

## A TRAVELOGUE ON THRILLING ENCOUNTERS WITH WILD LIFE: AN ELECTRIFYING WEEK IN KENYA

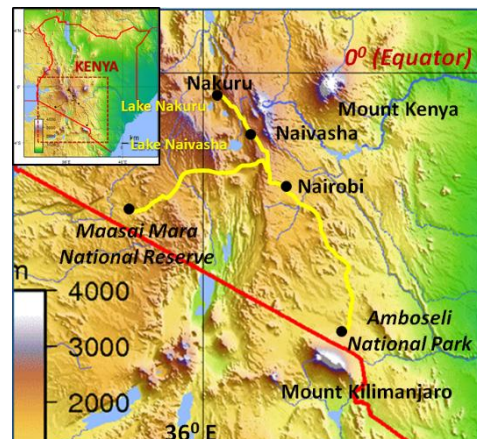
**Anand Prakash**

*Spending time in the great outdoors is a perfect window to see the brighter side of life.*

Since we were kids, the *National Geographic* and *Discovery* have always fascinated us and instilled an inherent go to wishes, for exploring the fauna of the wild and marvelling natural wonders of the Earth. Subsequently, on realising that Kenya is one such destination where much of this fairy-tale..... unfolds..... Kenya immediately shot to the top of my wish list.

Several years of waiting, and one fine day the wonderful moment came when our institution EOEW, New Delhi announced to facilitate a trip to Kenya. Myself with my wife (who by now also got passionate about wild life) immediately seized the opportunity and jumped on the bandwagon for a trip to Kenya.

Our trip to Kenya was awesome and amazingly memorable. Being Senior Citizens, the trip was customised and spaced leisurely to the extent possible. Still we all had a great and relaxed time, even though our itinerary was packed with travel almost every day. The rolling hills, sprawling savannas (grasslands), dramatic stream crossings and of course.....more wild life and adventure than any movie can offer. We could spot **Big-5** animals of Africa that included countless pride of lions and herds of elephants, Double horned Rhinoceros, Cape Buffaloes and the Leopards. The term **Big-5** was earlier coined by big game hunters, to refer to the five most difficult animals to hunt on foot, but is now more widely used by game viewing tourists and safari tour operators.



Our preparations for the trip began with getting mandatory Yellow Fever vaccinations at our different locations in Delhi, Gurgaon, Noida/G Noida and Dehradun.

### **Day 1 (10.02.2025, Monday): The meet and greet and arrival at Nairobi**

We, a group of 22 co-travellers including 9 couples, met at Indira Gandhi International Airport, Delhi. Everyone irrespective of being Senior Citizens and having physical limitations was excited to turn this venture into ad-venture. One lovely couple in their 80's, who had just returned from US, declared for himself, to be a ***now or never opportunity***.

Our Air India flight took off at 13:40 (IST) and after 7 hrs 25 mts of flight we were at Jomo Kenyatta International Airport (JKIA), Nairobi at 18:35 pm EAT (East Africa Time, which is 2 hrs 30 mts behind IST). Jomo Kenyatta, from Kikuyu tribe was the first President of Kenya who led Kenya to freedom from Britishers on 12, December 1963. At JKIA, Nairobi we were greeted by a representative of the operator **Endelea Africa**.

After completing the mandatory formalities and purchase of local SIMs and exchange of currencies by some members, we all were taken in a mini bus from the airport to Nairobi city, the capital of Kenya 20 Kms away. On reaching there we checked in **Hotel Pride in Azure**, an exquisite beautiful retreat for the night stay.

## Day 2 (11.02.2025, Tuesday): Picturesque Savannas and first Glimpse of Maasai Mara

The fascinating journey for our Group began after accommodating us in three Land Cruisers and we left for enchanting Maasai Mara.

The entire journey of about five plus hours was full of charms while passing through the mesmerising East African Great Rift Valley, the rolling hills and the vast grasslands called Savannas.

