasant reading,
and will enable members to read the
accounts at their leisure.**

My holiday in Kenya during March 2013

I last visited Kenya in 2007 and have longed to return, especially to again see the Maasai Mara; I also wanted visit Amboseli where I had not previously been. March in Kenya is when the rainy season arrives and consequently not many tourists visit around that time, precisely why I decided to go that month; it is also when more baby animals are born.

I prefer to stay in tented camps to be closer to the wildlife and to gain the whole wilderness effect. It is wonderful to hear lions roaring at night, elephants rustling in the undergrowth close to the tent and being woken by the distinctive sound of a hippo.

My first camp was in the Amboseli Selenkay Conservancy, I was met at Nairobi Airport by my driver with a mini bus and we had a four hour drive to camp. The first hour and a half was on tarmac (fortunately with a toilet break) the remainder was on a very bumpy dirt track, I was therefore rather relieved when we arrived in camp. This was one of the Porini camps run by Gamewatchers Safaris. They are eco-friendly camps with just 8 tents; they work with the local Maasai community, providing jobs and fresh water. The guides have to take rigorous exams before they qualify and their knowledge of the environment and command of English is excellent.

I certainly felt very tired and dirty from the overnight flight, so after lunch I had a shower and rest, and then went out for my first game drive at 4 pm. It was very hot, even at that time of day. With my driver and guides, Daniel and Malik, we visited a Maasai village, Daniel and Malik are both Maasai. I have previously visited other villages but some are quiet commercialised and tourists are expected to buy beads etc. or give money to the chief. This was not that type of village. The Maasai are a very proud people and still carry on certain traditions, including drinking blood and milk from their cows; they do not kill the cows to get the blood but just pierce a hole in its side with an arrow to let the blood flow out and then seal it again. The cow is not harmed. In this area of Kenya the men no longer kill lions to prove their manhood; however, some of the traditions of female and male circumcision still persist.

We then did a short drive and saw giraffe, elephant, wildebeest, antelope, etc. As the sun was setting it was time for a sundowner drink; we met up with the only other guest in the camp. This was Michael Brown, who came from Scotland; he had been out all day in Amboseli National Park and had seen lots of wildlife. We arrived back in camp at about 7.30 with dinner at 8.0 pm; then an early night to be ready for a 6 am drive next day.

However, there was torrential rain and thunderstorms all night (we had seen the lightning on the way back to camp). I hardly slept and thought I would be paddling out of my tent next day; after my early call, with tea, I went to the mess tent where I was told by Tony, the manager, that because of the rain I wouldn't be going to the National Park. I would probably be staying in camp, the ground being too sticky and the vehicles possibly getting bogged down, I hoped it would dry out during the morning.

Michael Brown was going by a small aircraft to another camp site, so after breakfast together he set off in the Land Rover for the airstrip. I eventually heard the plane fly off but the Land Rover did not return. The camp's other vehicle was sent to rescue it because the aircraft had apparently got stuck in the mud and had to be winched out. The two vehicles did not return until late afternoon so all I could do was go for a walk with Daniel and a soldier, who was armed in case we met any dangerous animals. We did not see much on our walk but did have a very clear view of the top of Mount Kilimanjaro, which is usually covered by clouds; it was a spectacular site but, unfortunately, I was not carrying my camera.

I felt sorry for Tony (the manager) because of all his problems; if I had been so inclined I could have made things awkward because I had not had any game drives and had wasted a day in camp. I could imagine some guests getting annoyed because they had missed out on drives. We had a drink around the camp fire before dinner and he showed me photos on his mobile phone of David Attenborough who had stayed in the camp last year with his film crew. I was thrilled that I was staying in the same camp as my hero.

The next day (no rain during the night) Tony decided that I could spend the day driving round the Amboseli National Park have a picnic lunch and then stay at Serena lodge overnight where a room had been arranged for me. I would then be able to get a flight to the Maasai Mara the following day; otherwise I could be stuck in camp again.

