



Kenya

Africa

Girls go wild

A women's-only safari creates a special kind of sisterhood, writes Lynn Gail



Safaris begin like a blank canvas, and we're full of anticipation from the moment our 4WD fires up as we peek out of the raised roof like meerkats surveying their terrain. Cameras poised, we visualise sightings: an unfolding chase, a mating ritual, a blood-red kill.

"We're in Kenya!" my safari friend Suzie cries as a red African elephant the size of a mini-van strolls languidly towards our vehicle. "I'm finally here!" Overwhelmed, she tears up. The Explore Kenya Tour, a 12-day escorted ladies' trip with African experts, Bench Africa, is Suzie's first safari. "It's only day two, and already life-changing," she says as Sammy, one of our guides and drivers, cuts the engine near a waterhole. The noon heat has seeped from the day, and a warm glow lights up an elephant herd immersing their mammoth torsos. Their trumpeting calls startle surrounding birdlife as they vacuum up gallons of water. It's live action – raw, magical, with ringside seats. Then nature turns it up a notch. A hulking male vigorously trunk-splashes the water before mounting a mud-caked female in a breeding frenzy. It's lightning-speed coupling, but the excitement inside our safe bubble continues.

"Absolutely made my day!" Michelle, a first-time solo traveller, shouts. "It's worth every cent to be here."

Being June we're here after heavy rains, bouncing along muddy tracks having free safari "massages" as we tick wildlife off our sightings list – lions, hyenas, cheetahs. Golden-coloured gazelle bound skittishly to avoid predators, a flock of ostriches buff their feathers against the wind, while a mud-caked buffalo stands statue-still.

Later that afternoon we pull into a clearing where director's chairs sit around a campfire on earth the colour of the Australian outback. Our view: some 13,700sq km of protected land in Tsavo East National Park. Dusk dusts the horizon as we sip Dawa, a Kenyan cocktail of vodka, lime, and honey. Our adventurous group of eight includes a mine site safety officer, head of hospital emergency department, cane farmer, nurse, ex-office manager and retired teachers. Conversations flow freely and before long we're singing "Hakuna Matata" (no worries) like no one's listening.

At dawn, the nail-clicking sounds of cicadas wake me. Cocooned in my dark glamp tent, I listen to the day start at Satao Camp. It's an orchestral mishmash of snorting, birdsong, and rumbling followed by Santa Claus-like laughter. At first light the unmistakable outline of an elephant appears metres from my deck. It's an unfenced lodge, but I feel completely safe as I watch buffaloes, zebras, and monkeys congregate like commuters, guzzling their morning drink around the waterhole. Overhead, thousands of starlings swoosh and swirl in wave after wave of murmuration – a spectacular natural phenomenon.

In two 4WDs, we head to Amboseli National Park, hoping to get a glimpse of Mount Kilimanjaro. At 5895m, it's Africa's highest peak. "Sometimes she plays hard, hiding under the clouds," Pesh, our experienced female guide, warns. "If she's in a good mood, she'll come out and you girls will be lucky to see her."

Our route takes us through villages where shacks clad with corrugated iron are called Versace, Chomp Hotel, and Club Vegas. Locals stand on the road selling snacks, fruit and water, while cattle farmers feed their stock along grassy verges.

We stop to watch giraffes, learning they are called a tower when still; when moving, they're a journey. We debate whether zebras' stripes are white-on-black or black-on-white. Being a women's-only tour, we let our guards down, chat about women's issues, and share our stories as we safari on.

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Photography: Lynn Gail (singing, Mount Kilimanjaro, beading)

From top: Red elephant spotting; singing "Hakuna Matata" in Tsavo East National Park; deluxe tent at Elerai Camp; zebras at a watering hole.



Snow-capped Mount Kilimanjaro. Below: Tour guests learn beading from Maasai women at Elerai Camp.

ESCAPE

ROUTE

GETTING THERE

Emirates flies to Nairobi via Dubai; Air Mauritius flies to Nairobi via Mauritius.
emirates.com; airmauritius.com

TOUR DETAILS

Explore Kenya, a 12-day Escorted Ladies Tour, starts from \$9990 (no single supplement add-on).
benchafrika.com
Entry requirements: Australians need an Electronic Travel Authorisation (eTA) visa to enter.
etakenya.go.ke/en

Sammy skids to a stop. He's spotted a baboon ripping apart a dik-dik – a miniature antelope. It's hard to witness, mesmerising to watch. His large human-like hands skilfully manoeuvre the limp body, and he devours the meat until the carcass is bare. The day gets even better when we arrive to see snow-capped Mount Kilimanjaro, resplendent as she towers over Tanzania and Kenya.

Our luxury accommodation, Elerai Camp, has only 12 glamping tents, so we almost have the lodge to ourselves. In the afternoon, we try our hand at beading alongside three traditionally bejewelled Maasai women. It's a coming together – two groups of women from different lifestyles connecting through creating traditional tribal jewellery. Fashioning bracelets, we thread tiny beads onto thin wire. It takes all my willpower to stay on task. I'm painstakingly slow, but the camaraderie around the table adds comic relief to the challenge. We ask the women about their families, learning some Maasai men take four wives; their village chief has nine and 65 children.

"I'm pinching myself," Suzie says. "I've dreamt of meeting the Maasai, learning about your traditions. This is such a highlight."

Denise, who is here with her twin sister, adds, "It's so special to sit with you, learning about your culture. It's exceeded all my expectations."

As we bead, we realise that, while our lifestyles at a material level are different, our values are the same. Family, health and friendship matter to us all.

It feels like we have come full circle as we farewell new friends as though we've known them far longer than an afternoon. While Kenya's calling card is undoubtedly its unparalleled safari experiences, meeting the Maasai women adds the final touch to the canvas, creating a complete masterpiece of our time in Kenya.

The writer was a guest of Bench Africa.



Lynn Gail is a West Australian writer and photographer with an addiction to elephants – one of the planet's most intelligent animals.

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