



CHASING THE WILD

Lions. Rhinos. Leopards. A safari into Africa's savannah will bring you face to face with these, and many more wonderful creatures – what better way to shoot them than with a camera, on a photography safari?
WORDS AND PHOTOS **AMY RUSSELL**



I CAN'T TELL IF THE knots in my stomach are tangles of excitement or nerves. You'd be forgiven for thinking they're the latter, considering there's an armed ranger with an AK-47 in the seat next to me. All I can see in the darkness of this night are his gleaming, white teeth as he murmurs to our driver, Moses, in Swahili. But he's not the cause of the fist-size ball of anticipation heating up in my belly; he is here for our protection. And the biggest danger isn't in our Land Rover; it waits outside in the all-encompassing blackness that descends on Solio Game Reserve in Kenya, after the sun has set.

Before I have a chance to dwell any further on what form this lurking danger may take, our Land Rover jumps to life and we speed off, belting down the dusty track as if the devil is on our tail. It doesn't matter that I can't understand the now-urgent dialogue between Moses and the ranger. I can tell by their tone, and the few Swahili words I know, that we're in trouble.

I jump up onto my seat, swing my camera onto my shoulder and peer out of the gap created by our hoisted roof. Squinting into the darkness, I spot what all the fuss is about: a baby rhino is chasing us. And while you may think a baby could hardly pose a great threat to our sturdy, green vehicle, I know that if a baby is behind us, its mum is too. And, that means we're being pursued by almost 2 tonnes of angry rhino flesh. Not the devil then, but close enough.

I should probably be concerned that I've never heard the normally calm-as-a-millpond Moses sound panicked, but it's hard to be worried when you're having this much fun. My hair whips around my face and dust invades my nostrils as, holding on for dear life, I laugh into the night air. Moses expertly navigates a sharp turn and we continue to pick up speed until finally he creates enough distance between the rhino and us, enough that its interest wanes and it ceases running. We've escaped danger and we're now, seemingly, alone in the African wild once again.

As we slow to a calmer pace I clamber over my three photographer companions and join our safari guide, Jess, at the front of the vehicle. Spotlight in hand, she paints the darkness with yellow light in search of big game, or more accurately, big cats. And just when I think we couldn't possibly pack any more adrenalin into this night ride, her torch beam falls over something that looks suspiciously like a leopard's spots in the distance. Moses has seen it too, and before I can grab a handful of roof to steady myself, he's off again. This time though, we're the ones doing the chasing.

With only our spotlight and the moon's weak glow to guide us, we tail the cat through dense forest and prickly scrub, all the while closely following the rutted tracks that have been eroded by years of safari traffic. She slips out of sight, so we come to a stop and scan our surroundings. It seems we've lost her until Jess catches another glimpse of that unmistakable mottled coat, almost hidden by the nearby undergrowth.

My pulse quickens and sweat beads on my brow as I try to focus my viewfinder on her muscly hide; it's in that moment that she turns to look me square in the eye. I lose my breath as two piercing, yellow pupils stare me down. I'm momentarily paralysed by the intensity of her gaze before I remember to push the shutter release on my camera. Click. Click. Click.

It isn't every day you get so close to a leopard in the wild,



Clockwise from top left: Reticulated giraffes make the most of their unique genetics by munching on the tips of trees in Samburu National Reserve, in the Rift Valley, Kenya; This pensive baboon cools off in the shade trying to ignore a crew of energetic vervet monkeys, at the outskirts of an abandoned safari camp in Amboseli National Park; You're often greeted by herds of elephants before you've even had time for breakfast on safari; Chris, standing on the front seat of John's safari vehicle, makes the most of the golden morning light, and the patience of some of the locals; Defassa waterbucks, like this one photographed in Solio Game Reserve, live in woodlands and clearings close to water, in family herds of 5-10 and bachelor herds of up to 40 - watch out, ladies!



close enough that you can clearly see her sniff the air, turn on her heels, and haughtily saunter off into the distance. Unless, of course, you're on safari.

WHEN I TOUCHED DOWN IN Nairobi just over a week ago, I wasn't sure what to expect of Kenya, the stomping ground for my two-week African photography safari, run by adventurer and professional photographer Chris Bray and his partner, also a photographer, Jess Taunton. My limited research for this trip - which I'm ashamed to say was a home screening of *Out of Africa* - did little to prepare me for boisterous and ramshackle Nairobi, and as we made our way south along the debris-ridden roads, negotiating the hazardous traffic, I couldn't help but be utterly transfixed by the heaving mass of commuting cars and people. And wonder where Robert Redford was.

