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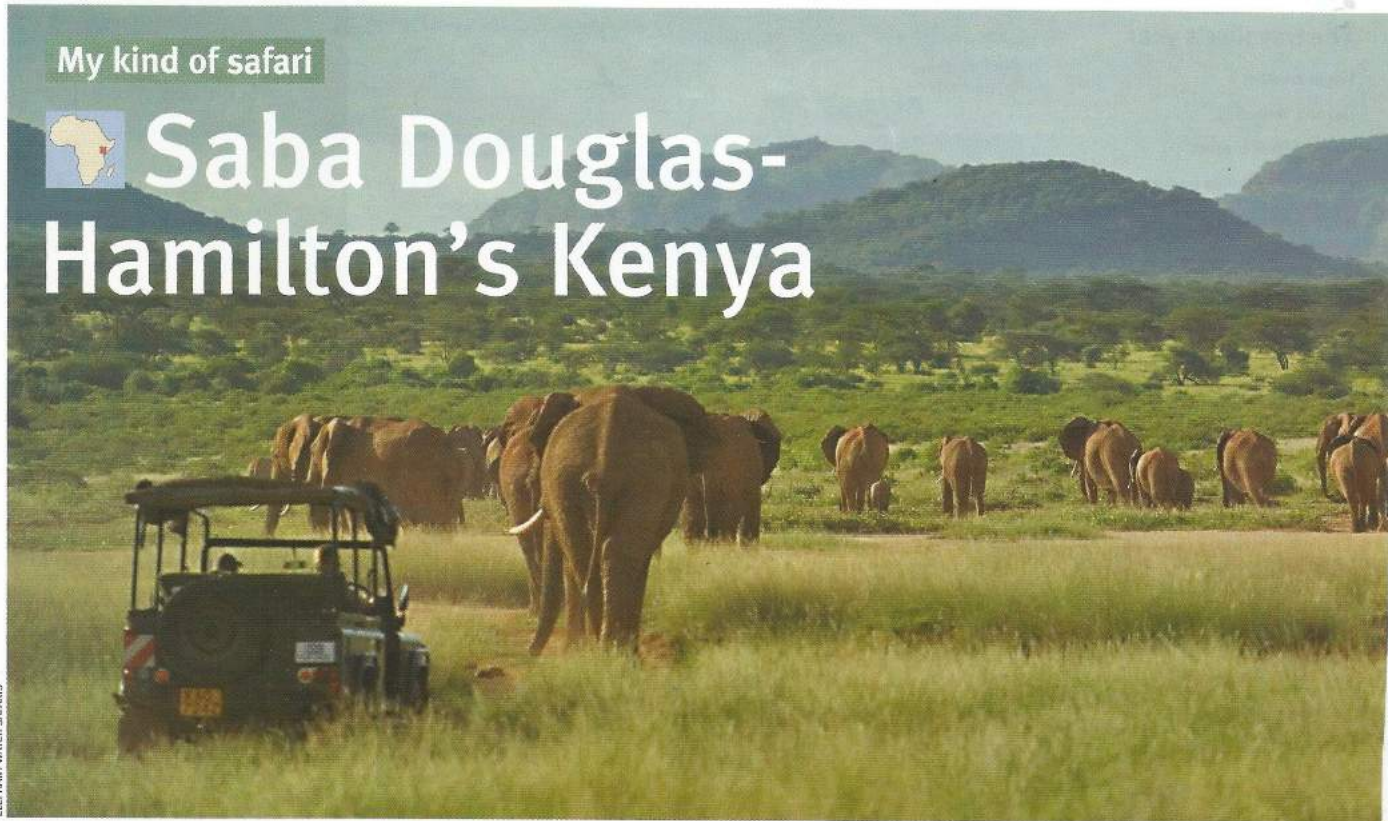


My kind of safari



Saba Douglas-Hamilton's Kenya

ELEPHANT WATCH SAFARIS



Best known for driving around the Masai Mara barefoot during the BBC's *Big Cat Week*, **Saba Douglas-Hamilton** was born and raised in Kenya and educated in the UK. When she's not looking out for photogenic leopards as co-presenter to Jonathan Scott and Simon King, she makes anthropological and wildlife documentaries and is actively involved in conservation projects. The daughter of natural history experts, she loves her home country with a passion. We asked her to reveal a few of her favourite places.

