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2009 READERS' TRAVEL AWARDS

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# The experts

Your travel queries answered ★ First-time safari ★ How to avoid hotel supplements

## OUR EXPERTS THIS MONTH



**PETER BROWNE** is associate editor of *Condé Nast Traveller* and an expert on safaris and travel in Africa



**LISA GRAINGER** is a prolific, Zimbabwean-born writer and editor, and a contributor

to *Condé Nast Traveller* who spends several weeks a year exploring Africa



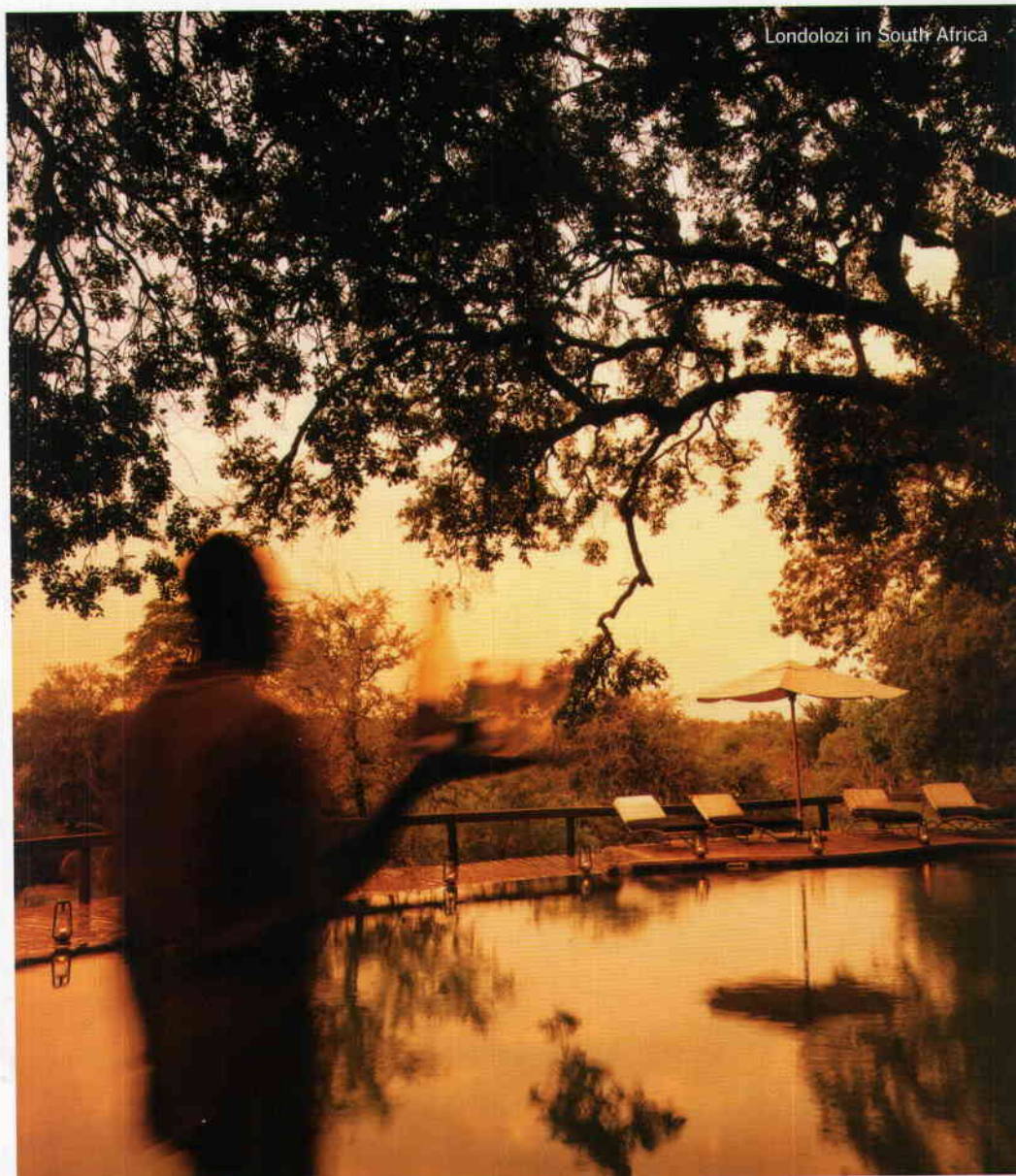
**GEORGE MORGAN-GRENVILLE** joined Abercrombie & Kent in 1986 and is now group chief marketing officer for

the tour operator and chairman of its UK, USA & Australian offices



**WILL JONES** is managing director of Journeys by Design, a specialist in Africa travel. He aims to ensure

that each travel itinerary is designed to support practical working African conservation projects.