The following day, whilst making our way out of the Selenkay Conservancy, I did manage to get a photo of Mount Kilimanjaro before the cloud came down again. We did not see many animals in the Park itself as most of them had left for other area.

However, we did see a large family of elephants with lots of babies. We stopped, switched off the engine and waited for them to cross the track in front



of us; it was wonderful to see such a large herd with so many youngsters, I felt very privileged. They were very relaxed. We also came across one very young wildebeest without its mother or the herd, I wanted to take him with us to find his mum; he was definitely in line for a

lion's dinner. We had a picnic lunch (excellent food) at the foot of Observation Hill in the Park (1150 metres above sea level).

We made our way to the lodge and I booked in and said goodbye to Daniel and Malik (the driver) and felt sad about being out of the camp. I relaxed and showered then went to the dining room for dinner; the lodge was quite busy with a large group of Chinese tourists plus a few other people. I ordered from the excellent a la Carte menu, the wine was included. I then saw Daniel, still in his Maasai robe, sitting at the drivers' table a short distance away and asked "What are you doing here". His reply was "Having dinner". So I invited him to join me and learned that he and Malik were also staying the night in order to take me to the airstrip the next day. It would have cost too much to ask the Serena Lodge staff to take me to the airstrip; I naturally assumed they had returned to the camp, it was nice to see a friendly face.

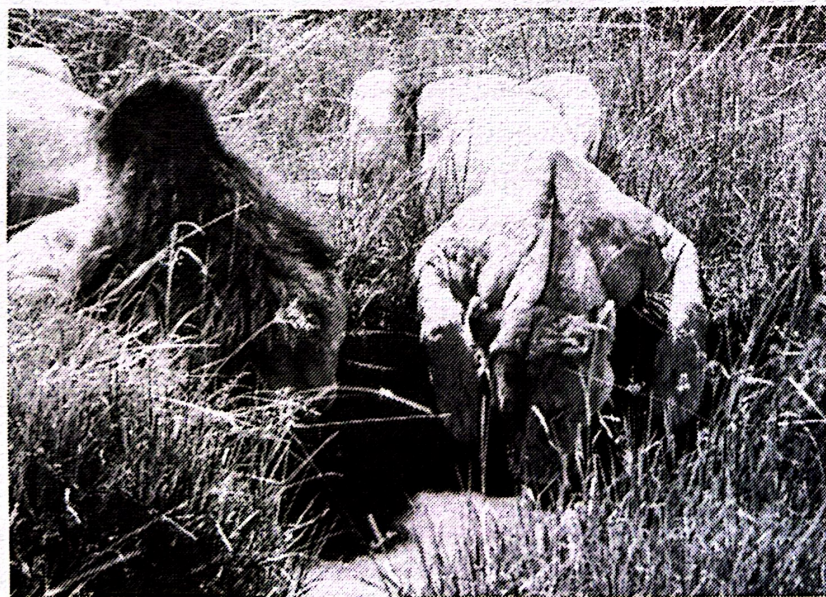
After breakfast we left for the airstrip and found there was another Land Rover also waiting for the aircraft. It had been driven by one of Cynthia Moss's helpers. Cynthia has studied elephants in Amboseli for over thirty years and had followed Echo with her family. She has a great knowledge of all the elephant families in Amboseli, it was fantastic to be able to talk about her work. The aircraft eventually arrived and I took off for Wilson Airport in Nairobi where I would take another flight to the Mara. I was met by Jackson at the airstrip and driven to camp (Porini Lion Camp) in the Olare Orok Conservancy.

I had been to another camp in this area a few years ago (Kicheche). The terrain is beautiful and vast, with lots of wildlife. The tent was even larger than my last one, again with flush toilet and a bucket shower which worked very well. I again met up with Michael for lunch (we were the only guests in the camp).

After lunch we went on a game drive together. We were lucky to see some cheetahs with cubs and lots of antelope, and two lionesses with a male, relaxing under a tree; they looked very healthy and had obviously eaten well.

