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# S O A R I N G M A J E S T Y

Aerial game viewing and hopping from luxury camp to camp by private Cessna is one thing, says Lydia Bell, but what really makes this safari stand out are the locals you meet while getting involved in conservation on the ground





**T**he belly of our plane grazes the dry bed of the Ewaso Nyiro River, scattering vervet monkeys in its wake. For me, nothing beats the exhilarating, yes-to-life high of flying over sub-Saharan Africa in a private plane. But this blows your average airstrip-to-airstrip transfer out of the water. It's about as much fun as you can have wearing a seatbelt. Kenya-based Scenic Air Safaris, top dogs in luxury air safari, have customised a new, 10-seater Cessna Grand Caravan, which means eight reclining and rotating leather seats. The idea is to fly low to allow for aerial game viewing and to satiate your lust for the visual stimuli of Africa. Travelling with you is your private safari guide as well as the bush pilot. But this particular safari has a twist: it follows a new nine-day 'Endangered Species' itinerary led by experts. It means that you discover the issues around threatened, endangered and critically endangered wild animals from the foremost authorities in Grevy's zebra, African wild dog, lion and cheetah, elephant, and white and black rhino. The trip encapsulates privilege, adventure, freedom and education in one beautifully realised, life-affirming package.

We fly southwest out of Nairobi over the Great Rift Valley, Masai manyatta and acacia pock-marking the landscape. The migration has started, and wildebeest mooch across the plains as we bump onto the strip. It's onwards to Justin McCarthy's Spirit of the Masai Mara lodge, the place to stay on the 35,000-acre Siana Private Conservancy, the newest of the seven that skirt this reserve. Created by charismatic larrikin McCarthy, its uniqueness lies in its seclusion in a rain-shadowed valley backed by an escarpment where buffalo wander. Here we hit the road with Dr Elena Chelysheva,

*The guides are Samburu; their warrior culture remains intact and their dress is so beautiful that it is hard not to stare*

the pioneer scientist on the behaviour of cheetah, of which there are only 7,000 left globally. The locals know her as 'Mama Duma' – 'cheetah lady'. Also with us is David Mascall, an eccentric lion genius who goes by the name 'Cat Snack', due to a mauling by a lion that required 385 stitches. Mascall has spent 30 years curating the orphan programme for the Kenya Wildlife Service.

We find a female lion crouched by a waterhole as zebra scoot nearby. She looks almost sleepy, but 'her body language says she's interested in hunting,' says Mascall, who knows all 420 lion residents of the Masai Mara. (In Kenya, in total, there are around 2,000 left.) Later, we encounter a coalition of cheetahs. Chelysheva explains that they are unrelated teenage boys learning to hunt ensemble; flouting the regular rules. 'Tourism affects cheetahs' behaviour in the Mara, says Chelysheva. 'For example, these cheetahs hunt only at night, when there are no vehicles.'

Morning finds us flying low towards Kenya's north, skimming over the brown earth of Laikipia punctuated by buffalo like wild stops. Some foreigners hesitate to visit these parts. In recent months, drought-afflicted pastoralists in Laikipia North have raided ranches, leading to the most negative international press coverage Kenya has received since the end of the Moi regime. Kenyans we spoke to argued that pockets of violence were isolated and linked to a politics, both tribal and federal, that doesn't affect visitors. Any safari itinerary is ultra-flexible and can swerve places that discomfort a client; we felt perfectly safe at all times. We touch down in the 65,000-acre Lewa Wildlife Conservancy, home to five lodges – one being Lewa Safari Camp, which has

Previous page: Aerial wildlife viewing from the Cessna Grand Caravan. This page and opposite: New Saruni Rhino in the Sera Conservancy offers high-tech black rhino tracking











old-style luxury tents nestled in the bush. This is one of Kenya's last safe refuges for rhino, elephant and Grevy's zebra.

It's late afternoon, when we venture into the field with Ian Lemaiyan and Mary Mwololo, whose expertise lies in black and white rhino and Grevy's zebra. Mwololo shows us some of the 270 Grevy's zebra – 12 per cent of the world's population; they are chunkier than the plain zebra, with delicate lines and extravagant ears. We spot a female black rhino on the horizon, a beautiful dinosaur being bothered by a male who wants to mate. She is demurring. 'Let's get closer,' says Lemaiyan, 'but hold onto your seats, as we may drop into holes made by aardvarks.'

