

Savannah secrets

Laura French heads to the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy in Kenya for a safari experience without the crowds



Lewa Wildlife Conservancy
PICTURE: Elewana Collection/Ken Gregory

I'm in the heart of the wilderness, with nothing else in sight. Around me lies mile upon mile of prickly, waist-high grass – gold in places, green in others – plus a pair of impalas standing slender in the distance, ears pricked in silent anticipation, their honey-coloured coats just visible against the backdrop.

I follow in single file behind my guide, Solomon, and our ranger, Reuben, who's dressed in full khaki and armed with a huge wooden gun. I feel as though I'm in an Indiana Jones film.

We've veered far off the trail into what seems like no-man's-land, but I realise that's the whole point of a guided bush walk. I try to calm my fears of stumbling across a camouflaged python or covert lion, and continue treading carefully through this deserted expanse, the savannah quietly crunching underfoot and a calm breeze carrying our whispers off into the distance.

Then we hear an aggressive, cat-like hiss from behind a tree. My heart pounds, our guide flinches and our ranger rears his gun. I'm told to stay where I am while Solomon steps round to the other side. For a solid 30 seconds, I stand feet away from what I think might be a lion.

Fortunately, it's a false alarm. The sound is actually a bat-eared fox about to be

attacked by an eagle, my guide tells me with an embarrassed laugh as we retreat back to the trail, heart racing, nervously laughing. Welcome to Kenya.

It's day one on my first-ever safari experience and the bush walk is certainly one way of being initiated.

But over the course of the following week, I get used to these close encounters and I'm soon hooked on this surreal world of fighting cats and wallowing hippos, grazing giraffes and stomping elephants, where nature rules the roost in a way I've never experienced before.

RHINO CONSERVATION

I'm staying at Kifaru House, one of two Elewana Collection properties in the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy, set next to the Laikipia region in northern Kenya and surrounded by scenic mountain ranges.

This 62,000-acre conservancy, home to nine lodges in total, is best known for its large population of black and white rhinos – as well as being the spot where Wills proposed to Kate. Originally a cattle ranch, Lewa became a rhino sanctuary in 1983 and set the standard for others to follow. It now has a high-tech monitoring room that guests can visit to find out more, as well as a comprehensive sniffer-dog set-up that ➤

DESTINATIONS

AFRICA | KENYA

TRIED
&
TESTED

KIFARU HOUSE

Kenya

Made up of just five thatched-roof cottages and a shimmering infinity pool, Kifaru House is all about rustic charm – think wood-beamed walls and bamboo blinds – with king-sized four-poster beds and huge bathrooms. The food is excellent, with set-menu dinners served in a wood-covered, log-fired dining area, and the service is just as impressive, with a friendly, personal welcome that makes it feel like a (luxury) home away from home. The real USP, though, is the location. Set in what feels like the middle of nowhere with plains stretching into the distance and mountains shaping the horizon, it's easy to feel completely disconnected here – and the peaceful infinity pool set in its own quiet enclave helps too. Rates from \$1,230 per night (full-board-plus). elewanacollection.com

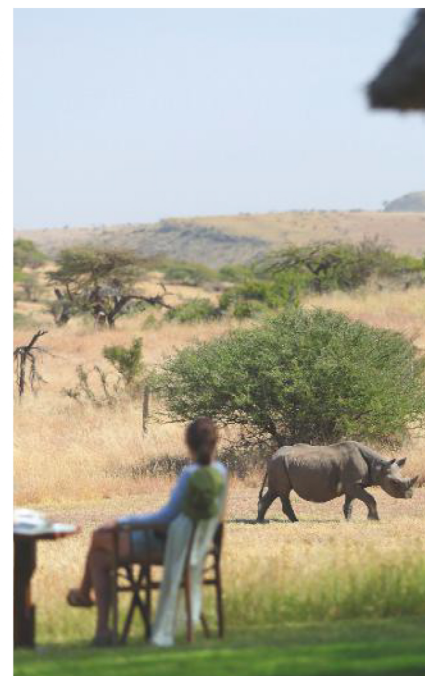


top tip

Elewana Collection is offering a private vehicle and guide at no extra cost for guests staying seven nights or more between November 1 and December 20

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Sniffer dog demonstration in Lewa Conservancy; view from Kifaru House; writer Laura French

PICTURES: Elewana Collection/Ken Gregory



sees a team of canines hunt potential poachers.

During an hour-long tracking experience, we hear how the dogs are trained and then watch a demonstration to see them successfully seek out two fake 'intruders'. We learn how Kenya's black rhino population diminished from around 20,000 in the 1970s to fewer than 300 a decade later, and how 14% of the country's rhinos are now found here.

Driving around the conservancy, we pass several of these greyish, wrinkly creatures, drinking from watering holes and grazing in the plains, their protruding horns reminiscent of images of prehistoric animals.

WILD DISCOVERIES

But it's not just the rhinos that leave an impression. Lewa is home to more than 70 species of mammal, including the big five, the endangered Grévy's zebra and the reticulated giraffe, as well as over 400 species of bird.

On an afternoon game drive, I manage to spot several of them: elegant giraffes arching against the horizon, huge African elephants plodding along the tracks, graceful ostriches fanning their black-and-white feathers and herds of curly-horned buffalo roaming the arid plains.

Later, we head out on a night game drive, rattling along beneath diamond-bright stars to seek out the region's nocturnal creatures using an infrared torch. We spot a cluster of bright red dots – a zebra herd, Solomon says – as well as pairs of jackal eyes and bounding hares.

Sadly, no big cats greet us on this trip, but on a game

drive the following afternoon we get lucky. Sprawled out on the grass within a few metres of our jeep is a huge, sleek-looking lioness, rolling around on her back, paws out like a giant tabby cat, her sandy fur perfectly blending into the arid grass in a way that's more endearing than intimidating. If this were the Masai Mara, we'd probably be one of 20 vehicles. Here, it's just us, the plains and the lazing lioness.

After 20 minutes spent staring and photo-taking, we drive a little way along a dusty track and stop for surprise sundowners, snacks laid out on a table in the middle of the bush, drinks in free flow.

I watch the sky turn dusky pink and electric blue as the sun sinks into the horizon, fully aware the lion is essentially just around the corner. But now, I don't care. After spending just a few days exploring this raw, untamed wilderness, I'm already fully attuned, at one with nature in a way I've perhaps never been before. And I'm half hoping to hear another cat-like screech from behind the tree – just for the thrill of it. **TW**

BOOK IT

Cheli & Peacock Safaris offers a seven-day trip from \$5,183, including three nights at Kifaru House and three nights at Sand River Masai Mara, based on two staying full-board in low season in 2022 and including domestic flights, transfers, park fees, game drives and other activities. chelipecock.com