

Walking with camels

Kenya | Amid the ancient landscape of the Laikipia Plateau, a camel-supported hike ventures 'off-map' in search of wonders big and small. *By David Pilling*

Are you on a quest for Zen-like simplicity? A slow, mindful walk through a vanishing wilderness, unencumbered by the heavy load of modern civilisation – or the need to carry your own bags?

It is easily arranged. All you will need is a light aircraft, a helicopter (optional, but preferable), 15 camels to schlep the gear, eight men to tend to the camels and to set up camp, plus two wildlife experts to guide your experience and keep you safe. Simplicity, it turns out, can be a logistically complex affair.

I recently joined just such an expedition for four days on the edge of the Laikipia Plateau in central Kenya, dropped by helicopter (the pilot had been instructed to “look for the hills that look like brains”) in what to my urbanite mind was the ends of the earth. Certainly, at the measured pace at which

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we trudged through the arid acacia scrubland, we were several days from the nearest human settlement.

In all our time there, we saw no vehicle nor any obvious sign of modern activity, though the landscape itself had been shaped by millennia of pastoralists and their grazing herds. We encountered shards of jet-black obsidian tools and some chalk-white cave paintings in what was once a stone-age settlement, now colonised by a troupe of rowdy (and pungent) baboons. Their shrieks and clambering lent a *Planet of the Apes* feel to a setting where homo sapiens has resided for some 300,000 years.

Nothing from our own era was evident, save the stump of a burnt tree – possibly the work of a modern honey poacher. Once we were shocked to discover a piece of plastic litter, a mysterious milky-white coil from some unknown packaging. It turned out to be the discarded skin of a cobra.

The only real plastic of note was the shiny black object in my pocket. Once a mobile phone, with no signal and no electricity it was now just an inert slab.

This is an ancient land. Lava flowed here 12 million years ago on to rocks some 800 million years old. Once as high as the Himalayas, the landscape has eroded to its present elevation of around 6,500 feet above sea level, flat but punctuated with red granitic upthrustings called kopjes. In the distance is Mount Kenya, a volcanic lagard at just three million years old.

Our guide is Gabriel Ewoi, a pastoralist from the Samburu people, close cousins of the Maasai. As a boy Gabriel gained a Wikipedic knowledge of the bush from a hunter-gatherer who took him under his wing after his father died. He learnt English at a mission school a six-kilometre walk from home. He is now in his early forties, and for him the land is as readable as any book.

“Look, smell, listen,” he entreats. “Try to get all the information you can from the bush.”

Where we scour the middle-distance for potential animal sightings – perhaps a rare Grevy’s zebra, of which we see several – Gabriel searches out smaller clues: the footprints of an animal, the trail marks of an insect, a zebra hair caught on a rubbing post, the scatterings of dung, the holes and burrows in the red soil, the scuffed earth.

Where we see flowers, plants and insects, Gabriel sees a pharmacy: a leaf that quells fevers, a biting ant used to clamp wounds, an eardrop of aloe oil in an unfurled Commelina flower. Where we see nothing, he sees a hyena’s colour-coded calling card on a single blade of grass. “White means ‘be back in five minutes,’” he says, smiling at his own anthropomorphism. “Brown means ‘this is my territory.’”



From top: David Pilling (far right), guide Gabriel Ewoi and other members of the group set off in the early morning; an evening around the fire; the dry river beds of the northern Lower Ewaso Wilderness; a leopard tortoise and rufous elephant shrew – two of the ‘Small Five’; approaching the Mathews Mountains — Will Jones; Karisia Walking Safaris



On our first evening, we camp on an open plain with Mount Kenya just visible behind the cloud. Ostensibly simple, the set-up – organised by Karisia Walking Safaris, a local operator – is decidedly luxurious given our remoteness and the amount of camel-power and manpower it takes to transport and assemble.

There are comfortable green-canvas tents tall enough to stand up in and equipped with a spongy mattress, sheets and blankets. There is a portable canvas shower for each guest and a canvas toilet, replete with raised-box toilet seat over a freshly dug pit. The shower is deliciously hot, the water heated over an open fire and released, with the tug of a cord, on to tired limbs and dusty hair.