Ever since I was forced onto a plane at the age of 13 and sent into exile at a British boarding school, Kenya has been the golden light at the end of a long dark tunnel. The opening scene in *Out of Africa* where the steam train disappears into an unfolding horizon still makes me cry my homesick heart out whenever I'm away.

As an adult I've explored every corner of my country. I could tell you about the sacred spots I've found but then, as they say, I'd have to kill you, for it could be the beginning of their end. Man tends to destroy what he loves best. But let's say you were my best friend to whom Africa was an enigma. Where would we begin?

There's an old man who lives in the northern frontier of Kenya, beyond Mount Kenya's folded blue foothills and past the rag-tag frontier town of Isiolo, where guns are as readily available as *miraa* (or *ghat*). He's further on, and further down, in the hot arid plains of scattered whistling thorn, aloe, and packed red earth. Here, close to

a wide dry river bed lined with tortilis trees, he can be found with his many wives and scores of children in a traditional Samburu *manyatta*. A respected elder in the Lekalaile clan, he's a renowned seer and on several occasions I've visited him for his gift. More importantly, he's a father figure and a friend, so I make a point of paying my respects whenever I'm in the area.

Our meetings have a familiar rhythm: he takes my hand in his long thin fingers, spits a fizzle of symbolic rain into my palm, looks deep into my face with his wise, rheumy, moonstone eyes and then begins his blessing. It has a hypnotic quality, a singsong surge and sway, that ends each verse with a flourishing, thundering *N'gai!* – God!

– May you be hidden from your enemies like the stars in the day time. *N'gai!*

– May we find the time to sit and chat like owls in the wet season. *N'gai!*

– May there be many blessings on the path ahead. *N'gai!*

– May you have countless children. *N'gai!*
– Fat cattle. *N'gai!*
– Rain. *N'gai!*

Praised in metaphors spun from the barren, beautiful landscape, *N'gai* is a walking god, a nomad's god, whose pace matches one's own. An invisible escort ushering one through the wilderness into the safety, before nightfall, of a crown enclosure of thorns.

We go and sit outside his hut for a cup of scalding *chai*. I love these moments – surrounded by livestock, swatting flies, and listening to the bubbling chitchat from the huts. Especially when it's green after the rains, when everyone is happy and peace reigns supreme. Rain. Grass. Green. When we can chat like two Verreaux eagle owls hurrumphing high in the trees. In Africa, guests are always welcome.

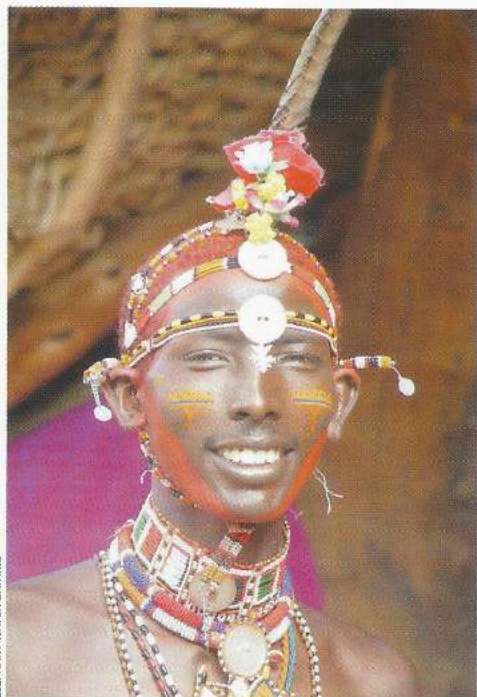
So, if I could take you by the hand and lead you on a journey to my favourite places, this is where we'd begin, outside Mzee Lekalaile's hut in Samburu. For he is the one who blesses journeys, and with such an auspicious start we can't go wrong. It's far more comfortable than it sounds, the air is warm, the skies infinite, and the powdery dust that envelopes every part of the body isn't dirt, but a rightful re-colouring to fit one better into the landscape.