It was safari Day 1, and we were en route to Amboseli National Park, in the Rift Valley Province - the first playground for our merry convoy of two Land Rovers driven by African safari guides John and Moses, and 10 passengers: Chris and Jess, and eight eager photography enthusiasts. As the traffic dissolved and the landscape morphed from a smoggy cityscape to wide, open fields and dusty plains, I made a desperate mental note of all the photography tips Chris had offered us the night before. Of the eight of us, I was probably the least experienced, and so like a thirsty elephant that's stumbled across a waterhole, I sucked up every skerrick of advice.

Now in their second year, Chris's Kenya safaris are the ultimate crash course in wildlife photography. "We picked Kenya because it is the African country that springs to mind when I think 'wildlife'," he told me over an ice-cold Tusker beer. "It has all of Africa's big symbolic animals and, along with the wildlife, we wanted to give people a taste of Africa's unique culture and stunning landscape. Kenya is rich in both."

His concept is a simple one: gather a group of would-be wildlife photographers, equip them with the basics in photography - such as an understanding of aperture, shutter speed, ISO, composition and depth of field - and then lead them on a trip of a lifetime to some of Kenya's richest wildlife

"Along with the wildlife, we wanted to give people a taste of Africa's unique culture and stunning landscape. Kenya is rich in both."

reserves where, for hours every day, they're given the chance to capture images of some of the most majestic animals on the planet. "We're there to help our clients capture the best possible images," Chris tells me. "We don't just position the cars and leave them to their own devices."

Sitting in the seat next to me, Chris, wearing his safari uniform of khaki pants and long-sleeve shirt rolled up to his elbows, was finding it near impossible to stay still as we drew closer to the gates of Amboseli. I threw a glance in his direction and noticed a mixture of eagerness and exhilaration written all over his face, as his tussled, brown hair ruffled in

the breeze. “Excellent,” I thought. “If Chris Bray is excited, this is going to be amazing.”

HERDS AND HERDS OF elephants were all I could see. Hundreds of them. As we combed the dusty plains of Amboseli they moved about us in the park as if we weren’t even there: huge families meandered past our vehicles – close enough that I could’ve brushed my fingers across their wrinkly, grey hides had I reached out – and with trunks raised heavenward, they trumpeted at the skies and herded their young across the roads, literally stopping us in our tracks.

To avoid the scorching midday heat we left Kibo Safari Camp (our canvas lodgings at the outskirts of the park) in the early mornings and mid-afternoons, to spend hours winding our way around the 392sq.km of dry, flat and savannah-pocketed parkland, while the snow-capped plateau of Mt Kilimanjaro peeked at us through the clouds.

What I had assumed would be a hunt for bashful animals hiding in swampy springs or high in the branches of umbrella thorn acacias, was actually a visual feast: sleepy wildebeest munched on savannah grass; intricately patterned zebras chased their young about in the dust; flighty Thomsons gazelles and silky impalas bounded about in the scrub; and regal baboons watched lazily as cheeky monkeys swung between low-hanging branches, while dozens of bird species flapped about in the skies.

They moved about us as if we weren’t even there... close enough that I could’ve brushed my fingers across their wrinkly, grey hides.

“What ISO are you on?” was the common phrase bouncing between us in the Land Rovers, as we adjusted the aperture on our cameras and played around with different angles. With Chris and Jess by our sides, and always at the ready with helpful advice, our skills were fast improving. Each passing day also brought us closer as a group, as we fed off each other’s passion and enthusiasm for photography and the alien surrounds.

ALL I COULD THINK AS our six-seater plane hit another air pocket and my stomach dropped to my ankles was: “I HAVE TO GET BACK DOWN TO THE GROUND. NOW.” We were gliding south over the Rift Valley, bound for the airstrip at Lake Baringo, and as I rested my forehead against the cool, thick glass, I watched the reflection of our plane skim the green and gold fields, lined up in squares like a patchwork quilt, far below. As we hit another air pocket I put my head between my knees and closed my eyes, conjuring memories from the past three days at Amboseli to distract myself from the imminent motion sickness I knew was about to hit me like a kick to the face. The next time I opened them, Chris was commanding the plane – in my airsick stupor I didn’t even notice that Joachim, our German pilot, had briefly surrendered the controls. Our touchdown couldn’t



Clockwise from top left: A few metres from this sign, in the shallow, murky and croc-populated waters lining Robert’s Camp, sits another wooden post labelling the site as a, “Children’s playground”; A cheetah keeps a close eye on her breakfast – an unlucky impala – in Samburu National Reserve; Johnno and Karen listen out for the songs of local birdlife and let the tranquility of an early morning boat ride on the still waters of Lake Baringo wash over them; More than a dozen red-billed oxpeckers hunt for ticks on the broad back of a Cape buffalo, one of Africa’s Big Five (the lion, African elephant, Cape buffalo, leopard and rhinoceros); Greater flamingos panic and take flight from Lake Bogoria when they sense they’re being watched by Chris and the safari group hiding in scrub on the shoreline; Common zebras chase their young as the sun sets on Solio Game Reserve.



come soon enough. Finally, I felt the plane begin to descend and, mercifully, we touched down. But my reprieve on land was short lived. After settling into Robert’s Camp, with our weathered thatched-roof bungalows shaded by lush foliage on the shores of Lake Baringo, we were shuffled in pairs back onboard the planes – now wide open where the right-hand doors should be – for a safari adventure by air.

