

The New Merry Pranksters' Adventures in Tanzania

Robert Primes, ASC, Dan Kneece, SOC and Yousef Linjawi Journey to Africa.

Sponsors include: ZGC Inc, P+S Technik, Clairmont Camera, Fujinon Lenses, Panavision, Canon, Sony, American Film Institute, AJA, Transvideo, Sachtler, Band Pro and 16x9

Supplying "...10 large cases plus suitcases and backpacks of bleeding edge gear..."

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Initial Introduction to “The New Merry Pranksters”

Dear friends,

Most of you already know about the adventure that Yousef Linjawi, Dan Kneece, SOC and I are about to embark upon. We are calling ourselves the 'New Merry Pranksters' partially because of the nature of our adventurous spirit and partially to honor the moment when I turned down Ken Kesey's 1964 invitation to join the original 'Merry Pranksters' because I was newly married to Theo.

In my youth, a safari to Africa was simply the most thrilling and dangerous adventure imaginable. In my 70 years on this planet, I have seen the will of man endanger, contaminate and destroy much of the beautiful world that preceded us. A visit to Chicago's Field museum of Natural History inevitably stirs my emotions contemplating the magnificent species that no longer exist. I feel compelled to witness at least a glimpse of what still remains of this extraordinary pre-human civilization. It is impossible to separate myself from my lifelong pursuit of cinematography and photography. If I am to witness the wonders of the world, I must at least attempt to share any visual insights I may stumble upon.

Working in Los Angeles has the advantage of knowing a number of fine people and fine artists. My beloved friend and esteemed colleague, Dan Kneece, SOC, president of the Society of Camera Operators is partnering on this project. He brings vast skills as a director of photography and as an extraordinary camera operator. His indefatigable humanistic spirit and limitless joy have elevated dozens of productions we've experienced together. Yousef Linjawi, a talented and passionate young cinematographer I met at AFI is the final member of the pranksters. His kindness and consideration, honor, responsibility and capacity for joy indicate a soul far more mature than his modest 25 years of age. We hope this adventure helps him launch a meaningful and fulfilling career.

The animals of Africa have already been interpreted magnificently by generations of brilliant artists, yet it is simply the nature of our beasts to try our own hands at it. Last night we were privileged to meet the great wildlife cinematographers Bob Poole, Dereck Joubert and National Geographic producer David Hamlin, all of whom have devoted a large portion of their lives to conservation missions and stunning visual interpretation of wildlife. They generously offered us 'newbies' invaluable tips and truly profound insights about patience, attitude, humility and the spirit of being in and interpreting the wild. The fact these great masters told us to be prepared for a 'cluster-fuck' didn't deter us in the least!

Long ago, we applied for and presumably received permits from the government of Tanzania to film, go off road and shoot in the 'magic hours' generally unavailable to tourists. Thanks to Chuck Lee of Fujinon and Bob Poole, we contacted and retained 'African Environments', seemingly the finest organization in Tanzania to coordinate a filming expedition. Janice and Richard Beatty and Wes Krause have been invaluable in steering us around obstacles and will provide the guidance, camera cars and camps we will depend on in Tanzania.

The question of equipment is a long and complex topic that has consumed us for weeks now. It is so involving that our mentors last night strongly cautioned us to try to get our minds off it. The truth is, that we have obtained what we are absolutely confident is the best equipment on the planet! How we obtained this is a long story of horse-trading, exchange of favors, long associations, begging and bartering but above all, the spark our project ignited in the spirit of our sponsors. Remarkably, we needed to make no compromises and Tuesday morning will bring 10 large cases plus full suitcases and backpacks of bleeding edge gear to accompany us from LAX. Our sponsors include Clairmont Camera, Fujinon Lenses, ZGC Inc, P+S Technik, Panavision, Canon, Sony, American Film Institute, AJA, Transvideo, Sachtler, 16x9 and Band Pro! Complete specifications and the intimate details of the use of this gear will follow as we blog from Tanzania.

More to come!

-Bob

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The New Merry Pranksters – Safari Episode #1

Creating and Preparing our Equipment Package

It took 6 long days for the three of us to check out, trouble shoot and pack our gear, even with all of Clairmont Camera's years of expertise and Denny Clairmont himself nursing us through a challenging Saturday. This was much, much harder than any of us anticipated and without Clairmont's kindness and patience, particularly Irving, Shane, Tom, Brandon, Zack and Steve, we'd still be trying to figure things out.

Our primary camera was the brand new Sony PMW-350, a CMOS camera bringing all the extraordinary sensitivity and image quality of the EX-3's Exmor sensors into a fully professional 2/3" camera. Because it will become AFI's flagship digital camera this fall, Bob was allowed to bring it to Africa to study so he could then teach it.

Fujinon makes some extraordinary lenses for sports. We were guided by the enthusiastic and knowledgeable Chuck Lee toward a 25:1 lens with an integral doubler that extended to over 800mm. That's a lot of lens for a 2/3" chip! We decided to carry Fujinon's awesome 4.5 to 54mm ultra-wide zoom and their superb image stabilizer that will probably save our asses trying to shoot with a (35mm equiv). 2500mm lens from a softly sprung Land Rover.

We chose the versatile Sachtler Studio 9+9 head which handled both our heaviest and lightest configurations, and some marvelously sturdy yet lightweight Sachtler carbon fiber legs even though the bulk of our work would be done off the 150mm ball sockets in our camera cars. The animals in Tanzania have almost no reaction to Land Rover camera cars. But if a person gets out of the vehicle all hell breaks loose.

We also wanted to shoot animal action in ultra slow motion and for us, the Weisscam HS-2 was the obvious choice because of it's proven reliability, high quality images and because it outputs HD/SDI directly from it's 12,000 frame buffer without any wait time for rendering. Les Zellan and Tom Greiser of ZGC were instrumental in obtaining one from P+S Technik in Germany.

Our star lens for the Weisscam is Panavision's immense and ultra-sharp 135-420mm T2.8, known affectionately as the Hubble. This is a huge lens that weighs around 70 lbs in it's case but thanks to the generosity of Phil Radin, we'll be able to shoot high frame rates in the beautiful early and late light.

For monitors we chose the brand new super bright Transvideo 8" monitors because of their fine image quality for judging light and a rich feature set that includes a one button zoom to see pixel for pixel focus, great peaking for focus assistance, built in level and variable gamma allowing us to shoot a flat, high latitude curve and see it crisper on the monitor. It came with a robust 'Israeli Arm' for mounting on camera.

Except for the PMW-350's SxS cards which we intend to use just for that camera's pre-roll image cache, we chose to output both cameras to AJA's portable and versatile Ki-Pro boxes that instantly convert our HD/SDI output to Apple's ProRes 422 HQ 10 bit color format ready to edit in Final Cut Pro. We're carrying both 250G hard drives and 128G solid state recording media. We intend to download each day through our Mac Book Pros onto redundant CalDigit mirrored RAID 1 arrays.

Birns & Sawyer provided a pair of cinesaddles to rest the assembled cameras on while traveling. They fill up most of our suitcases.

Our still gear is all Canon digital with two 5D Mk 2s, a 1D Mk 4 and a handy little G11. We are Carrying the superb new 70-200 IS 2.8, Bob's venerable 24-105 and the

magnificent 500mm f/4. We are also carrying a light carbon Manfretto tripod and a Canon time lapse gizmo.

But the really hard part was power! The Weisscam fully tricked out with monitor, Ki-Pro, zoom control etc. draws 5 amps of 24 volts, about like a 100 watt light bulb. To run that for 10 hours in the Serengeti requires 8 dual lead acid batteries that weigh 240 lbs. Surely we needed a better scheme . . . And we found it thanks to Randy Wedick of Band Pro. There is a new battery/power supply called the Liberty Pak 'Little Genny'. It is distributed by 16x9 and uses the newest, safest Lithium Phosphate technology. It weighs a mere 19 lbs and powers the Weisscam for 3 hours on a 2 to 3 hour charge. We could only find one of these so we also brought a dozen 98 watt hour Sony Li-On batteries, which are safe to carry as carry-on, to power both the PMW-350 and, with a pair of adapters from Clairmont, the Weisscam as well. We also brought a Triplite UPS (uninterrupted power supply)



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to protect our hard drives and are hoping to find a solution to using this 110volt 60 cycle device in a 220volt 50cycle country!