We spent the whole of the next day in the Mara, enjoying a picnic lunch, and actually managed to spend some time with the Marsh pride of lions from Big Cat Diary; Jackson had worked with the team whilst they were filming. The lionesses and cubs were all lying under a tree in the shade, all very relaxed. We stopped for a coffee break by the Mara River which is where the wildebeest cross on their migration to the Serengeti in September/October; I was privileged to see this on one of my previous holidays.

We arrived back at camp in time for a sundowner before dinner and just across the river there was a leopard sitting on the bank; I went to get my camera when Jackson said "Quick, get in the vehicle and we will go round to the other side of the river and get closer". Well it took so long to get there that by the time we arrived the leopard was nowhere to be seen. I could have taken a great picture of it sitting on the bank if I had stayed where I was!



On my last drive (Michael had gone back to Nairobi) Jackson came across a pride of lions---7 females with about 14 cubs---all relaxing under a tree, so we stayed and had a sundowner watching the pride. I couldn't think of anything I would rather be doing than having a

glass of wine in the Mara watching lion cubs playing with each other and having a rough and tumble with their mothers in their natural habitat.

I went out for a last drive before breakfast the next morning and caught up with the lionesses and their cubs; Jackson said they were hunting because they had not eaten that night.

I left camp after lunch by small aircraft back to Nairobi, I felt sad to leave this gorgeous place; I look forward to my next visit to Africa.

A list of Mammals and Birds seen during my stay

Mammals:

Baboon, Burchell's Zebra, Cape Buffalo, Cheetah, Crocodile (amphibian), Dik Dik, Eland, Elephant, Grant's Gazelle, Hippopotamus, Impala, Leopard, Lion Maasai Giraffe, Mongoose, Scrub Hare, Spotted Hyena, Springhare Thompson's Gazelle, Topi, Vervet Monkey, Warthog, Waterbuck and Wildebeest.

Birds:

African White-back Vulture, Black Stork, Cattle Egret, Common Bulbul Crowned Crane, Egyptian Goose, Go-away-bird, Goshawk, Green-backed Heron, Grey headed Kingfisher, Guinea fowl (helmeted), Hamerkop, Hornbill Kori Bustard, Lappet-faced Vulture, Lilac-breasted Roller, Little Bee-eater Maribou Stork, Nightjar, Ostrich, Sandgrouse, Secretary Bird, Spurrow Superb Starling, Starling (Violetbacked), Swift, Tawny Eagle, Three-banded Plover and White-headed Vulture.

Janet Holderness

"Not For Sail"

In fact there was not a single sail in sight on the lagoons and canals of Venice when I visited in February to watch the Carnival.

The glorious turquoise waters were ploughed by motorised public ferries of differing size called *vaporetti* since they were once powered by steam/vapour but now use diesel. These craft can carry up to 100 passengers and have an interior cabin which most people used as it was very cold but also have outside seats for tourists and the hardy or maybe the dog owners as they are

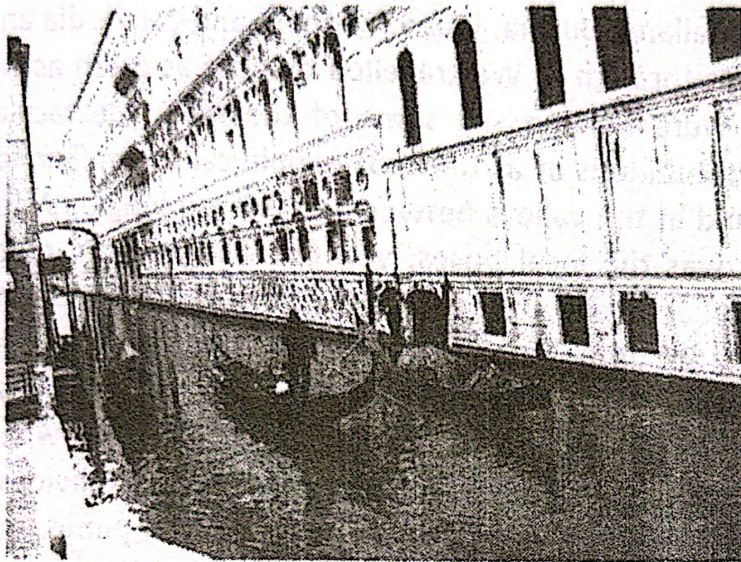
permitted on the ferries. The Venetians seem to like their dogs these days a far distant cry from the city of wild feral cats I first visited in the 1960's.

