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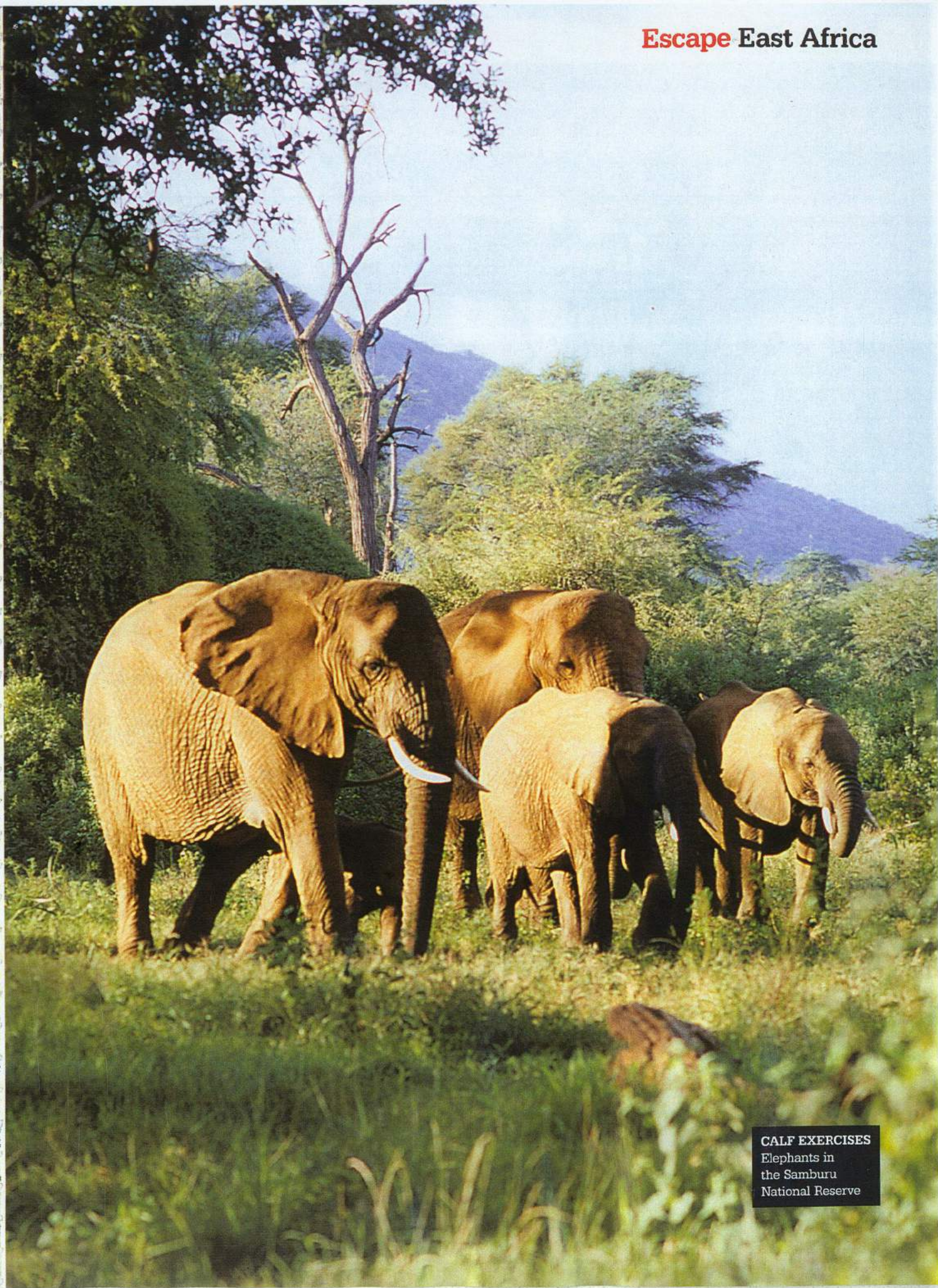
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CALF EXERCISES
Elephants in
the Samburu
National Reserve



Land of the giants

The luxe safari camps of Oria Douglas-Hamilton overlook a vast landscape where elephants roam among a riot of otherworldly plants. **Stephanie Theobald** enters a world in which everything is on a grander scale. Photographs by Simon Upton

Africa reminds me of *Star Trek*, or *The Magic Roundabout*: the starlings are blue, the trees are yellow and the flowers are gigantic and indecently erotic. Fecundity fills the air as though, should you decide to drop a seed on the ground, it would immediately spring up into a huge beanstalk.