The next morning we fly over a drought-parched landscape, the red-ochre earth riven with cracks and decorated with the soft green tops of acacia. Cusping Samburu National Game Reserve in the Northern Frontier, other-worldly Elephant Watch Camp is a romantic outpost made from fallen trees on the banks of the Ewaso Nyiro River. It is the home of globally influential elephant conservationist Saba Douglas Hamilton, whose parents started the camp, and whose mantle she carries magnificently. Seven kilometres downstream is the research centre for Save The Elephants, built by her father Iain Douglas Hamilton in 1997 on the remains of the Forties-era camp of George Adamson. It is one of few places in the world where you can still have close encounters with elephants.

The guides are Samburu; their warrior culture remains intact and their dress is so beautiful – vibrant loincloths, beads, bracelets and headdresses – that it is hard not to stare. I ask one man whether they dress less ostentatiously in the village. 'No, we put on more,' he smiles. Soon, a herd of play-fighting impala arrives, some buffalo and a family of warthogs with scampering triplets. A tower of reticulated giraffe joins the party, and a dazzle of braying Grevy's zebra. It's a like the opening scene from *The Lion King*.

We move on again, skimming the rocky plains of Kalama Conservancy to Sera Conservancy in the Northern Frontier District. Here, within the 3,450sqm wilderness of Sera, is a new, fenced sanctuary for black rhino. It is possible to track them on foot there from Saruni Rhino, a tiny, two-room lodge newly created by Italian writer and safari guide Riccardo Orizio for that specific purpose. Launched in February 2017, it's the only lodge in the conservancy – previously the only option was to camp.

This is true backcountry. Vast doum palms nested by vultures dwarf its two bandas on a sandy dry riverbed. Minutes after arriving, we are off – to the 41sqm sanctuary, edged in by a £1.15m fence and guarded by 120 SAS-trained rangers. There are 11 tagged rhinos currently resident – five males and six females. Driving along the perimeter, the ranger with the telemetry aerial tells the tracker, Joseph, to stop – we have a signal.

We walk across red earth scattered with chunks of granite and quartz, past termite mounds, amid a dense bush of conifer and tall acacia. It's thrilling to be on the ground. Joseph carries with him a sock full of ash, which, every now and again, he shakes to see which direction the wind is heading in. From that, and the sound of the rhino, he can determine its position. Then he whispers: 'Now they are 50-100 metres away, so remember not to talk loudly. Here



*It's an African journey  
of epic romance that has truly  
captured my soul*

she is.' We are stock-still. I hold my breath. The prehistoric, pregnant creature trots past, chewing loudly.

I drag myself away from this wild and pure place to fly back to Nairobi, the peak of Mount Kenya playing peekaboo above the clouds. We bed down at OneFortyEight in Lang'ata Suburb, a new eight-room hotel in the chic former home of jeweller and fashion designer Anna Trebinksi. The large garden borders the 1979-created African Foundation for Endangered Wildlife, home to critically endangered Rothschild giraffe, of which there are only 750 left. Our guide Simon Penfold displays a high tolerance for being licked with the cold, rough blue tongues of the giraffes as he feeds them pellets from between his teeth. Then we decamp to the David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust in time to see the orphaned baby elephants trotting back to camp for the night, trunks wiggling. Penfold reveals that we have each been allocated a foster elephant. Mine is Rapa, from the Sera Conservancy. He lost his family after falling down a well. Rapa deigns to Hoover pellets from my hand, then pushes my hand away with his trunk, signalling he's had enough. It's the final heart-stealer in an African journey of epic romance that has truly captured my soul □

*Natural World Safaris (01273-691642; [naturakworldsafaris.com](http://naturakworldsafaris.com)) offers a nine-day Scenic Air Safaris Endangered Species Flying Safari from £7,440pp (based on 10 travelling together), including accommodation at OneFortyEight in Nairobi, Spirit of the Masai Mara, Loisaba Tented Camp, Lewa Safari Camp and Elephant Watch Camp and exclusive use of a luxury Cessna Grand Caravan, accompanying pilot-guide, professional guide and host for the duration and endangered species specialists at each camp. (A stay at Saruni Rhino is a minimum of five days extra and costs an additional £2,720.) Scenic Air Safaris (020-7978 4534; [scenicairsafaris.com](http://scenicairsafaris.com)). Flights to Nairobi from £458pp with Kenya Airways ([kenya-airways.com](http://kenya-airways.com)). For more information, visit [magicalkenya.com](http://magicalkenya.com)*

Opposite, from top: Lewa Conservancy is a refuge for rhino, elephant and Grevy's zebra. Game viewing in Elephant Watch Camp on the Ewaso Nyiro River. Above: Old-school luxury at Lewa Safari Camp