

Plain to See in the Cradle of Mankind

A new initiative allows would-be safari-goers to learn bush craft from the tribespeople of the Great Rift Valley and Masai Mara. **LOU COOPER** experiences shock and awe in Kenya

LIVING AND WORKING in the sprawling metropolis that is London, the nearest most of us get to seeing wildlife up close is taking our children or godchildren to look at cramped, listless, clinically depressed specimens holed up in the Victorian menagerie that is the Regent's Park zoo. And even then it turns out the elephants downsized years ago, swapping their swanky but overcrowded central London pad for a mansion and acres of space in the Home Counties. So a Kenyan safari should delight your inner David Attenborough and put a few of those survival skills garnered from *Planet Earth* to practical use at last.

The Samburu region is located in the Rift Valley province of Northern Kenya. One of Africa's last true wilderness areas, it is home to the semi-nomadic Samburu tribe, closely related to the Masai and easily identified by their red *shukas* and colourful, beaded jewellery. Strongly connected to their traditions and culture, many still live the simple life in lightly built settlements that are removed periodically and transported to other areas, following the cycle of wet and dry seasons.

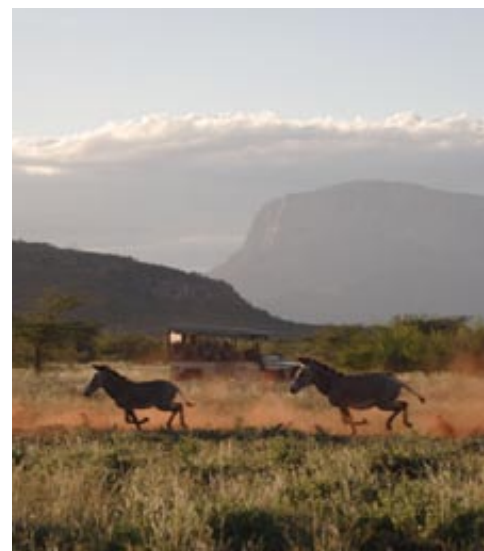
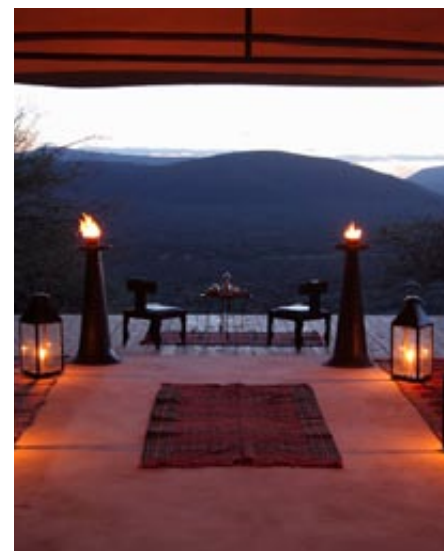
I am here as a guest of Saruni Samburu, a lodge located on the Kalama Wildlife Conservancy, about 7km from the Samburu National Reserve, to take part in their

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Walking With Warriors programme, ideal for the would-be student of red-in-tooth-and-claw nature. The inventive enterprise cuts to the heart of what fascinates us about safaris and delivers it in spades, allowing unfettered access to the most famous wildlife habitat in Africa – all within a luxurious, tailor-made, environmentally-friendly setting, of course – experienced through the eyes of the most well known and culturally intact tribal cultures; the Samburu and the Masai.

The Walking With Warriors programme aims to encourage dialogue between the tribes and a new breed of safari-goer. Rather than simply jumping into a hot-air balloon to gawk at a brief selection of carnivorous mammals, before heading back to a five-star hotel in Nairobi, would-be adventurers now have the chance to engage more authentically with these ancient, proud tribes of warriors. Learning the wonders of bush craft and surviving in the birthplace of mankind, it is an exchange of information that allows us to explore meaningfully a truly exceptional way of life.

The design lodge we are staying in, perched on top of the Kalama mountains, is closer in terms of style and luxury to a penthouse – to describe the accommodation as basic would be a little like describing The Ritz as a b&b. All minimalist luxury and low-impact design, giant lanterns fringe the open-fronted bedroom, replete with majestic canopy bed, which boasts a 360° view of the surrounding plains, a view that does justice for once to the adjective ‘sublime’. The panoramic vista, vast, dramatic, truly wild and frighteningly desolate, extends for miles – on a good day you can see all the way to snow-covered Mount Kenya – and I feel like a god on top of my mountain, gazing down on the wondrous earth below.



JUMP TO IT: (clockwise, from main pic) Masai warriors taking part in a traditional dance teaching cultural awareness during the walking with warriors programme; watching zebras on a game drive in Samburu in specially modified jeeps for enhanced viewing; the view from the family cottage at Saruni Samburu at dusk

My safari experience – enjoyed from the comfort of a customised, fully open-top Land Rover – began at 6am, with an early-morning game drive. My guide, Chris Lmariam Letur, a lean, lithe Samburu warrior with a cheery, floral headdress and an immovable smile, looks considerably younger than his thirtysomething years, thanks to a simple lifestyle and smog-free air. Accompanied by a strong, muscular tracker, Lepayon Lekoitip, who never went to school but can spot one of the ‘big five’ (lion, leopard, rhino, elephant and buffalo) a mile away, we descended from our mountain perch and onto the dusty, arid plains, just as the post-dawn light began spreading and the sounds of the wildlife started filling the air.