Finally, we packed all this gear into nine 50 lb cases and one 70 lb case (the Hubble) with the still gear in our carry-on backpacks. We then wrote up the 9 single spaced pages printed from Clairmont's Excel spreadsheet documenting the name, serial #, country of origin and value of every piece in every case and were ready for US customs to certify our manifest and insure we could get the gear back into the country. Except it didn't work like that.

The New Merry Pranksters

To be continued

The New Merry Pranksters – Safari Episode #2

Travelling to Tanzania A long, troublesome trip with a surprise heroine

Marcos, Clairmont's loyal driver, had our 10 large cases of gear at the airport at 6:13 AM on August 10 so we had plenty of time to register them at US customs before our 11:15 AM flight. Customs asked us to schlepp all our cases to their office. Once we had, they told us to check them in at Detroit, because we changed planes there. When we mentioned we only had 40 minutes to make our connection, the customs agent suggested we ask the airline to solve our problem.

We schlepped the package to the airport where a manager Yousef had contacted in advance told us our 11:15 flight was late and wouldn't make the connecting flight. He suggested we try to get on the already full flight leaving in a few minutes. We raced our now 13 bags onto the baggage intake, not noticing that 3 of our baggage tags had someone else's name on them. We rushed into the longest security line in the history of LAX and finally emerged at the gate as they were trying to talk people into accepting bribes to take the next flight. But we had standby chits and a great sob story. The agent finally whisked us through to take the last two coach seats and a first class seat. The first class seat disappeared and Yousef and Bob were ordered off the plane, but not before being required to check our Canon-filled carry-on bags. Then Bob was allowed back on leaving Yousef stranded because they'd cancelled his 11:15 reservation when they issued the stand-by chit.

When we arrived in Detroit, Dan went to retrieve our baggage, unfortunately without a boarding pass for our next flight, and Bob sought help at the Delta/KLM information desk where Bob met the heroine of this tale, Delta agent Karen McGill. Karen sprang into action like 007. She fixed it so Yousef could board the 11:15 flight now leaving at noon. She confirmed that 20 passengers on that flight would miss their connection to Amsterdam. She scoured the schedule to find a maintenance-delayed flight that might get Yousef to Amsterdam in time for our connection to Mt. Kilimanjaro. She fixed our boarding pass issues and then noticed that 3 of our 13 bags were registered to someone else and were about to land at New York's JFK! This could be a problem!

Undaunted, Ms. McGill tracked Yousef to seat 10E on the incoming flight and raced to get him off that plane first. By that time, Dan and Bob were sitting in the Amsterdam bound flight about to close it's doors. Now Ms. McGill is an energetic lass but it might be a wee stretch to say she was athletic. But there she was, racing Yousef through the concourse, huffing and puffing until they sighted our gate. After a brief hug, Yousef who really is athletic sprinted down the concourse, through the gate and squeezed into our plane at the last possible frame. Whew! Although, we certainly celebrated our joyful reunion, we were off to Africa with only 10 of our 13 bags and no US customs registration for our \$509,000 of borrowed gear.

Exhausted from trying to sleep in cramped coach seats, we finally arrived at the Mt. Kilimanjaro airport with \$100 per/person cash visa fees, pandemonium about the missing 3 cases and everyone in sight holding their hands out and shouting "tip", "tip", "tip".

To be continued.

-The New Merry Pranksters,
Yousef, Dan & Bob

The New Merry Pranksters – Safari Episode #3

A Miracle . . . No, a Clusterfuck . . . No, truly a miracle . . . No, a . . .

Our missing bags contained one of our tripods, the main lens for the EX-350, the alternate lens for the Weisscam, both our monitors, the charger for the Weisscam battery, one of our Ki-Pros and miscellaneous gack. We arrive at the Impala Hotel in Arusha which makes a great first impression with its beautiful wood carvings, myriad restaurants and indigenous decor. But things aren't quite so rosy within Bob's room. When he tried to take a shower, the so-called Hot knob produced but a trickle of cold water. So did the Cold knob. Eventually the water turned scorchingly hot, then icy cold again. The knobs then decided to go on strike and wouldn't work at all. No hot, no cold, no shut-off, just a never-ending stream of noisy water bouncing off the tub and ineffectual shower curtain and onto the bathroom floor. When help arrived, he shrugged and suggested Bob keep the bathroom door closed.

The African Environments compound is located on a private road with 2 gated, guarded check points. The entrance is also guarded and high walls protect the interior. So much for security worries. Our set-up crew includes our two guides, Richard Nashuma and Dennis Mollel, both from the Maasai tribe, an engineer and almost a dozen intelligent, energetic, smiling crew members with plenty of understanding of photography, film making, electricity, mechanics and Land Rovers. It's a given that the Land Rovers will break down. Dennis describes the process as like dealing with a woman, but still prefers their off-road abilities to the more reliable Toyota Land Cruisers.

We build the Weisscam and Panavision 'Hubble' lens and put it on the Bob Poole inspired 'French Flap' configured Land Rover camera car. It's the biggest camera and lens they've seen. They are familiar with the Phantom, but when we explain the Weisscam doesn't have to render during the night, they become fans. The 'French Flap' allows a wide gap in the left side of the L/Rover, allowing the seated or kneeling operator to pan over about 120°. Our other camera car was fitted with a welded frame 'balcony' which extended from the L/Rover's left side and looked like it would afford a greater panning range. The problem was the 'B' pillar stuck the operator in the back when our EX-350 camera was balanced out with a long lens. As we struggled trying to make it work, our crew was quietly but intently studying the problem. Just as Bob Poole had suggested, the French Flap was far better for our needs than the 'Balcony'.

Suddenly there was a cacophony of chattering in Kiswahili (Swahili). Fingers pointed and strong men moved swiftly. Arc welders and crowbars, showers of sparks and screeching sounds of metal tearing consumed the space. Before we could charge our MacBooks, before we could connect to the internet, before we could figure out phone service, the African Environments crew had transformed the balcony suite to a fully functioning French Flapper!

Wes Krause and Teena Payne, of African Environments, guides Richard and Dennis and Pranksters Dan, Yousef and Bob meet to discuss our itinerary and plans. We explain that while we hope to capture great movement with our 1000 fps rig, we really hope to capture the beauty of another culture, one that includes all the emotions of mothers, fathers and children, the drama of survival and the joy of living, without the sometimes questionable complexity of the human species.

That night (Thursday) 2 out of our 3 cases arrive. We are still missing a full tripod and head, without which we can use only one camera at a time plus, of course, our Canon still cameras. During the day we had alternated the 500mm with the 70-200mm on the 1D Mk 4. We love our 5Ds but the 1D is so fast, it's just brilliant. Bob has his G11 and Dan his Canon A640 which are handy, always with us and produce fine pictures, but the incredible responsiveness of the 1D Mk 4 has us hooked. The beautiful black faces of our crew yield stunning portraits shot on the fly in challenging light.

Friday morning we leave at 7 AM, pack the L/Rovers and begin our 7 hour journey over bad roads to the Serengeti. We're charging our MacBooks on the way and Yousef is shooting everything in sight with the 1D as Bob types out this narrative. The humanity along the road is incredibly varied. Seven year old boys tending herds of goats, Maasai women with their strong necks supporting huge baskets, men with giant pigs, markets, tourists and baboons. We are truly in Africa and it is wonderful indeed!

- The New Merry Pranksters
To be continued!

New Merry Pranksters Episode #4

The Cruel Road . . . The Serengeti . . . Camp!