By Lunch time we reached at majestic **Keekorok Lodge** within the Maasai Mara National Game Reserve.



Maasai Mara also spelt as Masai Mara is a large national game reserve in Narok County of Kenya and is contiguous with the Serengeti National Park in Tanzania. The landscape has grassy plains and rolling hills crossed by the Mara and Talek rivers. It is named in honour of ancestral inhabitants of the area, the Maasai people whose villages dot the area. In the name **Maasai Mara**, the word **Mara** in Maasai language means **spotted**, because of short bushy trees dotting the landscape as little spots when looked at from a distance or an elevated place. It is one of the Seven Natural Wonders of Africa, and as one of the ten Wonders of the World. The Maasai Mara National Reserve in Kenya is about 1510 sq km and is a part of the Kenya-Tanzania Greater Mara-Serengeti eco system totalling about 16273 sq kms. Maasai Mara is not just any safari destination—it is home to the *highest concentration of animals* in any national park.



Therefore after lunch, with such bewildering information and hazy ideas in mind we set off on our first game drive in Maasai Mara National Reserve. The first encounter was with an **Ostrich**. Thereafter the sightings of wild fauna knew no bounds. We were able to spot **Thomson's gazelle** often called **Tommies** are highly alert and are one of the most abundant antelopes in Maasai Mara. When startled, they perform a behaviour called **stotting**, where they leap high into the air, signalling to predators that they are fit and difficult to catch.





Spotting of **Impala** was another moment of excitement. Impala animals are truly fascinating creatures with an innate sensibility when it comes to avoiding predators. For example, they tend to drink in the hottest part of the day from rivers or other sources of water, aware that their enemies tend to be sluggish or in sleep during that time. Also, pregnant female impalas give birth around midday for the same reason, as there will be a lower risk of a predator waiting to attack. If a herd encounters a lion, leopard, cheetah, or other predators, they will scatter in many directions to confuse the attacker, while kicking their hind legs to release a scent from glands in the feet to help them stay together or regroup.



Then came the long awaited special moment of Africa, the splendid **Giraffes**, which we had seen earlier only in a zoo elsewhere. Giraffes are easily spotted grazing on Acacia trees. Watching their slow, graceful movement as they browse on treetops is a common sight in the open



plains of Maasai Mara. Basically, they are social animals, typically seen in small herds. They are peaceful and provide a serene contrast to the more intense predator-prey interactions seen elsewhere in the Mara. The Maasai giraffe, with its unique coat pattern, is native to the region. Giraffes help shape the landscape by preventing overgrowth of trees and providing food for other animals like birds.

Our moment of excitement culminated when, we came across pride of **Lions**. Watching lions in the wild is like having a front-row seat to the world's most majestic performance. The king of beasts doesn't just exist in the Mara.....



**he rules it.** When we saw the lion with his pride, we noticed that his every movement exudes authority. It's fascinating, raw, and downright intimidating, but we could not look away. We were on the edge of our seat, heart pounding, wondering if we just saw the most intense moment of our life—until it happens again. Lions in Maasai Mara typically form large prides. During the day, lions are often seen resting in the shade, but early mornings and late evenings offer the best opportunities for sightings of hunting or interacting with their prides.

Due to the 12 hour rule in Maasai Mara National Reserve, Game drive is allowed between 6 am to 6 pm only. Therefore, after 6 pm, we had to return to our nest i.e. Keekorok Lodge – which we later found to be a very eventful and wonderful place to stay.