The ferries stop at *tranchetti*, floating platforms where the would-be passengers wait behind a chain for the arrivals to disembark before they are allowed onto the boat. There are route numbers, time tables, and season tickets and day passes for visitors just like any other transport system only operating on the water in one of the loveliest cities in the world.

Not for sail either are the *traghetto*, gondola which transport passengers, who usually stand, from one side of the Grand canal to the other. A two-manned gondola unlike the traditional version which has just one gondolier who propels it standing facing the bow and crowing the single oar with a forward stroke, followed by a compensating backward stroke. Contrary to the popular belief, the gondola is never poled like a punt because the waters of Venice are too deep.



Until the early 20th century, gondolas were fitted with a "felze", a small cabin to protect the passengers from weather or from onlookers. Its windows could be closed with louvered shutters---the original venetian blinds". After the elimination of the traditional felze---possibly in response to tourists complaining that it blocked the view--- there survived for some decades a kind of summer awning, known as a "tendalin". While in previous centuries gondolas could be painted many different colours, a law of Venice now requires that all gondolas should be painted black.



It is estimated that there were eight to ten thousand gondolas during the 17th century; there are just over four hundred in active service today, virtually all of them used for hire by tourists. Those few that are in private ownership are either hired out to Venetians for weddings or used for racing. Even though the Gondola by now

has become a widely publicised icon of Venice there are many other forms of transport besides those described above. The small motor boat which is the more expensive than the vaporetto but cheaper than the gondola, the cargo barges, also motorised but offering no comfort merely large open boats for their cargo which may deliver post, pineapples or pillars to the 60,000 residents of the city.



I found the most amusing aspect of water travel was seeing private boats disappear into the walls, the water gateways of the buildings.

Janet Raine

A South East Asia Experience

Three months was a long time to be away from friends and family; let me tell you of just some of the things we did or saw (We being my friend Carol and I).

Laos Not originally on our itinerary but it would be a crime to travel all that way and not take in Laos. We knew precious little about this country except that it is landlocked and borders Thailand, Burma, China, Vietnam and Cambodia and the mighty Mekong River runs through it. We travelled by boat as often as we could; it was slow but we were able to see some of the most spectacular scenery. In the north it is mountainous or as the Laos people call them 'karsts'. These 'karsts' are forested and in the valleys between it is dense jungle. When boats were not available it was the local buses; you can imagine, the roads zigzag through up and down karsts and the journeys were long, very hot and very bumpy. Roads frequently are often nothing more than dirt tracks with large holes, so it made for some interesting times. We were often the only Europeans on the bus and the object of curiosity; when buying our tickets we would request not to be at the back of the bus but this fell on deaf ears; they obviously looked after their own first. Buses were always full to bursting with people and their goods, crates of chickens etc. were often our companions on these journeys.

People sat on plastic stools down the aisle, no space was ever wasted. On one



particular long journey we were baffled by the driver's mate who walked to the back of the bus using the seats to reach us, he was handing out plastic bags. It soon became clear, not more than 5 miles into the journey the Laos folk were all sick; they do not travel well, as we found out. When we stopped at a café for the driver to have a meal and for us to have a toilet

break the Laos people went into the café and had something to eat, then promptly regurgitated it when we resumed our journey.