Bob Poole warned us. The ride was going to be rough. Two L/Rovers w/ the rear seats removed for camera maneuvering space. Seven hours of roads even the locals called bad. Richard and Dennis with the pedal to the metal - slipping and sliding - teeth rattling washboard roads - climbing the side of the road to let another speeding Kamikaze L/Rover squeeze by on the narrow road - our Maasai drivers throwing their L/Rovers with the accuracy of a spear - and when a big bus or truck comes at us - Holy shit!

Dan rode shotgun w/ Dennis, Bob w/ Richard. Where was Yousef, the youngest and most limber of us? In the back w/o a real seat, acting as a barrier in case our cases tumbled down. Carsick? Yes. Seat belts? Surely you jest. Choking on dust? Of course. But we're charging into adventure, trying to hold a 200 mil steady as we get thrown around plenty. It's an image stabilized lens and we're shooting at 1/2000, but holding a composition is another thing.

We picnic near Ngorongoro Crater, where we'll film on the way back. No prepackaged food for us! Dennis and Richard produce ultra fresh fruit and vegetables, peeling and cutting them on the spot. Finally we're at the Serengeti, the endless plain where animals are free and humans confined to their vehicles. Of course our big gear is packed for protection from the merciless roads. But we can hand hold the 1D w/ our 70-200 and monster 500mm.

And now we get our first glimpse of what we came here for. Stunningly beautiful Thomson's Gazelles and larger Grant's Gazelles playing together, taper nosed spotted Hyenas, male lions. We saw lounging on their backs as cubs and their mom play and scratch on a felled Umbrella Acacia. herds of Zebra and Hippos, or at least their eyes and ears protruding from what seemed to be large grey rocks. Also, Impalas, Topi and Hartebeests. All of this animal expertise comes of course from Dennis and Richard who can spot and identify animals at absurd distances while negotiating the road.

We shoot stills from the road of course, but they're not really very dramatic. We realize that even with our precious off-road permissions and superb lenses, this is not going to be easy. Our National Geographic and African Environments advisers had warned us that this would take great patience and not to be discouraged. Already, we see it will require all the creativity and character we can muster. Soon, Richard's amazing eye spots an elephant! We look and look and finally spot a tiny patch of grey obscured by foliage well to our right. Up comes the 500mm and as Richard maneuvers to find the behemoth between trees, we wait and wait for the great beast to show us more than tail. Finally, we are rewarded with profiles, trunks raised and ears flapping, of three magnificent elephants. There's a lot to say for this patience stuff!

Our Camp is 3 minutes past the elephants! It is set beautifully among Umbrella Acacia trees in the midst of territory inhabited by lions and elephants. It was set up specifically for us a few days before. Each of us have a 2 room tent w/ solar powered low energy LCD lighting and a real toilet. We are sealed by ground covers and zippered flaps and there is a hot water sack shower hung just high enough so we can turn the valve on tiptoes. Water and power are priceless. We have everything we need and absolutely nothing more. It feels so good to live so harmoniously with the planet. It is almost dark and a hot shower, glass of wine, sumptuous dinner, campfire and star-filled black velvet sky complete our day. That night we hear lions clearly enjoying their kill and an elephant comes with 5 feet of our tents before deciding to ravage a tree instead.

-The New Merry Pranksters
To be continued

Good morning! Just a short update before Episode #5 (Sunday). Because Creative Cow's Tim Wilson, has re-labeled our original submission "Intro" rather than Episode #1, yesterday's blog will be relabeled "Episode #4" and today's will be labeled "Episode #5 Sunday" to distinguish it from yesterday's "Episode #5". If That's not clear, don't worry, be happy.

Our sincere thanks to that fine gentleman, Jon Fauer, ASC for his link to our Creative Cow blog. Speaking of which, we have now shot around a thousand behind-the-scenes photos and movies but have no way of transmitting them. Tim Wilson may well decide to wait for the visuals before posting more episodes, putting quality before immediacy. Therefore, until we hear differently from Tim, we suggest you not relay our blogs to others at this time, in order to allow the Cow's illustrated blogs to have maximum initial impact. Thanks!

New Merry Pranksters Episode #5 (Sunday)

Our first day in the park and our first thoughts about core values and what this this film might be about.

We awoke Saturday still without our missing 2nd tripod and head. We built our primary camera, the Sony/Fujinon/Sachtler/TranVideo/AJA 'A' camera. We documented this with our Canon G11 in movie mode, a far more agile instrument than a 1D or 5D. The swiveling screen allowed us to make magnificent low to high moves and put the camera wherever we wanted, bending the finder to maintain framing.

Serengeti means "Endless Plain" in the Maasai language, which we are slowly learning to love. "Kaka" means "Brother", which is what we like to call each other. Our brothers absolutely include Dennis and Richard, who attend every planning session, every meal and gossip session, appreciate the good light, help mount and move our cameras, shoot stills and tell us when it's worth waiting for an animal to move . . . real veterans of the finest BBC Wildlife and Nat Geo shoots.

The Nat Geo pros had urged us to be patient and observe animal behavior, possibly the best advice ever. Dan started with the 'A' camera and Yousef shot stills in Richard's car. He hung a 1D w/ a 500mm and a 5D w/ a 70-200 around his neck . . . the dudes got one strong neck!

Dan started with an elephant close - real close - full eyeball close! That yellow eyeball seemed about the size of a baseball, with the bushiest fluttery eyelashes you ever saw. The old elephant wasn't doing much, just standing there staring at us but Dan kept rolling. Patience paid off and the elephant started grazing, snapping off branches with green shoots with it's amazingly versatile trunk and enjoying his Whole Foods-like repast. Dan followed the trunk up and down showing the tactile sensitivity of the mittened-hand-like snout and the enormous quiet strength of the great long branch-snapping muscle called a trunk.

Soon another elephant joined in and they gave us all kinds of cool shots, finally lumbering away into the soft focussed abstraction of the roiling heat waves. Dan finally cut his shot, 42 minutes after it began! This was to become a template. We had plenty of batteries and plenty of cheap media. When Dereck Jaubert had told us he had 50 64G P2 cards . . . and that was for a single day, we thought it was the Mojitos speaking. But now we were beginning to understand the process of dancing with your subject, anticipating it's rhythms, thoughts and needs.

Bob was up next with Yousef riding shotgun and Dan shooting stills. Bob went straight for the maximum length of the 25:1 Fujinon, flipped in the 2X extender and glared at Yousef every time he blinked. You had to be ridiculously still in the soft sprung L/Rover which bored Yousef to tears. From now on, the 'A' camera car would have only one Prankster and the immaculately disciplined Dennis.

We shot a hilarious duck and about a dozen of her tiny kids. The duck would slam her head into the water 3 times really fast, then shake the water off and look daffy as hell for a beat and then do it again. The kids would cluster around their goofy mama trying to figure out what was going on. Yousef was trying to get Bob to turn around to shoot an approaching lion but he was hung-up on the goofy duck. So much for pecking order.

We shot huge close-ups of gorgeous yellow long-billed birds landing on a giraffes mouth and poking hard into her giant mouth. After a few seconds the massive beast shook them away. A few seconds later it began again.

Rolling endlessly on a few dozen immobile, long, grey submerged stone-like objects yielded hippo heads breaking the surface, twirling their ears and gazing out through half-lidded lazy eyes. But those eyes could suddenly flash intensely clear if something if alerted.

The guides' radio blasted that a lion was sighted munching on a Thomson Gazelle head. By the time we got there, 7 or 8 tourist cars were jostling for position, dozens of tourists climbing all over each other for a look at one sleeping lion and a chewing one.

Unnoticed behind the backs of all the clamor was a single stork fishing. He would become an incredibly beautiful subject. Our compressed perspective and the lake's mirror image played with the stork's pole-vault-like legs crisscrossing in front of his rhythmic, open-beaked fishing ritual and created a stunning, almost architectural abstraction.

