



DO THIS. / Safari_Kenya



Kenya four ways

ALMOST TWO WEEKS, OVER A THOUSAND PHOTOS,
LIONS AND A NEVER-ENDING SUPPLY OF WILDEBEEST MADE
FOR THE SAFARI OF A LIFETIME FOR *Madeleine Stratton*.



FLYING IN OVER THE SAVANNA SPOT-
ting wildlife from above with Tanza-
nia's Mount Kilimanjaro looming in
the distance is a pretty impressive way
to launch a safari. With our immeasur-
ably wise and all-knowing Abercrom-
bie & Kent guide Maurice leading the
way since our arrival in Nairobi, our
party of five had left that morning
on a flight south to the Chyulu Hills
region. Our destination was Ol Donyo
Lodge, a gorgeous safari lodge and the
only one in the 275,000-acre Mbir-
ikani Group Ranch.

We were met by a driver for the
trip back to the camp, a mini-safari in
itself. As we drove past striking and
spiny acacias I ticked off my list of
animals-I've-never-seen-outside-a-zoo:
zebras (specifically the plains variety),
giraffes (maasai), ostrich (also maasai),
Thompson's gazelle, Grant's gazelle and
the huge kori bustard. I was hanging





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out for elephants though, and emerging into a clearing we found a group of enormous bulls, huddled together around the smallest watering hole. Maurice pointed out the dominant male, aptly-named Torn Ear due to the great tear in his left ear, who had planted his immense body in the tiny waterhole and was keeping firm control over the limited supply.

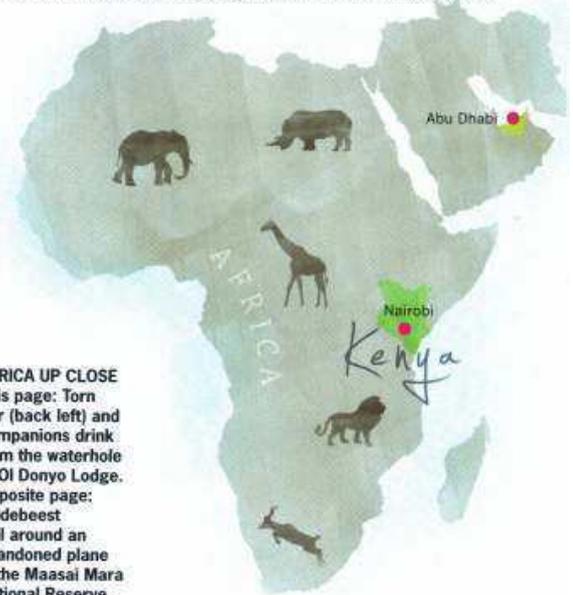
Ol Donyo Lodge overlooks the waterhole. It is made up of six stand alone villas housing 10 guest suites. My suite had a spacious living room with fireplace (and was the perfect space for an in-room massage), with an equally spacious bedroom and bathroom. Out on my verandah was an outdoor shower and plunge pool with a view over the savannah, thirsty elephants and other wildlife, and above the suite was a rooftop bed for sleeping under the stars. We dined in the open living and dining

area, furnished with large and comfortable armchairs and couches, with wildlife photography adorning the walls.

The stay at Ol Donyo was only the one night, and the next day it was back to the airstrip to fly north to Samburu National Reserve. Due to its northerly location, Samburu is home to a rare mix of wildlife which I got to see including: gerenuk, a long-necked antelope which will stand on its hind legs to feed at a higher level; Grevy's zebra, with thinner stripes than the plains zebra and a bare white belly; and the reticulated giraffe with its striking rust-coloured polygon markings.

With the Uaso Nyiro River running through, there's plenty of water and plenty of elephants. We encountered a group of them by the side of the road en route to our accommodation at Larsens Camp. After casually grazing by our jeep for a while the elephants >>

AFRICA UP CLOSE
This page: Torn Ear (back left) and companions drink from the waterhole at Ol Donyo Lodge. Opposite page: Wildebeest mill around an abandoned plane in the Maasai Mara National Reserve.