Since it was not dark, we went to a place behind the Keekorok Lodge, where Hippos were seen in their natural habitat. Hippos mostly spend the day submerged in water to

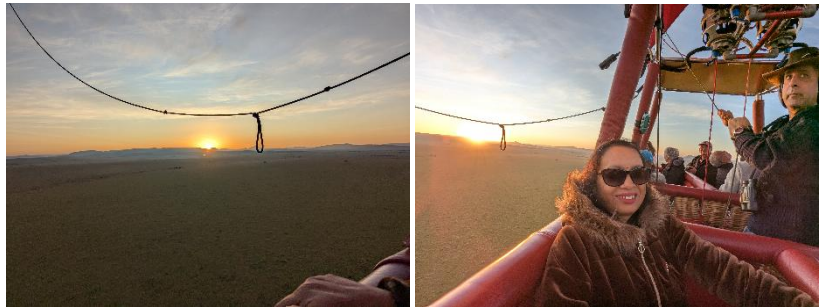


stay cool. They come ashore to graze at night. Despite being herbivores, hippos are highly territorial and aggressive in water. Hippos play a key role in the river ecosystem, creating channels and pathways that are used by other animals. Their territorial behaviour and massive built makes them one of the most dangerous animals to encounter near water.

### **Day 3 (12.02.2025, Wednesday): The Hot Air Balloon ride and game drive in Maasai Mara**

During the third day of the itinerary, the first half had an option of Hot Air Balloon ride as well. Some of us including me opted for it and remaining friends opted to continue with the Game drive in Maasai Mara reserve park.

For **Hot Air Balloon** ride we left early morning for the launch pad spot around 5:00 am. The idea of waking up at the crack of dawn during a vacation, sounded less than pleasant. But the rewards of embarking on this high flying adventure greatly outweighed the inconvenience of setting the alarm clock for somewhere around 4.00 am. Though it was still dark all around, the operator had special permits to drive in the Reserve before 6 am for this purpose. At the launch pad, a general technical briefing was given by the pilot on how to get in the passenger basket of the balloon. The passenger balloon basket was lying on its sides and those infirm or old were asked to get in first and lie down securely during inflating of hot air in the balloon. Those who were physically capable, were told that once the passenger balloon basket gets upright.... to climb up swiftly and get in!! Then the crew began preparations for take-off. Once the balloon was ready, we climbed and jumped into the passenger basket. By that time the sun had begun rising in a stunning colour show of fiery reds and golds.



Against this backdrop of stunning sunrise, hot-air balloon flight in the Maasai Mara gave unique, lovely, unparalleled and unforgettable perspective of the vast plains and wildlife.

There is really nothing quite like the feeling of freedom and exhilaration we got when flying high above the Maasai Mara grasslands. Flying high up in the skies above the Maasai Mara is the ultimate safari experience. The landscape below was a never-ending exciting mixture of riverine forests, sprawling Savannas, towering escarpments and rugged streams. Our pilot made sure to fly lower at times to allow for the best possible pictures to be taken. The pilot also made a HD video





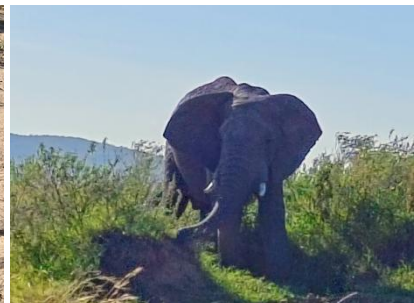
from all possible angles up and below the balloon and of the passengers, which we showed to our family and friends back home.

The hot air balloon ride culminated in a **champagne bush breakfast**. The Bush Breakfast in the vast grasslands (Savannas) was another memorable moment which we had not imagined earlier. The bush breakfast with nearly all facilities including Champagne/Fruit juice kept us hypnotised for the days to come.

The other group which was on Game drive also came to meet us and we all had a lovely group photo in the Savannas (grasslands) of Maasai Mara.



Though we could not witness the Great migration, it will be prudent to mention here, that it is once in a life time achievement to witness world renowned Great Migration which normally happens from July depending on weather where herds of wildebeests and zebras move in large numbers crossing river Mara from Tanzania. This makes it one of the prime viewing locations for this wildlife spectacle. This mostly happens in the Mara Triangle which is one third of the Maasai Mara National Reserve, with an area of 510 km<sup>2</sup>. It has two natural borders and one political; to the southwest is the Tanzania/Serengeti border, to the east is the Mara River, and to the northwest is the Oldoinyo Escarpment (also called Olololo or Siria Escarpment). The landscapes of the Mara Triangle include riverine forest, red oat grasslands, volcanic hills and the 400-metre high Olololo Escarpment.