At the end of the day, reflecting on the amazing diversity of life we had witnessed our first day on the Serengeti, we were certain we had discovered the miraculous Garden of Eden, the place where unlimited beauty waits around every corner. We became joyously excited over the colors and shapes and movements we had witnessed. We became intensely aware of the divine engineering of these self-propelled, self sustaining creatures. But most importantly, we became profoundly moved by the way so many diverse life styles co-existed in this harmonious utopia.

The history of man is at once the history of enlightenment and the history of cruelty and intolerance. We, or at least some of us, have killed off entire species of sublimely beautiful and sentient beings. Others, we have snatched from their homes and imprisoned as curiosities for our amusement. It is only when you travel half way across the earth to see how it could have been and should have been, do you realize that we can grow beyond kindness only to our own family, countrymen, race or species. It will be the intent of our film to attempt to communicate an understanding of and sensitivity to the magnificence of our sister species. The late Bill Fraker, ASC said that half the people were driven by fear and half were driven by love. We're going to try to tip that balance a little bit.

-The New Merry Pranksters

-more to come

New Merry Pranksters Episode #6

A scary day - from electronics and a lion

Carrying this much electronics into a place with one crude old solder gun with the tip bent up 45° and about to break off is not for the faint of heart. A few days ago we realized we could power the image stabilizer, 25:1 lens controls and Transvideo monitor directly from the Sony PMW camera, but the only power outlet left for the AJA Ki-Pro recorder was only a half amp connector designed for radio mikes. So Dan, our resident gear geek, snipped off the end of an AJA power supply and soldered it on to the connector powering the monitor. Field repairs 101!

Yesterday, our missing tripod case finally arrived, flown in by private plane to the nearest airstrip. At last we could build the Weisscam/Panavision monster. The size and weight of this rig should not be underestimated. Even without an extender on the lens, the distance from the tip of the eyebrow to the hood of the monitor is greater than the width of the Land Rover interior. We take the Sony off the tripod head and rest it on a mattress when we drive from place to place. This would be impossible with the Weisscam not only because there's no space, but also because we aren't allowed to get out of the car and it would take Schwarzenegger's former strength to lift the camera from inside the car.

So off we go in the scorching equatorial heat with a fairly new and power hungry camera trying to remember the instructions we were given in case it overheats, which of course it does. Tom Greiser, the US Weisscam technician told us to just shut the camera off rather than run the fan. Of course we forgot and ran the fan and couldn't understand why it wouldn't cool down. We shot a test and brought it back to camp and a Clairmont 24 volt to 12 volt converter box went 'Pop' and then smoked 'Poof'. We blamed it on the curse of Africa and found a work-around.

As Dan and Bob were working through this nightmare, Yousef was off with Dennis living a nightmare of his own. They had a good day shooting wildlife sequences but were distracted with tourist cars pulling up as they were patiently waiting for an animal to perform. The tourists would often make noises loud enough to make the animals go away. This in turn made Yousef go away. He asked Dennis to take him away from the tourists. Unfortunately that also seemed to take them away from the animals as well.

They finally found a lioness with two cubs nursing. They tried shooting from a distance but too much foliage obscured and besides, Yousef loved the closer presence. They finally landed about 15' from the nursing lioness. Yousef went in tight and panned from the nursing cubs to a tight close-up of the mother's face. Yousef didn't like what he saw in her eyes, though. She was clearly not happy about the film crew invading her privacy. Yousef assessed his position. He was young, quick and agile and, if necessary, packed a mean punch. She, on the other hand was lying down with two cubs attached to her teats. No problem, right?

At that moment the lion acted. Yousef never learned how she moved from her reclining position or what happened to her cubs. There was only a blur in his finder and a roar in his ears. The engine of the L/Rover started instantly. It was only a warning, but Yousef was shaken by the incredible power and unimaginable speed. As they raced off he realized he was alive only because of the graciousness of the lioness. It made a great conversation piece at dinner.

-The New Merry Pranksters

-more to come

Episode 7

Why our 'A' Camera can Touch your Heart

Now that the Weisscam was sorted out and we had learned how to use it, we started a 3 position rotation with each Prankster moving daily to a different camera. Our A camera was the workhorse of the show. The Fujinon 25:1 and Image Stabilizer could get miraculously tight and steady shots of animals a long, long distance away. Even animals accustomed to close proximity of Land Rovers, still get shy, especially if the L/Rovers have large long lenses protruding from them.

Yesterday, Dennis spied two elephants playing together in the river. Perhaps the elephants were aware of the camera because they almost immediately turned a corner and were hidden by a rock. Dennis went cross country in 4 wheel drive until they came upon them again. This time they turned around side by side and showed the camera their considerable backsides.

Dennis and Bob were stone silent and didn't move. Neither did the elephants. Perhaps 15 minutes went by in this contest of patience. Their colossal ears quivered. So did the elephants'. Finally, one elephant extended his trunk and drank some water. Then he squirted a bit at his buddy, who returned the compliment. The two adolescent Pachyderms finally felt alone and played boy games until an amazing thing happened. One spectacularly rose up circus style and dexterously placed his front feet on his pal's shoulders and seemed to mount him doggie, or rather elephant style. Dennis told Bob that male elephants reach puberty at around 18 to 25 years and practice sex with other males to be ready. The two friends touched trunks and tusks and sweetly rubbed their heads together. There was no mistaking their love and affection.

Of course we got the shot in all its beauty. We had an easy 80 minute run time from the 128Gb Ki-Pro solid state modules and the AJA hard drives gave us twice that. Our Sony PMW 350 camera had CMOS low light ability sensitive enough to shoot magic hour with a lens that when fully extended and stabilized became a T/11. We assigned a button to turn on the picture cache and set it to 15 seconds. Any time we were waiting for an animal to react, all we had to do was start to record and the 15 previous seconds would be added to the head of the shot on the 8 bit SxS card version.

The Transvideo 8" monitor was so good that we used it rather than the Sony finder. It had a full length wave form monitor across the bottom that we based our exposures on and a comprehensive peaking function that we used to focus. The only thing was it was a big monitor to use in the short L/Rover and placed toward the back of the camera it was sometimes hard to reach all of the way forward to focus the lens. We wished we'd brought a Studio Follow Focus.

We zoomed with the sensitive Fujinon zoom control mounted on the tripod handle. We used Sachtler 9x9s on both cameras despite their vast differences in weight. The heads are so versatile they can perfectly balance almost anything. We had about a 90° angle of view out the side of the vehicles and both of our guides were quite expert at spotting subjects and lining up the car for the best shooting angle. In short, we were a formidable weapon in the battle to reveal the secrets of nature.

But nature was a clever foe that time and again taught us humility. A crocodile had exited a water hole too suddenly for us to capture. But the end of her tail still dipped into the mirror still water. We had a beautiful abstract shot with the tail looking like some scaly tree. We fully expected to surprise our audience as the 'tree' moved upward and we tilted to reveal the croc waddling away. But the croc sat for almost half an hour without moving as we rolled on every boring frame. Finally, Dennis agreed to toss a rock in the lake to motivate the seemingly comatose croc. But instead of slowly continuing up out of the water, the croc flipped 180° in the air and was back in the water so quickly that no mere human could possibly react fast enough.

Another dirty trick pulled on us was watching a large lioness creeping toward a herd of gazelles in high grass. We filmed the lion until we lost her. Then we filmed the gazelles ad nauseum with a really long lens through heat haze as they postured and gestured and went on full alert until . . . absolutely nothing happened! We now have a fascinating sequence of a lion moving through grass and a ridiculous amount of blurry heat-distorted gazelles on alert.



