

# Back to life

After her husband was murdered in 2001, Anna Trzebinski travelled to northern Kenya to recover in close communion with nature. Now she's running authentic but luxurious holidays there, and has married into the local tribe; **Stephanie Theobald** meets a woman reborn. Photographs by Simon Upton

## MANY RIVERS TO CROSS

Anna Trzebinski in the Uaso Nyiro river in Kenya





### HOME ON THE RANGE

Clockwise from above left: the main tent at Ngabolo Namunyak camp. Anna's bedroom tent. Samburu tribesmen. Inside the main tent

**I**n the dark days following the news that her husband had been shot dead near their family home in Nairobi, there was one inextinguishable ray of light flickering in the back of Anna Trzebinski's mind.

'When Tonio was killed and the world was focusing on the Happy Valley murder mysteries, the tribal people I had known and loved for so many years really understood what was going on and were there for me in the most important way,' she says.

Tonio Trzebinski was killed in October 2001 outside the gates of a house belonging to Natasha Illum Berg, a Swedish beauty and professional hunter rumoured to be his lover. The murder remains unsolved, although the fact that Trzebinski's body was found with £180 and a Rolex watch has led police to believe the murder was not the result of a classic car-jacking.

While the dust was still far from settled, Anna went to northern Kenya – to Koiya, in the Laikipia central highlands. This raw, untouched area of 10,000 acres, belonging to the Samburu tribespeople (a neighbouring tribe to the Masai), was a place she had been coming to since she was 18. Anna had lived in Kenya for most of her life, apart from a brief period of study at the London School of Economics. Her English father came to Africa to work as an architect, and her German mother remarried to a relative of Lord Delamere, one of the first white settlers in Kenya. They run an exotic, luxury 'folly' hotel by the shores of Lake Naivasha.

Many of the Samburu warriors Anna walked with as an 18-year-old had become elders. 'On finding out I'd lost my husband, they immediately invited me to come and live with them and to receive support from their community,' she says. Anna was initially dubious that anybody could help pull her out of the hole she found herself in – let alone a group of people from a completely different culture – but she was wrong. 'A few months later, about 60 members of the community walked along the river with me and chose a spot under the most sacred fig tree on their land for me to build on. The fig tree blesses those who come to it.'

Anna says that the spot pretty much saved her life. She made many pilgrimages alone through the bush, 'trying to come to terms with what had happened to us' (she and Tonio had two children, Stas and Lana, now 13 and 12 respectively). She turned what she calls this 'amazing calm oasis' into a camp-cum-holiday home, Ngabolo Namunyak – meaning 'the blessed fig tree' in Swahili.



# Escape East Africa



**WALKABOUT**  
Above: Anna with Samburu tribesmen on a walk overlooking Laikipia. Below: Samburu dancing, seen from the main tent



**SWING TIME**  
Below: Anna relaxing in a hammock by the river at Ngabolo Namunyak. Bottom: inside Anna's bedroom tent





**A LIFE LESS ORDINARY**

Clockwise from left: Anna in a kitchen rondavel. With her new husband, Lemarti. A bag and shawl, both designed and made by Anna



Even before the tragedy, she says going to the Kojia bush was her idea of a spa. 'It was a way of reconnecting with mother earth – don't puke!' she adds, with her characteristic sense of humour. 'There is nothing like walking through the bush with a Samburu and his spear – no guns, just tracking, listening, smelling – and, at night, sitting around a fire under an African sky.'

Naturally, once Ngabolo Namunyak had begun its healing process, Anna started thinking how she was going to turn her camp into a more permanent home. 'I didn't want any filters. I wanted to build something that would act as a platform to simply connect me to what is out there.' This, she says, with another smile, meant, 'no walls, no golden taps and no waiters in white gloves.'

Her idea of luxury was much more seductive, and her priorities included plenty of areas to lie down and read in, very comfortable beds, big sofas, calf hides, sheepskin rugs, lots of cushions ('lots of stuff to sink into'), rich fabrics in earth tones, hand-knotted carpets, wind chimes, outdoor showers and wooden furniture made from the wrecks of old boats. Back in Nairobi, she and Tonio, a reputed painter, had built their home from the wood of a dhow they saw smashed up on the rocks one weekend when they were surfing. 'We were broke at the time, so it was like a fantastic gift,' she says.

The energy Anna gets from her escapes to Ngabolo Namunyak gives her renewed inspiration when she returns to her Nairobi home in Karen – the exclusive, mainly white suburb built on Karen Blixen's failed coffee estate – to carry on her working life as a fashion and furniture designer.

Tonio used to make furniture – some of his glass-topped coffee tables still fill the Nairobi house. They are crafted from more wood from old dhow boats, topped with glass, and filled with sun-bleached zebra shoulder blades or elephant bones he found on safari. They are incredible objects – like macabre aquariums. In the past few years, Anna has begun to make her own version of these tables, underlining that she and Tonio both had different aesthetic outlooks. 'Tonio was an artist. He was into death and decay and the process of time. I'm into birth, life and fruition.'

For her tables – which will be shown in David Gill's London gallery this September – Anna casts the animal bones in glass or stainless steel, or fills the tables with cheerier objects such as butterflies with luminous blue and green wings. 'It amazes me how nature makes such beautiful things,' Anna says. 'Shells that look as though they were made by Cartier, or butterflies that look like jewels.'

In her fashion studio, which is next to her wood workshop at her Nairobi home, she employs local women to embroider beads,

charms, shells and flamingo feathers (found on the shores of various local lakes) onto a variety of shawls, shoes, pashminas and belts, ready to be shipped to shops such as Paul Smith and other high-end fashion stores around the world.

And yet, she is most excited about the creation of a new camp for her new husband, a Samburu warrior called Lemarti whom she fell in love with and married this summer in a week of spectacular celebrations in Kojia. She and Lemarti have decided to create their own safari experience in the Kojia area to offer visitors a taste of the joy Anna has always felt there. It will be a camel-trekking operation hosted by Samburu tribespeople ('absolutely no white men in short shorts, carrying guns and narrating tall stories by the fire. No phones, no radios, no four-wheel drives. Just warriors with spears.'

Anna has created a luxury mobile camp with Bedouin-style tents, 'very comfortable beds' (as opposed to the safari staple of huge metal-framed wooden beds) and sheepskin rugs to lie on by your own fire. Each walker will be accompanied by three warriors to keep them safe, and the overall approach will mirror Anna's philosophy of relaxed luxury living: walking as much or as little as you want, moving camp when you want, and dining under the stars.

She says that, above everything, it is the Samburu tribesmen and women that mesmerise the people who come to stay with her at Ngabolo Namunyak, and she wants this to be reflected in the new camel-trekking experience.

'Everywhere you go in Kenya, there is a thin sheet of glass between you and the indigenous people who work in lodges or who you see on safari,' she says. These people have never had the opportunity to act as hosts themselves, and now they will. Anna describes her new adventure as a 'rare, rare thing' in a 'rare, rare place' that is 'a balm for the soul'. □

For more information about Anna Trzebinski's camel-trekking safari, contact Journeys By Design (01273 623790; [www.journeysbydesign.co.uk](http://www.journeysbydesign.co.uk)).