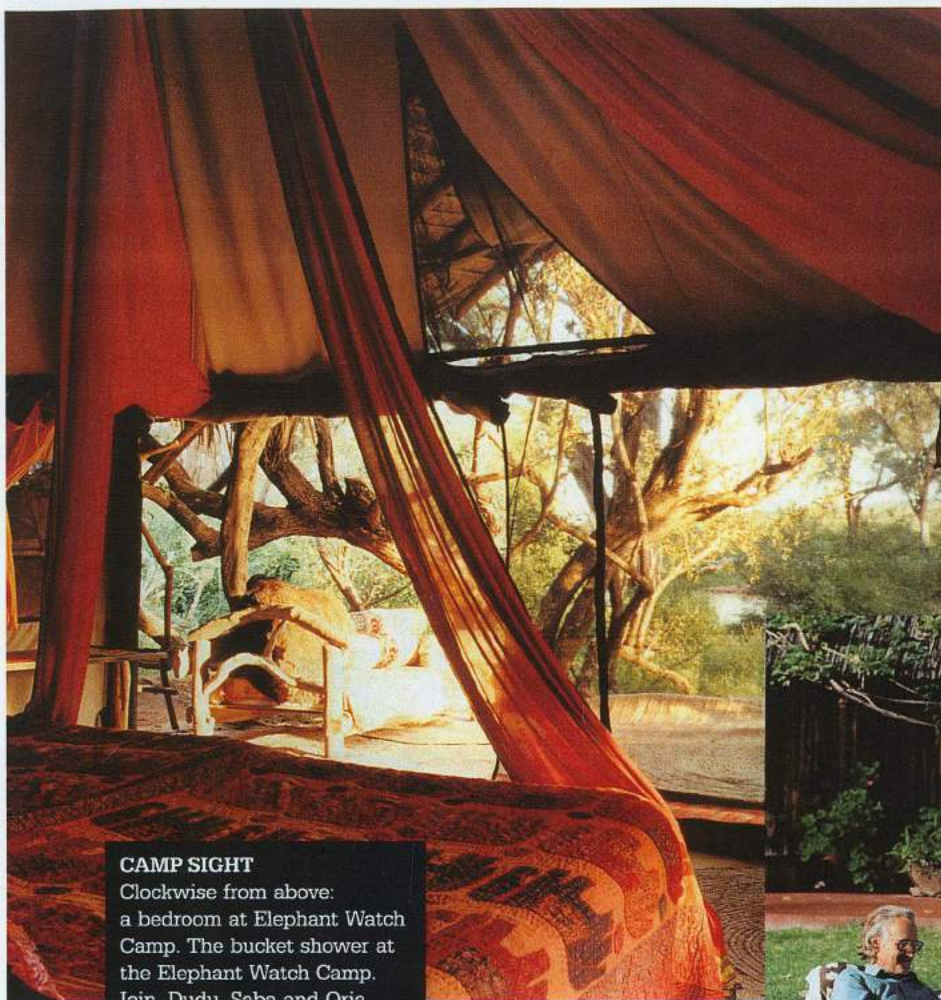
If there is anyone capable of explaining the exoticism of Africa, it is Oria Douglas-Hamilton. She specialises in what she calls 'soft landings', and has created a guesthouse called Olérai (the Masai name for the acacia trees that surround the house) on her family estate on the shores of Lake Naivasha. The house functions as a kind of luxe decompression chamber for stressed-out urbanites.

The Olérai experience includes sleeping in four-poster beds draped with opulent fabric in fresh-smelling rooms made from reclaimed wood. Through the windows, you can see zebra and antelope (the

house is located in the Douglas-Hamiltons' private game sanctuary; Oria's husband Iain is a celebrated elephant conservationist). You become familiar with birds that look like dinosaurs perching on the dinner table, and hippos suddenly appearing on the front lawn. By day, you can chill out or take a trip in an African gondola (designed by Oria), and in the evenings, guests are tempted with sundowners in the green and gold light. Then you will be fed by a personal chef with produce from Oria's kitchen garden.

