

Wild about Kenya

A unique safari in the company of experts

CARRIE HUTCHINSON

There's not much that can top spotting rhinos, elephants and lions in Kenya's wilderness. That is, unless you're doing it on a special air safari accompanied by those protecting Africa's most endangered species. Talk about close encounters. The air feels electric. If I raised my arm, I could place my palm against his broad face. He is so close I can smell the wafting pheromones.

"Stay very still," whispers guide Saba Douglas-Hamilton. "Whatever you do, don't move." There's no chance of that. After what seems an eternity, but is likely less than a minute, Ban Ki-moon (yes, that really is this elephant's name) exhales loudly, flaps his ears to send a wave of hormones over the truck and ambles off towards the river.

Ban Ki, as Douglas-Hamilton calls him, is in *musth*. It's an Urdu word that means gratification or pleasure, but in this case is used to describe the periodic changes that occur to bull elephants. They secrete from a gland near their ears, constantly urinate, have a green crust around their penis and become aggressive.

Usually they take it out on other bulls, but Douglas-Hamilton has just finished telling us how her father, Iain Douglas-Hamilton, founder of Save the Elephants, once came between two bolshie boys on the hunt for females of the species. He was fine but not so his LandCruiser.

I am spending the morning with Douglas-Hamilton, who now helps run Save the Elephants with her husband, Frank Pope, in Kenya's Samburu National Reserve.

Guests at the neighbouring Elephant Watch Camp may see her around, but viewing elephants with her is an activity reserved for a privileged few. Douglas-Hamilton is one of the experts guests of Scenic Air Safaris' Endangered Species Flying Safari meet as they travel between mighty tracts of wilderness, interacting with researchers providing vital protection to at-risk animals.

The Save the Elephants team knows about 1000 elephants individually and tracks their movements using collars fitted with SIM cards plus an iPhone app. In the past couple of years, numbers have increased while the incidences of poaching appear to have dropped.



"In 2013," Douglas-Hamilton says, "[we held] epic meetings under the trees with all the community and no one would admit they had poachers in their midst."

She says that, finally, one man who admitted he had killed elephants for their tusks stood up and pointed out another 19 who he knew were poachers.

Conversations about poaching, lobbying governments to ban trading of ivory and working with communities to ensure elephants and humans can live together harmoniously are a reality check amid our ex-

tended game drives, where a huge array of wildlife is spotted. No matter how many times you spy a lion panting beneath a bush or glimpse a rhino, it's impossible not to become excited.

I spot my first wild animal from the window of our long-distance transportation for the week, a Cessna Grand Caravan fitted with first-class seats and headsets so everyone can communicate. We've flown out of Nairobi over the Great Rift Valley towards the Masai Mara.

As we approach our destination, the pilot takes us close to the ground. "Giraffes ... three o'clock." And there they are, just for an instant, as we fly over. From our low cruising height it's possible to see buffaloes, elephants and hippos swimming in the Mara River.

Our first stop is Keekorok airstrip in the Masai Mara National Reserve where we're met by Justin McCarthy and his team from Spirit of the Masai Mara, where we'll bunk down that evening. Three big-cat experts are part of the welcome committee: Nils Mogensen from the Mara Lion Project; David Mascall, who's worked with lions for most of his life; and Elena Chelysheva, who has spent three decades studying cheetahs and runs the Mara Meru Cheetah Project.

Once we are on the road, the cats don't disappoint. A leopard trying to nap in a ditch isn't happy about the whirring of cameras and our excited whispers and roars and rushes at the LandCruiser before slinking off.

Chelysheva's research assistant Mandela radios to say he's observing a group of cheetahs hiding among thick shrub. We park away from where they've been spotted and eventually they stroll out, seemingly oblivious to us.

A pride of lionesses and their cubs are unfussed.

Elephants in Samburu National Reserve, top; the Scenic Air Safaris Cessna Grand Caravan, above

THE FAB FOUR KENYA SAFARI HIDEOUTS

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SPIRIT OF THE MASAI MARA: Just 10 luxury suites, each with separate living and sleeping areas, overlook the wilderness. This lodge is noted for its lion population and guests rise early to spot the big cats hunting before the heat of the day. After morning safari, there's an infinity pool, bar and restaurant for relaxing. Many of the design items in the communal areas, from matting to large steel masks gracing the walls, have been made by women's and community groups. Don't miss sunset drinks on the ridge where Masai villagers perform dances and songs. More: spiritofthemasaimara.com.



SOSIAN LODGE: Built in the 1940s by Italian artisans, this classic African homestead accommodates up to 14, with an additional four cottages set within the surrounding tropical gardens. As well as safaris to track African wild dogs, Sosian has a stable of horses that can be taken on game-spotting rides to find zebras, elephants, giraffes, leopards and the wild dogs. Afternoon tea on the wide, cool veranda, meals prepared using the produce grown in the organic kitchen garden and swims beneath a nearby waterfall are other highlights of a stay here. More: sosian.com.



ELEPHANT WATCH CAMP: There's something a little louche and hippie-era Marrakech about this collection of six eco-friendly tents strung along the banks of the Ewaso Nyiro River. It's because each has been handcrafted — the wood often collected from trees felled by elephants — and decorated with bright local fabrics. There are bucket showers in the outdoor bathrooms, and vervet monkeys and hornbills can sometimes be found checking themselves out in your mirror. Of course, elephants are a big part of the attraction here and often visit the camp, particularly after rain. More: elephantwatchportfolio.com.



SIRIKOI: For the ultimate in safari luxury, book one of the four Luxury Tented Rooms, set beneath huge acacia trees. You'll return from drinks and dinner by the waterhole — where the now fully-grown orphan giraffe Nditu will probably have come begging for oranges — to find the fire lit and the sheets warmed by a hot water bottle. There's also a two-bedroom cottage and grand Sirikoi House, with three bedrooms in total. As well as game drives, the property offers cultural visits, quad biking, horse riding and helicopter rides to Mt Kenya. More: sirikoi.com.