

# INTO THE WILD

WITH ITS RAW BEAUTY AND SPECTACULAR WILDLIFE, THE AFRICAN BUSH IS SURE TO SEDUCE YOU *By Britt Collins Photography Greg du Toit*

Nothing prepares you for the beauties of Africa. The big skies, the breathtaking landscapes and the wildlife. It's hard not to be star-struck by seeing your first lions and giraffes and to forget the rest of the world exists. From *Out of Africa* to *Born Free*, the continent plays a starring role in movies, books, fashion magazines and the most seductive jet-setting fantasies – and no country is more fabled than Kenya.

Starting in Nairobi, we soak up the old-world opulence of the Sarova Stanley Hotel, one of Hemingway's many global watering holes, before flying upcountry to the remote northern plains of Samburu. Our guide, a Masai tribesman, is waiting on a dusty airstrip beside a pile of sun-bleached buffalo bones to take us to Samburu National Reserve. Being whisked around by tribesmen with biblical names like Moses and Noah – who were raised on tall tales of wild animals and have a deep understanding of the region's wildlife and culture – adds to the adventure.

Driving across the great emptiness of scorched earth and skeletal trees, we watch nature's cruelty and grace under the dramatic African sky. Along the way, Moses points out jewel-like starlings

weaving nests; a meerkat eating a scorpion the size of a grapefruit; a family of cheetahs dining on warthog remains; and a sleeping lioness with her cubs in the burnt grasses.

Samburu National Reserve is the home of the lioness famous for adopting baby antelopes. There is a giant mural of her walking alongside a kudu at the park entrance. She protected an oryx calf, escorting it around the reserve. When the oryx was killed by another lion, she adopted another a few days later. The sight of a full-grown lion at the side of a newborn antelope – in total she adopted five – attracted hordes of tourists. As she defied the laws of nature, she found herself constantly surrounded by safari jeeps and rangers tracking her and her latest adoptee in the dark. 'Her last adoption was an impala which got killed by one of the other lions,' Moses tells us. 'We haven't seen her since. Maybe she died of a broken heart.'

Samburu is light on the exotic animals such as lions, but it has its own special 'big five': gerenuk, oryx, reticulated giraffe, Somali ostrich and Grevy's zebra – the world's most beautiful wild horse with its big round ears and pinstripe ▶





d to bleed



ABOVE Elephant Bedroom Camp in Samburu.  
LEFT Giraffe Manor in Nairobi.  
BELOW Meru National Park



coat. There are leopards and other predators, too, who leave their tracks in the dust. But, above all, ‘Samburu is elephant country.’

There are no signposts to Elephant Bedroom Camp. We are deep in the wildest wilderness. Like grey ghosts, a herd of elephants with calves of varying sizes, appear out of nowhere. ‘You’ve come here for a wild experience,’ Moses announces on our arrival. ‘Remember these are wild animals, so respect them and their space. In the day, you can walk alone.’

An hour’s flight from Nairobi, the Maasi-run Elephant Bedroom Camp is appealingly stripped back: with 12 luxury tents built around tree trunks and boulders, which are open to the elements. Any passing wildlife who care to can drop in.

After a sundown safari, we have a candle-lit dinner beneath a sprawling baobab tree, gazing at animal silhouettes and shadows and swapping adventure stories, exhilarated by it all.

‘At night,’ Moses warns, ‘Padlock your tents. There are lots of keen black-faced monkeys who will help you unpack.’ That evening, I hear them partying on the roof of my tent. Outside, on the porch, a pair of wayward adolescent baboons are warring. I do the only decent thing I can and offer them my plate of fruit and cookies.

Sitting beside the river’s edge over breakfast, we watch elephants and baboons drinking on the other side, preparing for our next destination.

We take a micro-light plane to Meru for a glimpse of another world: a sort of harsh paradise with no barriers, just sweeping, scorched savannahs where you don’t see another soul for miles. Situated in 80 acres of privately owned wilderness, Rhino River

Camp, an eco-chic compound in Meru National Park – where the legend of Elsa, the Born Free lioness, began – is possibly the best spot in Africa to see wild rhinos. Italian film-maker Andrea Maggi, who has been chased by water buffaloes and come face to face with big cats, created the space to preserve the dwindling species – it’s more sanctuary than safari camp and home to 40 white and 25 black rhinos. Set among the trees, this isolated hideaway has five elegant tents on stilts with rough-hewn furniture and wooden verandas, each with its own plunge pool. Surrounded by giant raffia palms and tamarinds, it has the feeling of being in a secluded treehouse.

The next day, we’re up with the sun to track rhino and explore a dry river bed with ranger Noah. Every corner reveals new surprises: vast herds of wildebeests, scampering doe-eyed gazelles, giraffes nibbling at acacia trees. Seeing white and black rhinos startlingly close – mothers with babies and territorial males sparring gently – is like a scene out of *Jurassic Park*. At night, aside from a sprinkling of stars and hurricane lanterns, it’s pitch-black and silent with only animal noises for company.

Back in Nairobi, our final stop is Giraffe Manor, a 30s mansion that’s been turned into a boutique hotel-sanctuary, where the rare Rothschild giraffes roam freely around the grounds. Sheer magic ■ *Elephant Bedroom Camp, from £180 a night, atua-entkop.com; Rhino River Camp, from £200 a night, rhinorivercamp.com; Giraffe Manor, from £250 a night, giraffemanor.com. Return flights to Nairobi from London Heathrow, £525, Air Kenya, airkenya.com; return micro-light flights from Nairobi to Samburu, fbsafarilink.com. For more info on Kenya, see magicalkenya.com*



Rhino River Camp in Meru