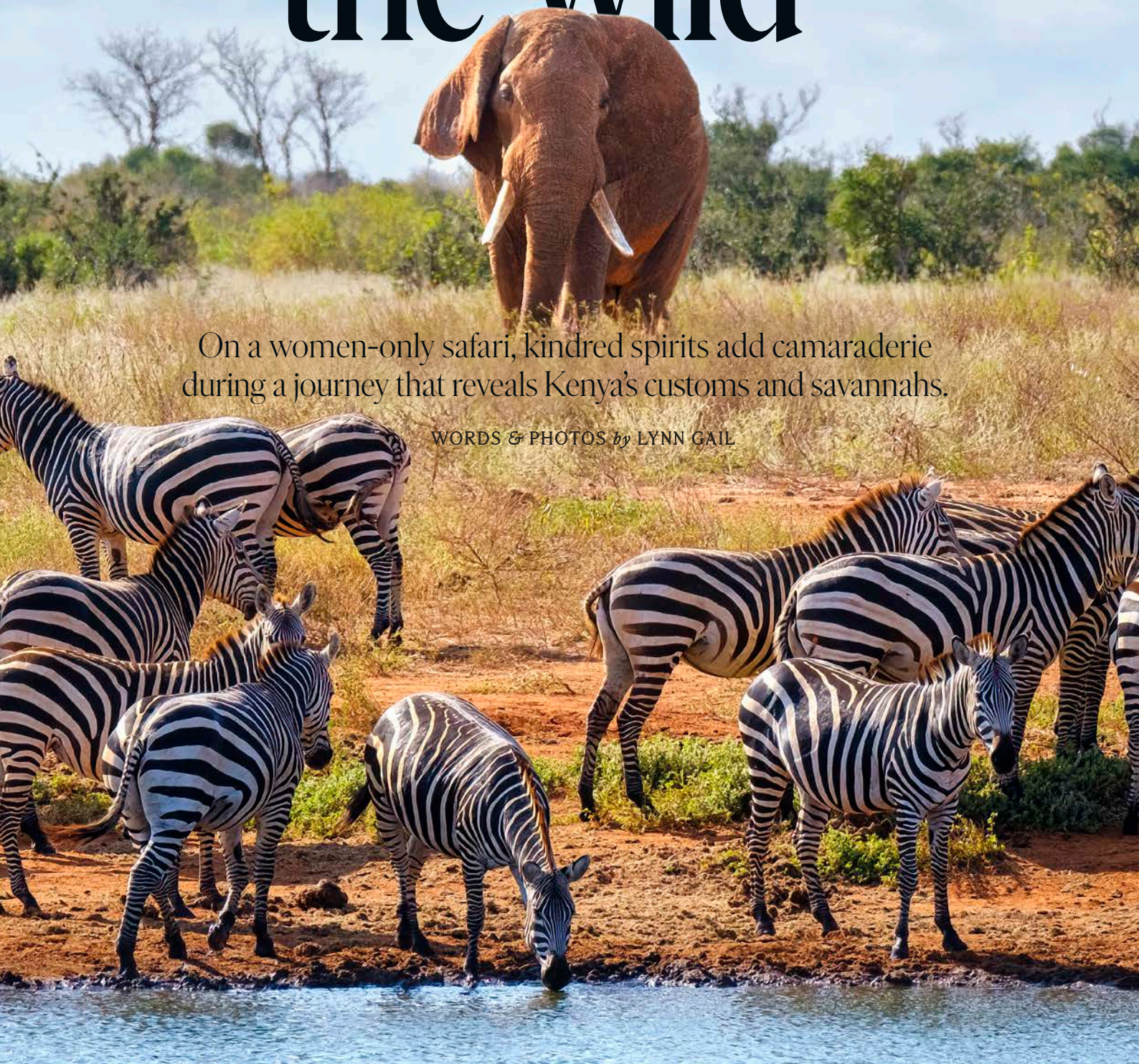


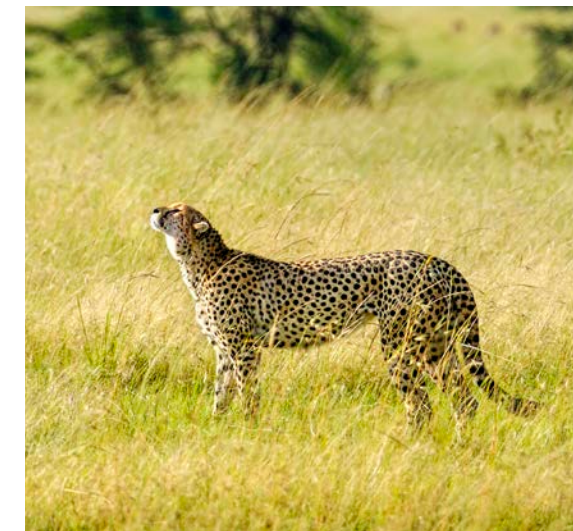
Call of the wild

On a women-only safari, kindred spirits add camaraderie during a journey that reveals Kenya's customs and savannahs.