That first morning, I saw a pride of lions stalk their Grevy's zebra prey. As we watched in morbid fascination, binoculars glued to our expectant faces, the practised pride split up, inching forward on empty belly with purposeful paw, concealing the approach in the assortment of shallow gullies, patchy grass and sparse undergrowth that stood between it and lunch. Progress was slow. The smallest slip and the game is up. After 20 minutes, still cheerfully oblivious to its impending doom, the black-and-white slap-up sniffed the air before trotting off; blissfully unaware of how close it had come to danger.

Others were not so lucky. Later in the day we saw a satisfied leopard drag the bloody carcass of an impala into a tree, away from the hyenas who were looking to share it. Further on, and a decaying gerenuk (a type of gazelle) skull greets us, lying by the side of the road as scavenging, keen-beaked vultures systematically pick it clean. In an attempt to calm our racing, hitherto mollycoddled hearts, we ate our lunch by the river and were soon warmed by the infinitely more tranquil sight of an elephant mother and baby, digging holes in the riverbed with their long, languorous trunks, to search for water.

As our eyes adjusted to the myriad shades of beige, we uncovered darting, fawn-coloured dik diks (small antelopes) who mate for life, precariously swinging bat's nests that hung like so many Christmas baubles from the canopies of the stately acacia trees – and suddenly, out of nowhere, a family of lolling, unhurried reticulated giraffe glided into view, the males sparring now and again in a comical clashing of bendy necks and stunted horns that looked more like flirting than fighting.

The day ended with a gin and tonic at sundown, perched high on a hill, a profoundly awesome spectacle, rendering every one of us speechless. In our own contemplative worlds, we watched the joyful ochre that splashed the sky, as it melted into brooding burgundy before plunging into deep crimson, until the sun disappeared altogether. We suddenly felt woefully exposed – at once grateful for the steadfast warriors, standing vigilantly around us.

On the second day we visited a Samburu village. The colourfully dressed native women stood in line as we pulled up, ▶

► singing in welcome as dozens of barefoot children in an assortment of hand-me-downs rushed to greet us; smiles all round, despite the basic conditions. Dim, cramped, smoke-filled huts housed silent, crouching families, forming a ring around the central camp, used for meetings and to accommodate the animals – the source of the Samburu livelihood – at night. Pungent dung covered the ground, the cracked earth and filthy clothes a testament to the lack of water. The reality of third-world living hit us like a punch in the face.


From Samburu we headed southwest, our Cessna Caravan soaring off the dirt airstrip for a bumpy ride to Samburu's sister lodge, Saruni Masai Mara, the scenery unfolding below us, one breathtaking vista at a time. In stark contrast to the dusty beige of Samburu, the Masai Mara was a burst of fresh air, verdant and fertile, with long, patterned necks, black and white stripes, bushy feathers and curling horns, bobbing into view at every turn.

The lodge here is peppered with personal touches; organic soaps and Persian carpets, assorted art and colonial furnishings, lovingly collected by the owner on his frequent foreign travels. Canvas-fronted bedrooms (secured nightly for sleeping, of course) make you feel like you're camping – albeit in unadulterated comfort – and a massage in the Wellbeing Space completes the feeling of being totally at one with nature.

Five towering, statuesque Masai warriors in full tribal regalia came to collect us from camp to take us on one of their signature walks, a chance to educate tourists not only about the diverse, remarkable wildlife but how the Masai nurture and protect it. Intensely knowledgeable and bashfully proud, the youngest were eager to show us what they were capable of, throwing *panga* and spears that never missed their mark as we wandered the plains, thrillingly on foot for the first time.

Conscientiously practising with bows and arrows and tending (or trying to tend) cattle from a nearby village there was something infinitely refreshing about using our instincts in place of the studied knowledge of the City grind. Slowly, under diligent guidance, we learned to recognise which plants could be used as insect repellent, which to flavour soup, the



 STRIPE IT LUCKY: It's the black-and-white mammal show again, this time in the Masai Mara

peacekeeping tree, the leaves of which were waved like a white flag in times of unrest and those that cured depression. No animal, from the heftiest hippo to even the tiniest termite was left unexplored, and we enjoyed every instructive minute of it.

In our last remaining days, the wildebeest began building for the migration, 600,000 charged bodies, impatient to begin one of the most incredible journeys on earth. We watched, mesmerised, as a bold group attempted a river crossing. Tentatively picking their way among the rocks, a few brave frontrunners

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broke away, failing to see the basking camouflaged crocodiles, vigilantly observing their every move, eagerly awaiting the right time to pounce. The tension was palpable, everything moving in slow motion, until jagged teeth connected with flesh and bone in a crazed flurry of movement.

A cacophony of noise called for retreat as the frontrunners backed up and the herd surged forward to protect its own. This time they are lucky and the last wildebeest escapes, the stocky reptiles retreating into their watery world, happy in the knowledge that many more must make this crossing, on their way to greener pastures. **H**

Walking With Warriors In Kenya costs from £2,880 per person for seven days (six nights). Price includes three nights' accommodation at Saruni Samburu and three nights at Saruni Masai Mara (both full-board); one child under 16 can join in the experience for free. Price excludes international airfares. For bookings and information contact African & Indian Explorations 01993 822 443, or visit africanexplorations.com Flights from London Heathrow to Nairobi with Kenya Airways start at £490 return, all taxes included; kenya-airways.com