

## Luxury travel

# Africa by air — the best way to see the Big Five

Travelling by private plane and staying on exclusive reserves, **Anna Murphy** gets thrillingly close to Kenya's wildlife on a bespoke safari adventure

**B**ox-ticking is a safari kind of a thing. People go on them to cross off the so-called Big Five — the African lion, elephant and leopard, the rhinoceros and the Cape buffalo. As I discovered on my most recent trip to Kenya, though, there is a whole other array of boxes ripe for the ticking.

I mean, for a start, which rhinoceros are we talking about here? The common-or-garden white rhinoceros? (Still pretty tricky to spot in my experience because it is far from common-or-garden.) Or the far more perilously endangered black rhinoceros, which is down to fewer than 1,000? And, sure, the plains zebra is a dime a dozen in Kenya's famous national parks, but what about the endangered Grévy's zebra, with its Mickey Mouse ears and stripe-free belly, which numbers only 8,500? Or the reticulated giraffe, again, far less common than the Masai giraffe ubiquitous in the Masai Mara?

The above and more are the focus of a new nine-day Endangered Species Flying Safari launched by Scenic Air Safaris. The airborne tour stops not only at comparatively mass-market Kenya safari destinations, such as the Masai Mara, but also at smaller conservancies run by zealously committed professionals in collaboration with local tribal communities.

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Which means that, if it isn't remarkable enough to find yourself up close and personal with a black rhinoceros in the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy — although thankfully not too close, given their notorious bad temper — here is a trip during which you may find yourself chatting to a Samburu junior elder as you walk through the bush, he in full beading and bright drapery, his dagger hanging at his waist.

When fortysomething Sambara (the names can get confusing) wasn't nonchalantly pointing out to me in more than passable English some fresh leopard prints as we wandered through the otherworldly wilderness that is the Kalama Community Wildlife Conservancy, he was filling me in about his everyday life. Like his typical lunch (a mix of milk and fresh blood), and his worry that his six-year-old son is “crazy”, after he tried recently to pull a cheetah off a goat it was attacking. (Apparently this would be fine if his son had reached the ripe old age of ten.)

Box-ticking doesn't even begin to cover it. And that's before you factor in the airborne part of the equation, in which you fly in first-class Cessna Grand Caravan style — with flatbed leather seats and minibar — over a semi-abstracted landscape of plains, lakes and mountains so beautiful as to appear the stuff of fantasy rather than the real world.

While it's not unusual on the more high-

end variety of Kenyan safari to take a shared air transfer from one camp to another, this tends to entail multiple stop-offs at other camps en route, and can take some time. The Scenic Air Safaris approach is, as its name suggests, rather different. The itinerary is yours and yours alone, and the pilot-cum-guide Sam, Kenya's answer to *Top Gun's* Maverick, goes out of his way to make the time spent in the air as breathtaking as the time on the ground. One minute we are high over the sacred Samburu mountain of Ololokwe, the next swooping low — a mere 100ft — above a dry riverbed. “Giraffes at two o'clock,” is not an unusual announcement to hear over your headset from Sam. “Elephants at four.” Not so much box-ticking as out of the box altogether.

Even the room tours on arrival at each lodge are memorable. “Here are the cotton buds,” says another Samburu, a younger warrior, assiduously pointing out what he considers to be the accommodation highlights in the luxurious rock-top eyrie that is Saruni Samburu. After all, the epic view over the plains of Kalama to Mount Kenya beyond is old hat to him.

“The terrace is elephant-proof,” I am reassured at Spirit of the Masai Mara. The warning when I am shown my room-cum-tent's outdoor bathroom at the Elephant Watch Camp in the Samburu National Reserve is: “Don't leave out your tooth-



paste or the monkeys might steal it.” This is shortly before I am shown the “George Adamson loo”. Apparently the late British conservationist was the first to come up with the idea of using an elephant's lower jawbone as a loo seat. I remain unclear as to who conceptualised a loo-roll holder made of gazelle antlers, but being taken short at Elephant Watch certainly makes for a memorable experience.

The joy of the accommodation on a trip such as this is that it combines all the luxury expected by a high-flyer with a sense of place, of the wilds out of which each lodge has been incongruously conjured. (In fact, it is their remarkable sense of congruity that is perhaps these lodges' greatest achievement.) Rooms are designed to let the outside in, when they are rooms at all. My all-mod-cons tent at the Lewa Safari Camp is so palatial as to be a case of not so much



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glamping as pampering. My ultra-luxe abode at Saruni Samburu may be a bricks-and-mortar affair, but it is so open to the panorama below as to feel like a castle in the air. (The Italian cuisine here is also excellent.) The quirky wooden structures at Elephant Watch, with their generous terraces, are charmingly Admirable Crichton affairs, the delicious food Ottolenghi-inspired.