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But nature didn't win them all and we ultimately scored big-time. We discovered a big pride of lions at the very end of our lens. There was a group of young cubs hanging out around Mama's tail. Every time the tail would swing low enough, the cubs would jump up and try to catch it. Mama would flick it high in the air just in the nick of time over and over until a slightly older cub bit it hard. Then there were young cubs playing tag, rolling around, wrestling and biting. No harm, no pain. Then Mama got jumped by at least a dozen cubs at once. You never saw anyone have more fun in your life. It was touching, funny and 100% pure lion. Is this fun, or what?

-The New Merry Pranksters

-But wait! There's more to come!

Episode #8

The Microscopes and Telescopes of Time

High speed and time lapse are to time what macro and astronomical photography are to space. We've shot time lapse sunsets at our camp to show the transition from day through gorgeous sunset to shutter-open-for-25-seconds night, and then have the lap tops come on as we began our daily download. The sun sets like a rock at the equator and it goes from unbearably hot to 'where's another layer to put on' cold. In between, the Tse-tse flies have a field day. That sharp prick you feel is an injection of something lovely into your system.

But today's episode is about high speed cinematography. We love our Weisscam. We traced our overheating problem to the shorting Clairmont voltage converter and our user error in not simply shutting the camera down. But even though the camera has worked flawlessly these past three days and the images are stunning, never ever let anyone tell you that taking a high speed camera on safari is easy.

Powering it in the field requires a hefty amount of 24 volt power. Our 19 lb. state-of-the-art LibertyPak Little Genny powers the HS-2 camera and 8" Transvideo monitor for about 2/3 of a day's filming. Additional power comes from Sony 12 volt Li-Ion camera batteries paired in series to create 24 volts. Each pair runs for about 45 minutes. Fortunately, the Little Genny charges in around 4 hours. Unfortunately, when it charges, it draws so much power that our uninterruptible power supply beeps the equivalent of, "Hey dude! I can't protect your hard drives if you're going to draw the voltage down with that power hungry pig of a battery charger!" Not being able to download to hard drives as you charge your main battery makes for a long night running the generator.

The way the Weisscam works is that you frame while rolling. You must be in record mode to see a monitor image. So once you're at a location with animals that move fast enough to warrant high speed photography, you set your estimated frame rate and set your shutter speed in a small touch screen. You hit RECORD and the camera shoots 12,000 frames (8' 20" @ 24 fps). When you've filled the 12,000 frame cache, the camera continuously records over the oldest frames until you press STOP. You then review your shot with a user-friendly interface allowing you to search forward or backward at up to 32x speed, and mark in and out points in the timeline. You then record the sequence onto the AJA box. Now you're ready to shoot another shot.

Shooting at 1000 frames a second requires 32 times (5 stops) more light than shooting 24fps. If you'd lit to T/11 at 24 fps you'd need a T/2 at 1000 fps. Shooting animals in the Serengeti requires large telephotos. You're not allowed out of the vehicle. The animals are most active when it is cool and the light is lower. Begin to get the picture? Low light, high speed and long lenses. You need a HUGE lens to do what we need. Hence the gigantic Panavision 135-420 T/2.8. We use it with a 1.4x Primo extender. This is an astonishingly sharp lens and takes the extender with ease.

Don't forget that we're 4 wheeling cross country and over absurd roads. We passed an overturned Land Cruiser today. Bad things can happen and this lens with its matte box and eyebrow hang out of the L/Rover a mile. Only the focussed concentration of driver/guide Richard keeps the lens from mowing down small trees. It draws gawking penis envy from every tourist with a camera.

This camera, lens, monitor and AJA box weigh so much that we travel holding the camera with the tilt lock off so the camera can't wrench the 150mm ball leveling socket. But screws loosen under this kind of weight and vibration. We must constantly retighten the Sachtler quick release plate. But the bolt and locater pin holding the camera to the Panavision dove tail device vibrated completely loose today. The only reason we didn't lose the Weisscam was because Dan was checking the camera constantly and spotted the problem before disaster struck. This is certainly not for amateurs.

But the footage! Oh the footage! The human eye simply isn't quick enough to see some of the amazing accomplishments of nature. In fact, the human operator is rarely quick enough to follow an animal perfectly if all of his focus and framing reactions are to be slowed by a factor of 20 or 40. But the camera is quick enough and it's spectacular footage justifies all the hassles of taking such a beast halfway around the world.

How does a stork take off? She begins with her head pulling down sharply. A long micro-beat later her knees start to bend and her spindly legs contract. Then her tail feathers start to ruffle and eventually part, revealing a



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symmetric, unbelievably beautiful feathery abstraction. Then like a Yo-yo, she reverses direction. Her legs expand, her head rises and her wings emerge from the sides of the lady. At the peak of the leap, her wings push down and the bird's claws arch downward as they leave the ground. Her great wings circle back around, revealing that incredible symmetrical abstract painting again. And then her wings extend impossibly far outward and then downward, pulling the lovely stork forward with thrust, and upward with lift, high, high into the sky. You can see it all at 1000 fps and it is indeed magnificent.

-The New Merry Pranksters
more to come

Episode 9

Tactics of Wildlife Cinematography

The Serengeti Wildlife Preserve is roughly 15,000 sq. kilometers or approx. 8,000 square miles. If that doesn't impress you, perhaps you died. Each day hundreds of driver/guides give and take info about where the animals are. Just like ants communicate with other ants going in the opposite direction, drivers chatter away, usually in Swahili but sometimes Maasai, about what they've seen. They also use short wave radio, texting or anything else that helps communicate. This is because overnight a large area teeming with animals can become barren. Each morning, three pranksters posing as cinematographers set off around 7 AM when the sun is already bolting past the horizon like it had been catapulted. They tell their guides what they hope to photograph knowing full well that they are more likely to photograph what they stumble upon than what they ordered from their guides. Sometimes you come across a dozen or so frantic tourist cars jockeying for a view of a leopard sleeping high in a tree. It certainly is a leopard all right but a dark, unmoving, camouflaged spotted blanket in a tree is hardly a cinematographer's dream.

So you're basically on your own. This ain't Disneyland. The animals roam as they please and nobody knows where they'll show up. So you and your guide are basically hunters. Today, during the mid-day heat, all we could find were a few lions lying under trees panting and the usual surplus of Thomson Gazelles. We had found a really large herd of Cape Buffalo earlier, but an hour later it seemed like the entire endless plain was empty. We tried driving cross country. We talked to drivers coming from every direction all reporting the same thing: no animals. The few we found were standing still and just not very interesting. We were discouraged.

We decided to head home and get some other work done while it was still light. When we were almost at our camp we saw a huge gathering of tourist vehicles. Because of our film permits we could go off road around the tourists. What we saw completely obliterated our discouragement. An extended family of about 40 elephants of every age and description had taken over a water hole and converted it to an elephant resort. They played in the water and they played in the mud. The kids leaned into and squeezed each other. Elephant women would fall sideways into a mud bank and slide into the water with a humongous splash. Elephants blowing trunkfuls of dust at their still wet friends filled the air with shafts of sunlight. No one, absolutely no one, could have had more fun. It was a great day to be an elephant. It also turned out to be a great day to be behind a movie camera.

Each time you have a subject in your viewfinder, you ask yourself the same question: Is this worth the expenditure of time, light and valuable battery life? You may abandon an animal and find nothing better all day. You may shoot a dull shot and miss a brilliant one. It's just the way it is. Sometimes, an animal may be immobile but if you're quiet and still long enough, the animal will reward you. Other times, you'll just waste time end up with nothing but a sore neck from holding the frame so long.

When you decide to shoot a scene it's undoubtedly because you or your guide liked what you saw with your eye. But when you drive up close to animals, they tend to move away, often giving you retreating butts instead of the idyllic scene that first attracted you. Sometimes you roll up with the camera already recording. You uncap the lens (remember the dust), level the camera (remember the terrain) zap in for a quick focus, zoom out and you're recording. The Sony starts almost instantly, but the AJA has a frustratingly long initial start up. The Transvideo monitor is somewhere in between. We output the monitor from the AJA box so if we're not booted up when our subject is, we lose our monitor as well as the Ki Pro recorder.