Just around the corner, and hidden like a secret on the western side of Samburu National Reserve, is my favourite tented camp, Elephant Watch, built by my mother Oria. It's not just La Mama's food – an



inspired fusion of Italian and bush cooking – that brings me back here time and again, but the aesthetic and environmental principle that lies behind the Elephant Watch philosophy. Inspired by whale watching, the concept is to get up close and personal with elephants in the way that only a researcher would experience. Teamed up with Save the Elephants, a research charity founded by my father Iain, Elephant Watch has unmatched access to behavioural insight. Over 750 elephants are known individually rising to 1000 animals during the rains; their characters, families, hormones, migration routes, likes and dislikes all mapped, plotted, analysed and assessed in a fascinating overview of elephant social life. Parked outside the research centre, a crumpled Toyota pickup is on display, the artwork of Rommel, a particularly aggressive bull that came out of nowhere. He has a tear like a joker's smile in the top corner of his right ear. When in the heightened state of sexuality and aggression of *musth*, he's no joke.

What I like best about Elephant Watch is the minimal impact the camp has on the fragile environment of Samburu. Each tent is built to fit the shape and needs of the tree under which it has been erected so that in the morning you awake amongst a growing tangle of roots and branches. Every drop of water is hand pumped from a well and the loos are long-drop. As dusk falls there's a hot shower in the old safari style under a starry sky from a bucket hung on a branch. No need to be eco-unfriendly, at Elephant Watch it's all about sun-power for heating water and providing light. At night the clicking, burbling, chirruping, blurring sounds of >>



Opposite page: Following the herd with Elephant Watch Safaris in the Samburu National Reserve This page, top: Bella the leopard and Chui her son, stars of *Big Cat Week* Left: Samburu guide at Elephant Watch Camp Above: Saba on safari



the frog and insect chorus tumble in through the wide, netted windows. The only light to disturb your dreams comes from the beams of the moon. And the food, well, let's just say that nothing beats Mama's cooking. I'm very proud that Elephant Watch Camp was mentioned in *The Week* magazine for being voted Best Tented Camp in Africa, and has been praised by *Travel Africa* too.

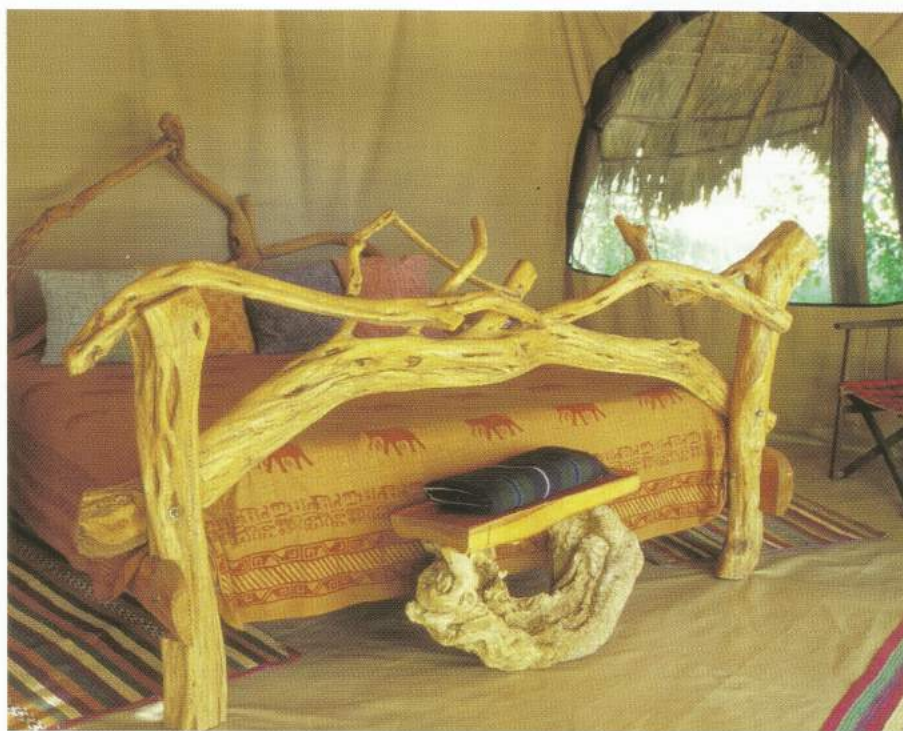
Right, let's jump into an open Land Rover and head up into the Northern Frontier. First stop: Wamba, a small town in the foothills of the Matthews Range, where Italian missionaries have set up the best hospital in Kenya. Here, emaciated AIDS victims, TB-racked children, road accident victims and the wounded from trigger-happy cattle wars find sanctuary. The Italians have my absolute respect and the hospital is well worth supporting – in fact, one should lower one's head in deference when passing.