Kenya is home to some of Africa’s most magnificent land animals, and it’s easy to forget – unless you have your eyes forever raised skywards – that it also has prolific birdlife. Take the time to notice and you’ll be floored by the sheer number and variety of them adding colour to the skies. And, in Chris’s mind, there’s no better way to photograph them than from above.

“Last year there were thousands of flamingos milling about in these waters as we flew over,” Jess yelled to me over the roar of the engines as we dipped and circled high above Lake Bogoria – a saline, alkaline water body to the south of Lake Baringo. Strapped into the seat opposite me, Jess – all lithe, tanned limbs, glossy, sun-streaked hair and bright, blue eyes – was completely at ease. I took a deep breath and summoned some courage. With my toes resting on the edge of the gaping hole at the side of the plane, I leaned out and over the edge. My seatbelt strained as the force of the wind pulled me forwards and I squinted against the glare while searching the murky, green water for any traces of long legs, pink feathers and curved, black beaks. I ignored the familiar flips in my stomach as Joachim angled the plane downwards and took us closer to the surface for a better look.

With strict instructions from Chris on how to set my Canon 7D to a fast shutter speed, I captured hundreds of images of flamingos when we returned to the lake’s edge the following day in our vehicles. “These are the greater flamingos,” John whispered to me as we hid in the scratchy, spindly grass – a rare treat as you’re forbidden to get out of the cars in the other national parks. “They differ from the lesser flamingo because they are larger and whiter.”

We tried to muffle any noise as we dispersed across the shoreline – once flamingos scare there’s no keeping them still – and we watched in awe as hundreds at a time danced across the water’s surface and leapt into the air. With wings outstretched and bodies angled as flat as planks, they were a blur of white, black and pink feathers against the horizon.

We photographed dozens of other bird species while at Robert’s Camp, where we rose at dawn each day and glided out onto Lake Baringo’s glassy surface in long, narrow fishing boats. We saw a vibrant assortment – the African darter, cattle egret, malachite kingfisher, cinnamon-chested bee-eater, African pied wagtail, squacco heron, little egret and blue-cheeked bee-eater – before our boat guides summoned the imposing African fish eagles from their nests, high atop the trees, with sharp whistles and an enticing breakfast of fresh fish.

In the early evenings we traipsed about on Baringo’s shoreline in search of the family of resident hippos; we often spotted them from our porch, bobbing about in the water, less than a few metres away. They are responsible for more human fatalities than any other animals in Africa, and are the reason we had to be escorted to our bungalows at night by stick-wielding guards. It wasn’t uncommon to pass a croc

resting in the grass as we wandered around the camp, and as we paced the lake's edge with cameras at the ready, hundreds of dragonflies buzzed around us in swarms.

THERE ARE LIONS IN THE trees. It's the afternoon following our thrilling, high-speed escape in Solio Game Reserve and we've returned to the park – a 71sq. km private reserve, pocketed with forests of yellow acacias, shallow rivers and dry, rolling plains. Book-ended by the western slopes of Mt Kenya and the Aberdare Mountains, Solio is one of the most successful private rhino-breeding grounds in Kenya, but all anyone can think about right now is the cats; we've found them to be the most elusive of all the animals, and we've become obsessed with tracking them down – a safari game of cat and mouse.

Each evening we wolf down the baked treats, fresh vegetables and tasty marinated meats prepared by David (our private chef, who's followed us from Robert's Camp to Rhino Watch, perched high in the Mt Kenya region). We download images to our laptops, compare notes on that day's photos, and take turns talking about where, and how, we're going to find the cats.

Moses has done the hard work for us, and I can hear his voice calling excitedly through John's phone, "There are lions in the trees!" After years of exploring these parks, John and Moses are experts at finding animals and their knowledge on the breeding habits and behavioural patterns is astounding.

A few hours ago, as we sat and watched a rare black rhino – smaller than the white rhino and with a pointer jaw – munch on prickly foliage, John admitted that he'd never seen one this close before. "The rhinos are very solitary animals," he whispered. "Mostly they move about on their own and they communicate via their droppings: a rhino will drop a pat by a tree and then stamp on it before continuing on; another rhino will come to the same spot, and by sniffing the droppings he'll be able to tell the sex of the first rhino and, if it's a female, whether she is in heat, and then also which direction they headed in."