### THE TRAVEL WRITERS

#### PETER BROWNE

I know you want your first safari to be special, but you will enjoy it more if you accept you might not see everything on one trip. Elephant? No problem. But spotting lion, cheetah and leopard from one base can be tricky. To up your chances, I recommend South Africa's private game reserves for first-time, intensive game-viewing: Singita ([www.singita.com](http://www.singita.com)), Londolozi ([www.londolozi.com](http://www.londolozi.com)) and Royal Malewane ([www.royalmalewane.com](http://www.royalmalewane.com)) are all brilliant ➤

### Q&A CLASSIC QUESTION

We're planning our **first safari** and are thinking about staying in a **luxury tented camp**. We are **flexible** on the location, but want to be sure of seeing **elephant, lion, cheetah, and leopard**. Any suggestions?



## The experts

► options, but they are luxury lodges, not tented camps. For an upmarket under-canvas experience, tiny Zarafa Camp in northern Botswana ([www.wilderness-safaris.com](http://www.wilderness-safaris.com)) is excellent for exclusivity (there are only four tents) and cheetah sightings; and in the Okavango Delta, there's the new nine-tented Xaranna camp ([www.andbeyond.com](http://www.andbeyond.com)) and classic Stanley's Camp ([www.sanctuarylodges.com](http://www.sanctuarylodges.com)). In Zambia, one of my favourite tented options is Chiawa Camp ([www.chiawa.com](http://www.chiawa.com)) in the Lower Zambezi National Park, which has recently been upgraded to celebrate 20 years in business.

### LISA GRAINGER

Zambia is too often overlooked for safaris. It doesn't have the vast Serengeti plains of Tanzania, nor the old-fashioned colonial glamour of Kenya. What it does have is huge, really wild reserves (19, covering 30 per cent of the country), top game guides who have been there for decades (Derek Shenton at Kaingo; Robin Pope at Nkwali and Tena Tena; Phil Berry at Kuyenda; John Coppinger at Tafika) and camps surrounded by wildlife. Tena Tena is one of Africa's best, with its libraries of books, comfortable shaded canvas rooms and guides who are as enthusiastic about iridescent beetles as they are big cats. You won't see cheetah here, but you'll get such a thrilling, educational, personal safari that checklists won't matter. *Prices from US\$550 per person per day from May to October (excluding travel), from [www.robinpopesafaris.net](http://www.robinpopesafaris.net).*

### THE TOUR OPERATORS GEORGE MORGAN- GRENVILLE

I would recommend a cross-border Kenya-Tanzania safari, starting with an Abercrombie & Kent

luxury private mobile camp in the Solio Conservancy, hidden away in the Laikipia region below Mount Kenya. The area has plenty of rhino and leopard, leaving you with a real sense of being in your own private African heaven.

From Solio, head south to Kenya's legendary Maasai Mara for a few nights at Olonana, a beautiful tented camp on the banks of the Mara River. And then go across the border to Tanzania and take a short charter flight to Tarangire National Park. Here, Sanctuary Retreats has just completed Swala, a magnificent boutique camp. You will barely need to move from your private veranda to see herds of elephant foraging and enjoying the cool shade of the baobab trees. *Seven-night safaris, including a private mobile camp, from £4,250 per person through Abercrombie & Kent ([www.abercrombiekent.co.uk](http://www.abercrombiekent.co.uk))*



### WILL JONES

I wouldn't hesitate to recommend Rekeru Camp in Kenya. It's one of our firm favourites, ideally set in the heart of the Maasai Mara. Here, over a period of three days, you can guarantee sightings of cheetah and all of the Big Five; try to time your trip around migration (between July and September).

Rekeru is beautifully crafted and positioned under a canopy of trees beside the Talek River. You can even track leopards with Jackson Looseyia from BBC's *Big Cat Diaries*. *From about £380 per person per night, excluding flights but including the Mara conservancy fees through Journeys by Design ([www.journeysbydesign.com](http://www.journeysbydesign.com)).*



Q&A

## NICK TREND ANSWERS YOUR TRAVEL QUERIES

### LUXOR FOR A SHORT BREAK

**Q** We'd like to visit Luxor for a short break (about four days) in early December. I can't find direct flights which allow me to do this. Do you know if it is possible and how best to organise it?