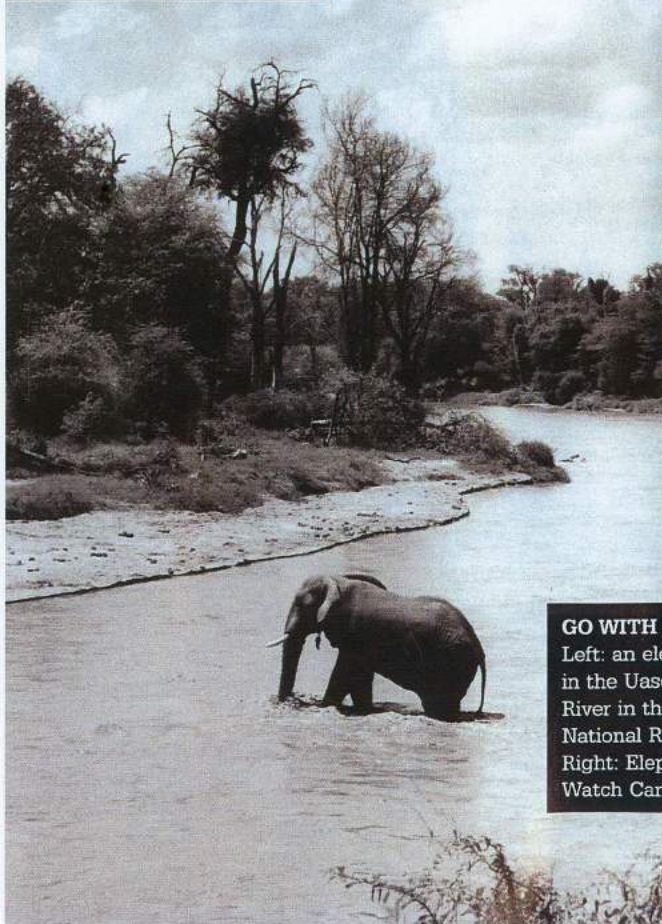
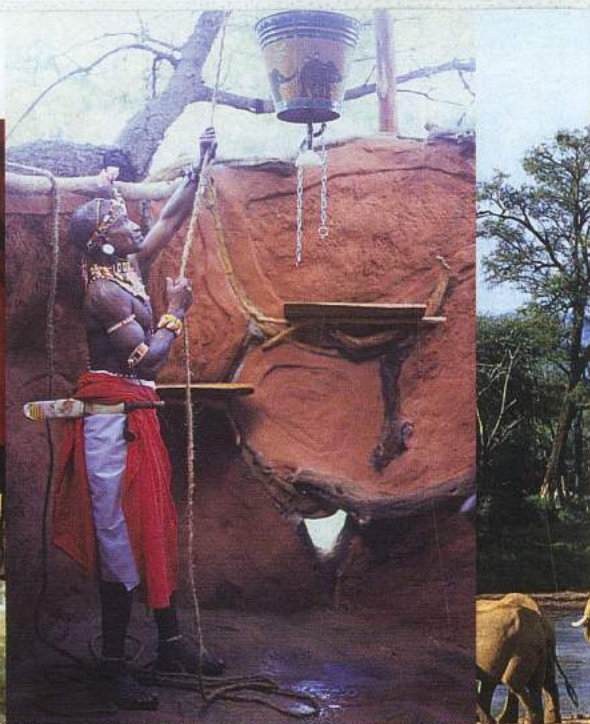
Yet there's no danger of her going too soft on you. It is fitting that her husband is famous for his work with African elephants, because Oria herself exudes the matriarchal qualities that the animals are so famous for. The 72-year-old mother of two grown-up daughters (Saba and Dudu) manages and trains all the staff on the estate, campaigns for local girls to be given an education and has a family-planning clinic for the women who work for her. 'It's important to still be in awe of everything around you,' she says.

