

Game on

A stalking lioness bides her time. *Below*, one of the staff at Elsa's Kopje prepares the early-evening G&Ts



TAKE ONE SOPHISTICATED AND SCEPTICAL URBAN MAN AND LAND HIM ON THE PLAINS OF AFRICA, ADD SOME FEARSOME ANIMALS AND SEE HOW HE'S TRANSFORMED

KENYA: DIG IT

WORDS *Philip Watson*

IT'S 6AM AND WE'RE OUT searching for lion. The pale blue light of an African dawn is seeping into the parched, burnt highlands of the Laikipia plain in central Kenya, and we know they are out there somewhere. A couple of days earlier, two lionesses and their cubs had spent a long, languid night sleeping coolly by our camp, but the rains have dispersed the game and the pride is now on the move.

Still, Stefano and Francis are confident. Stefano Cheli is the mischievous owner of the small, isolated camp in which we are staying, and he and his head man Francis know the 60 square miles of the private ranch that surrounds it as if it was their backyard. We're just 40 miles north of the Equator here and 6,000ft up on the edge of the Great Rift Valley, and the

views across the scrubby grasslands and lava-strewn plains are long, flat and wide. Laikipia lion are less habituated to tourists than those on the more popular Masai Mara and Serengeti reserves; they are shy and skittish, stay in prides, and cover more ground. Yet if there is game to be spotted, you can near enough guarantee that this experienced pair will locate it.

For one thing, we're pretty sure we have heard them. About three quarters of an hour into our safari, as we splash through a shallow gully, Stefano suddenly stops the Land Rover, switches off the engine, and leans meaningfully out of the window. "Listen," he says, sotto voce, as we peer out from the top of the vehicle. The only sound I can hear is the cawing and crying of a secretary bird perched in



a tamarind tree. And then we hear it: the deep, bellowing roar of a young male lion.

For another thing, Francis has picked up a faint signal on his crackling high-frequency radio. Seven of the 30 lion on the ranch have been caught and collared as part of a research project funded by a US university; it is a study that, luckily for us, makes tracking them a little easier. It seems as if the pride is in the middle of a large, thick clump of doum palms and thorny acacia trees.

So we circle around them and approach from upwind. We are driving into a low sun, which is slowly burning off the silvery dew that shimmers and shines like a glassy green lake. We are bush-bashing our way through the landscape, the Land Rover heaving and

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Up, up and away

A balloon passes over termite hills on the Masai Mara. *Right*, a leopard is disturbed. *Below*, Esquire and camp-owner Stefano Cheli on the Laikipia plain. *Bottom*, a bathroom at Elsa's Kopje

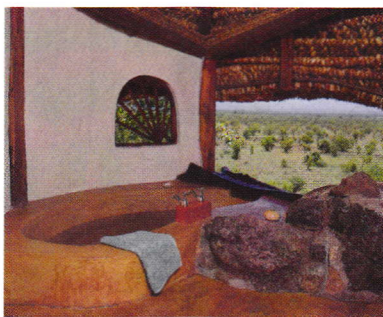
lurching on the rocky terrain like a boat in a stormy sea. It's too rough, so we try another way in.

We've been out for more than an hour and a half when Francis directs us to a desert spring. From here, we follow a dirt track up into the outcrop. The signal is getting weaker. "This is a good time to spot lion because they like to come out into the open and warm up in the sun," says Francis, "but I think they are giving us the runaround." They could be on the move – or further away than we thought.

And then, suddenly, on stony ground near a towering termite mound, it feels as if they are almost on top of us. The signal is strong, and again Stefano turns off the engine. The air is limpid and still, and the sense of expectation almost too much. "Look under the trees and bushes – they are really close," directs Stefano. "Still, I hope the lion don't decide to get nasty. We are off the beaten track here and there is no quick way out." He looks only half-serious.

We drive on slowly, and move out into a clearing close to some ancient, twisted olive trees. We can hear that resonant roar again, and also a low purring close by on our right, and I am on tenterhooks, my head swivelling to catch a glimpse of the pride, the binoculars slipping in my sweaty palms, my heart hammering against my ribcage. Although I am quite still, I am breathing heavily.

"Huku," whispers Francis; this means "there" in Swahili, I quickly realise. And then, "Simba eku hapa" ("Lion right here"), and we are upon them. A pride of two older females, three large juvenile males and six cubs are slowly crossing the



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muddy path in front of us. Their bellies swollen from a recent kill, they are so close that I can smell the mustiness of their skins and the meatiness of their breakfast. While two of the males stop to drink from a puddle of rainwater, the others saunter on. Only the third looks up. He gazes at us languorously with deep amber eyes, shakes his head dismissively, and moves into the bush. It feels as if he is just about tolerating us.