Travel through Laos was always a little tricky; the infra-structure is not there yet and it is always at their pace; you eventually get used to it and go with the flow because there is no alternative. One of the places we visited and worth telling about is Vieng Xai; it is close to the Vietnam border, Vieng Xai has a system of caves which were used by the Phathet during the secret war; this secret war was I'm afraid to say both my friend Carol and I had no idea it took place. In 1964 to 1968 the CIA employed mercenaries and they ran the war on America's behalf. They systematically bombed Laos dropping more bombs than were dropped on the whole of Europe during WWII. These atrocities never hit our headlines, we only ever heard about Vietnam and then the news would be skewed as it was being reported from the American frontline; now with the internet we hear from both sides. The total cost of the bombing was US \$ 7.2 billion or 2 million a day for nine years, it is not known how many died. Yet the Laos people are, for the most part, a friendly bunch. They look serious but give them a simple smile and attempt to speak their language and their faces break into smiles. Life here is at a very sleepy pace and we both loved it.

Cambodia It took all day to get through the border crossing from Laos into Cambodia; not sure who was to blame, I suspect both sides; Laos and Cambodia could shoulder some of it. At these crossings there are always hundreds of people going either in or out and we had learnt by now that it's a waiting game. We were trying to meet up with some friends from back home who were spending a month mostly in Vietnam, but were crossing over into Cambodia to see the famous Temples of Angkor. We were trying to fit in a visit to an elephant sanctuary out to the east near the Vietnam border. We wished to visit and we had hoped to meet up there around the 6th March.

This meant a lot of travelling and we were very disappointed because when we got there they could not give us a definite day for our visit; we of course had to be Siem Reap to meet our friends so time was limited. So we booked the bus to Siem Reap for the next day but were fortunate to meet an airport taxi driver who offered to take us back for the same price, a preferable option as this journey will take 12 hours. It turned out well as the chap took us to his brother's family and we shared a meal with them and a few beers sitting cross-legged on the floor. They were lovely people, no English, so our driver acted as interpreter; it is chance meetings like this that make travelling so interesting.

We spent several days in Sem Reap; the temples took us two days, we could have spent more, but eventually you get 'temped' out, also it was very hot and humid, so by 11 am all you want is a cold drink and a shady corner. A visit to the land mine museum was very thought provoking.

Meeting up with our friends was great and they gave us some places of interest to see in Phnom Penh, our next city to explore.

It appeared that we could travel by boat from Siem Reap to Phnom Penh down the Tonle Sap Lake and river; it could be tricky in the dry season as water levels drop dramatically. We changed boats halfway and watched with baited breath as they threw our rucksacks onto the other boat. Once again we were treated to spectacular scenery and birds, a rarity in this part of the world as they eat them if they are big enough. One of our visits here is to the Killing Fields Memorial; this museum-cum-memorial is the most well-known of over 300 killing fields. The atrocities that were committed here by Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge were unbelievable. I think the most harrowing for me was to stand in front of a tree which the guards used to smash babies and small children to death in front of their mothers and fathers.

Needless to say we needed a little light relief after this visit, so a visit to the Foreign Correspondents Centre was on the agenda. It is essentially a restaurant/bar these days and very expensive by Cambodian standards but it was 'happy hour' for cocktails, so we had a couple. Originally this was a meeting place for the foreign correspondents, no doubt to glean as much information from one another as to relax, have a beer etc. and check out the view over the river.

Another harrowing site is S21 or Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum; this was originally a school but Pol Pot turned it into a detention centre designed to interrogate and use inhuman torture all of which are well documented. All these things were going on in the late seventies, yet even today there are dictators treating their citizens badly; we do not seem to learn from history.

We left Phnom Penh and headed down towards the Mekong Delta, here we saw the Irrawaddy Dolphins, a fantastic sight as they breached and put on a show for us. They are in decline due to the pollution of the Mekong; the further south we travelled the more intense the heat and humidity but we found some wonderful islands with turquoise water and white sand to keep cool. Our last few days of March in Cambodia were spent here before we crossed the border into Vietnam.

Vietnam The border crossing was a little easier this time but as we already had our visas in place before crossing maybe this helped. They took our temperature and charged us a dollar for the privilege and we were not sure what would have happened had someone had a fever, probably nothing, but it looked official and to all intents and purposes they knew what they were doing. It was back to the hustle and bustle of the cities again. We ended up in Can Tho, this is Vietnam's fourth largest city and is on the Mekong Delta heartland.

