



TV WILDLIFE EXPERT
SABA DOUGLAS-
HAMILTON
INVITES US TO HER FAMILY'S
STUNNING ECO-CAMP AND
TALKS OF GIVING BIRTH
OUTDOORS AND HER
PASSION FOR KENYA

Saba and her one-year-old daughter Selkie at Elephant Watch Camp with Samburu warriors on the banks of Ewaso Nyiro River. A few days later, a flash flood caused the river to burst its banks and destroy the camp. Miraculously, no lives were lost and most of the wildlife was unharmed. Determined to return the site to its former glory, Saba and her family are now hard at work helping to clear up and rebuild

'For Selkie, the vast presence of the elephants is almost too much to bear... She gives her best chimp calls, pointing wildly'



She has lived with wild chimpanzees on the Ivory Coast, run barefoot among herds of elephants in Kenya, been shipwrecked off the coast of Angola and tracked polar bears in the Arctic wilderness... But ask wildlife filmmaker Saba Douglas-Hamilton what the greatest adventure of her life has been and she sums it up with a single word and a broad smile: "Motherhood."

It was a year ago this month that Saba and her husband, *The Times* ocean correspondent and author Frank Pope, welcomed their first child, a daughter named Selkie, into the world. Somewhat fittingly, Saba gave birth in the great outdoors – in a birthing pool under a fig tree in Cape Town – and since then she has never looked back.

Talking from Elephant Watch Camp in Samburu, northern Kenya, a few days before celebrating little Selkie's first birthday, the strikingly beautiful presenter of BBC1's *Big Cat Diary* and BBC2's *Unknown Africa* recalls the time leading up to the birth.

"I battled with being pregnant as it completely derailed my life," she

6 "Selkie is crawling like a demon and is about to start walking," says Saba, who gave birth in the open air. "She rarely wears clothes – a blessing now she's determined to feed herself on her own." Explaining why she and her husband, writer Frank Pope, named their daughter Selkie Lela, Saba says: "Selkie is Gaelic and means 'seal spirit'. Lela comes from the Swahili love story of Lela and Majinim – rather like our *Romeo and Juliet*"



Selkie – Saba's "greatest adventure of a lifetime" – is spellbound by elephants (above) and a Samburu warrior (below). "The warriors make a huge fuss of her," says Mum. "I love watching her exploring the world"

says. "One minute I was in the politically fraught Central African Republic filming lowland gorillas, and the next I was having to fend off a stream of unsolicited advice from housewives on nappies and the pros and cons of breast feeding. I felt like my life was coming to an end. What I didn't realise was I was carrying a jewel of a creature in my womb, who would set me off on the greatest adventure of a lifetime."

ANIMAL MAGIC

Saba is sitting on the bank of the Ewaso Nyiro River watching as Selkie plays in the sand, surrounded by Samburu warriors from camp who have become her friends. "I study her as if she was a small animal," she laughs. "Communicating with a baby requires one's empathy to be on full beam. It's instinctual and animal but so much gets said. She's a delightful, affectionate little character, smart as a whip and quite discerning. Best of all, a generous sense of humour is emerging."

Born and raised in Kenya, Saba inherited her passion for the natural world from her campaigning parents. Her father Dr Iain





Selkie and Saba – and some favourite soft toys – relax at Elephant Watch Camp, “one of my favourite places in the world”, says Saba. “My mother Oria designed it using the bright materials worn by nomads and palm carpets woven by locals and built the structure using branches of fallen trees so it blends into the acacia forest”



Douglas Hamilton, a renowned zoologist who alerted the world to the dangers of the illegal ivory trade, set up Save the Elephants in 1993, a research and conservation charity in the Samburu National Reserve. Her Italian mother Oria is also a leading conservationist and was responsible for establishing Elephant Watch Camp, an eco-safari camp four miles from Iain's project. Guests live among elephants like the researchers and gain a special insight into how these magnificent animals live.

Though Saba and Frank are based in Langata, on the outskirts of Nairobi, where they live in a “funny little tin shack on stilts” that backs on to a giraffe sanctuary, Saba helped build Elephant Watch Camp and stays here often when she comes to work with Save the Elephants as a trustee. Today she's waiting to meet Selkie's grandparents so her daughter can celebrate her birthday surrounded by family, friends and, of course, the wildlife. “This is one of my favourite places in the world,” she says. “It's like my second home.”