GF, via e-mail

**A** Frustratingly, the only direct scheduled flight between Luxor and London is a Monday departure with **Egyptair** ([www.egyptair.com](http://www.egyptair.com)). Charter flights also work on weekly schedules. This makes it a slightly awkward destination for a short break, which is a shame because it has a wonderful winter climate, as well as exceptional historic sights. The best solution is to travel via Cairo on the outbound flight and return direct from Luxor on the Monday. This means leaving Heathrow at 2pm on, say, a Friday, and allowing 90 minutes to change planes in Cairo, gets you to Luxor at about 11.30pm. The direct return on the Monday leaves at 9am and gets back to London at about 1pm.

**Hayes & Jarvis** ([www.hayesandjarvis.com](http://www.hayesandjarvis.com)) can arrange a three-night weekend break using these flights and staying at the **Softel Karnak** for £575 B&B per person, or at the **Nile Palace** at £649 B&B per person. If you'd like to spend an extra night in Cairo to break up the outward journey, **Thomas Cook Signature** ([www.tcosignature.com](http://www.tcosignature.com)) offers a four-night holiday staying one night in the **Softel Cairo El Gezirah** and three nights in Luxor at the **Softel Winter Palace** from £1,029 B&B per person including flights with **Egyptair**, transfers and four nights' accommodation in early December.

### CHRISTMAS HOUSE PARTY

**Q** We are looking for a big house for a memorable family Christmas, and in order to celebrate a 70th birthday. We want somewhere with character and which can sleep 14 people. Can you guide us in the right direction?

YH, via e-mail

**A** You don't specify a budget, but at this time of year, big holiday houses are very expensive. The best value I could find, which still has plenty of character, is **Southwood House Farm** in Derbyshire, which sleeps up to 14 and costs £2,254 for Christmas week through **National Trust Cottages** ([www.nationaltrustcottages.co.uk](http://www.nationaltrustcottages.co.uk)). It's an 18th-century, brick-built farmhouse on the south side of Calke Abbey estate with views over open farmland. Alternatively, **The Big Domain** ([www.thebigdomain.com](http://www.thebigdomain.com)) has a number of excellent - though more expensive - options, including the West Wing at **Compton House** in Dorset (reference 693) which sleeps up to 14. This costs £5,000 for five nights over Christmas. Built in the 16th century, it was restyled in the mid-19th century with Victorian-style crenellations and Gothic windows. Internally, it has been completely renovated (power showers, cinema room) but has the original oak staircase and bookcases. In Scotland, the Georgian-fronted **Gargunnoch House**, near Stirling can accommodate up to 16; central to the house is an elegant first-floor dining room with superb views and antique furniture. It costs £4,617 for a ►

**TEXT ALERT** If you get into trouble abroad, you can receive emergency telephone numbers by texting the name of your destination to 80818 (service costs £1)