We spent three days here exploring the delta by boat mostly; away from the city it is forest and rice paddies. The paddies are emerald green and they have ingenious methods to irrigate them, besides rice they grow French beans, courgettes, sweet corn, melons, morning glory (a type of vegetable) etc. all to feed the huge numbers of folk living in the city. I loved this area of course, because it appealed to the gardener in me.

From here we journeyed to H C M C (Ho Chi Min City) or Saigon as it once was; I loved this city despite the traffic and the noise; it still retains its old French colonial style buildings and many of the streets are tree lined like French Boulevards. They even have a replica of the Notre Dam Cathedral. We took a trip one day to visit the Cuchi Tunnels; this system of tunnels was used during the war with America to live and to plan the fight for their independence. Visitors are encouraged to go into sections of these tunnels but they are very small and being a little claustrophobic I declined. Our journey continued by train up to Dalat, the central highlands; not only did this bring a welcome decrease in temperature due to the height but a complete change in scenery.

The mountain sides are terraced and for miles you pass poly tunnels used for growing flowers, predominately, although vegetables and fruit are produced here. You can buy 60 perfect roses for just one dollar, (about 50p) extraordinary



isn't it and they export vast quantities of chrysanthemums, mostly yellow, to Laos, Cambodia and China. The yellow chrysanthemums are used in Buddhists temples for decoration, Cambodians proudly tell you they have overtaken Brazil as a coffee producer and we did visit a coffee plantation. There are

several varieties of bean but the most expensive they produced was a bean that was passed through the gut of a weasel; we declined the tasting.

Another train journey on to Hoi An, it is very touristy but also very pleasant, lots of tailors ready to make a garment for you in the next 24 hours at very reasonable prices plus masses of silk to choose from. Its train and bus journeys now up through the country visiting cities and towns before reaching Hanoi, the capital. We had to travel into Hanoi to get out to Halong Bay; this is a U.N.E.S.C.O world heritage site and is a must see if travelling in Vietnam.

We also had to book our visit through a tour operator as they are making it increasingly harder for you to do it on your own. We were booked on a junk boat, it's not how it sounds, and the boat, cabin and food were extremely good. This is site 1553 Sq. kilometres and has 1969 islets/islands; although the port was packed with boats and people once out on the water you can lose them.



I am not sure how to describe this place to you; it is truly beautiful of that there is no doubt but the Vietnamese really need to take care of it. There are pearl and fish farms here and the Vietnamese will live where they work, creating floating villages and quite a sight in its

A Vietnamese Water Market

self, but of course there is no sanitation or rubbish collection, so the bay is the receptacle. It is also tidal around some of the islands so there was no dip in the Gulf of Tonkin for us. Having said all this, it was worth the visit and the time we spent there. Our last town we visited before going back to Hanoi and home was Sapa, it is very close to the Chinese border and home to many small ethnic groups.

This small town is perched in a valley with terraced mountains spreading out from it, again spectacular scenery and colourfully dressed women. These women work so hard often walking several kilometres with their goods to sell to the tourists or locals at the markets. If all goes well they can afford a motorbike ride home, if not, then it is a long walk back.



A Typical rush hour in Hanoi

We decided to take the train back to Hanoi as the sleeper bus we used to arrive here was awful; we still have to use the bus to get to the train station and it takes most of the day. The train leaves at 6.30 pm and we have soft sleepers back to Hanoi. Our last day here is spent doing the sights, Ho Chi Min's Mausoleum and different museums, a jazz concert, but for me the best was a concert in the Opera House. A magnificent building and wonderful music played by the Vietnamese Symphony Orchestra, a marvellous end to an amazing three months of travel.

We loved the experiences, the ups and downs, would not have missed them, but also loved to come back to good old England, we are lucky to live here.

Carole Loveridge

(This South East Asia Experience was set up by Carole and her friend Carol; they organised everything themselves, travel, accommodation, catering and currency, a task most of us would ever consider doing)

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