In that case we can record almost instantly onto the SxS cards and use the PMW 350's viewfinder. The only problem is that it's not always easy to reach the forward finder from our pretzel-cramped shooting position. So usually we keep the camera on and squander precious battery power. We can easily run through 8 batteries in a day. The Weisscam is the same deal. Sometimes we boot up only when we think we have a shot and still return to camp for a mid-day charging break. Rolling for a long time until the subject behaves appropriately drains a lot of precious power.

If all this sounds hard, it most certainly is. But your secret weapon is your guide. We have total respect and affection for Dennis and Richard as much for their character as their expertise. Both can slide and drift a Land Rover, negotiate ridiculous terrain, fix anything on the car, cater to your medical needs, speak multiple languages, diplomatically negotiate anything, maneuver your vehicle for the best angle without guidance, watch and thoroughly understand the light, spot subjects your eyes are simply not good enough to see, pan and zoom your



camera to find almost invisible animals, shoot beautiful stills, understand absolutely everything in nature and it's history and care deeply and personally about you. 'World-class' doesn't even begin to describe their quality.

There was a piece of fiction called, "The Deadliest Game" that described a contest between deadly hunters and equally deadly animals. Hopefully, we as an evolving species have become far less cruel and much too enlightened to consider that game and contrary to legend, almost no animals want a piece of us unless we give them no choice.

But we can still have the adventure and excitement of the game. A gun causes pain and suffering, orphaned children and the destruction of a creature so beautiful and amazing that our science will probably never be good enough to create one. But the camera takes far more skill and allows the joy of these beautiful species to be experienced and celebrated throughout the planet.

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-to be continued

Episode #10

Health, Hygiene and a Bunch of other Stuff

The travel nurse at Kaiser Hospital in Los Angeles routinely included two different styles of Diarrhea medicine in travel kits to Tanzania. The first is for symptoms. You try that first. The second is for the cause. You use that if the first one doesn't work. We used both.

You wake up in the morning and put on every layer you have. The sun pops up and you take almost all of it off. You sit writing at the computer in the evening. You feel a little chilly and you turn around to look for a jacket. But you don't see one because it's pure jet-black night. Yes, night happens that fast at the equator, almost between paragraphs.

Every day you, your gear and everything else is covered with dust. Your jug of shower water is heated in a black boiler with a wood fire lit under it. It is then carried a few hundred yards to your tent, poured into your shower bag and the bag is hoisted up. The man who carries two jugs of this water at a time is really, really strong. You take your shower immediately unless you like it cold. The full moon lights you like a chandelier through the open-topped stall. But you must be quick because you only get the water that can be carried. The first night you may run out just after you're covered with soap. Too bad! The second night you adjust the valve and make it through the rinse cycle. Perhaps on the fourth or fifth night you set the valve to a trickle and risk a shampoo. But not Dan, he has far too much hair.

Your finger nails are disgraceful. Getting your ears clean is an accomplishment, only to be undone a few hours later. Your laundry is washed by hand in a bucket and dried in the glorious sun. Life is good. Lions and elephants roam freely through your camp at night and you are not afraid.

While renewing our permit at the Serengeti airstrip we got to see how the other half lives. Shiny Land Cruisers with immaculate paint jobs parked next to our beaten up L/Rovers with half the left side hacked away for camera panning ability. F I L M was proudly spelled out in white tape on our right sides and 'Film Crew' labels covered the covers of our two spare tires. Two rotund, middle aged American women couldn't keep their hands off their smiling young jet black guide, who wriggled and teased anticipating some very large tips.

We originally felt that our differences in age would be part of the story. Yousef is 25, Dan is 54 and Bob is 70. But our camaraderie seems to have eclipsed that story. We are each good at different things. We have been together for 18 days now except for going to our homes at night while prepping at Clairmont, one Sunday off before we left and splitting into two L/Rovers for each day's shooting. We do whatever needs to be done. There is no boss. There are few assigned asks. We all discuss and understand all aspects of the adventure and mutual consideration precludes conflicts. The win-win is the only state acceptable to any of us. There is nothing we can't discuss and no taboos. We can joke about the size of a bull elephant's 'sixth leg' and become fascinated by how long a gazelle's elimination process lasts at 1000 frames per second. Allowing each other to be ourselves without judgment is a good recipe for far more than this safari.

As we collect material at a rate too great to review, each of us knows what we have personally shot and has only heard the enthusiasm of the others. No one knows what we really have. Perhaps our guides have the best overall picture. Because the camera often runs a long time before anything interesting happens, we've tentatively agreed to edit the chaff out of our own footage. But editing dozens of hours of footage is a giant task that we haven't really planned for. The reported interest generated by this blog requires we edit the stills and behind-the-scenes footage to tell the story of our adventure visually, perhaps as an iBook. But for now, we stay focussed on trying to capture the best footage we can and let the future bring what it brings.

The New Merry Pranksters
-more later

Episode #11

Five Canons and Waiting for a Kill

In the mid day sun, the animals may be too static for good movies but ideal for portraiture. The third rotation for each prankster, besides the Sony/Fujinon camera and the Weisscam/Panavision camera are the Canon/Canon cameras. Five of them! Actually Dan's A640 and Bob's G11 are personal cameras. The G11 is our favorite documentary style movie camera because the finder flips out and bends every which way giving us the ability to boom up or down, see around corners, go through car windows etc.

The basic kit for the prankster shooting stills is a 5D Mk 2 wearing a 24-105mm, often wearing a pola for landscapes and skies; another 5D Mk 2 with the new ultrasharp 70-200 f/2.8 often wearing an extender; and the super quick 1D Mk 4 with the 500mm f/4 often sporting an extender. Remembering that we must remain in the L/Rover, the 500mm is especially useful for animal close-ups. It is a handful to maneuver in a small space but often we place a cinesaddle on the left front window frame and rest the big lens on that. The machine gun 10 fps motor drive is perfect for birds taking flight or anything else that requires a little luck.

We noticed we were dodging a lot of trees that had been felled on both sides of the road today. Many were substantial in size and looked too healthy to have just blown over or suffered from drought. Guide Richard informed us they were undoubtedly knocked over by a young bull elephant demonstrating his strength to the admiring ladies.

Later, we watched three lions stalking a herd of Thomson Gazelle. Each slowly crept through high grass trying to get close enough to make a kill. Our Weisscam shot framed a lion and gazelles in the same shot. The lighting was perfect and we had enough depth to get the lion and gazelles in one perfect slow motion shot. The day before we had seen a lion get to within 6 feet of a young gazelle. We captured the lion's charge but the gazelle ran across the road out of camera range and once they hit an open area the young gazelle hit the turbocharger and left the lion literally in its dust.

We were as thirsty for a 'kill' as the lion and rolled the Weisscam for over an hour continuously, trying to get the spectacular shot. All we got was an exhausted battery as the cat and deer game proceeded like a deliberate high stakes chess game as each side moved and the other countered. Even for the so-called king of beasts life in nature is far from easy.

-The New Merry Pranksters
-More to come

Episode #12

What we Learned from the Serengeti

We are leaving the Serengeti a day earlier than planned. After nine days with three of us filming all day we found it increasingly difficult to find animals and shots we hadn't shot before. They were there of course, just not in the profusion of before. It was time we moved to the Ngorongoro Crater with a side trip to the Olduvai Gorge, known as the cradle of mankind.

But the Serengeti moved all of us profoundly. If Paris arguably represents the most refined and sophisticated of man's efforts, the Serengeti may represent the simplest. Except for the dirt trails, very occasional and inconspicuous carved direction markers and evidence of man-made controlled ecological burns, the only evidence of man are the vehicles full of tourists. Considering that they pay the costs of protecting and maintaining the park, it's not a bad deal.