# Where to stay

Reviews of the month ★ Kenyan safari camps ★ Oslo ★ Cumbria ★ Plus Suite talk

Kenya Sasaab

## Kindred spirit

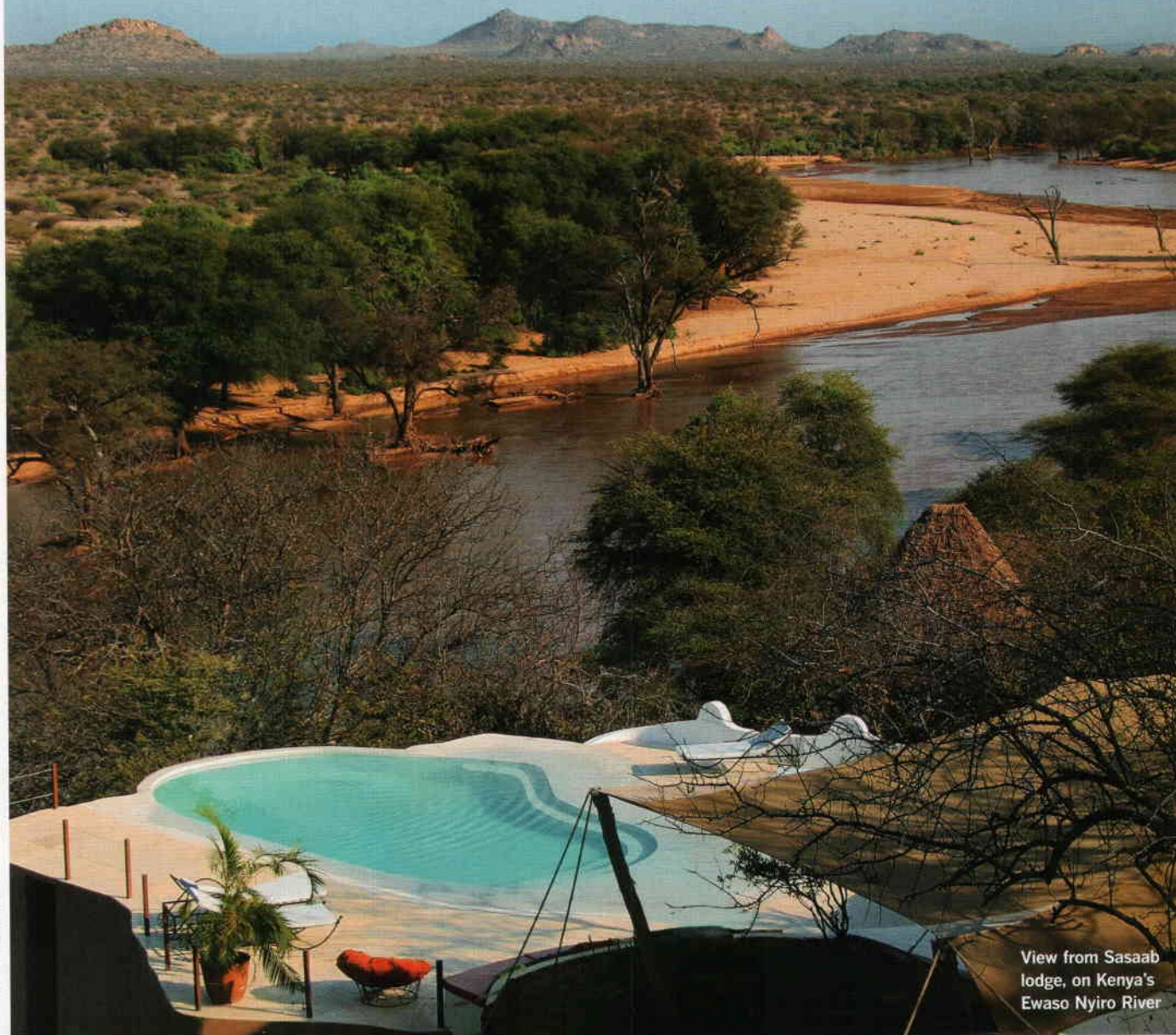
A family-run eco-retreat offers real warmth in the heart of the savannah, says Rachel Howard

IT'S NOT OFTEN A MANAGER asks you to pick up some whipping cream and a couple of lettuces on the way to your hotel. But when we finally reach Sasaab, a luxury lodge in the heart of Kenya's wild Northern Frontier, I can see why popping out to the shops is tricky.

The lodge is a hot and dusty, nine-hour drive north from Nairobi through a succession of thrilling landscapes – lush valleys, shimmering wheat fields in the foothills of Mount Kenya – followed by close

encounters with elephant in Samburu National Reserve. Then there's another bumpy hour's drive across arid plains, where Samburu warriors in scarlet kikois and brilliant beads herd their cattle.

No wonder most guests prefer the one-hour flight from Nairobi. But when you arrive in a sweaty heap in a broken-down jeep you definitely appreciate just how remote Sasaab is. Chilled lime juice and hot towels quickly restore our spirits. That, and the ▶



View from Sasaab lodge, on Kenya's Ewaso Nyiro River

PHOTOGRAPH: STEVIE MANN



## Where to stay



Left, one of the nine tented rooms at Sasaab and, below, the Moorish-style lounge

► sensational view from the 'mess', a Moorish lounge on a ridge above the Ewaso Nyiro River. Apart from a thatched *makuti* roof, it's open to the elements and overlooks a savannah landscape that melts into the distant peaks of the Matthews Range. There's a telescope, but you don't need it to spot baboons loping along the dry riverbed.

'My father would come here to bag oryx,' says Mikey Carr-Hartley, matter-of-factly. Soft-spoken Mikey is one of a long line of Carr-Hartleys, East African explorers, hunters, and now conservationists. Clark Gable and Ava Gardner stayed at the family ranch while filming *Mogambo* in the early 1950s. Now Mikey and his wife Tanya have created this glamorous eco-retreat, worthy of today's Hollywood stars and

### This is not exactly camping: the four-poster bed is draped in richly coloured fabrics; a footpath leads to an outdoor rain-shower


fashion royalty including Calvin Klein and Donna Karan. Skincare supremo Liz Earle was so smitten with Sasaab that she opened a spa here and is working on creating therapeutic products made from local plants.

