



**NATURE
ENCOUNTERS**
TOURS & TRAVEL LTD.

The Beauty of Balloons.....

By Rose Fodor, Zookeeper/Tour Leader

Floating silently above the ground is one of the most surreal experiences one can have. It must be how a bird feels coasting on the thermals...

In the summer of 2005, I was fortunate enough to experience a hot air balloon ride over the Maasai Mara during the migration. We started out to meet our pilot long before sunrise. Driving down to the river bank, we could see the faint orange glow as the burner was starting to warm the air that would inflate the billowing fabric that would ultimately lift us off the ground. As we gingerly clambered into the basket and took our positions, we could hear the muffled grunting and snorting from the hippos in the adjacent river. Working as a zookeeper, I understand

just how powerful, dangerous and surprisingly fast hippos are so was eager to climb into the safety of the balloon and out of the unknown darkness around us.

As our balloon was taking off, the feeling of unbelievable lightness overtook me but that was too soon, as our pilot, in his amazing flying wizardry dropped us over and down the river bank until we were just meters away from those formidable fat beasts that we had just heard bellowing. But just as effortlessly, he lifted us

back up again and off for the ride of a lifetime. The sun was rising over our shoulder, with our lodge, the Mara Serena slowly passing underneath; thus began a magical couple of hours - the finale being a full breakfast complete with champagne, served on the Kenya/Tanzania border.

In 2006, I had a different vantage point on this magical experience of a balloon ride. Half of our group was up in the balloon and the rest of us in a safari van below. We saw the balloon overhead and waved frantically to our group as another amazing experience started to unfold. The balloon was heading toward a small herd of elephants. They were a bit of a distance off the road but we could see the action very well. As the balloon was floating silently towards the ambling group, one of the younger calves spotted the large yellow ball in the air above him. Immediately, he spun around, trunk in the air as if to send an angry fist defiantly towards the sky. His mother and aunties saw the craft as well, and started to move off more quickly but with much less angst than our first little "sentinel". We watched in amusement as he bluff charged in the direction of the balloon and then retreated with very animated tail and trunk - both of which were straight up in the air.



We watched as the balloon continued on its path and left the elephant herd behind. We had a wonderful game drive and had a great time of sharing when the rest of the group returned from their safari breakfast out on the plains of the Maasai Mara. Now that's how to "safari" in Africa!



Champagne and orange juice after a successful balloon safari in the Mara - April 2006.