WALL OF WATER

Poignant words – for just days after these pictures were taken both Elephant Watch Camp and the STE research centre fell victim to a flash flood when the river broke its banks. At the safari camp a wall of water surged through the site, catching sleeping guests and staff unware. Luckily, they were all able to flee to higher ground but the water swept away the tents and facilities. The situation at the research centre was just as bad. Incredibly, no one was hurt and the majority of the wildlife, ▶

**'I often find myself studying Selkie as if she's a small animal!
She's the most delightful, affectionate little character'**





Wildlife presenter Saba is putting her TV career on hold so she can enjoy time with Selkie. She says what makes the camp really special is spending time with the Samburu warriors who work there. "One is humbled by the hardships they face yet their wicked sense of humour is never far from the surface"



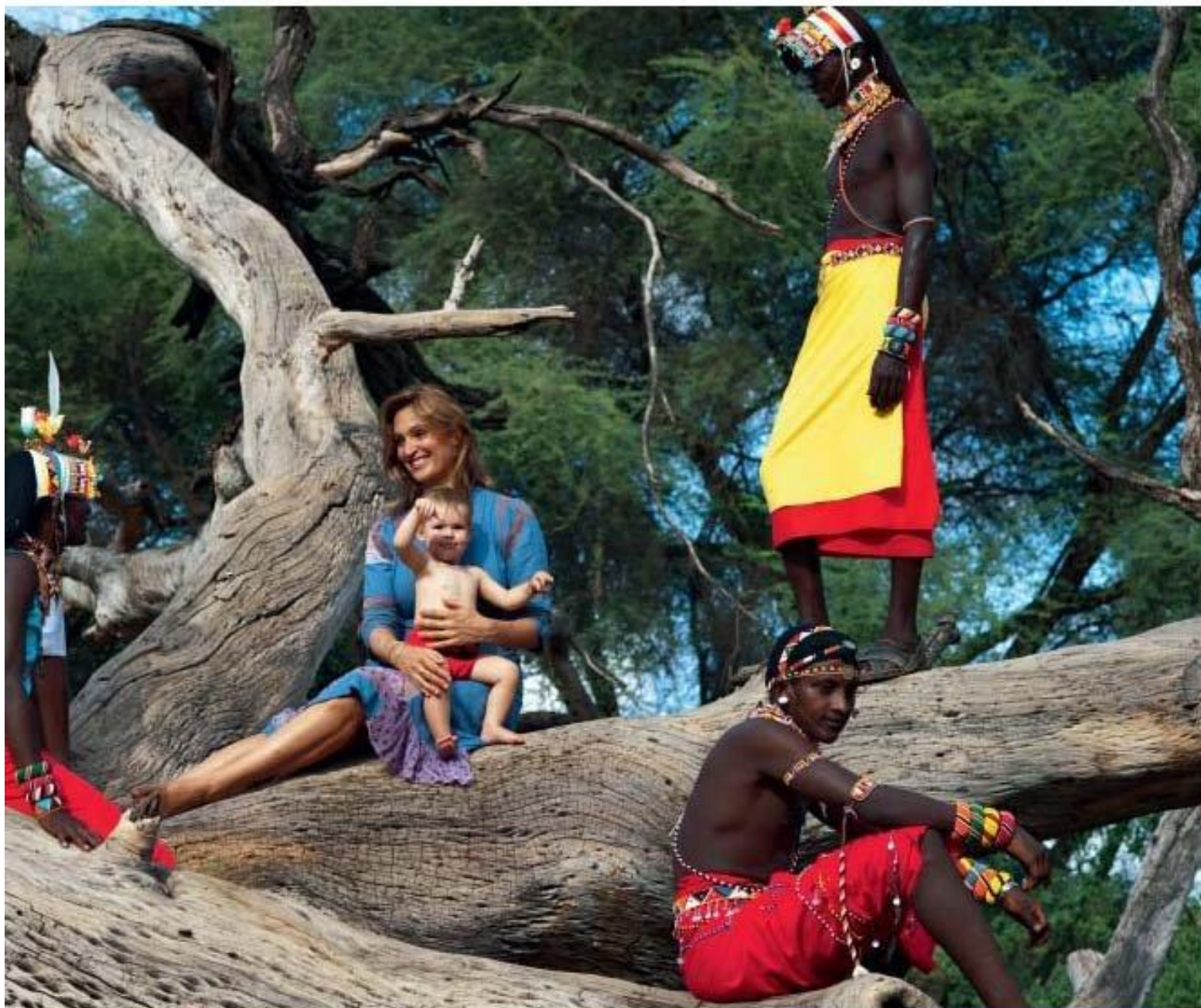
including the elephants, was not harmed but key research data, equipment and computers, as well as tents, were lost in the deluge. Saba wasn't at the camp at the time but went up immediately, joining her family in the process of cleaning up and rebuilding both sites.

"It will cost hundreds of thousands of dollars to get back on our feet but we've launched a fundraising appeal to rebuild Save the Elephants and we'll get Elephant Watch Camp up and running as soon as possible, so I hope people will come and see us soon," she says.

TRADITIONAL BIRTHDAY

Despite the location, Selkie's birthday was to be a traditional affair. "We've made her a chocolate cake that to her looks like mud – her favourite medium to play in – but this time it will be properly edible."

Growing up in the African bush, Saba and her younger sister Dudu had an idyllic childhood. They ran wild through the bush, rock-climbing up waterfalls, catching snakes and clambering up trees to spy on elephants. Saba was just six weeks old when her parents



introduced her to her first wild elephant. Recalling those years, it's clear that she'd like Selkie to benefit from a similar upbringing.