And then the pride is gone, and following it is impossible over such unfriendly terrain. "It's probably a kill of zebra or eland. Anybody want to get



TEN KENYAN SAFARI MUST-DOS

1. Visit the Masai Mara. While it's true that the proliferation of Land Rovers swarming round a single leopard is unfortunate, this is still the place you're guaranteed to find the greatest concentration and widest variety of game, including lion, leopard, elephant, buffalo and rhino. Best camps are Governors' Ilmoran and Little Governors'.
2. Go on a sunrise balloon flight. It will cost you £250, but the experience will be unforgettable.
3. Go on a walking safari.
4. Go on a night safari.
5. Spend some time washing off the dust on the tropical Indian Ocean coast. We headed to the laid-back Hemingways resort just south of Malindi.
6. Drink Tusker lager and smoke Sportsman cigarettes.
7. Chill out at Elsa's Kopje. Named after the orphaned lioness returned to the wild by George Adamson, who had his first camp nearby, this resort hideaway overlooks the remote Meru National Park. There are just eight traditional stone cottages, designed in a modern, elegantly ethnic style, like understated African safari fantasy rooms. Pricey (up to £220pp per night), but one of the most memorable places I've stayed.
8. Get yourself a good guide.
9. Visit Lake Naivasha. This picturesque lake three hours' drive north of Nairobi has islands of water hyacinth backed by purple mountains, and is perfect for longboat rides and hippo-watching. It's also a mecca for birdlife (listen out for the call of the male ring-necked dove, which sounds like "fo' pints o' lager"). Try a night or two at the lakeside colonial up-country residence Loldia House.
10. Get out of Nairobi. "Nairobi" is traffic jams, shopping precincts, violent crime and 2.5 million inhabitants.





WAY TO RO

I wouldn't recommend flying Kenya Airways (01784 888 222). Although the cabin crew were helpful and friendly, the in-flight food, films and facilities were way below standard. Better to go BA (0845 773 3377). Tourist visas (recently reintroduced) cost £35, and can be obtained from the Kenya High Commission at 45 Portland Place, London W1N 4AS (020 7636 2371), or by queuing at airports on arrival. Contact the Kenyan Tourist Board on 020 7355 3145 or at www.kenyatourism.org

All the properties mentioned here can be booked through Africa Exclusive (01604 628 979) and Hartley's Safaris (01673 861 600). Fourteen-day safaris visiting Laikipia, Governors' Ilmoran and Hemingways start at £3,535 per person, including BA flights, meals, accommodation, most drinks, and all game-viewing activities. To contact Stefano Cheli, call Cheli & Peacock on 00 254 2 604053 or go to www.chelipeacock.com. Other UK operators include Abercrombie & Kent (020 7559 8666), Cazenove & Loyd (020 8875 9666) and Safari Consultants (01787 228 494). For cheaper deals, try Somak (020 8423 3000). December and January are the peak tourist months; if you want to see the migration of the wildebeest on the Masai Mara, visit during July and August.

Desert boots. Wranglers and a bright torch are optional; binoculars, a zoom lens and insect repellent are not. I wouldn't recommend taking Lariam anti-malaria tablets – they gave me violently paranoid dreams.

For a preview of what you might see on safari, go to www.africam.com, a site which links you to webcams on game reserves across southern Africa; www.safarilink.com has a very good round-up of safari options and operators.



Breakfast in the bush
Esquire, guides and other members of the trip eat out after a sunrise balloon flight. *Left*, elephants on the plains. *Below*, giraffe crossing savannah on the Masai Mara

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out and search on foot?" deadpans Stefano, breaking the mood.

It's over in a matter of minutes, and seems all too brief a sighting for the intense couple of hours we have been out, but until now I hadn't believed the safari experience could be so visceral, so emotional – so involving. Whipsnade and Windsor have never done it for me; neither has *Out of Africa*.

Laikipia and Stefano Cheli changed all that. Granted, the camp is luxurious, exclusive (and expensive) compared to most, and you are very spoilt. Laikipia Camp has only four spacious, stylishly designed canvas tents, but a uniformed staff of 13. You're greeted with refreshing hot flannels when you come back from safaris; in the mornings, camp staff climb up ladders with hot water to fill the canvas buckets that feed pulley showers. Meals, produced from a bush kitchen, meet the international standards of the Italian-African owner. There are flushing toilets, for God's sake.


The camp is also environmentally responsible. Beds and furniture are made from the wood of dead olive trees, and the lighting is kept at low levels so as not to disturb the wildlife. Water is brought into the camp and waste taken out. A percentage of the fee paid for each guest goes to fund local community projects.

And yet, for all its refinement, Laikipia connects you directly with something at once universal and quintessentially masculine. After all, how many of us

haven't at one time fantasised about the ruggedly heroic life of the bushman and big-game hunter, of the survival instincts of such irascible and hard-drinking outsiders as George Adamson?

There is also something surprisingly elemental about safaris that calls to something deeper. I don't want to make too much of it, and it crept up on me when I least expected it, but safaris tune you in to a sense of the primal, of vulnerability, of our original place in the world. Kenya feels timeless, menacing, mysterious and immense. And romantic.

After a while, urban eyes focus and see more clearly. I noticed herds of zebra camouflaged against the savannah; black-faced vervet monkeys scampering high in the acacia trees; crested cranes crossing the flat horizon; a pair of leopard dangling dangerously in a baobab tree.

Africa leaves you with indelible memories. There was the dreamlike journey of giraffe that wafted across our path on a walking safari, their long black tails swishing rhythmically behind them. There was the flight from Laikipia to Meru in Stefano's 1968 Cessna bush plane (registration: BAD), during which we zigzagged so low through the valleys we could see lichen on the rocks. And there were the massive, snorting hippos that bobbed and then resurfaced on the silvery blue waters of Lake Naivasha like huge prehistoric submarines. At times like these, a safari is not so much a holiday as one of the great travel experiences. 



ANIMALS: AREN'T THEY WILD?

A giraffe's tongue is 21 inches long
Some lions mate more than 50 times a day
An ostrich's eye is bigger than its brain

The hyena's bite has a power of 200lb per square inch
Buffalo weavers build countless decoy nests to confuse predators
The termite queen lays 30,000 eggs each day
Elephants can eat up to 300lb of plant food daily