The other guests in the group are not new to adventure. Will Jones is a fellow of the Royal Geographic Society and

founder of Journeys by Design, which offers tailored safaris and what he calls “off-map” or “off-Google” experiences. Laura Marshall-Andrews, his wife, is a GP in Brighton, an author and a student of different cultural approaches to medicine.

Our routine becomes soothingly predictable. Each day, the camp is dismantled, loaded on to the camels and carried to the next site, where it is magically re-erected before we arrive. After breakfast, we set off at early light and walk for about six hours, reaching the new camp by lunchtime, followed by a postprandial rest and an evening stroll of perhaps three hours.

The walking is easy and addictive. On the first day, we were full of excited chatter. Now our voices have fallen to a librarian’s whisper. We spend long spells in silence with only the synchronised

crunch of our feet on the parched earth to mark time.

Most of the camels go on ahead, but three stay back to carry daypacks, water and – if we fancy – us. We yield to temptation just once, for a faintly ridiculous lurch into camp on the second day. I had the impression of camels as bad-tempered and aggressive. These ones are placidness itself, long-eyelashed and serene as they delicately pick their way, munching cactus plants as they go.

It was at dinner on the first evening that we decided ours would be a quest for the “Small Five”. Gabriel had just spotted an elephant shrew scurrying across the path. A long-snouted, rodent-like creature, the elephant shrew, despite its modest proportions, is more closely related to the larger animal of its name. It is one of the so-called Small Five – miniature counterparts to the “Big Five” marketed as the must-sees of a conventional safari. As Gabriel has been teaching us to think small, it seems fitting that we seek out the remaining four mini-attractions: the antlion, the rhinoceros beetle, the buffalo weaver bird and the leopard tortoise.

The next morning we set off brightly on what, to my mind, has become our *Horton Hears a Who* safari. In the 1954 Dr Seuss story, Horton the elephant helps the nanoscopic people of Whoville residing on a speck of dust. Though invisible in Horton’s eyes, the citizens of Whoville are perfectly proportioned in their own.

An odd thing happens to scale on our safari, too. As in the scene from TV comedy *Father Ted* when Father Dougal struggles with the concept of perspective, the faraway elephants, eland and waterbuck appear tiny to the naked eye, inch-tall creatures only properly discernible through binoculars.

The little tykes a few inches away, by contrast, become terrifying monsters. On one occasion, Gabriel finds a giant (well, satsuma-sized) hairy baboon spider. Mesmerised by its menacing anatomy, I wonder how nervous I’d be if it were the size of a car. Later, we watch fascinated as a bottle-green dung beetle lifts off, hovers and then buzzes horizontally as zippily as any Whoville helicopter.

Gabriel regularly tests our growing if still superficial knowledge of paw and hoof prints or, better yet, our dung-identification skills. “Poo Safari”, I write in my notebook. This one is chalky white from digested bones (hyena), this scattered with the heads of termites (aardvark), this black peppercorn-sized (a miniature dik-dik antelope), and this one fluffy cotton wool (leopard).

He directs our attention to a thumb-sized concave funnel in the sandy earth: an antlion trap. Ants stumble in and, sensing the vibration, the antlion larva, hiding below, pounces, snapping its jaws and injecting a paralysing venom.

We entice one out with a fake-ant vibration. Given its fearsome mandibles and killer instincts, I’m glad it is smaller than a pea.

Our quest for the Small Five falters, but there are plenty of other things to distract us. Like some Sherlock Holmes of the bush, Gabriel is forever reconstructing crimes. Here is the Mystery of the Impala Horns Stuck in a Tree. We discover them via a leopard’s paw prints, the scuffed scene of a kill, the dragging of a carcass and the claw marks up a trunk. More detective work solves the Case of the Scattered Eggs. The culprit turns out to be a mongoose and the victims five turtle hatchlings.

