

Senior Traveller

NOVEMBER 2018

GO WILD

ON SAFARI IN AFRICA
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Photo: LYNN GAIL



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Senior Traveller

There's an elephant in the (bed)room

BY LYNN GAIL

"THAT'S a wild animal, you know." It's a question and a statement rolled into one; a subtle warning as I stand metres away from Kenya's largest animal, the African elephant.

As a safari virgin I want to study his innocent expression as he trunk-tosses mud into the air. The guard backs up his caution, "it's unlikely that he would attack you; if he did, you'd be flattened", his hand slicing the air, demonstrating what flat looks like. But I sense no threat; unprovoked, these are the gentle giants of the African savannah.

We've just arrived at Elephant Bedroom Camp, Samburu National Reserve, with Africa tour experts Bench Africa and the camp's manager, Joseph Gitonga, briefs us on safety.

There is no fencing around the property, so elephants and other wildlife are free to wander through the grounds. Guides carry rifles and clubs at all times and if elephants are present during the day we're asked to ensure we are accompanied by a guide. At night, if we require assistance, a flash of torchlight will alert night watchmen.

The camp boasts 12 spacious tents built on raised decking. Furnished with a fusion of indulgent African decor and rustic furnishings, they overlook the Ewaso Ng'iro River, Kenya's third-longest river and integral to the survival of wildlife.

We squeeze in a game drive before dusk dims the arid landscape. Standing 6.5 metres tall, our guide Julius Lesori, a member of the Samburu tribe, greets us wearing a bright yellow and blue shuka, the traditional wrap-around cloth.

Within minutes we come across a large herd of elephants feeding on a tough dinner of thorny acacia trees. To maintain their six-tonne bodyweight, they often spend up to 18 hours a day eating a buffet of various grasses, twigs, tree bark and, if they can source them, wild fruits.

The baby elephants seek protection between their mothers' legs, while the teenagers tangle tusks, play fighting rather than feeding. But the matriarch has stopped ripping branches from the trunk. Julius turns around from the driver's seat and sounds a long, "shsssh" as he points to a prowling lioness stalking the vulnerable calves.

Our stationary open-sided vehicle is surrounded by the herd. Alarmed by the lion's presence, the matriarch produces an



ON THE PROWL: A lioness watches and waits for her chance around a herd of baby elephants. **Photos: Lynn Gail**



SEE ME NOT: Reticulated giraffes resemble dry cracked earth with their joined-up white lines, which provide camouflage against predators.

ear-piercing trumpet-like scream. Flapping her ears she kicks up the earth behind her as she charges at the lioness, standing metres from our 4WD. The lioness takes off at speed and for several minutes afterwards, the elephant paces, unsettled. Protecting her young is instinctive and here in the savannah survival is not guaranteed.

Being May, the evenings are brisk and we pull blankets around us for the drive back. We spot a journey of reticulated giraffes. From a distance they resemble dry, cracked earth with their joined-up white lines, but up close they are striking in their elegance

as they feed off high branches. Their coat is most distinctive and provides camouflage, although I wonder how an animal so tall is able to hide.

After the drive, we invite Julius to dine with us in the open-air restaurant edged by the river. Interested by his culture, we warn him there may be myriad questions. Over tasty African-infused dishes, prepared to five-star standard, we learn about his life as an orange sunset fades, revealing a star-studded ceiling.

When he was seven, he tells us, Christian missionaries came to his village and asked each family to allow one of their children to

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JUMBO-SIZED ADVENTURE: Elephants graze undisturbed in the long grass.

attend school. As Julius was the fifth of six children he was the right age to go. "At first my father did not want me to go. Children tended to goats and cows. He was not very happy." As the only one in his family to go to university "now, when I return home, I'm a role model and more people send their children to school," he says proudly.

But with more children leaving the village, he worries about his community maintaining its culture and traditions. It's a double-edged sword, for while education is important in raising professional career awareness it also takes the women away from his village as they move to the city to study and then marry.

