

The ESCAPE

SPECTACULAR SAFARI

*Taking a detour off the beaten track,
Bazaar travels to Kenya's rugged
Northern Frontier for an
unforgettable adventure*

Words by KATE WILLS



A scenic camel ride
A group of Samburu 'mamas' on their way to a beading workshop



Take time to relax in a sunken stone bathtub

I realise that spying on elephants from above is a new one for me, as I observe an entire family of pachyderms, gracefully mooching through the valley right below my cliff-top infinity pool at the opulent Ol Malo Lodge. This vantage point on the northern edge of the Lakipia Plateau in Kenya would be jaw-dropping, even without the “ellies” – as safari types call them – lumbering past as I sip on my expertly mixed sundowner.

Kenya’s rugged Northern Frontier’ remains one of the most adventurous parts of Africa. Unlike the queues of mini buses you now find in the Maasai Mara, Lakipia feels distinctly off the beaten track. And because Ol Malo is a private conservancy, you can easily pretend you’re the first person to ever set flip-flop in this 3,000-acre wilderness of dense thorn bushes, 4ft-high orange termite hills and cactus-like candelabra trees.

It’s a one-hour bi-plane flight from Nairobi to the airstrip at Loisaba, and then another hour bumpy jeep ride (or “African massage” as my driver calls it) before you come across Ol Malo – jutting out on a rock escarpment like a Bond villain’s lair. I spend at least 30 minutes just staring at the view from the floor-to-ceiling glass windows in my thatched cottage. And what feels like another 30 getting lost in the bathroom, where there’s enough room to swing a hippo, complete with polished-stone bath tub and rain shower. Interiors here are thoughtful and luxurious – the bed is fashioned from tree trunks recovered from forest fires and the woven rugs, wicker lampshades and a wood-burning stove make things cosy in the cooler evenings. Dotted around the gargantuan living space are bronze sculptures and oil paintings of animals by Tanzanian artist Mike Ghau.

I drag myself away from my room for a lunch of delicious salads made from produce grown in the kitchen gardens. Between bites, Chyulu and Andrew Francombe – who run Ol Malo – regale me with stories of saving orphaned baby elephants by helicopter and a close shave with a lioness. It’s the perfect preamble to my first game drive, a live-action version of *The Lion King*. Baby warthogs spring out of burrows, giraffes poke their heads between flattened acacia trees and I get so close to the elephants I can see every wrinkle on their dexterous trunks. Just as exciting is the fact that many animals I come across are unique to this part of Kenya – such as the white-bellied Grevy Zebra and the shy Kudu antelope.

The next morning, I ride a very well-behaved camel down the valley to have breakfast in the bush, cooked over an open fire. A few hours on a ‘ship of the desert’ is enough for me, alternatively, an afternoon’s horse-ride is a brilliant way to get up close to animals. I trot alongside a majestic ostrich and clop happily among the zebra, feeling like part of the herd.

But there’s more to Ol Malo than the wildlife. The nomadic Samburu tribe graze their livestock on the areas surrounding the conservancy, and on a morning walking

safari my Samburu guide Hussein demonstrates the strength of his people’s connection to the land. That evening Hussein takes me to a nearby manyatta (village), where young male warriors clad in beads and holding spears are singing and jumping in a circle at sunset. He leads me into a smoky, dark, dung-walled house, where a woman is heating

goat milk in a gourd over a small fire. Hussein tells me about the traditions of the Samburu, unchanged for centuries, but increasingly under threat from drought and modernity.

Ol Malo has a close relationship with the Samburu and since 2000 their Samburu Trust has worked to help provide economic sustainability for local people. Every day, Samburu ‘mamas’ from the nearby villages hold a beading workshop at Ol Malo, where they make belts and necklaces to be sold in a small shop on-site.

How you spend your time here is very much self-directed and nearly all activities are included in the cost – everything except chartering the lodge’s helicopter to fly you over the Rift Valley. Couples can rent individual cottages and families or larger groups can take over the entire ‘house’ area which sleeps 12 to 15.

Every afternoon enjoy home-baked treats such as cinnamon buns or brownies. It’s a challenge to save room for the sumptuous three-course dinners, held al fresco on a candle-lit table around the fire. There is the option of spending the night in the leopard hide, an open-air treehouse near a watering hole where the big cats often come out to play. But I retire to the comfort of my high thread-count sheets and listen to them roar instead.

Three nights at Ol Malo Lodge in a double cottage on a fully inclusive basis, including domestic flights within Kenya and local transfers, from Dhs7,787 per person based on two sharing. Ol Malo is offering a third night for free when you pay for two nights stay. Fly from Dubai to Nairobi with Kenya Airways starting from Dhs1,028 return. Trueluxury.travel.com ■



Dinner with a view