During the second half after lunch and rest, we again moved for the game drive in Maasai Mara Reserve. Spotted the **Lion and its pride, elephants, Giraffe, Zebras, Rhinos and several antelopes**.



We also spotted **Grant's Gazelle** which are larger than their Thomson's counterpart and are often seen grazing in open plains and Savannas. While they share habitat with Thomson's gazelles, they are more adaptable and can survive on a wider range of vegetation, including tougher grasses. Also they are



less water-dependent than many other antelope species, allowing them to survive in drier areas of the reserve.

Subsequently, we moved on to near **Mara River** at Kenya – Tanzania border. A desolate looking place with the skeletons of animals kept at the border, probably as demarcation. Also, we found a recently built pillar marking the Kenya – Tanzania border. Out of excitement and thrill, we all went on clicking memorable photographs for posterity.



Our next sojourn was at Mara river itself on the border. The rangers posted there were good enough to take us on a trek tour for about a kilometre. First, we saw the skeletons of jaws of weighty Hippo and other animals kept near the bank of Mara River. Then we were taken close to the Mara river bank where we spotted **bloat of Hippopotamus and Nile crocodiles**. While passing through the bushes alongside, we pleasantly noticed our own Tulsi plants, the variety probably offered in Badrinath (Van Tulsi – Ocimum Gratissimum) thriving extensively. The Kenyan ranger already knew it is called Tulsi in India, so he also pointed it by this name and also described its medicinal properties being used by local tribes.



Come late evening at Keekorok Lodget in Maasai Mara National Reserve and some people from Maasai tribe had come in and performed the traditional tribal dance with occasional high jumps.



After dinner we all were enjoying bonfire in the open space. Almost every one was at the peak of ecstasy singing and dancing. Suddenly,





a Hippo was noticed in the precincts of the Resort, which had strayed in from the backside. The Resort people informed that the Resorts in Maasai Mara do not have fencing, hence it is a normal phenomenon. They calmed us not to worry, but also advised to be alert and refrain from venturing at night without security guards.

#### **Day 4 (13.02.2025, Thursday) : The visit to a Maasai Village and game drive in Maasai Mara**

The first half was again filled with game drive in Maasai Mara national Reserve, when we could spot more and more wild animals in their natural habitat, including close encounters with elephants.



In the second half after lunch and rest we proceeded for a **Maasai village**. The Maasai are nomadic herders and warriors and easily recognised by their bright red clothing, colourful beaded jewellery and large plate like necklaces worn around women's necks. When we reached their village late afternoon, a group of Maasai people were already waiting for us to interact and share their culture and traditions. The son of their chieftain described in detail about their traditional ways of day to day life.

The Maasai speak a language known as **Maa** and their shared Nilotic origins link them in various ways to the Kalenjin tribe of Kenya which is



famous for producing some of the best long distance runners in the world. The cloth used to wrap around the body is called Shúkà in the Maa language. The Maasai women regularly weave and make bead jewellery, which plays an essential part in the ornamentation of their body. Ear piercing and the stretching of earlobes are also part of Maasai beauty, and both men and women wear metal hoops on their stretched earlobes.



The Maasai people don't use instruments when they are singing or dancing. All of their music is vocal, except for the large horns used for certain songs. Their music comprises of rhythms rendered by a chorus of vocalists singing harmonies, all the while the olaranyani (song leader) sings the melody. The ladies in our group sang and danced with the Maasai women.



