



LIONS & TIGERS & CLIENTS, OH MY!

BY KALPANA MOHAN

[1099PROFILE]

STORIES OF BOSS-FREE PEOPLE

It's a dry dusty afternoon in the pit of the Ngorongoro Crater in northern Tanzania. A safari truck splutters to a stop by the bank of a long patchy lake. "There, do you see the lioness and her cubs?" asks guide Royal Marcher, pointing toward a mass of reddish-brown rocks. His clients stare hard, but they can't see anything. Suddenly, one of the rocks stirs, stretches, and yawns, baring its giant teeth.

Marcher definitely knows a lion when he sees one. After 25 years as an independent safari guide, he can spot a leopard's telltale tail high in the branches of an acacia tree 100 feet away. And his conversation is filled with facts he's picked up over the years: Did you know, for example, that hippos kill more people in the African savanna than any other animal? That a leopard can carry a carcass its own weight up into a tree to protect its kill from other predators? That animals rarely attack Masai tribesmen? (They've lived together for thousands of years, and have learned to coexist peacefully.)

The Lion King

Marcher, 76, didn't start out as a safari guide. He's been a jewelry salesman, an agent in the film industry, a restaurateur, and a sailor — jobs that often had him traveling around America and the world.

"But I always wanted to work with animals," Marcher says. As a child in New York City, he would bring home mice, snakes, and birds. As an adult, he housed and fed a couple of baby lions and a monkey for a local pet store. "It was legal in the 1950s," he explains.

Marcher didn't make his first trip to Africa until he was in his thirties. But after that first visit, he ended up in Africa whenever he had time off from work. In time, he started bringing his friends along so they could see the continent through his eyes. And before he knew it, his passion had become his profession.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOE MARUCA



Marcher is quick to point out that he's a true professional. He's proud of the badge he received from the Kenya Professional Safari Guide Association — proof that he's a certified guide. "There are too many travel agents in Africa pretending to be guides when they're not," he says. To earn certification, guides have to pass a comprehensive exam on wildlife and its protection, and on Kenya, its history, and its tribes. According to Marcher, the test is so difficult that even native Kenyans have trouble passing it.

Marcher divides his time between the African savanna and the concrete jungle, his home in Los Angeles. He spends about six months of the year in Africa; the rest of the year, he's in the United States drumming up new clients. His marketing strategy? Show people what they're missing. "I have videos that I take on the trips. Potential clients come to my home, watch those videos, and look at my photographs. Then they look at all the

African artifacts I have in the house," he says. And pretty soon, they've been bitten by the safari bug and are itching to go to Africa.

The cost of a Marcher safari, excluding airfare, is between \$300 and \$500 a day. That includes Marcher's fee, transportation and gas, food and drink, lodging, and tips.

Buffalo and Balloons

Marcher has led clients ranging in age from 7 to 87, in groups of 2 to 76 people. He has run tours for students and for corporate employees. When he puts together a custom tour, he factors in the age, stamina, and interests of his clients. He also worries about the group's chemistry.

Marcher works as an independent safari guide because of the freedom it gives him. He not only creates his own tours, but also brokers and guides tours for several different tour companies on a freelance basis. He knows just about every tour operator in East Africa, and those relationships give him all kinds of options when he's planning a safari. He might take his



Q & A

Q: What was the worst project you ever worked on, and why?

A: The guy in the office who had all the money to make the reservations stole the money. So I would get to places where I had no reservation. It happened four times on that trip, and I was the only guy there for the clients to yell at. And when the plane landed on the strip at the Masai Mara, I didn't know where the camp was, and there was nobody at the strip to meet me to tell me where it was. So we had to drive all over looking for our mobile camp. When we finally found it, some of the clients were hysterical and wanted to leave on the next plane.

Q: What do you say when people ask about your job?

A: I tell them that I have a good time and that the East Africans are the friendliest people in the world.

Q: What's the best thing about being an independent professional?

A: The term itself explains it: being independent, being your own man.

Q: What's the worst thing about being an IP?

A: I'm responsible for a lot of people's lives when we get over there. And I've got to be nice to people no matter how bad I feel.

Q: Do you have any advice for other IPs?

A: Nobody wants to work for anybody else. Learn your job thoroughly. Your future is in your hands.

Q: What's the best thing a client can say to you?

A: "Here's a lot of money!" No, the best thing is "I had a great time."

Q: What is your guiding philosophy?

A: Learn as much as you can about the world. Travel and learn a little bit of a new language. Learn to say *thank you* and *hello* in a new tongue. You ingratiate yourself with people right away when you speak their language.

clients from South Africa north into Namibia, Botswana, or Zimbabwe, and from there to Zambia, Tanzania, or Kenya.

From June through October, Marcher is hot on the trail of migrating animals in East Africa. Each year, 2 million wildebeests, 500,000 zebras, and 100,000 gazelles, buffalo, and warthogs make their way from the Serengeti Plain in Tanzania into the Masai Mara Game Reserve in Kenya. "The viewing is spectacular," he says.



It's even better in a hot-air balloon: "You can see all of Africa from up there." From high above the plains, a long line of wildebeests looks like a winding river. The balloons float for an hour over the bush wherever the wind takes them. When they finally land, in the middle of the animal territory, vehicles are waiting to take the tourists back to the safety of their lodging.

Or Marcher might take a group into a *sekenani*, a tented camp in the heart of the Masai Mara, run by a longtime Kenyan friend. Here, one of Marcher's groups was lucky enough to see the festivities following the circumcision rites of a Masai boy.

Charge!

For prime viewing, Marcher likes to set up his party's tents right in the middle of the bush. But isn't that dangerous? An open invitation to animals?

"Nothing's dangerous except for Los Angeles traffic!" he quips.

Actually, Marcher has had a few run-ins with wildlife.

"I've had my vehicle charged by a rhino. And another time, I had it charged by an elephant," he says. On that occasion, he got too close to a baby elephant, and its protective mother flared her ears and charged the truck.

Marcher, who has a sixth sense about animal behavior, knows to stay calm in these situations. "First of all," he says, "you don't upset the animals. After all, you're a guest in their home."

Close encounters of the animal kind are just part of the African experience. So are



IP STATS

Field: Travel guide

Specialty: African safaris

Hours per week:

I work all the time during my waking hours. It's a hobby. I'm always doing something related to my work.

Yearly earnings:

I have what I call a psychological income. I do what I want to do where and when I want and with whom. There aren't many people who can say that.

Best way to get clients:

My Web site (africansafaris.com) is one big way. When somebody is searching for *Africa*, my site will eventually come up; it's linked to a lot of things. I also man a booth on Africa at travel shows several times a year.

water shortages and electricity outages. "You take so many things for granted in America," he laughs.

Spreading the word about Africa is good business for Marcher; but it's also a mission. When he's not on safari, you can find him working to protect the environment and lobbying for more movie production there. He believes movies about Africa will create more awareness of the need for conservation and will help increase tourist traffic in the poor nations there.

After a quarter of a century leading safaris, Marcher still loves his work. And he's tireless. He's writing a book on animal behavior, and he plans to travel and work as long as his health allows. "I've got a great body, you know," he says with a chuckle. **1099**

