

CANARY WHARF

Magazine

August 2019

Out of OFFICE

All you need to kick off the holiday countdown



Sun, sea, sand and swimwear

Essential family travel ideas

Victoria Pendleton on friendship and fitness

King of speed, Christian Horner



THE CALL OF THE W I L D

FAMILY-OWNED BY FOURTH GENERATION KENYANS, THE SAFARI COLLECTION'S INTIMATE CAMPS PROVIDE AN EPIC TOUR OF THE NATION'S BEST WILDLIFE RESERVES

WORDS LILY DEVAN

One day on safari is not like another. The wonders of the natural world are not always lying in photographic wait, poised in anticipation of your arrival. They are busy surviving: stalking prey, hiding from predators, dozing beneath sparse foliage, bathing, bonding. The presence of humans might be immaterial or, indeed, a hindrance to them. However you encounter the riches of these habitats – no more so than in Kenya, the king of safaris, out of popularity for a time but now reasserting its force – the ability to witness their daily lives is quite remarkable. The thrill of expecting the unexpected awaits each day, driving out in the early morning and late afternoon hours.

Just as one day is not like another, nor is one safari destination quite like another. The Safari Collection, a company founded by a pair of fourth-generation Kenyans, offers just that: a collection of four dazzlingly varied safari destinations, in absolute luxury and degrees of Kenyan wilderness. The most refined, and arguably most restrained, is the photogenic Giraffe Manor; a 1930s property on the edge of Nairobi National Park, just south of the city. Its private land is home to a herd of Rothschild's giraffe, who guests of just 12 rooms may meet over a dawn breakfast or afternoon tea.

A childlike excitement is in the air as bleary travellers edge in awe towards the manor house windows – or balconies, for a truly premium experience – to feed the giraffe, warthogs scurrying between spindly legs. Open the front door, and a lofty visitor might be waiting. Dining on pancakes and dishes fit for an aristocrat, you may be joined by birds swooping through windows, and a long ▶



THIS PAGE, FROM TOP LARGE WHITE RHINO AT SOLIO; ZEBRAS IN THE MASAII MARA, PHOTOGRAPHY BY LILY DEVAN; GIRAFFE MANOR; OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT GIRAFFE MANOR; LION SLEEPING AT SOLIO; ELEPHANTS ON THE SAND RIVER IN THE MASAII MARA; GIRAFFE MANOR; LION IN THE MASAII MARA PHOTOGRAPHY BY LILY DEVAN; TERRACE AT SALA'S CAMP; BATHROOM AT SOLIO



► powerful neck craning in for a bite. And while the environment is controlled, there are reminders that this is far from a zoo. The giraffes' human custodians look on in delight as in the distance a newborn, hours old, meets the rest of the herd for the first time, protected on still wobbling legs by its mother.

A short flight north, skimming low in a tiny plane over green fields and rolling hills, Solio Lodge lies in a valley between Mount Kenya and the Aberdare mountains. Its five stone cottages are the sole place to stay within a 45,000-acre private game reserve devoted to breeding rhino. Nearly half of this land is a conservancy: meaning that the chances of seeing other travellers are minimal, and that guides know exactly who – or what – is coming in and out (including the occasional rogue elephant, trampling the conservancy's border fences that cross a former migration path). This higher altitude spot is a haven for both the critically endangered black and near threatened white rhino. The opportunity to jump out of a jeep and stand with these at-risk animals just beyond is spectacular.

Solio's charms are indeed many, not least the floor-to-ceiling glass walls that run along each cottage, presenting views of the grassland beyond from bed, bathroom and lounge. Albeit well spread out, since the property is so intimate, manager Ava ensures a personal touch, making sure to catch up with each guest after private game drives, or sharing the recipe to some of the dining room's Kenyan fare: tender meats, flavoursome soups and hearty salads. When a lone buffalo – docile in herds, aggressive when alone – is known to be roaming nearby, she is on high alert.

The importance of a knowledgeable guide, and the difference that they can make (especially when such a buffalo is still at large), is effortlessly showcased here. There are just a handful

at Solio, including Maasai Ole, a keen photographer with infectious spirit and a firm hand on where to drive next. His encyclopedic knowledge might result in a friendly quiz over sundowners on how to spot black from white rhino; how to distinguish the many colourful bird species flitting through the trees and the types of monkey scampering below; or even, during a nature walk, how to tell various mammal footprints and dung apart.

Solio is also blessed with varied terrain (marshland, vast open landscape, thickets ideal for hiding kills from vultures), which – again, if you know where to look – might lead to a family of young lions playing on a makeshift bridge, or rounding an unsuspecting corner between bushes to meet a pride of 15 resting in the afternoon sun. A tower of 28 giraffe might move slowly across the horizon, while you wander between the stragglers; a baby rhino might scurry to keep up with its parent's stride; or the sound and smell of lions methodically digging in to a fresh buffalo kill could be the first sign of your next sighting. With the engine switched

off, silently sitting within a few metres or less of these animals is a privilege.

Not far from the Tanzanian border, Sala's Camp is a tented outpost in the Maasai Mara reserve for up to 18 guests, set above a riverbed. Here, the wildlife experience is by contrast less intimate but holds the wonder of the boundless savannah; the exhilaration of the day is, quite often, simply trying to find wildlife in these breathtaking open plains. Private game drives can make all the difference, allowing your guide and spotter – their incredible ability to spot the slightest camouflaged movement is crucial when attempting to track animals in these wilds – to hone in on trying to find the elusive hippo, hyena or herd of elephants that you have not yet seen.

Bush breakfasts, campfire sundowners and communal dining – on rather haute cuisine, considering the remote climes – lend this camp its traditional safari air. Maasai warriors are tasked with patrolling the camp and escorting guests in the dark before dawn and in the evening to their tents (luxurious to a tee, and

where elephants and giraffe might graze the side as they pass through under midnight moonlight). As much as wildlife rules any safari, these brief human encounters are perhaps the most illuminating. Robert, for instance, tells of Maasai life and traditions in hushed tones before stopping dead in his tracks, spear ready in hand (no guns allowed, in these parts). It is the arguably imperceptible sound of what transpires to be a buffalo further ahead.

A day on safari highlights the cruelty and beauty of nature in equal measure. A lioness will shelter a couple of newly born cubs from foe, venturing from a den only to hunt food for them. The next day, the sound of her grief-stricken howls can fill the air as an outcast male, ferocious towards any perceived rival (however young), has ransacked her home. Not far away, a hippo wallows in mud and a leopard sleeps sprawled over a branch in the afternoon sun. No two days on safari are quite like another. ■

Giraffe Manor, from \$795 per night; Sala's Camp, from \$800 per night; Solio Lodge from \$700 per night, thesafaricollection.com

A day on safari highlights the cruelty and beauty of nature in equal measure