The traditional Maasai diet consists of six basic foods: meat, blood, milk, fat, honey, and tree bark. They drink both fresh and curdled milk. The fresh milk is drunk from calabash and sometimes it's mixed with fresh cattle blood. The blood is obtained by nicking the jugular vein. Mixed blood and milk is mostly used as a ritual drink and as nourishment for the sick. Bulls, oxen and lambs are slaughtered for meat on special occasions and for ceremonies. The by-products of the animals – skin and hides are used as bedding while cow dung is used for smearing on the walls. The Maasai's entire way of life truly revolves around their cattle.

The traditional Maasai houses known as **Manyatta**, are low height dwellings, essentially huts, made of mud, cow dung and wood, with a single entrance and minimal side windows. The houses are either circular or loaf-shaped, and are made by women. The individual huts have



windows so small that it can be very dark inside even on a sunny day. Clusters of these manyatta huts, which form a homestead or village, are known as a Maasai **Boma**. Their villages are enveloped in a circular Enkang (fence) built by the men and this protects their cattle at night from wild animals.

The warriors of the Maasai tribe are known as **Morans** and often display their jumping skills during dance. We also got a chance to jump but found nowhere compared to the Maasai morans.

We were treated to a demonstration of how to create fire without matches or lighters. The Maasai tribesmen make fire by rotating a wood stick in a hole in a board. They use Elephant dried dung as part of their kindling, and with a shield of sticks to divert the air (their's and nature's) to encourage the fuel to light into a blaze.



At the end of the day we returned to our hideaway, the Keekorok Lodge. After dinner we had merry making group activities with another beautiful round of bonfire ..... singing and dancing. We were joined by another group of Indians who had settled in Kenya long ago and had come for recreational trip from Nairobi.





## **Day 5 (14.02.2025, Friday) : Moving on to Lake Naivasha and the charming Boat ride**

Having sighted magic of the wild in Maasai Mara, it was time to say goodbye. Early morning, we left for another wonderful place a Ramsar Wetland site at Lake Naivasha outside the town of Naivasha in Nakuru County. The town of Naivasha (formerly East Nakuru) lies on the north-eastern edge of the lake. Lake Naivasha, was once described as the Jewel in the Crown of all the East African lakes, but of late has been under intense pressure of horticultural and agricultural industries along its shores, and further worsened by ever-increasing siltation, sewage and other effluents emanating from lakeside human population.



This lake is at the highest elevation of the Kenyan Rift valley at 1,884 metres in a complex geological combination of volcanic rocks and sedimentary deposits from a larger Pleistocene Era lake. Apart from transient streams, the lake is fed by the perennial Malewa and Gilgil rivers. There is no visible outlet, but since the lake water is relatively fresh it is assumed to have an underground outflow. The lake has an average depth of 6 metres, with the deepest area being at Crescent Island, with a maximum depth of 30 metres. Ol Njorowa Gorge located south of the lake once formed the lake's outlet, but it is now high above the lake and forms the entrance to Hell's Gate National Park immediately south of Lake Naivasha.

We reached to our destination **Lake Naivasha Country club** and after completing check in formalities and lunch, set off for a **boat ride in Lake Naivasha**, which is one of the two freshwater lakes in the Kenyan Rift Valley and the closer one from Nairobi. Being freshwater, it hosts a large number of different species, in particular birds. We took an hour long boat ride around the eastern part of the lake and saw lot of birds, including **fish eagles**, a few species of **pelicans** and **herons**. The eagles swooping for fish just a few yards from us was spectacular.



The scenery was breath-taking, with the calm waters surrounded by towering acacia trees. We even managed to get really close to a group of pelicans (about 10m)



before they flew off. We also saw a group of **hippos** lazing in the water and at the bank. The view of zebras and other animals on Crescent Island was spectacular.



Later on coming back to Lake Naivasha Country Club, we had wonderful evening stroll in the beautiful precincts by the Lake side. The setting



Sun with changing colours from golden to Orange to Red all around amidst zebras, birds and other animals was a cosmic feeling from Nature.



