



UKULELE SAFARI

by Angie Rodgers

Last year I went on the trip of a lifetime and it was an experience I will never forget. I went on a ukulele safari in the heart of Africa. It was a trip full of incredible animals, sights, people and fellow ukulele players. The Ukulele Safari was the brainchild of Michela, who wanted to combine her love of playing the ukulele, Safari and charity work with local children. My fellow travellers Michela, Leru, David, Janene, Saraya, Elise, Claudia, Julianne, Lawri, Dave, Justine and of course our teacher Boris. A special mention to my assistant, Evie of 11 yrs old, whose journal helped me complete this article.

A small group of us met at Schiphol airport and we easily recognised each other as we were the only people carrying ukuleles! We travelled to Nairobi, to the first school to deliver 30 ukuleles for the children.

These kids and the teachers had never played and some had never seen a ukulele, but they were willing to learn. It took time to tune the ukuleles and that was a lesson that we learnt very quickly, to ensure ukuleles were tuned before we gave them to the children.

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Boris was quick to teach in his signature style and had the children strumming and playing percussively on the ukes. We all joined in helping the children to learn how to strum. We also had a go at their homemade musical instruments. One of which was a long tube into a ball which acted like a bassoon or for Australian friends; didgeridoo. It was a fantastic experience which I would recommend to anybody.

We were overwhelmed with the appreciation from the children. We were up early the next day to travel from Nairobi to Maasai Mara National Reserve which was going to be our home for the next three nights. As we entered the Reserve conservation area we were met by a group of elephants with their babies, numerous zebras, gazelles and other very wild animals. We were greeted by the manager who had drinks waiting for us. We were later shown to our rooms by Maasai warriors. The rooms were safari tents which look like a tent from the outside, but inside were extremely nice hotel rooms. The area that we were staying in was surrounded by a river with hippopotami. Boris even had a crocodile outside his tent by the river.

Most of our meals were outdoors, however, at night we were unable to walk around alone.



The conservation area has no fences and some animals. Even lions are able to wander through the camp. So in order to travel around at night we were escorted by Maasai warriors. At no time did I feel unsafe and in fact I felt safer here than on several other holidays I've been on.

One early morning, I was awoken by Miebela and informed that the noise outside was a lion within hearing distance of the tent. I also saw baboons running around the camp and in the river, there were hippos, crocodiles and Dik Diks.

We had a lot of ukulele sessions with Boris, our teacher. We wrote several songs about what we had done that day. We wrote songs such as Ants In Your Pants, The Sleepy Leopard Blues and Elephant Poop. We sat around the campfire at night and had a brilliant jam session. For someone who has never played alongside others with the uke, I found this a fantastic experience!

One evening we were having sunset drinks in the bush and there was noise nearby. To our surprise the Maasai warriors who had been looking after us in the camp came out of the bushes. They were doing a traditional warrior dance and then treated us to a display of their jumping skills which apparently is a display of their strength. We just kept thinking, is there any more to this holiday that we have not already experienced, little did we know!

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We went to a place called Olmalaika. The purpose of this home is to house and protect underaged girls years old who have experienced trauma from forced marriage, female genital mutilation and babies who have been abandoned. The centre is trying to be self-sustaining by growing their own food.

It also has a community dental clinic. Volunteer dentists come from around the world to help local people with dental issues. I would strongly suggest you check out the website:

www.theolmalaikatruster.org

Kala Ukuleles donated 10 ukuleles, Bernadette donated tuners and our travel group donated numerous other items for these young girls. The girls were so happy to play along to Boris's strumming and percussion lesson. We were so welcome here and we had lunch with girls that they had prepared. As we left they all lined up at the exit and sang to us and strummed their new ukuleles.

We arrived in Lumo, Lions Bluff, which is managed by Michaela. First impression was that it was extremely luxurious. The rooms had 4 super king 4 poster beds. Each room was a small cottage on stilts. The front of the whole cottage was glass, including the bathroom. It was possible to have a shower while looking at Kilimanjaro!!! The views were breathtaking. While at Lions Bluff we practised the songs that we had written at Mara.

I can't express enough how fantastic it is to play alongside other people who have the same passion for the ukulele and are part of this fantastic ukulele community. Even one of the drivers/guides, Maluki, joined in with our jamming session. He thoroughly enjoyed trying to play the ukulele, something he had never done before. He did have a fantastic rhythm.

The second school that we went to was a lot more deprived than the first. When Boris was introduced to them, they all ran to him and surrounded him as if he was the Pied Piper of Hamelin. The time with these children was a life-changing experience. The children had nothing at the school. They made the most of what they had. They were all very excited to play the ukulele, it was lovely to be able, even for a few moments, to teach them something that will enhance their lives for the future. These children have to walk miles past dangerous animals in order to get to school. The classrooms do not have windows and their football was made from plastic meshing. We were able to donate ukuleles and tuners to them, thanks to the generosity of Kala and the fundraising done by Michaela with the assistance of some fantastic teachers namely Boris Mogilevski, Sammy Turton, Bernadette Mata, John Atkins and James Hill.

If you thought we'd finished with animals we had not. We went to an island which had its own troop of the baboons, who thought it was fun to come and try and pinch things from your rooms or from the restaurant table if the staff were not on the ball. They also woke you up on a morning climb across the roofs. There were other types of monkeys on the island. The sea life was also very interesting, as the girls in the group discovered. The hotel also had its own resident peacock which I thoroughly enjoyed spending time with. On our final evening, we were given a display of traditional dance in the restaurant.

While on the island, the plan here was to play and have Boris teach, however after the first evening, Boris became ill. We were still able to play together in small jamming sessions and we played a Ukulele game that had been created by Michela. This game is completed when you write a song at the end. We didn't get away from not playing for long. As soon as Boris was well enough he had us back to practising again. We actually recorded one of the songs around the pool with the beach behind us. It was a fantastic experience to play alongside each other and such a wonderful setting.

While at Chale Island we were surrounded by mangroves and we couldn't miss the opportunity to go out on a boat, through the mangroves with our ukuleles. We played as a group amongst the mangroves. We had a couple of people that were not part of our group on the boat and they thought that we had been together as a group for a very long time. They were very surprised to find that we had only met in person 7 days before.





We ended our journey flying back to Nairobi. We were allowed to go through departures and stand outside near the air strip. Another opportunity to play ukulele together, much to the amusement of staff and other travellers.

I would like to thank Boris, who was a constant professional, helping us learn while enjoying ourselves.

I would mostly like to thank Michela for dreaming up this fantastic experience and for organising the ukulele safari which provided a trip of a lifetime!

The ukulele safari experience was something that I will never ever forget, along the people that I travelled this journey with and those I met along the way.

Would I recommend this trip to anybody else? YES, if you ever get the opportunity to do this, please grab it with both hands!