Escape East Africa



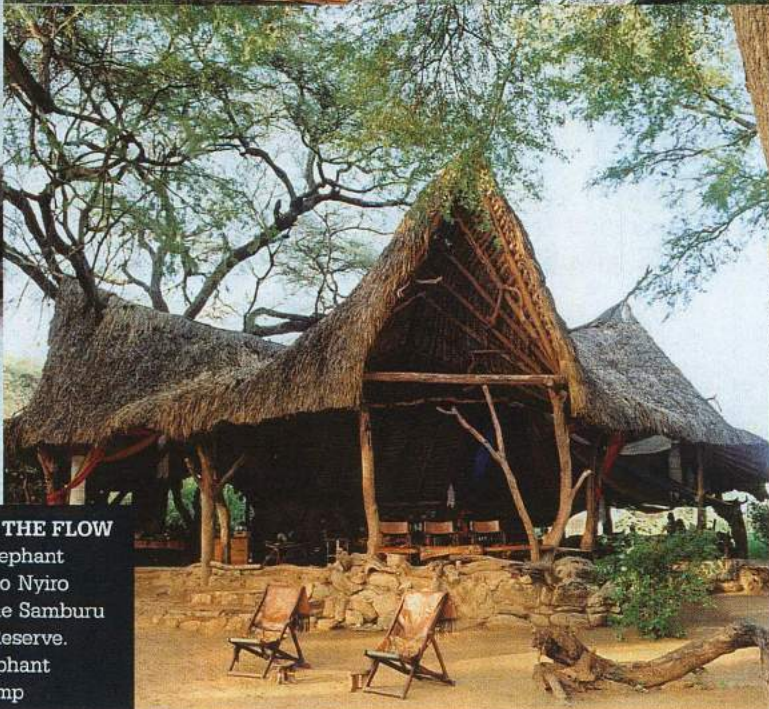
CAMP SIGHT

Clockwise from above:
a bedroom at Elephant Watch
Camp. The bucket shower at
the Elephant Watch Camp.
Iain, Dudu, Saba and Oria
Douglas-Hamilton at Olerai



GO WITH THE FLOW

Left: an elephant
in the Uaso Nyiro
River in the Samburu
National Reserve.
Right: Elephant
Watch Camp



BEACHED BABES

Elephants in the Samburu National Reserve



ANIMAL HOUSE

Clockwise from left: an elephant. A room at Elephant Watch Camp. Zebra outside Olerai



A typical teatime conversation might begin with Oria telling guests to beware of African bees. 'They go for your eyes,' she says, with the nonchalance of someone asking you to please pass the honey. (Oria's honey should not be resisted, by the way. If African flowers remind you of fleshy, wax Playboy mansions, then African honey verges on the orgasmic.)

As tea is poured from a silver pot with a swan's-neck spout and stirred with a teaspoon embossed with Napoleonic bees (brought over from Paris by her mother, Giselle, in the Twenties), the conversation will progress to talk of elephants. *Among the Elephants*, published by Oria and Iain in 1975, is considered a classic. The couple was largely responsible for stamping out the excesses of the ivory trade (and frequently getting their battered Cessna shot at with AK47s for their trouble), as well as being the first people in the world to establish esoteric elephant facts – for instance, that the elephant clitoris measures an average of 18 centimetres. Oria admits that, as a child, in the days before animal conservation, she got a thrill from killing animals. 'I used to go hunting with local warriors and come home dripping in buffalo blood,' she says. 'My Austrian governess used to get most upset but, the fact was, it was wartime and we were hungry for meat.'

Oria has graft in her blood. Her father, Mario, was an Italian cavalry officer, and her mother, Giselle, was a French sculptor who trained under Rodin. They met in Paris in the late Twenties, and travelled to what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo to go, ironically, elephant hunting. When Giselle became pregnant, they stopped at Lake Naivasha and Mario built Sirocco – a vast pink palazzo inspired by a West African palace, filled with art deco and African art. Giselle's cousin, Jean de Brunhoff, was so inspired by Mario and Giselle's adventures in the Congo that he wrote the famous Babar the Elephant books.

Oria divides her time between the house at Lake Naivasha and the Samburu National Reserve, where Iain's elephant-research headquarters are located. Here, Oria has set up an impressive outdoor hotel called Elephant Watch Camp – the perfect place to relax after a day's safari. The camp is a mix of deluxe hippie eco-chic (more four-poster beds with draped fabric and showers from water warmed by the sun) and old-school colonial formality. (It seems funny that in the middle of the African bush, waiters – in this case Samburu warriors decked out in traditional beads – are still supposed to serve from the left).

But Oria is not all earnest talk about elephant conservation; if you catch her on a good day, you might persuade her to tell you one of her anecdotes from the *White Mischief* era. Today, she joins our table and recalls the afternoon when Diana Delamere (the glamorous society woman immortalised in the book as the lover of Lord Erroll, whose murder remains unsolved) came to visit her mother. 'Diana's maids had pink rouged cheeks. Iain was talking about how there are more important things in life than money, and I remember her exclamation: "Iain, never mock money!" We had a good smile about that afterwards.'

For more information, visit www.elephantwatchsafaris.com. A week's safari in Kenya costs from £2,482 a person full-board, including four nights at Elephant Watch Camp and internal transport, with Journeys by Design (01273 623790; www.journeysbydesign.co.uk).