### Day 6 (15.02.2025, Saturday) : Safari Game Drive at Lake Nakuru National Park

This day was a continuous full day programme with packed lunch. The programme was to have a safari game drive at **Lake Nakuru National Park**. The park is approximately 2 kilometres from Nakuru town and about 164 kms NW from Nairobi. This Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is sitting on the floor of the Great Rift Valley surrounded by the characteristic bushy and woody grassland. The sky mirrored waters of Lake Nakuru extend to an expansive mass of semi-alkaline



water. The park is home to over several bird species and mammals including rhinos. It is known for its flamingos and abundant wildlife, including black and white rhinos, lions, leopards, zebras, hippos, baboons and endangered Rothschild's giraffes.

Therefore, After having breakfast at our retreat Lake Naivasha Country Club, we all drove north west towards Lake Nakuru National Park 70 Kms away. We were able to spot Rhinos, though from a distance.





While returning, our group also visited a **Gujarati Temple Shri Jalaram Aradhana Dham in Nakuru**. It was a divine experience with pleasant Indian feeling in a foreign country. Shri Jalaram Bapa was a saint and reformer from Gujarat during 19<sup>th</sup> century. Jalaram Bapa is usually portrayed as wearing simple white clothes as a symbol of purity, with a stick in his left hand and a tulsi mala in his right hand. The idols of his patron deities Rama, Sita, Lakshmana and Hanuman were also placed along with his idol. Devotees of Jalaram believe that if they pray to the saint sincerely, he blesses them and fulfils their wishes.



### **Day 7 (16.02.2025, Sunday) : Long journey for a grand Game Drive in Amboseli National Park**

The penultimate day of our trip was planned for moving to **Amboseli National Park** in Kajiado County. The 6 hour journey covering about 320 Kms was pretty long one. So we set off quite early in the morning via Nairobi so as to reach to our next retreat **Amboseli Sopa Lodge**, about 250 Kms from Nairobi. To save time we had lunch on the way and reached directly to Amboseli National Park for a splendid game drive.

Amboseli National Park is another world famous wildlife conservation area located in the south eastern part of Kenya, adjacent to border with Tanzania. It covers an area of 392 square kilometers and is home to a wide range of wildlife species, including several species of mammals and birds. The Park teems with abundant wildlife – **lion**, cheetah, wildebeest, Maasai giraffe, zebra, buffalo and so much more. Small mammals like jackal, hyena, fox, monkey, and baboon also inhabit the area. The park's active marshes offer sightings of several beautiful species of birds like kingfisher, egret, pelican, heron, and raptors. And above all the park is known for its large herds of free ranging elephants with longer tusks and stunning views of Mount Kilimanjaro rising through the clouds, in the backdrop.



Mount Kilimanjaro a dormant volcano located in Tanzania, is Africa's highest peak and the world's highest free-standing mountain (not part of a mountain range). It rises to an elevation of 5,895 meters (19,340 feet) above sea level.

We were able to sight a number of wild animals like elephants with long tusks, baboon monkeys, etc. But the most glamorous sighting was of elusive but graceful Cheetahs, the fastest running animal in the world. Cheetahs prefer to live in grasslands and not forests because these habitats provide them with **open spaces for hunting**, optimal visibility to spot prey, and the speed



needed to pursue and catch their prey. These grasslands also offer some cover for stalking and camouflage.

The magnificent Kilimanjaro could not be sighted fully in the evening as it was covered with clouds.

After the exciting game drive, we finally reached late evening to our resort --- the Amboseli Sopa Lodge. The beautiful countryside resort is set in 200 acres of private land with a rustic charm all of its own, nestling in the foothills of Mount Kilimanjaro.



### **Day 8 (17.02.2025, Monday): Amboseli to Naivasha and au revoir**

And the Final day.....

As usual, we came out of our rooms for the breakfast, as we had to reach Nairobi airport latest by 5:00 pm to catch the flight in time.