Today, we have the place to ourselves, but with only nine rooms accessed by private footpaths, Sasaab will always feel exclusive. Although my enormous 'tent' has a zip-up mesh entrance to keep insects and wildlife at bay, this is not exactly camping: the four-poster bed is draped in richly coloured fabrics; a footpath leads to an outdoor rain-shower and wraps around it like a snail's shell; a hyrax is sunbathing by the plunge pool.

A spotted genet with a stripy tail joins us for a candlelit dinner beneath a ludicrously

starry sky. Over feta samosas, lamb tagine, and sticky date pudding, Carr-Hartley explains how a percentage of the revenue helps finance local schools, mobile clinics and businesses. The land is leased from the Samburu, who will eventually inherit the lodge. The Carr-Hartleys' ethos is as much community as conservation. Their next project is Giraffe Manor in Nairobi, famous for its resident herd of Rothschild giraffes, which will reopen this summer after a brush-up. In December, they will open the first and only lodge in Solio, a private game reserve founded to protect the endangered black rhino.

At 6.30am, with a gentle 'Hodi', my butler brings tea and biscuits. Activities are tailor-made. We opt to visit a local village with Daudi, our Samburu guide, who shows us how women bleed camels for blood milkshakes and build round huts from cow dung, hide, twigs and mud. After a bush breakfast of muffins and muesli, Daudi shows off his game-spotting skills, honing in on a Somali ostrich and her six chicks several kilometres away, and a herd of Grévy's zebra, rare beauties with fluffy round ears.

As dusk falls, we peel our sun-baked selves from Sasaab's infinity-edged pool and ride off into the sunset on some rather truculent camels. Our destination is a kopje with 360-degree views across the savannah. At the summit, beaming staff are waiting with barbecued sausages and ice-cold Tusker beers. Now that's what I call anticipating your guests' needs. 



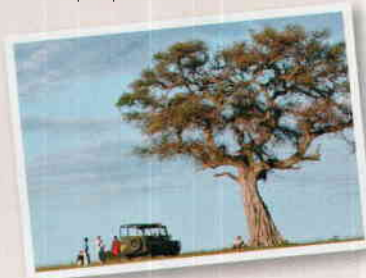
## 4 MORE FAMILY-RUN SAFARI CAMPS IN KENYA

### WILDERNESS TRAILS

Lewa Downs has been in the Craig family since 1922. Determined to reverse the damage done by their game-bagging grandmother, Ian and Will Craig created a conservancy famous for its endangered black rhino. Karamushu, a Masaai guide, leads safaris on foot or horseback; Will takes intrepid guests for a spin in his biplane. [www.journeysbydesign.com](http://www.journeysbydesign.com). From £430 per person

### RICHARD'S CAMP

Richard Roberts grew up in the Mara; his parents helped bring together the Masaai communities to create this conservation area. Their former home is now an intimate camp with seven solar-powered tents and a resident pride of lion. Every stay is tailor-made, but communal meals are convivial affairs hosted by Richard's nephew, Jay MacLeod. [www.richardscamp.com](http://www.richardscamp.com). From £335 per person



### ELEPHANT WATCH CAMP

Near Iain Douglas-Hamilton's Save the Elephants research centre in Samburu National Reserve, his wife Oria has created this eco-camp on the banks of the Ewaso Nyiro river. It has just six, fabric-swathed tents, so only a privileged few can observe the herds at close range with guides who know each elephant by name. [www.elephantwatchesafaris.com](http://www.elephantwatchesafaris.com). From £350 per person

### COTTARS 1920S

The Cottars, East Africa's first safari outfitters, introduced the Queen Mother to the bush. Calvin Cottar operates this elegant camp on 22,000 acres with his wife Louise and their children. The 10 tents are lit with kerosene lamps, and furnished with antiques, family heirlooms and brass horns to summon room service. Each party has a dedicated guide for activities, which include fishing expeditions and night drives. [www.cottars.com](http://www.cottars.com). From £335 per person

**SASAAB, KENYA** (00 254 20 251 3166; [WWW.SASAAB.COM](http://WWW.SASAAB.COM); [WWW.THESAFARICOLLECTION.COM](http://WWW.THESAFARICOLLECTION.COM)). DOUBLES FROM US\$530 PER PERSON PER NIGHT, INCLUDING MEALS AND ACTIVITIES