Gabriel’s investigations are ably assisted by his own Watson, camel-handler and sharp-eyed spotter Ntation

(the “N” is silent). On the third day, as we approach the Ewaso Ng’iro river, which flows from Mount Kenya towards Somalia, Ntation suddenly whistles. Not far away is a leopard tortoise in plain sight. About the size of a dinner plate, it is a female, discernible from the rough patch on the back of the shell where she has been mounted, evidently quite often.

After a swim in the fast-flowing river – not for the faint-hearted – we find the fourth of our Small Five, a rhino beetle. There are two of them on a cowpat (evidence of cattle herding, and therefore humans after all) like a battling pair in some Japanese video game.

The next morning’s walk is my last. The earth has turned from red to black. Gabriel and Ntation have their eyes peeled for a buffalo weaver bird to complete the set. We spot a giant land snail, which can grow up to eight inches long,

dile hunter, he started Tropic Air 31 years ago with just one de Havilland Beaver but now has a fleet of planes and helicopters. When he’s not ferrying tourists around, he’s spraying the swarms of locusts now menacing parts of east Africa.

We clamber in and within seconds the helicopter is hovering with the poise of any dung beetle, before whooshing off at speed a few hundred feet above the ground as a huge flock of egrets scatter like confetti at a wedding.

Roberts manoeuvres the machine like a motorbike as we chase here and there, following the river, rounding hills, ducking below the treeline and zipping off to see herds of elephant or a black eagle’s nest perched on the craggy pinnacle of a spindly kopje. About half the helicopter is window, so the views are spectacular and the sensation of the ground rushing beneath our feet palpable. I can only imagine this is what it’s like to ride a broomstick.

We approach another of the bulbous rock protrusions, several hundred feet high, and I gasp as I realise that Roberts is going in to land. He approaches but the wind drives us back and he steers tightly around the rock for another go. “It’s a bit of an old dog to fly around corners,” he growls. He comes in again, this time successfully. We get out on the very spot where David Attenborough filmed the opening shot of his *Africa* series. Roberts knows because he brought him here himself.

After a cup of coffee, we take off again and, 20 minutes’ heart-stopping manoeuvres and jaw-slackening views later, we drop off Will and Laura at the base of another kopje. They are continuing their adventure.

I carry on to the town of Nanyuki, from where I am flown, this time by prop plane, back to Nairobi. Later my WhatsApp dings with a message from Will. Minutes after my helicopter left the ground, he writes, Gabriel finally spotted a white-headed buffalo weaver bird. However thrilling it is to take to the air, I think, it always pays to be grounded.

David Pilling is the FT’s Africa Editor



though this one is smaller than my fingernail. “Not a good ambassador for his species,” quips Will.

We scour and squint for several hours, but there’s no buffalo weaver bird to be found. The sight of an actual buffalo is small consolation.

There is, however, one last adventure. Waiting for us at Tumaren camp, Karisia’s main base, is an H130 helicopter and celebrated bush pilot Jamie Roberts. A rough-talking, grizzle-haired man in his fifties, Roberts has the swagger of a ranch hand and a nicotine-throated laugh. The son of a croco-



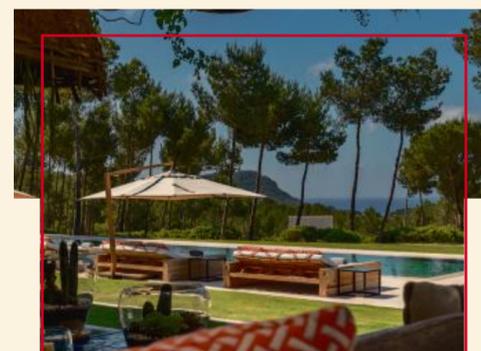
Endangered Grevy’s zebras with Mount Kenya in the distance — Karisia Walking Safaris

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David Pilling was a guest of Journeys by Design (Journeysbydesign.com). It offers a four-night camel-supported walk with Karisia Walking Safaris, including private charter flights from Nairobi to the airstrip at Tumaren, from \$5,950 per person. A private two-week safari including the four nights’ walking and also helicopter transfers into Kenya’s northern deserts would cost from \$19,100 per person



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