But WoW..... The Kilimanjaro was visible to us in its mightiest form with stunning snow covered peak. Everyone present there from all nationalities went berserk.....Klick.....Klick.....Klick. We too jumped in the fray getting photographed in different poses and fashion.



Kilimanjaro in the East African Rift system was formed about 2 million years ago due to intense volcanic activity and tectonic plate movements. It consists of three cones **Shira, Kibo and Mawenzi**, in which **Uhuru** peak located on Kibo is the highest. Its slopes host montane forests and cloud forests. The massif extends 95 Kms from east to west and 65 Kms north to south. Interestingly, due to its size and location it gives rise to five distinct climate zones – temperate forest, rain forest, moorland, alpine desert and ice cape – that emerge from surrounding arid Maasai savanna.

Then we left for Nairobi about 250 Kms away, and reached lunch time at an Indian Restaurant located in a Mall. We all had a truly sumptuous favourite Indian Lunch after so many days and then moved on a fast track drive through Nairobi for sightseeing while going to the airport.



Now was the time to say goodbye! Farewell. Life would never be the same again. No matter how far away we go, our memories with the group friends would always stay close to our heart. We bid adieu with heavy heart to our guide cum driver Mr Khan of Indian origin, a thorough gentleman, well read and very knowledgeable person hailing from Mombasa, the port city of Kenya .....who at every stage answered our questions very enthusiastically but patiently.



Our sincere thanks with gratitude to Mr K.A.N. Mathur for piloting, coordinating and steaming ahead such a wonderful trip. Everything happened so beautifully. The enthusiasm of Mr Ved Prakash Mahavar Sir and dedication in meticulously orchestrating such a trip was simply marvellous. His bonfire अंत्याक्षरी was simply superb. Mr Abhayabh Vardhan was truly the one with whom we have had the pleasure to interact with. The simplicity and zeal at this age of Mr Ashok Bhutani Sir and his wife Mrs Poonam Bhutani was worth admiration and emulation by us. The fervour and passion of Mr Biplob Kumar Dey, Mr Bidhan Nayak, Mr Shubhashis Roy Chowdhury and Mr Tuhin Dutta made the trip so pleasant and moving.

And the great melting pot (Land Cruiser No. 1) in which we....along with Mr Sanjay Wadhwani, Mrs Shanti Wadhwani, Mr Pramod Gupta along with our better half's, shared and enjoyed all the bumpy rides during game drives and long intercity journeys through all these days. The experience was unmatched, splendid and unforgettable. The ardour and commitment of Mr Wadhwani, despite his physical limitations was amazing and inspiring. The passion and ability of Mr Gupta in spotting the wild life was spectacular.

But without the charm, grandeur, radiance intelligence, resilience, determination and compassion of ladies in the group, the trip would not have been so successful.

Thanks to each and every member of this fantastic Group for sharing not only the journey enjoyed, but also the photographs and videos through Whatsapp. The beautiful pictures included here were only possible from that fountain of repository.

And the most important.....our grateful Thanks to EOEWa and relentless preparatory support of friends behind the scene, in organising this trip and providing the opportunity of bringing us together.

**With lots of beautiful memories together.....**

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**The Rovers:**

*Ved Prakash Mahawar (Group Leader)*

*Kunwar Avikal Nath Mathur (Group Leader)*

*Ashok Bhutani, Poonam Bhutani*

*Biplob Kumar Dey, Anuradha Dey*

*Abhayabh Vardhan, Sashi Vardhan*

*Bidhan Nayak, Sanjita Nayak, Payal Nayak (Daughter)*

*Sanjay Wadhwani, Shanti Wadhwani*

*Pramod Gupta, Ruchi Gupta*

*Shubhashis Roy Chowdhury, Tanusree Roy Chowdhury*

*Chitra Sengupta, Mitra Ghosh*

*Tuhin Dutta*

***Anand Prakash, Meena Prakash***

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