"My parents inspired me greatly by their passion for wilderness, their lifelong dedication to the elephant cause and their principles," she says. "Times have changed since the 1970s when they introduced me on foot to wild elephants. They were researchers and knew their subject well. Selkie has met elephants close up too, but in an open vehicle as it disturbs them less. She finds their vast booming presence almost too much to bear and bounces up and down excitedly, giving her best chirp calls and pointing with delight."

Selkie's first encounter with a large animal was at home in Nairobi. The family were having breakfast outside when three giraffe loped into the garden from the sanctuary. Selkie was mesmerised. "She's also walked with us among reba, antelope, hippo and no doubt the odd buffalo lurking around unseen. From a few months old she was very conscious of animals. At four months, she would follow the path of birds in flight and any kind of bird song, especially during the dawn chorus. Soon she started trying to answer the calls of the habada ibis, fish eagles, colobus monkeys and even dogs."

While she has always been passionate about the natural world and conservation, Saba never imagined she'd end up with a career as a wildlife filmmaker. After a spell at boarding school in England — which she describes as "miserable" —





"Selkie's got my skin and eye colour," Saba says. "The rest of her is mostly like Frank - long-limbed, slanty-eyed and utterly adorable." Saba would love lots of children but feels a responsibility to limit her family to two. "We number almost seven billion on the planet - when Selkie's my age we could be ten billion."

because she was homesick for Africa - then two happy years at the United World College of the Atlantic in Wales, she gained a first in social anthropology at St Andrews. She worked with the Save the Rhino Trust in Namibia before teaming up with her father's Save the Elephants.

"I was brought up in a family whose priority was fighting to save elephants from poachers and ban the ivory trade," she says. "So conservation and environment have been my foremost causes. Wildlife filming happened by chance. The BBC was interested in

my father's work. They were looking for authenticity in their presenters and I happened to be the genuine article in the right place at the right time. Looking back now I realise it was the perfect fit."

It would seem the BBC's Natural History Unit would agree - since making her first documentary *Living with Elephants* in 2001 she has fronted many flagship programmes from *Going Ape* to *The Secret Life of Elephants*.

In 2004 she met Frank at the wedding of a mutual friend in Kenya. "I couldn't miss him in his bright

green suit. That was it. It was such a chance meeting I feel truly blessed." The couple married two years later.

Although his passion is the ocean and hers the wilds of Africa, Frank and Saba have a lot in common. They spend what free time they have walking, climbing mountains and wild swimming. "When possible we head off into the bush in my old Land Rover and sleep under the stars," she says. "In civilisation I'm read about ballet and we indulge in the films we don't get to watch in Kenya, as well as delighting in good food, seeing

'We set up a birthing pool in a friend's garden under a fig tree. I wanted to draw strength from the stars'

friends, reading books, dancing..."

The icing on the cake was Selkie's arrival under that fig tree last year. Saba had no intention of having an outdoor birth and was happy to have a Caesarian if there hadn't been such a long recovery period. "But my midwife steered me towards a natural birth. Then I took a hypno-birthing course which made me realise how much fear surrounds childbirth and how much it's a factor in prolonging labour and interfering with the natural process. Our bodies have evolved over millions of years to give birth so I practised my hypno-birthing breathing and decided to trust my animal self and give birth at home."

"We set up a birthing pool in a friend's garden under a fig tree. I was sure my child would be born at night so I wanted to draw strength from the stars. On her due date my waters broke at last." Having drifted in and out of sleep for the first stage of labour, on her midwife's advice she and Frank walked up Table Mountain. They were halfway up when her active labour started. They made it home in "the nick of time". Their daughter was born two hours later and they fell "instantly in love" with her.

TV CAREER ON HOLD

Although Saba is easing herself back into her conservation work - fundraising for Save the Elephants and the David Shepherd Wildlife Foundation, lecturing and acting as a chair for the Future of Nature Awards in the Netherlands - she has put her TV career on hold so she and Frank can enjoy time with Selkie. "I'm too busy looking after my little girl and building our home to do TV. But we've got some great documentary ideas for when I pick up the reins."

"I'd love to take Selkie with me when I'm filming. Locations such as the forests of Central Africa are probably too difficult for now but filming something like big cats in the Maasai Mara should be no problem. Selkie's at the perfect age to start exploring the bush. I'd love her to grow up knowing all the names of the birds and trees - in English, Kiswahili and Latin - to speak several languages, European and African, and to be culturally at ease amongst the different tribes."

INTERVIEW: NATASHA GARNETT

PHOTOS: TIM BECCOW

HAIR: MAKE-UP: GEMMA FRANCIS

To donate to Save the Elephants' rewilding effort, visit justgiving.com/saveearth-ough. For more on Elephant Watch, visit elephantwatch.org.uk. Saba flies from Nairobi to Sumburu with Safarilink.