



Samburu Intrepids camp



CALL OF THE WILD

HALLIE CAMPBELL ON SAFARI IN KENYA'S BIG CAT COUNTRY

I didn't see the cheetah coming. She flashed out of the underbrush and leapt soundlessly onto the bonnet of our Land Rover before I could make a move. Staring at us with aristocratic hauteur as we cowered, her luminous amber eyes set in a sleek, elegant face, she was utterly wild and beautiful. My fear vanished into a sort of awe-struck admiration. The entire trip was worth just this one remarkable encounter.

But that's why we go on safari. To meet these amazing, rare and elusive animals, whose power and grace haunts our imagination. To be with the wild things in their land, on their terms, is what safari travel is all about. The thrill of seeing a lion cub playing with its mother, of watching a leopard drag its prey high up into a tree, of hearing a distant roar as you sit by a camp fire – these experiences are the essence of safari.

The adventure began as soon as I landed amidst the chaotic, sweaty and crowded throng of Nairobi airport. It was odd to realise I was a minority, a pale face among the crowd. Happily, this made me easy to spot and I was soon welcomed by a booming voice calling "Jambo!", the cheery Swahili greeting that resonates throughout Kenya. I was now in the capable hands of The Intrepid Safari Company and its rather dashing founder, David Stogdale. An old Kenya hand who radiates energy and optimism, he has more than thirty years invested in the land and its people. David works closely with the local tribes and offers them leadership roles in the company, providing much-needed local

employment. While some safari companies pocket the profits, Intrepid takes pride in ploughing the proceeds back into the community. The company supports local villages, builds and sponsors schools, and provides vital training for naturalists, guides and hotel staff. David is a passionate environmentalist. As a result, the Intrepid Safari Company camps have become a role model for sustainable tourism in East Africa.

We took off from Nairobi in a SafariLink plane, which was great fun and a perfect way to see the spectacular Kenyan landscape unfold. We headed for Samburu National Reserve, fifty minutes by air. Bouncing gently over the clouds and into golden sunlight flooding the emerald green coffee plantations of the Kenyan highlands, I thought of brave Karen Blixen (the author Isak Dinesen), who wrote *Out Of Africa*, and her love affair with legendary white hunter Denys Finch-Hatton, of eccentric Lord Delamere, and the naughty antics of the Happy Valley set. Kenya's history is as colourful as its wildlife. As we descended, dots became herds of animals, creating undulating patterns on the dusty landscape.

Our plane was met by smiling, khaki-clad guides and a group of Samburu 'morans', (young male warriors) wearing their bright red, traditional dress. The Samburu are gentler cousins of the famed Maasai tribe. They are herdsman who live pastoral, nomadic lives, virtually unchanged for centuries. Handsome, humorous and great storytellers, the Samburu people live in enviable harmony with their surroundings. By western definitions of wealth, the >



Samburu Intrepids camp

'THE INTREPID SAFARI COMPANY TAKES PRIDE IN PLOUGHING THE PROCEEDS BACK INTO THE COMMUNITY. THE COMPANY SUPPORTS LOCAL VILLAGES, BUILDS AND SPONSORS SCHOOLS, AND PROVIDES VITAL TRAINING FOR NATURALISTS, GUIDES AND HOTEL STAFF. DAVID IS A PASSIONATE ENVIRONMENTALIST. AS A RESULT, THE COMPANY CAMPS HAVE BECOME A ROLE MODEL FOR SUSTAINABLE TOURISM IN EAST AFRICA'

> Samburu are poor. They live in mud huts, their sandals are made from old tyres; and they eke out a bare living from harsh land. Yet when you see their lovingly tended herds, laughing children and close-knit tribal communities, you feel that all the hi-tech gadgets and luxuries back home reveal a different sort of poverty – that of the spirit.

The Samburu Intrepids camp is in an idyllic location. It rambles for a few acres along the tree-lined bank of the Usao Nyiro River, a favourite watering hole for the reserve's famous elephant herds. My thatch-covered tent had a lovely view of the water, and was everything I wanted. The four poster bed, draped in billowing mosquito netting, was big and comfy; there was a desk for writing, and plenty of room to move about. After a quick dip in the pretty swimming pool it was time for my first game drive.

Our guide, Tom Lmakiya Lesarge, helps run the Intrepids Safari camps, and knows everything from the Latin names of the birds on the balcony to where you're most likely to find a leopard. The Samburu National Reserve is in arid, rocky scrubland punctuated by thorny umbrella acacia trees and a sprinkling of springs. It is home to such a vast variety of bird and animal life that every game drive reveals something new.

Near the river we spot a family of elephants, a dignified matriarch leading the way with that stately stride all elephants possess, followed by three

'THE MARA INTREPID CAMP OFFERS THREE GAME DRIVES A DAY, AND THERE IS AN EXCELLENT PROGRAMME FOR YOUNGER GUESTS. UNLIKE MANY KIDS' CLUBS THAT AMUSE THEIR YOUNG GUESTS WITH PLAYSTATIONS, INTREPID GUIDES TAKE THEM TO THE VILLAGE TO MEET LOCAL CHILDREN FOR GAMES, GO ON BUSH WALKS AND GAME DRIVES WITH SEASONED NATURALISTS, AND LEARN TRIBAL ARTS AND SKILLS LIKE TRACKING (HOWLS OF LAUGHTER AS THE JUNIOR EXPLORERS LEARN TO SPOT THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A GIRAFFE DROPPING AND ELEPHANT DUNG!).'

pint-sized calves playfully tagging along and flapping their floppy ears at our approach. Along the dirt tracks sprightly 'Dik-Diks', (tiny antelope) leap past, while clutches of comical helmet guinea fowl run about dodging predators. Rare Grevy's zebra add a splash of pop art to the landscape as they trot into view. It's a great pleasure to watch the interaction of all these animals – so different from a zoo, where each species resides in its own caged area.