Elephant Watch is run by Saba Douglas-Hamilton, the daughter of the late zoologist Iain, who has dedicated her life to elephant conservation via her nearby Save the Elephants research centre. She, like all the other conservationists I meet, emphasises that her work is as much about an area's human residents as its animal ones, that the challenges in protecting the latter are not just those of poaching, but also the encroachment of an ever-larger human population.

And so a key element in the complex equation of 21st-century conservancy is to make the local communities part of the solution. Some of this takes the form of innovative and simple ideas. Such as the beehive fences used to stop elephants from destroying crops. Ferocious African bees like to sting an elephant's eyes, which affects their sight, or the soft skin under their trunks, which affects their breathing. It's no surprise that elephants don't want anything to do with bees, which means that if hives surround a farmer's

crops, they don't want anything to do with those either.

Similarly cunning is the Lion Lights programme, which I learn about from the lion expert David Mascall, one of a number of animal experts lined up for my visit by Scenic Air Safaris. Bright lights fixed to the outside of a family-and-livestock compound (a *boma*) are enough to stop leonine night-time incursions, Mascall explains. He then continues to tell me merrily that he goes by the nickname Cat-snack, after an encounter that left him with 385 stitches.

"Mama Duma" (Cheetah Mother) is another charming eccentric I meet who is worthy of a walk-on role in an Isak Dinesen novel. Elena Chelysheva, a Russian

who has dedicated her life to this particular cat, is even more excited than me about our encounter in the Masai Mara with a group of five males not from the same family — a so-called coalition, and an arrangement that is extremely rare.

All the experts on this trip provide an extra dimension to wildlife encounters that, for a European, are already so raw, so other, as to seem to exist in four dimensions as opposed to a mere three. To witness a lioness surface from the grasslands, her eyes like citrine, then disappear again, seemingly transmogrifying into the veld itself, is an incredible thing.

A safari such as this offers the loudest moments of silence imaginable, the most dynamic moments of stillness. It somehow fuses together vastness and a diamond-sharp sense of focus. It takes your breath away while simultaneously filling your lungs to bursting. It is glorious, endless nowness. This is especially the case if you are lucky enough to spend time on a conservancy, I discover. The charms and the copious game population of the Masai Mara are rightly celebrated. Huge as it is, though, you will almost inevitably share the best sights with other safari vans. Stay at the Siana Private Conservancy on its borders, however — a bowl of greenness gathered up by a ring of hills — and you will have the 35,000 acres pretty much to yourself. Only guests at the Spirit of the Masai Mara and a partner lodge on the



## Need to know

Anna Murphy was a guest of Aardvark Safaris ([aardvarksafaris.co.uk](http://aardvarksafaris.co.uk)), which has a nine-day Endangered Species Flying Safari with Scenic Air Safaris ([scenicairsafaris.com](http://scenicairsafaris.com)), from £7,736pp, based on a group of ten people travelling together. The price includes two nights' full board at Spirit of the Masai Mara, Elephant Watch Camp, Laikipia Wilderness Camp, and Sirikoi or Lewa Safari Camp, private light aircraft flights, services of a specialist wildlife expert at each location, local drinks and safari activities. International flights cost extra. Kenya Airways ([kenya-airways.com](http://kenya-airways.com)) has economy class fares from London to Nairobi from £458pp and Premier World seats from £2,350pp

same land have access to a safari-scape straight out of central casting, in which myriad different animals interact, and your van is the only audience.

Picture this, by way of just one example. A tower of giraffes, to use, ahem, the correct collective noun, stands grazing round a cluster of croton trees. To the left of this zoological San Gimignano are a couple of dozen zebra (a dazzle, don't you know?). To their right, assorted gazelles, their highly patterned derrieres as bootylicious as Beyoncé's. In the skies above a crowned crane lolloping by. Perched on the branches of a sausage tree, with its large salami-shaped fruit, are a couple of African hawk-eagles. Lower down, on a balanite tree, there sits a stunning lilac-breasted roller, its name not doing justice to a multicoloured plumage that makes it nature's answer to a Sonia Delaunay painting. It's pinch-yourself stuff.

Ditto what can only be described as the elephant fantasia at Samburu. Because of the active research work of Douglas-Hamilton and her team, the animals are used to ignoring vehicles or actively sidling up to them. We meet a couple of the family groups, and they are so close that I now know elephants have cilia worthy of Betty Boop; it's a case of being not so much eyeball to eyeball as eyelash to eyelash.

"If we open hearts, we open minds," is how Douglas-Hamilton puts it to me that evening, not long after a particularly macho pachyderm called Sarara has decided to eat his way through a tree next to the camp's kitchen, watched by equally enthralled guests and staff. "We need to move away from the idea of taking only photographs, leaving only footprints," she continues. "We need to start giving back."

Throughout my time in Kenya there are different opportunities to do just that, to sponsor an orphan elephant, say, or a cheetah, to finance the education of a local child. Here is an experience that goes beyond mere observation and becomes about connection; about being part of the future, as well as the present. My heart and my mind have indeed been opened, the two most important boxes of all to tick.