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Tourists flock Mara for the wildlife world cup



Wildebeests cross the Mara River in the Masai Mara Game Reserve yesterday. Thousands of tourists have thronged the area to witness the annual spectacle. (PHOTOS: ROBERT KIPLAGATI/STANDARD)

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Hotel operators have reported high bookings as visitors troop to the park to witness the annual spectacle

By **ROBERT KIPLAGATI**

Thousands of tourists have thronged the Masai Mara Game Reserve to witness the annual wildebeest migration.

Tourists surrounded both sides of the Mara River armed with cameras and mobile phones to capture the action as the snorting beasts cross the crocodile-infested river.

A dash, a jump and then a splash and just like that the fight for survival begins for the wildebeests. Successfully crossing the Mara river does not guarantee survival as other predators usually lay in wait on the other side. Tourists who spoke to The Stan-

THE SPECTACLE

- The wildebeest migration is one of the seven new wonders of the world
 - It is also known as the world cup of wildlife
 - Mid-February is calving season when approximately 8,000 wildebeest are born every day for three weeks in Serengeti
 - The birthing occurs at the lower northern slopes of the Ngorongoro Crater highlands and around Olduvai Gorge
- Source: Masai Mara website

dard and most of whom were witnessing it for the first time were ecstatic, describing the migration as epic.

One such tourist is Diana Mangalago, a French and a Professor at the University of Oxford in the United Kingdom, who is in the country for four days.

"It's my first time to be at the Masai Mara. I have been to other parts of Kenya such as Nairobi, Longonot but

had never witnessed the Wildebeest migration before. It's amazing. The randomness, the numbers, it's priceless," Ms Mangalago said.

The wildebeests usually migrate between July and September every year to avoid the tall and dry grass in Masai Mara, which exposes them to predators. Serengeti is their breeding ground.

Mid-February is calving season, when approximately 8,000 wildebeests are born every day for three weeks in areas around Lake Ndutu in Serengeti.

Edward Johnson from California, USA, is on his second tour. Mr Johnson is enjoying the spectacle so much that he said he could be flying in every year to witness it.

"I love the sight. It's even interesting seeing them battle the crocodiles. I was lucky to see a zebra being mauled by a gigantic crocodile. Oh boy! It was a thriller!" he said.

Hotel operators in the park have reported high bookings as tourists flock the park to witness the eighth wonder of the world.

Oltare Mara Kempinski Camp Manager Fairman Muingi says bookings have been on a steady rise from 52 per

cent last month to 70 per cent.

"So far so good. The business is good. We've had visitors booking into our camp, most of whom are coming for the wildebeest migration," said Mr Muingi, adding that the number of domestic tourists was still low.

Area senior Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) Warden Collins Omondi said being the high season, they had put stringent security measures to deter poaching and to ensure tourists' security.

"We have enhanced our security in the entire Masai Mara park. We are working closely with the police, rangers and the Tanzanian authorities to enhance patrols at this time of the year, and always," said Mr Omondi.

Governor Samuel ole Tunai, who chairs the Tourism sub-committee at the Council of Governors, said they were working with the Kenya Tourism Board and the Tourism ministry to market Masai Mara as the best tourist destination in Africa.

"Masai Mara is the jewel of tourism and with the peace that we have had in the country as well as the great marketing by the Tourism ministry, tourists from across the world are welcome to sample our best," said Mr Tunai.