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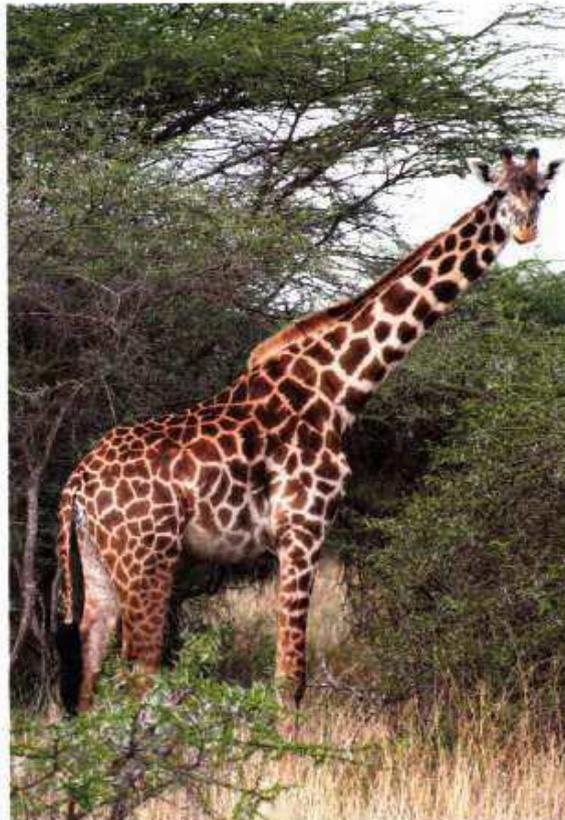


My tent had a private verandah and there were hippos in the water right before it, who stayed all day and serenaded me with a symphony of snorts and grunts into the night.

crossed directly before us, and as they emerged from behind bushes and trees revealed some the biggest and most adorable babies I'd ever seen.

Larsens Camp is a tented safari camp on the banks of the river, and there are 20 tents in total, a reception tent and a large dining tent with a bar. My tent was decorated with safari-style furnishings of wood and leather and was roomy with a king bed, built-in bathroom with shower and a verandah where I could sit and watch the river. I was warned both by Maurice and the staff to be wary of the vervet monkeys (the definition of cheeky), who would ransack my tent without hesitation if given a chance. The vervets provided entertainment during meals as well, which were taken on a platform set right on the riverbank. There was a Maasai warrior on guard with a sling-shot to defend us from any opportunistic attempts to take our bread rolls.

The next priority on my list was big cats, and in Samburu we found one on an afternoon safari – a male cheetah. He was eyeing off gerenuk in the distance but we soon realised he was injured and had a swollen back knee. Maurice told us that, while other Afri-



can cats can get away with a feed every couple of days, the lean and fast cheetah needs to feed daily, and this guy was looking pretty skinny.

Two nights and a drive south later and we were at the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy, landscaped with rolling hills, green grass and dotted with acacia trees and the country's highest mountain, Mount Kenya, forms part of the backdrop. Lewa is a rhino conservancy and we saw white rhinos grazing in groups and solo, as well as running along before our vehicle on the road (it's amazing to watch a rhino defy the laws of physics as it trundles along carrying its immense weight at speed). I also spied the endangered and solitary (and reportedly aggressive) black rhino from a distance (little more than a speck through binoculars but enough to cross off my list).

In Lewa we stayed at Lewa Safari Camp, and my double tent with ensuite was set under a thatched roof and had a view onto the vibrant green grounds of the camp. The camp has 12 tents plus a central building housing a lounge and dining room and the food was excellent. Abercrombie & Kent arranged for renowned Oscar-nominated film-

KENYA CHECKLIST

Clockwise from above: A maasai giraffe near Ol Donyo Lodge; A hippo wallows in the Maasai Mara National Reserve; A male lion feeds in the Mara.



maker Alan Root to join us for one dinner, and he shared stories of his life in Kenya and his close wildlife encounters while filming documentaries.

As far as game viewing goes, Abercrombie & Kent had truly saved the best for last – our next stop was the Maasai Mara National Reserve. The open grasslands of the Mara stretched out seemingly endlessly before us as we flew in with the aerial view of the Mara River curling through.

Our destination was Sanctuary Olonana, a tented safari camp comprising 14 luxury tents set on a private portion of the Mara River near the Siria Escarpment.