Back at camp and feeling ravenous, I was delighted to find exceptionally delicious food. Chef Okinda is a creative genius and his lime cheesecake is as good as anything from Maison Blanc. How he conjures up three mouth-watering meals a day, out in the middle of nowhere, is a culinary miracle. Sitting out on the dining terrace in the open air, listening to the melodies of songbirds and screeches from the playful monkeys, sipping an icy Tusker lager and eating freshly grilled Tilapia from Lake Victoria is my idea of safari heaven. Guests swap stories of the day's sightings, and the warm-hearted staff join in with their own tales. Service may not always be speedy, but it is full of kindness and a sincere desire to please. There is a real camaraderie here between the guests and staff that makes the stay special. I'm sad to leave my cosy tent when it's time to move on.

The Masai Mara National Reserve is on a much bigger scale than Samburu. The 2,300 kms reserve is home to one of Nature's great spectacles, the annual wildebeest migration. A single wildebeest is fairly unimpressive. He's a hairy, grimy-looking hodge-podge of an animal. But when there are a million all together, they demand your respect. Thundering past at a gallop, they are like a torrential river in full flow, all raw strength and dynamic ener-

gy. But there's much more here than wildebeest. People come from all over the world to experience what is considered the finest safari experience in Africa. The Mara is unique for its high concentration of animals and its varied ecosystem. It has more than 500 species of bird and 95 different mammals. All the big cats are here, with more than 20 prides of lions dominating the scene. Along the Talek River you'll find exotic birds in every hue, crocs and hippos, pythons, water buffaloes and the occasional rhino.

Mara Intrepids camp is laid out along the same lines as its little sister in Samburu. The buildings are all thatch and wood and blend seamlessly into the environment. The camp offers three game drives a day, and there is an excellent programme for younger guests. Unlike many kids' clubs that amuse their young guests with Playstations, Intrepid guides take them to the village to meet local children for games, go on bush walks and game drives with seasoned naturalists, and learn tribal arts and skills like tracking. (Howls of laughter as the junior explorers learn to spot the difference between a giraffe dropping and elephant dung!) Respect for other cultures, the animals and the environment is a lifelong lesson that the children take home.

Heroically deciding to brave a dawn outing, I awoke groggily to the sound of my tea arriving outside the tent. The sky was just turning pale pink as I zipped up the tent to keep the mischievous monkeys out, and headed for the jeep. We took off in a swirl of dust, in search of adventure. In the Mara, you'll find the real Africa – not a theme park.

Peering at the horizon, our guide decided to investigate a tree which looked slightly strange. As our driver approached, we discovered why. A stunning female leopard was gracefully reclining along an upper branch as if it were a luxurious chaise longue. She radiated feline chic and I suddenly understood why leopard print rarely goes out of fashion. But she was more than just a pretty face. Leopards are the most successful of the big cat hunters, stalking their prey with relentless precision until they pounce.

The next day our guide, the expert naturalist and consultant for the BBC series, Paul Kirui, offered to try and find the Ridge Pride of lions made famous by the BBC's Big Cat Diary series. More than 75% of the filming for the series took place around the Mara Intrepid camp. The challenge involved a few hours of exciting searches along river-banks, by rock outcroppings, and in shady thickets. At last we cleared a small hill to discover a group of Ridge Pride lionesses and their cubs relaxing in the shade of a giant Ficus tree. The tenderness and patience of the mothers, as they endured endless attention-getting antics from their cubs, was a delight to observe.

We headed back to camp as the brilliance of a bush sunset unfolded across the sky. Waiting for us was a roaring fire and a glass of wine. In the evening, a majestic group of Maasai warriors lead us in a lion dance under the stars. Their whoops enlivened the darkness as they have for ages past. Going to Africa on safari brings you back in touch with something eternal and profound. The earth speaks, and for once we really listen.

Hallie Campbell is a freelance lifestyle, travel and property writer and is a regular contributor to *Harpers & Queen*, *Tatler Travel Guide*, *House & Garden* and *Condé Nast Traveller*.

Further Information

Hallie Campbell flew with Kenya Air (www.kenya-airways.com) and SafariLink (www.safarilink.co.ke). To arrange a similar safari, Kuoni has a 'Wings Over Africa' 7-night package which costs from £1,390 per person from 18 April – 31 May 2006. For details, call 01306 747008 or visit www.kuoni.co.uk

The Intrepid Safari Company is part of Heritage Hotels. For details on their safaris and resorts, visit www.heritage-eastafrika.com

For information on Kenya, visit www.magicalkenya.com

The next series of the BBC's Big Cat Diary begins on 3 April 2006.