



Saba Douglas-Hamilton and her daughter Selkie, with a group of elephants in Samburu National Reserve.

Among the Elephants

On a remote nature reserve in Kenya, an Anglo-African family is helping preserve local wildlife by living alongside it—and inviting guests to do the same. **BY BRITT COLLINS**

Saba Douglas-Hamilton and I were sitting beneath the acacia trees beside her lodge in the Kenyan bush, talking about how, while filming in a dried-up riverbank, she narrowly escaped being crushed by an enraged elephant. Tall, tanned, and barefoot, with windswept hair and watchful eyes, the wildlife filmmaker and broadcaster looked every inch the fearless conservationist.

As she spoke, a hefty rustling in some nearby foliage signaled the arrival of an elephant. “It’s Anwar, one of the teenage bulls,” she whispered. We watched in silence as Anwar feasted on foot-long seed pods from

a sausage tree just yards away. “They’re mostly friendly,” Saba said, “but there’s a bit of turf war that goes on between us.”

Saba has crossed the world making wildlife documentaries for the BBC, and is a well-known personality in the U.K. Last year, she and her environmentalist husband, Frank Pope, gave up their base in Nairobi to take over Elephant Watch Camp, her parents’ safari lodge in the Samburu National Reserve, in central Kenya—a move recorded in a BBC TV series. The show followed the dramas of raising children in the wilderness while running an eco-lodge and conservation station along the way. →

Saba's Scottish father, the zoologist Iain Douglas-Hamilton, and her Italian-French mother, Oria, have been living and working in Samburu for over 20 years. Since the 1960s—long before it was fashionable—they have been devoting their lives to African elephants, which at the time were being slaughtered for ivory in the thousands. The couple's pioneering work is credited with helping bring about the international ivory-trade ban of 1989. In the 1990s, Iain set up Save the Elephants, a charity and research center on the Samburu reserve; then, in 2001, Oria opened Elephant Watch Camp, which aimed to involve visitors in the nonprofit's work. After a poaching crisis beginning in 2008 that decimated Kenya's elephants, numbers have at last begun to stabilize—in part because of the family's decades-long monitoring project. The elephants of Samburu are now one of Africa's best-studied, and most protected, animal populations.

Iain and Oria raised Saba and her sister, Dudu, in the bush, taking them on their conservation missions in some of the wildest corners of Africa, including Uganda in the aftermath of the Idi Amin regime. The sisters spent days trailing elephant herds with their parents, until starting school in Nairobi. "We'd be in the jeep



Clockwise from top left: Saba as a child with her father, Iain, in Tanzania; Saba feeding a warthog in Nairobi, Kenya; Saba, her husband, Frank, and their three daughters, with the Samburu staff of Elephant Watch Camp.

surrounded by animals," she recalled. "I said to my father, 'Can we go home?' and he said, 'We're going to stay here until you get over your fear.'"

After living in cities in the U.K., and more recently in Kenya, Saba wanted to live among wild animals again, and work to secure their future. So she, Frank, and their three small daughters swapped suburban Nairobi for the nowhere-ness of Samburu, where the nearest store is three hours away. "When my mother needed help running the camp, a lot of things aligned that made it possible," Saba said.

An hour's flight north of Nairobi, Elephant Watch Camp is hidden away on the banks of the Ewaso Ng'iro River. A stay here offers a glimpse of another world. It's a sort of harsh, elemental paradise with no boundaries, surrounded by sweeping expanses of scorched savanna where passing wildlife—including some 900 elephants, each of which has a name—comes and goes as it pleases. "We have everything coming through: lions, leopards," Saba said, laughing. "Between the elephants breaking down walls and the monkeys

looting, it keeps us down-to-earth." As if on cue, a vervet monkey swooped onto a table and ran off with a sugar bowl, with Saba in pursuit. "Noooo!" she screamed when she heard the bowl crash to the ground. "You little bastard!"

There's an authenticity to Elephant Watch that's rare among safari camps—which may explain its popularity among influential travelers (visitors have included Bill Clinton and Natalie Portman). It's a world away from the polish of a typical luxury lodge; instead, it offers an entrée into the world of a family for whom conservation is a way of life.

I got more insight into the Douglas-Hamiltons' commitment to Samburu that afternoon, when Saba took me up-river along rutted red-ocher roads to the Save the Elephants research station. She showed me the results of the family's GPS tracking operations, which told the story of the 2008 poaching crisis, →

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FROM TOP: COURTESY OF SABA DOUGLAS-HAMILTON (2); TIM BEDDOO

BEYOND

Dispatch

when ivory prices in China soared. By 2012, 73 percent of elephant fatalities on the reserve were ivory-related, and the piles of bones at the center are mostly relics from that devastating time. Save the Elephants, other nonprofits, and government agencies grouped together to promote wildlife law reform, new tracking technologies, community engagement, education, and tourism. Poaching remains a concern, but the situation in Samburu has stabilized over the past two years. In 2014, elephant births outnumbered deaths, and last year poaching dropped to pre-2008 levels. Guests from the camp are among the charity's biggest supporters, and proceeds from bookings help fund its work.

Accommodations at the camp are appealingly intimate and low-key, with six thatched-roof canvas tents built around tree trunks. Each hut is solar powered and filled with furniture made from trees felled by grazing elephants. Bathrooms are en suite and open-air, with bucket showers that use well water warmed by the sun. Saba has plans to upgrade and expand the camp—but wants to ensure the guest experience remains unpretentious.

In this rugged setting, she and Frank live simply, educating their daughters Selkie, seven, and five-year-old twins Luna and Mayian, about the natural world. They homeschool the girls, and let them explore the bush with members of

the local Samburu community—who also make up the staff of the camp. “When we first arrived, the girls’ shoes fell off, and they ran off with the Samburu warriors,” said Frank, who grew up in Oxford, England. “The crocodiles are the only things that scare me.” Saba is more wary of snakes, scorpions, and rabies. “The rest sorts itself out. I want the girls to be adaptable. Who knows where the world’s going to take us.”

Safaris at Elephant Watch are personal, low-tech affairs. I spent a long, sleepy morning in the bush with Samburu guides Rosemary and Serenoy, who grew up on the reserve. In the gauzy dawn light, we saw two lionesses dining on a warthog under thornbushes. Rosemary, having picked up birdcalls and tracked paw prints, was aware of them long before I was. Along the river’s edge, we saw elephants stripping toothbrush trees with babies at their side. Serenoy explained that the Samburu identify elephants by the shape of their heads, tusks, and ears. These people have lived peacefully alongside this species for centuries, and it’s one of the few places I’ve been in Africa where elephants are so trusting.

That night, aside from a sprinkling of stars and lanterns and the sound of distant wooden cowbells, the camp was pitch-black and silent. The Samburu staff, in their sarongs, feathers, and beads, produced a banquet of Italian dishes made using Saba’s mother’s recipes. As we sat around the fire eating porcini-mushroom pasta, Saba remarked: “To have this richness of life around you is amazing. Where in the world is it silent anymore?” ■

Below: Guests and members of the Douglas-Hamilton family relax at Elephant Watch Camp as evening draws in.

elephantwatchportfolio.com; four nights from \$3,072 for two people, all-inclusive.