Lunch was served on a verandah right on the river, and there hippos were hiding in the river, their noses just visible above the water, and some of them would occasionally lift their heads and make a hilarious grunting and snorting sound. My tent (with its two king-sized beds and an ensuite bathroom) had a private verandah and there were at least another five hippos in the water right before it.

At this point in the trip I still hadn't seen a lion, but Maurice all but promised me I'd get my chance and he was proven right on our first drive, where we located a male lion feasting on what had been a baby wildebeest. I sat transfixed, watching him devour the carcass through my camera lens, and couldn't help but be disappointed when he eventually got up, clamped his jaws on the kill and awkwardly waddled with it behind a bush to continue his meal in privacy.

I'd seen a lion in the wild, I was satisfied, but the Mara really had a chance to show off when we found out there were lionesses and cubs from the local pride not far away, and we dutifully waited our turn behind the other vehicles to get a glimpse of the mothers and their babies snoozing, eating and playing in the grass. The cubs were unbelievably adorable, and we saw an older cub affectionately reunite with a lioness returning to the group.

BOOK THIS SAFARI

Abercrombie & Kent offers the 10-day Wildlife & Warriors safari which visits the Chyulu Hills region, Samburu Game Reserve, Nairobi and the Maasai Mara and includes flights between camps, game drives, all meals and some drinks. Prices start from A\$8,650 per person twin share. Visit abercrombiekent.com.au or call 1300 851 800.

GETTING THERE

Ethiad Airways flies from Sydney and Melbourne to Nairobi via Abu Dhabi. Return Pearl Business Class fares start from A\$7,496 and return Diamond First Class fares (only available from Sydney to Abu Dhabi) from A\$10,496. ethiad.com

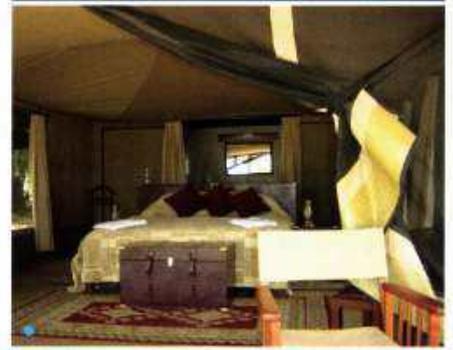
The final game drive of the trip took eight hours and brought us as far as the Tanzanian border. We watched the hundreds of thousands of wildebeest grazing in endless herds. This meant a potential river crossing, but it was a herd of zebras who seemed most likely to make an attempt. The braver individuals would cautiously edge towards the crocodile-infested river then back hastily away, and a huge croc drifted towards them as if it were expecting them. At once two zebras plunged into the river and began to struggle through the water for the opposite bank, the croc only metres away. I willed them on while my pulse raced, wishing that they would make it but fearing they wouldn't,

the croc steadily bearing down on them as their panic increased. And then they were there, they'd made it, and a wave of relief hit me while they clambered up the bank.

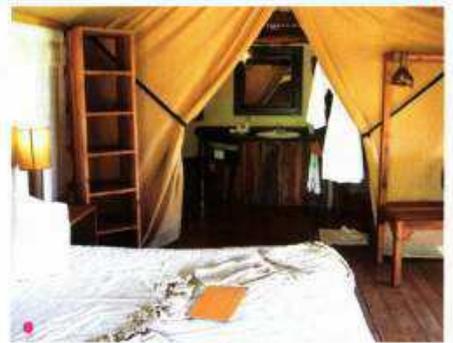
After the excitement of eight hours in the Mara, missing out on a leopard seemed a small loss, and really, it left me with the perfect excuse to plan a return trip to Kenya to finish checking off my list.



OL DONYO LODGE
Ol Donyo is the only lodge on the banks of the huge Mbirikana Group Ranch and overlooks a waterhole.



LARSENS CAMP
Larsens sits on the banks of the Uaso Nyiro River, a great spot to see elephants.



LEWA SAFARI CAMP
Lewa's 12 luxury tents are in a rhino conservancy and close to Mount Kenya.



SANCTUARY OLONANA
Sanctuary Olonana is in the Maasai Mara National Reserve and hippos are often found in the river nearby.



HOGMEAD
A boutique property in the prestigious suburb of Karen, Nairobi. A good spot to start or finish your safari.