"Sons have to come back home when they marry, but daughters now marry who they choose and leave their families." After our dinner conversation putting the world to rights, Julius sees us to our tents. "If we don't see the big five tomorrow, we try to see the small five!" he says with a broad smile.

I awake completely relaxed to the sound of birdsong and the soft pitter-patter as small monkeys dance over the roof of my tent. After a hearty buffet breakfast in the company of squirrels and hornbills we meet Julius for our safari bushwalk. Against the backdrop of Mount Kenia, we stroll through red earth

and tall, dry grass. A guard in full army uniform, complete with rifle, accompanies us. Julius says animals don't usually bother you unless you provoke them. "Buffalo and rhino are worst. If you get in their way, they just kill you and leave you there; they don't even eat you!"

Thankfully the big five – elephant, buffalo, rhinoceros, leopard and lion – don't make an appearance while we're on foot. We search for the small five – buffalo weaver, elephant shrew, rhinoceros chameleon, ant lion and leopard tortoise – and see their tracks.

Where I see an arid landscape, the Samburu see a supermarket. We chew on twigs Julius pulls from a toothbrush tree and our teeth feel surprisingly clean. He shows us a salt bush used for tenderising meat and flavouring food and explains how witch doctors use the acacia tree to aid stomach complaints among other ailments.

Two hours slip away and we arrive back at Elephant Bedroom Campsite, hoping to witness its namesake wandering the grounds before we leave in the morning. Elephants drink up to 200 litres of water a day and regularly visit the camp to rehydrate as the weather warms up. Joseph tells us to watch the river. "They will be here soon; they go up into the mountains to feed at night."

It's a warm, balmy afternoon and after lunch I slip into my tent's plunge pool and watch the world go by. And go by it does: a fully grown male elephant enters from the clearing beside my tent. Oblivious to my presence, he ambles so close I see chunks missing from his tusks where he's wrestled other elephants. As he continues on the way to the river, languidly swinging his trunk, I savour every moment. Only this time I enjoy Kenya's most majestic creature from the safety of a raised platform.

IF YOU GO...

To mark its 50th anniversary, Africa travel specialist Bench Africa has launched an eight-day Connoisseur Signature Safari Special, featuring three nights at Elephant Bedroom Camp in Samburu National Reserve and four nights at Mara Ngenche in Maasai Mara National Park – both prime locations. Prices start at \$6960 per person, twin share – a saving of up to \$1600 per person – including rustic yet luxurious accommodation, all meals, local drinks, road transfers, game viewing, two sundowners, park fees and internal flights. International flights not included. Conditions apply. Phone 1300-237-422, benchafrica.com.

Lynn Gail was a guest of Bench Africa.



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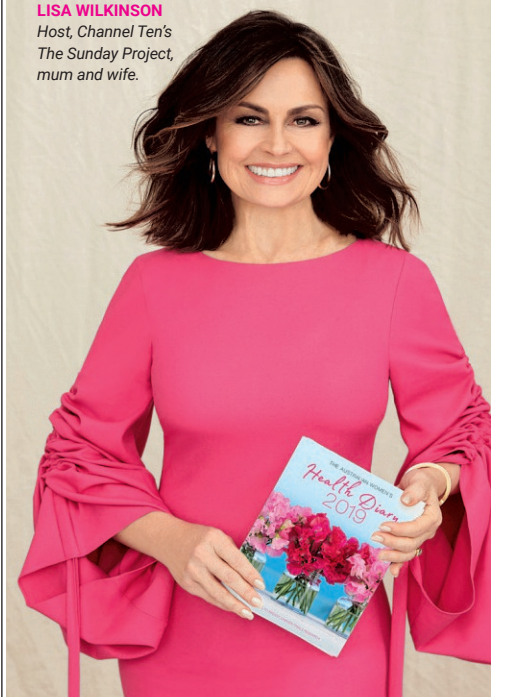
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