WORDS & PHOTOS by LYNN GAIL



Clockwise from left: A hungry elephant calf at Sheldrick Wildlife Trust; a cheetah surveys the savannah; the tour group on safari; an artist at the Kazuri Beads Factory. Opposite: Majestic wildlife.



I'd like to tell you about Kenya's heart. How it beats, its rhythm. How this welcoming East African country takes you by the hand and shows you its ways. Kenya doesn't hold its cards close to its chest; it shares them.

I'm watching baby elephants bound across a paddock at Sheldrick Wildlife Trust, a conservation organisation in Nairobi. They are focused only on huge milk bottles held by their keepers, the bond between calf and carer is clearly parental. Rescued from the wild by rangers, the orphaned elephants, some only months old, suckle the containers dry. Then it's playtime, splashing around in sludge. A four-month-old rhino joins the shenanigans as we hear why, and how, the animals were saved. I look over to my fellow travellers who are with me on Bench Africa's Explore Kenya Tour, a 12-day fully escorted ladies-only trip, to see we've all teared up.

"What incredible work, I wanted to pop that baby rhino in my bag," Shelagh, a retired nurse, says as we leave.

Bursting into song

The good feels continue when we visit Kazuri Beads Factory. It's a poverty-to-purpose story. Seeing a need to help struggling single mothers from Nairobi's slums, Susan Buxton Wood, an artist and daughter of missionary parents, began the grassroots company in her home in the 1970s.

"We couldn't dress or feed our children before Kazuri," the manageress tells us as she explains how the kiln-fired ceramic beads and jewellery pieces are meticulously handcrafted. "We have over 50 workers, and each woman now has a sense of responsibility and focus."

Their joy is real. In a sudden flash mob moment they put down tools, drumming



the tables, hollering soulful, gospel-like songs. We join the throng, swinging and singing along, our smiles as wide as theirs.

A visit to the remarkable Giraffe Centre to learn how the endangered Rothschild giraffe was saved rounds off an inspiring day.



Into the wild

The following morning our group of eight board the Kenyan Railway for the four-hour train ride to Mombasa. Train attendants dressed in their finery usher us to first-class carriages. We're kids on a field day having a field-day as we take it in turns spotting distant wildlife: zebras, giraffes, elephants, warthogs – anything that moves.

When we arrive at Tsavo National Park it's not long before we encounter a "Big Five" safari animal. Less than five metres from our



African ADVENTURE

Need to know

WHEN TO GO

Bench Africa has trips departing on June 3, 2025, and November 13, 2025.

GETTING THERE

Emirates, Air Mauritius and South African Airways all reach Nairobi through various flight routes departing from Australia's capital cities.

TOUR DETAILS

Bench Africa's 12-day Explore Kenya – Escorted Ladies Tour starts from \$9990.

Visit benchafrika.com/experiences/classic-kenya-ladies-tour/



Clockwise from top: Lions at Tsavo National Park; learning to cook ugali, the national dish; tribal men dance Adumu at a traditional Maasai village.

4WD a pride of lions devour a kicking zebra. Their blood-stained faces are the only pop of colour in the dry grass as they survey the savannah. We watch the zebra still. It's a bittersweet, circle-of-life moment.

"The safari gods are smiling upon us!" Suzie, a mine site safety officer, shouts. "I've dreamt of witnessing a wild kill – it's both sad and special."

Women-only safaris bring like minds together and we easily connect as we search the plains. We write the script as we go, manifesting leopards, cheetahs, giraffes, rhinos and more, and are surprised when they come into view. It's the beginning of the dry season and the landscape unfolds like a pop-up storybook. We watch herds of zebras merge like mind-bending puzzles, and see huge, tusked elephants walk within camera-lens reach.

Tests in the kitchen

Learning about Kenyan culture adds another layer to our journey. We don aprons and unforgiving hairnets to cook the national dish, ugali. Over a huge crock-pot we share the strong-arm task of mixing the ingredients – maize flour and water – until we achieve a dense, dough-like consistency, though there's more laughing than ladling.

"Before we marry, the mother-in-law tests our ugali; if it's bad, sometimes we cannot marry," Daisy, our upbeat cooking teacher, explains.

"Is it harder to please the mother-in-law or husband?" Jane, a physiotherapist, asks.

"The mother-in-law!" Daisy laughs over a lunch of ugali, chicken curry, tasty Kenyan greens called Sukuma Wiki, chapatis and

delicious bean dishes. I taste the efforts of our labour – it's fair to say any one-knee proposals would be off.

Leaps and bounds

On our final day, Kenya's rhythm comes full circle when we visit a traditional Maasai village. Tribal men wearing shukas – a vibrant red blanket worn by Maasai warriors, dance Adumu, a jumping tradition performed to attract brides. Bejewelled Maasai women stand by keeping their eyes peeled for the highest jumper; his strength is seen as good marriage material. It's when a Maasai man asks me to photograph him inside his simple mud hut that another layer of Kenya reveals itself. Dignified, swathed in his shuka, he poses, kinglike – proud of his nation and his unmaterialistic world. **AWW**