

TRANSLATION: VANITY FAIR ITALIA | THE SAFARI COLLECTION

NICE TO MEET YOU – BY LAURA FIENGO

LET'S DANCE

All the women of the village gathered for a traditional dance: we are among the Samburu (Central- Northern Kenya), some of the rare people in Africa who still live (almost) like their ancestors. Dancing with the Samburu, landing in a waterfall, looking for the black leopard, ditching the jeep, sleeping in a tent without knowing where you are, hugging a giraffe: safaris have changed. Adventure in Kenya from Laikipia to the Masai Mara, looking for the other Africa.

FIND THE INTRUDERS

Image credits: *Sundowners, sunset drinks, around Sala's Camp (Masai Mara). The very rare black leopard: a female, we followed her to Siruai (Laikipia). The Safari Collection mobile camp dining tent.*

What do you eat? The first Indiana Jones moment of this journey catches us in Samburu, the exact centre of Kenya, in a village beaten by a dry desert wind that passes through huts and people leaving a loud sound and serpentine, like a flute. In certain adventures, especially African ones, you don't know if what you hear and see is completely true. In fact, when the older lady with her face covered in red clay and the beaded collar surrounding her like a ring of Saturn (sign of his authoritative social status) replies "Milk and blood, and without killing our cow," I look at the interpreter and have him repeat it to me. After all, we met the Samburu women, who live around the national park that carries their name, in an exciting way to say the least. From Sasaab Samburu, the lodge that hosts us, we set off, some on foot, some on very tall camels walking in a line towards sunset. Cautious and with a large escort of guides and friends of the lodge, we descend towards the river. We're in the kind of place where the movement increases towards evening: the baboons seek out the leopards and the leopards reciprocate, while everyone fears the lions, who in turn love the camels more than anything. The only creatures that seem calm are the placid Grevy zebras, beautiful and at risk of extinction. We will encounter every element of this East African fair in the following days, but all thoughts of the food chain fade from sight of women in the distance. The whole village is there, from shy little girls with big smiles to grandmothers and great-grandmothers, the most energetic. They are close together underneath a large tree and they sing, a sound much louder than that of the wind: they seem like children's voices, a children's choir in the middle of the savannah that reaches everywhere. Let's try to learn dance (neck movements that are impossible to imitate) and to steal the secret behind their determination to maintain the ancestral tradition of semi-nomadic pastoralists despite the pressures of modern Kenya which he would like them to be more sedentary, more evolved. "The only issue on which we are trying to convince the Samburu to change is female genital mutilation, which is still practiced," says Juan, who runs Sasaab with his partner Alzaane. This luxurious and remote lodge was built by The Safari Collection.

The Safari Collection sets out to create different unexpected safaris linked as much as possible to local communities, be they sapiens or all the other species that crowd these wonderful corners of the world (thesafaricollection.com, to see what they do). And the itinerary focuses on the surprise effect: "You don't have to know everything before leaving, google too much, create a real expectation," says Mikey Carr-Hartley, who founded the collection with his wife Tanya. Hence our itinerary which will cross half of Kenya whilst keeping its mysterious. We leave the Samburu with their stories of clans, machetes and tribes, and the Sasaab with its tents with swimming pool, chefs, an organic garden and new cultural hub, on board of a helicopter (Tropic Air, guided by Tatz the pilot and living impersonator of Denzel Washington who generally brings guests such as Bill Gates). He drops us with acrobatic turns at the top of the mountains, under the waterfalls, on sharp boulders, everyone shouts, a bit of terror and a lot of happiness. The final descent, with doors open, is in a tented camp set up especially for us in remote Laikipia. The plateau is surreally beautiful, we can see from the sky that we are only surrounded by prehistoric boulders and nothing absolute. Don't imagine a campsite: everyone has a tent with bathroom, one hot water bottle in bed, a canvas wardrobe for explorers. Then bunches of flowers, lit bonfires, G&Ts at all hours and an excellent chef, but we're not here to play Out of Africa. Mikey and Tanya welcome us with shoe gaiters (for ticks, they say), and announce a walk on foot. "If I say stop, everyone stop behind me, if I say run, run fast." This trek among giant stones, tall grass and unknown noises is already among the memories of life, it ends in a river among palm trees: we dive Mowgli style floating on inner tubes and kayaks. Before leaving paradise without a name, we leave at night covered and trembling: Mikey has heard of a black leopard around, it is very rare and he wants to find it.

It's a female, she's paired with a "classic" male, they already have 5 cubs of various colours and to find her, at the right distance, we'll follow him. The two beautiful leopards are courting each other under the moon in a clearing. The silence is total, only us, them and the darkness.

With this sense of empathy with the whole world we arrive at the Masai Mara. Sala's Camp is the last lodge before the grand finale at Giraffe Manor in Nairobi, perhaps the most instagrammed hotel in the world. Maybe it's because friendly giraffes have lived there for almost 50 years and you find them at the window in the morning looking for food. The Mara is equally famous. The nearby Serengeti, in Tanzania, is called "the Venice of Africa," due to the crowd of jeeps that besiege the animals, so we veterans of Eden are a little afraid, but in Sala's Camp we find silence, infinite horizons and lions practically everywhere (they also sleep in the middle of the plane's runway), and then families of elephants, rhinos as slow and solemn as an engraving by Dürer, and curious cheetahs that interrupt our breakfast cooked on the vehicle's stove.

When we arrive at Giraffe Manor I decide to adopt a giraffe. Her name is Daisy, she arrives, stares at me with two large, liquid eyes of a fantasy creature and I don't believe it, but she hugs me.

The journey of life: where, how and with whom... Our itinerary in Kenya was organised by Journeys by Design (journeysbydesign.com), a company specialising in African trips, private safaris and special experiences. Our itinerary started in central Kenya, at Sasaab lodge, then we reached the Laikipia plateau at the Siruai Mobile Tented Camp (available for exclusive use only. Rates from €5,660 per night for 10 guests, friends or relatives, all included) . All these camps, including Sala's Camp in the Masai Mara and the famous Giraffe Manor in Nairobi which now has a new (impressive!) Retreat with refined day-suites, spa, swimming pools and food, ideal for refreshment after a safari or just arrived from a long flight, are all part of The Safari Collection.