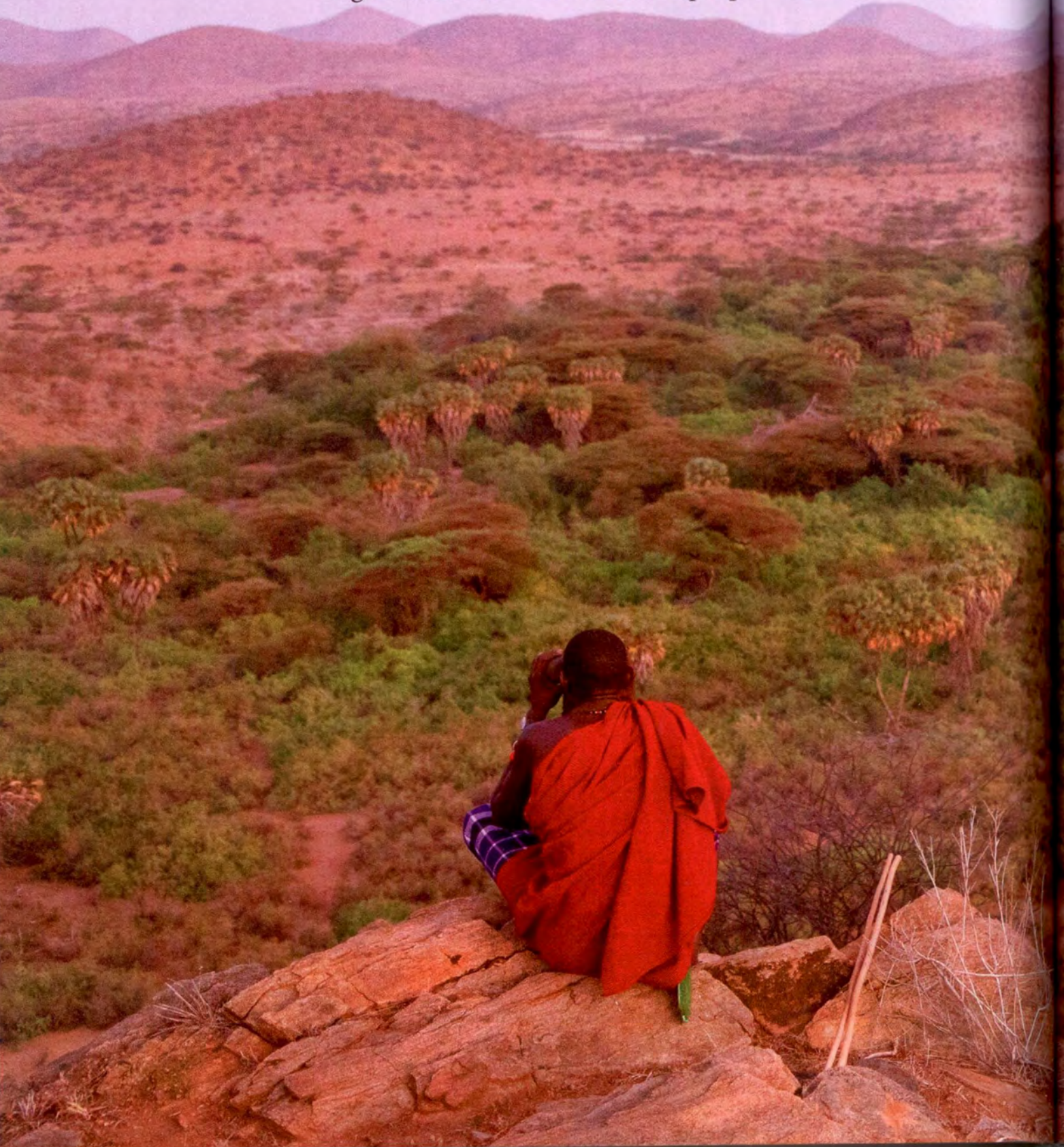


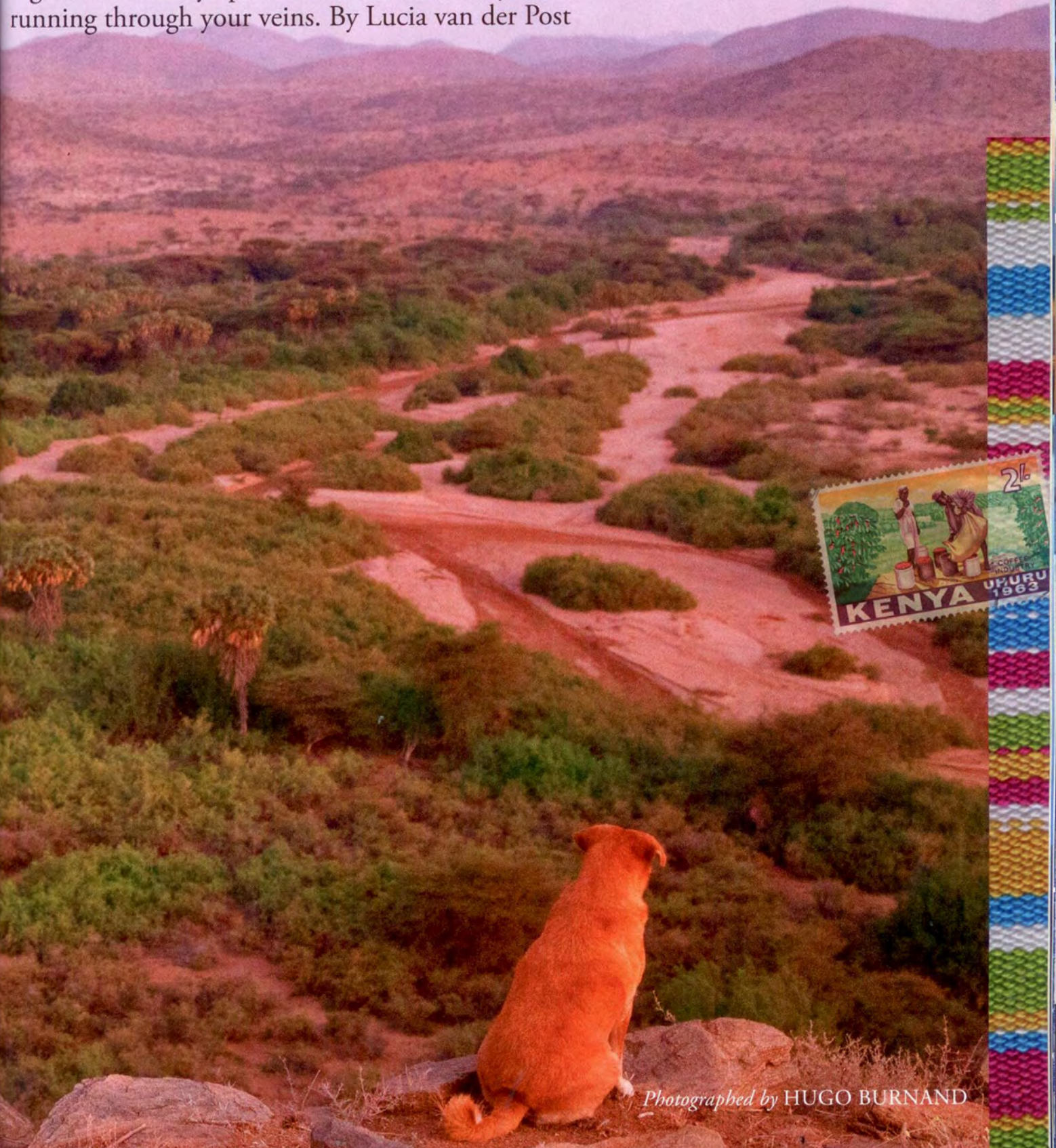
Kings of all

Beneath a skin of parched riverbeds and scrubby acacia trees, the
To go walkabout with their tribespeople is to feel a different Africa