We often hear references to the cruelty of nature or the savagery of the 'jungle'. When we first saw a lion holding the severed head of a gazelle, we too could have fallen into that philosophical trap. Certainly from the perspective of that young gazelle things weren't too good. But after spending days watching lions work patiently and diligently to catch a pray and feed their beloved cubs, we could find no cruelty. To the contrary, watching lions communicate silently to each other with head gestures and tail flips over hours of stealthy maneuvering only to be evaded by the equally cunning pray makes us, if anything, empathetic to the lions. In its seemingly infinite wisdom, nature has chosen to make creatures that eat vegetation and creatures that need to eat meat. It is certainly not the lion's fault that it must find meat in order for its children and species to survive. It has no choice and hence in no possible way can be considered cruel.

This, regrettably is not the case with our species of homo sapiens. Unlike any of the species we have witnessed, we seem to have little difficulty justifying widespread and egregious cruelty for trivial pursuits. Sometimes these are justified by the concept, "You have to break eggs to make an omelette". This is a specious argument. To the best of our knowledge eggs are not sentient beings. Other times the rationalization is that nature is inherently cruel and "dog eat dog". After nine intense days observing the interaction and behavior of elephants, hippos, giraffes, warthogs, zebra, serval cats, lions, leopards, cheetahs, gazelle, hyenas, jackals, mongeese, cape buffalo, baboons, monkeys, topi, impala, dik-dik, hartebeest, reebok and uncounted birds and reptiles, we all feel with conviction that nature simply isn't cruel.

To witness such a mutually respectful culture not only gives the lie to those who try to excuse their cruelty as 'human nature', but it should also serve us as a role model. One of the best ways to judge the success of a culture is simply by noting if their people look happy. The faces of the Tanzanian people working in or around the Serengeti National Park are almost universally joyous.

But in America, which already has more material wealth than almost anywhere else, our culture seems obsessed with acquiring more than they need and sometimes more than they can possibly use. There would be nothing wrong with this if it caused no pain to others. But it does. And causing this pain needlessly, when it isn't necessary for survival is what separates us from the animals, but not in a flattering way.

So what we learned from the animals and people of the Serengeti is that we can improve ourselves by simply asking if what we are doing is causing pain to others, and if it is, questioning if it is really worth that.

The ride to our camp on the rim of the Ngorongoro crater was filled with three merry pranksters with dueling lenses. Dan had the 500mm, Yousef the 70-200mm and Bob the 24-105mm. Tomorrow we rise at 5 AM to try to beat the tourists. Goodnight!

-The New Merry Pranksters
to be continued

Lucky Episode #13

The Crater

Ngorongoro Crater is an incredibly popular tourist attraction. A volcano blew the top off a massive mountain. When the hole eventually filled in, it created a large level plain visually different from the Serengeti because of the rising mountainous wall behind almost every shot. Because our cameras are mounted around chest height this makes a difference. There are also forests and swamps with more verdant green than almost any place in the Serengeti.

We rose this morning at 5 AM to have our customary African Environments full breakfast. We would try to complete the tortuous crater wall descent before sunrise. It was the silhouettes of the magnificent trees above the narrow road that prompted pulling out the Canon G-11 and setting it to movie mode to document our early morning ride. The L/Rover bumped and lurched down the grade with its hood reflecting the silhouetted trees in the bottom of the frame. The squirming of the hood and the bouncing of the handheld little camera combined with the banging and shrieking of the Land Rover gave a convincingly visceral account of the ride.

On a whim, the camera was panned to Dennis. The auto exposure alternating between silhouetting him and revealing his beautiful dark chocolate skin tones. It was still so dark the speedometer light was bright. Extending the swiveling fold out display gave us remarkable mobility within the wildly bucking vehicle. Bob asked Dennis some simple question and Dennis, with all the instincts of a born actor, answered charismatically, raising his voice so the tiny mic could discern it over the bitterly complaining Land Rover. Stirring the shifter, masterfully manhandling the wheel, even reaching out to manually wipe the fogging windshield with the lifeless wiper blades, Dennis spoke.

Dennis spoke of nature and animals. He spoke of Land Rovers (a lot). He spoke of how his father at 60 and grandfather at 80 still farmed, raised livestock and proudly worked demanding physical days every day. He spoke of how neither would accept help from him because it would make them lazy, then weak. Dennis spoke of his family surviving famine. He called the famine "a good thing" because it made them stronger. He then spoke of learning to live in a state of love. He explained how that led to living in peace which ultimately led to a long and fulfilling life.

Dennis had married outside the Maasai culture because he didn't want a wife trained in obedience. He wanted a wife who would argue back, who cherished her own independence, and if she indeed loved him, did so because she freely chose to, not because she was required to. It was an amazing interview. The camera lurching around and the cacophonous Rover merely added to the intensity of Dennis' profound thoughts. If we had ever wondered how a man raised as a Maasai warrior, skilled in spear and bow and arrow could so easily assimilate western language, customs, technology etc. yet not lose any of his original culture, it was now becoming clear.

The Crater itself was sublime. There were herds of Wildebeest and Zebra interacting with the familiarity of old army buddies. We shot a sex training film for ostriches including sequences in super sensual ultra slow motion. The male begins with an uncomfortably familiar sequence of prancing and poses. The finale resembles a perfectly rhythmic fan dance. The suitor languidly glides a puffed-out feathered wing across his body and follows with his head and neck imitating some slithering serpent. By the time the serpent has crossed his supine form, he moves the wing across again. Wing, then serpent. Wing, then serpent. This continues in an absolutely regular and evidently seductive tempo for a considerable time. The eye candy must function as some form of foreplay and evidently does the trick because the male ostrich then casually rises and proudly walks to the female, mounts her and with two long necks wriggling synchronously, an extremely large egg is conceived.

We came across a line of tourist Land Cruisers that seemed to stretch a mile with tops popped open and every size, shape and style of human looking through cameras, binoculars and telescoping spyglasses of every description. A Rhino had been spotted. Rhinos may be a dime a dozen at the San Diego Wild Animal Park, but they are far, far more elusive in the wild. The Rhino was truly an immense distance away and the only ones allowed to leave the roads were rangers.



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We looked and looked and saw absolutely nothing! Dennis aimed the Sony and we zoomed the 25:1 in all the way, flipped in the 2X extender and maxxed out the Fujinon image stabilizer and at 2500mm saw absolutely nothing but great abstract blobs constantly changing shape in the intense heat waves. Only a Maasai with an awesome pair of binoculars could possibly have discerned the Rhino. But there they were, tourists stretching as far as the eye could see, all staring intensely into the dancing air and imagining seeing a Rhinoceros. So it goes.

-The New Merry Pranksters

-nearing the end but still more to go

Episode #14

Yousef the Charmer, More about Maasai and a Spectacular Kill

Yousef is an extremely social animal. He has over 2,300 facebook friends. He loves portraiture and has charm to burn. We pull into a gas station where a half dozen or so men lounge against a wall. Richard cautions Bob not to take pictures of them or at least to ask their permission first. But Yousef is already in there holding the 70-200mm vertically and blazing away. Richard frowns and the men look menacing. But the young Saudi/American charmer walks right into their midst and not only shows them their portraits but offers to send them copies by E-mail. Bob shoots Yousef doing all this of course Dan shoots Bob shooting Yousef shooting everyone else. Soon Yousef is directing the formerly scowling crowd into poses and two-shots, exchanging contact info and recruiting new international facebook friends.

Our next stop was a lunch stop at the ranger's station exit from Serengeti National Park. As we're opening our box lunches we see an exceptionally attractive woman in a green park ranger uniform. She seems to be smiling coquettishly and posing for you know who. She would surely have blushed were it not for her dark complexion. Yousef the charmer strikes again. The mutual attraction is clear. She tells him she's not married. They exchange contact info and . . . who knows?

We have now been shooting, traveling, eating and sharing life with our guides Richard and Dennis for about two weeks. Sometimes the conversations are extremely personal and we learn a lot about each other. Maasai men become warriors. Dennis was 16 when he became a warrior and Richard was 19. It was their rite of passage into adulthood.