I once attended the burial of a child there in the graveyard out the back. He was only three weeks old so the hole was tiny, no bigger than a shoebox, and the body wrapped simply in blue cloth tied with string. All around us body-length mounds of earth facing east signposted the dead. On some of the graves relatives' attentions were evident in the carefully tended scraggly desert plants. On others, of those converted to a Catholic god, were a simple cross with a name handwritten in biro, often misspelt, scratched out and corrected. Without fail, and in the proper Samburu tradition, on each and every grave was a pair of thousand-miler shoes,

I can't imagine Africa without flight. It's part of the age-old romance of living here. Released from the ground to skim low across the treetops or soar along an escarpment like an eagle catching thermals, you take in the full immensity of Africa

the ones made from car tyres and worn by all nomads, for the owner to rise each morning with the sun and continue his journey. As we placed the child into the ground and sprinkled the first handfuls of earth, oh so gently, onto that pathetic little body, I remember thinking how noble a place this was to be laid to rest, in this good red African soil.

Abdi's Hotel is the best chai shop in town. Mirrors are set at eye level around the tables to service the narcissism of nomads, all good for business. A stern sign out the back discourages riff raff: *No Idlers or Miraa Chewers Here.*



ELEPHANT WATCH SAFARIS

Above: luxurious tent at Elephant Watch Camp, Samburu Below: candlelit bath at Richard's Camp, Masai Mara



RICHARD'S CAMP

here. Released from the ground to skim low across the treetops or soar along an escarpment like an eagle catching thermals, you take in the full immensity of Africa. So catch a flight with some bush pilots and head off to the next destination. Tropic Air in Nanyuki embodies the spirit of flight, and they'll treat you to a good dose of their favourite rock n' roll music too if you let them.

The ritual of early morning tea by a fire long before dawn is the cornerstone of Richard's Camp, my very favourite in the Masai Mara, as is the lovers' tub, a huge steaming bath under the stars. Richard and his girlfriend Liz treat you to the Mara with a mixture of irrepressible fun, razor-sharp expertise and passion. The best time to go is during the wildebeest migration, quite simply the most spectacular animal show on earth. And of course the Mara is home to my favourite cats, the stars of the BBC's *Big Cat Week*: Bella the leopard, the Marsh and Ridge prides, Kike the cheetah, and all their cubs.

Well, that's good enough for a first taste. Just remember, it's better to indulge in a few places than try to do too much. Keep it simple and eco-friendly. And talk to the locals as much as you can. Their stories of courage, humour and humility will floor you. Next time it'll have to be the coast. But I'll save that for later. See you out there! ■

Find out more:

www.elephantwatchsafaris.com
www.savetheelephants.com
www.richardscamp.com

The further north you go the better it gets. As you slide off the grid into no man's land, petrol pumps cease to exist, the demanding trill of cell phones is made mute, and the views are even more eartbreakingly beautiful. As for places to stay, you can rough it, sleeping out in the open under a mosquito net, or stay in charming, low impact, ecotourism camps like Sarara, Tassia, Ilengwesi, and Desert Rose. If you'd like to walk with Samburu warriors, Helen Dufresne's camel safaris in the Milgis river are a must.

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