"It is rare for lions to be in the trees," John tells me, as he puts the Land Rover into reverse and changes direction to go in search of Moses and the lions. "I have only seen this very occasionally and I can't think why they do this. Maybe it is cooler for them up there!"

The lioness sitting just 4m away, doesn't look cool; she looks annoyed. We've roused her from her afternoon nap, and she's looking at me like I'd make a tasty pre-dinner treat. Her silky, caramel coat glistens as sunlight filters through the trees, and we catch a glimpse of her huge canines as she stretches and yawns, before sliding down and off the sloping tree branch.

She circles the vehicles menacingly before slinking off into the bush, and we quietly (well, as quiet as two Land Rovers can be) follow her to a clearing where she collapses in a tired heap next to three other sleepy cats: two juvenile male lions and another female. For the most part they ignore us, even though we're close enough that, through my lens, I can see the purplish scar one lioness wears across her left eye, and I watch her whiskers twitch as a brave colony of flies tickles her fur.

THE YOUNG GIRL PLACES a beaded necklace over my head and takes my hand. She pulls me into the circle of dancers, and a sea of brightly coloured fabric envelops



Clockwise from above: Primary school children at the Green Bell Academy in Kampi ya Samaki, a small village on the edge of Lake Baringo, soak up the attention from the safari troop when they call into the school for a visit; A sleepy lioness does her best to ignore the hum of the two safari vehicles and the excited whispers of the photographers, stationed just metres away; Visiting this Samburu village gives the photographers a chance to sample authentic African culture. "These tours aren't only about wildlife," Chris explains; Despite the fact that between 1970 and 2010, Solio delivered 93 black (pictured) and 52 white rhinos to other game reserves, you'll still encounter them wandering the dusty plains of the park; A grey-headed kingfisher claims a lizard by the banks of the Ewaso Nyiro River, in Samburu National Reserve.



me as the women chant and jump, stirring clouds of dust from the ground. It's our last day on safari and we're visiting a local Samburu village before journeying back to Nairobi.

We left Samburu National Reserve, a 165sq.km park on the edge of the Ewaso Nyiro River, in the southern corner of the Samburu District in the Rift Valley, this morning. Our past three days were spent at Elephant Bedroom, a luxury camp of tents built up on stilts, in the heart of the park. Without fences to keep them at bay, animals can enter freely and it's common to see elephants wandering past your veranda and drinking from the lake, only metres away. On arrival, we were warned by the camp's concierge Julius to always lock our tent fly. Apparently, naughty vervet monkeys unzip the flies, rummage through guests' luggage and escape up palm trees wearing their clothes.

Along with the exciting possibility of sharing our nights with elephants, Samburu offered us sightings of strange, alien-like animals; the gerenuk, a slender, long-necked gazelle, munched on trees while standing on his hind legs; and the dikdik, a tiny antelope bounded around like Tigger on springy hooves.

The village, not much more than a few weaved huts, is a 20-minute drive from the park. When we arrive I'm introduced to Rose, a striking woman wearing an intricately beaded diadem. She is head of the females in the village and is active in raising awareness for issues concerning Samburu women, such as female circumcision. As we're given a tour of the village, she tells me that the money collected from passing tourists who stop to visit the market is divided between the small communities in the area and spent on education and food.

"Njeri, I've found you a husband!" Moses calls to me over the sea of dancers. 'Njeri' is the nickname he's given me, which he tells me means, "girl who likes to travel". He introduces me as such to the young Samburu warrior who, wearing sandals, dozens of bright, beaded necklaces, a green feather in his hair and a cloth around his hips, shakes my hand with one calloused palm while clutching a sharpened spear with the other.

"If you married him, you could stay here, in Kenya, forever," Moses tells me when we're back in the Land Rovers and bound for Nairobi. As I look out the window, cast my eyes over the dry African savannah and think back to all I've seen, I'm more than tempted to tell him to turn back around.

THE ESSENTIALS

Getting there: Major airlines fly to Nairobi daily. Everything else is taken care of by Chris and Jess, and included in the cost of your safari – \$9995. The next safaris run from 23 December 2012–5 January 2013 and 6–19 January 2013.

Gear: I took my Canon EOS 7D and Canon 100–400mm f/4.5 – 5.6L, 10–22mm f/3.5 – 4.5 and 50mm f/1.8 lenses. The 100–400mm was invaluable because of the reach and sharpness it offered when shooting in the game parks. Chris also lends out his two giant 600mm super telephoto lenses each day – this top-of-the-line lens lets you capture incredible detail shots.

More info: www.chrisbray.net. Chris and Jess also run photography safaris in the Galapagos, Patagonia and Tassie, and also one-day courses across Australia. For more on Kenya, visit www.magicalkenya.com.

📷 Check out Amy's blogs and more photos from the safari at www.australiangeographic.com.au/outdoor/africa.htm