Before boys can become warriors and men, they must confirm the Maasai tradition of bravery by becoming circumcised. Successful completion assures that you are worthy to be a Maasai warrior, afraid of nothing in life, be it warfare, predator or the deadly Black Mamba (the snake, not Kobe).

While the boy's family may know when the circumcision will occur, the boy usually doesn't. Typically, a large group of boys walk far from home and celebrate and dance the night before the event. Arising at 4 or 5 in the morning they plunge into an extremely chilly river. That is the only anesthesia they will have before or after the operation. A Maasai specialist called a Ngariba performs the circumcision in about 3 minutes. The boy is expected not to flinch, not to move, not even to blink. There is tremendous pride associated with completion of the ritual. No woman will consider sex with an uncircumcised man. Immediately afterwards, training occurs about life values and the responsibilities of manhood.

We have written before of the morality of the predator. Some say that in nature there is no right or wrong, only what is. Yesterday, we captured a very beautiful shot and sequence. It will be disturbing to some. It was a rite of passage for the wildlife cinematographers. We had witnessed three previous failed attempts by lions to capture prey. We had also seen lions with their ribs far too prominent and seen lion cubs who would starve before the next summer.

We first noticed the lioness a long, long way from a herd of Wildebeest and Zebra. She clearly was focused on the herd. For well over an hour she hid in the tall grass, creeping forward a few feet and then hiding again. Dan had the long Fujinon zoom on the Sony in Dennis' car and Richard's car contained Yousef on the Weisscam and Bob with the Canon still cameras. Over and over we debated whether to move on to the forest or swamp or whether to keeping waiting for what could easily be another failed attempt or non-attempt.

There is debate about the intent and behavior of the zebras. They were downwind from the lion and sometimes we thought the adults sensed her presence. But they allowed a young zebra to graze closer and closer to the lion while the rest of the herd drifted back. A sacrifice? Dan thinks so but the guides doubt it.

Dan, currently president of the Society of Camera Operators chose the harder assignment, tracking the barely visible lion who would charge without warning. Yousef and Bob chose the easier job of framing the zebra. The lion would come to them. Yousef burned precious battery power continuously shooting at 700 fps, re-recording over the buffer every 17 seconds. Bob was hand holding the 1D Mk 4 on a Cine-Saddle with the 500mm with a 1.4x extender.

Suddenly the lion lunged. Dan had turned his head for a second and when he looked back his frame was bare. Richard shouted the alarm, "There she goes" and Yousef and Bob went on full alert. The young zebra grazed for another second then raised its head up high for a beat and went into full panic flight, twisting around, almost stumbling, then speeding away. The young zebra zig-zagged frantically raising clouds of back-lit dust.

Yousef's perfect framing shows the zebra at the right of the frame turning left as the lion enters from frame left on a perfect intersection vector. The black and white haunches make a perfect target as the lion leaps high, swiping out with her right front paw, claws fully extended, and knocks the zebra off balance, stumbling again and creating a huge cloud of dust. The lion, in clear silhouette against the dust opens her jaws impossibly wide and jams her mouth into the zebra's side. The zebra goes down and in a flash the lioness finds the zebra's neck and it is all over. In Yousef's extraordinary 8 minute shot, a greek chorus of horned wildebeest watch over the spectacle, nobly framed through the dust watching a zebra leg thrust upward and the lion's tail whip high at the coda. But now Yousef's 17 seconds of fame is all but over and he switches off just in time to avoid recording over the beginning of his shot.

Dan's long, long lens covered the lioness chasing off scavenging hyenas and then dragging the hefty carcass to her cubs hiding in the brush some distance away. For us, as new wildlife cinematographers, we felt like we'd just been circumcised.

-The New Merry Pranksters
-next episode: Tarangire Park

Episode #15

Tarangire Park

Despite our success at the Ngorongoro Crater, the strict rules prohibiting going off road cramped our style. Tarangire Park had been mentioned as the 3rd most important attraction but when we heard a German couple rave about the animal density there, we asked our guides advice. Now the guides aren't supposed to change schedules or rock the boat but when we asked what they would do in our position, the call was made to spend our last filming day in Tarangire Park. What a good decision it would prove to be.

Tarangire has a large river running through it which proves to be a magnetic attraction for the animals during the dry season. Elephants, zebra and a lot of wildebeest gather at the river. But best of all, offroading is almost completely unrestricted for those with filming permits like ours.

In addition to their charm and formidable people skills, our guides are the kind that really love the land and the animals. While offroading we discovered two lion families that had just killed a huge wildebeest. The two adult females were so full they would roll over with their bellies and legs up and squirm with satisfaction on the ground. The five cubs were enjoying the feast like kids with a Thanksgiving turkey. Except their table manners followed a slightly different convention.

A physical description and certainly some of the footage we shot would be distasteful to many, but we were too focused on the joy of the entire family to be offended. A lioness climbed a tree, but took a bit of time figuring how to get down. The cubs jumped in to the river to wash themselves off. They played their cub games and we laughed out loud. One would sneak up and jump another. Then a third would pile on both of them just before a fourth, who had been stealthily playing possum would, sopping wet from the river, fly into the mix. They were truly the merry pranksters and we shot and shot until it was dark, until we had added 12 db of gain to the Sony 350's sensitive CMOS chips, until we could see them no more except on the bright Transvideo monitor. Now we had to find our way back without roads in the darkness. Hakuna matata. No problem. Our guides were Maasai.

Fear is a common factor in human society. The Maasai are almost exempt. So are the lions. How many times have we been warned about approaching an animal who's eating. We're told animals will attack to defend their meal. But here we were in a Land Rover, perhaps fifteen feet from the felled wildebeest, sometimes directly between the mother lions and their cubs. They looked up at us when we started the engine. But then they saw who we were and went back to enjoying their fresh wildebeest tartare. Long experience had confirmed that Land Rovers were no threat to them.

African Environments had hosted us in solar powered environmentally sound camp sites for almost two weeks. Our last night in Tanzania was spent at the solar powered Tarangire Safari Lodge, a luxurious permanent establishment set overlooking a spectacular view of the river, that also catered to genuine tourists. It felt luxurious to have real flushing toilets and running water after so many nights of happy camping.

As we packed for the trip to Arusha, where we'll grab a quick shower and change clothes, we'll try to get all the gear packed in their original cases as per the original manifest that customs neither checked nor certified. We become concerned about soil - African soil. Anticipating an adventure at customs, we are concerned that the amount of dust accumulated on all the gear could be construed as bringing African soil into the U.S. Under different circumstances this might seem absurd. But bringing \$509,000 worth of largely foreign gear into the U.S. without a stamped manifest can make one paranoid. Especially when it was the customs agents at the same airport, LAX, who wouldn't check our gear in the first place. So we rose quite early to clean the gear. Our new honorary pranksters, Dennis Mollé and Richard Nashuma, are up at the crack of dawn to help.

Our other concern is baggage costs. We hope our legitimate media credentials, including Creative Cow magazine and ICG magazine plus work being done by our favorite Delta agent, Karen McGill will get us the \$50 media rate instead of the normal \$200/bag rate. It is Tanzania after all. Anything can happen and that's a big difference with 10 cases of gear.

We consider ourselves fortunate to have had such a successful voyage. We brought the newest, most complex equipment and it performed beautifully under tortuous conditions. We all feel an excellent movie could be cut



The Professional's Choice
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from just our own footage. No one saw much of our dailies due to our non-stop shooting schedule. The editing will be a formidable chore. We have just short of four terabytes of Apple ProRes 422 HQ and Canon RAW material. Anyone know an appropriate editor who wants to become a Prankster?

Perhaps most important though, we each had a magnificent time, bonded not only with each other but with a pair of Maasai guides from the other side of the globe and learned a great deal about life in Tanzania and a great deal about ourselves.

-The New Merry Pranksters