



GETTY IMAGES



Checklist

Scenic Air Safaris' nine-day Endangered Species Flying Safari with Bench Africa starts at \$21,945 a person, twin-share; includes eight nights in five-star accommodation, luxury air transfers, all meals, conservation and park fees, game viewing and Silver Level guiding, and talks with specialist wildlife conservationists. More: benchafrika.com.au.



CARRIE HUTCHINSON

A white rhinoceros, above; the deck at Sirikoi, above right; a lioness and cubs near Spirit of the Masai Mara, left

The largest of the group is lying on her back, stomach exposed, to cool down in the heat.

Back at the Siana Conservancy, where the lodge is located, Mascal suggests we look for the resident lions. When he visited in 2015 he says he saw one lion in two weeks; now there are 14, including a litter of cubs. He tells me they'll brush up against one another and rub their

heads together in the lions' equivalent of banter. As the sun dips, they emerge from their hiding space to drink from a puddle, and they behave exactly as Mascal said they would. How did he know? It's exactly how the orphaned cubs he's raised interact with him.

In the coming days we fly across the country and head into the Laikipia wilderness, where the landscape changes dramatically. It's rocky and rough with cactus and dead scrub that, in places, has been trampled flat by elephants. We meet Simon Kenyon, who runs Sosian Lodge, and he explains he fell in love with African wild dogs when he saw his first at the age of 18.

"They're as rare as pandas," Kenyon says. "There are only about 3500 left in all of Africa." Many have been killed by farmers to protect sheep and goats but they're also susceptible to rabies and canine distemper.

When we find a pack, the dogs twitter and yip in a way that sounds like a flock of birds — it's how they communicate with one another. They can move at up to 50km/h for long periods, Kenyon tells us, eventually wearing out their prey. "Yet you can walk along safely with them, as long as when they stop you sit or lie down."

For many travellers, the peak safari experience is to spot a rhino in the wild. In the stunning Lewa Wildlife

Conservancy, the efforts to alleviate poaching are obviously working. On the rolling savanna, black and white rhinos roam.

As part of our tour, we stop first at the Joint Operations Centre, where we can see the location of collared rhinos thanks to an encrypted version of Google Earth. About 25,000ha of land are under the protection of rangers and an armed anti-poaching team.

"Every time a ranger spots a rhino, they radio the control centre, identify the rhino, where it is, its condition and behaviour," rhino scientist Ian Lemaiyan says when we're back out on the plains observing Zaria and her calf.

With thoughts of rhinos running through my head, I settle in my tent at Sirikoi; it's so big and the decor so refined it's a crime to describe it as a mere tent.

Sundowners are about to be served overlooking the waterhole, but a huge family of baboons sifting through the grass for tasty morsels has me captivated. It's a moment to reflect that thanks to the efforts of thousands of people across the country, Kenya is a dream for wildlife lovers.

Carrie Hutchinson was a guest of Scenic Air Safaris and Bench Africa.



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