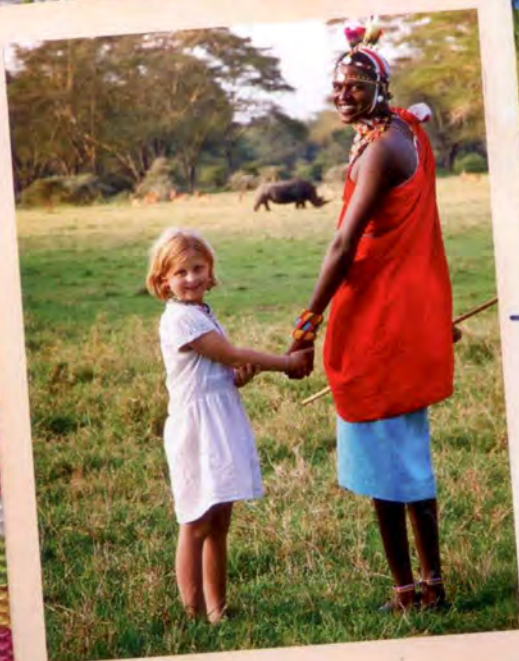


we survey

highlands of Kenya pulse with an ancient rhythm.
running through your veins. By Lucia van der Post



Photographed by HUGO BURNAND



Previous page, Samburu warrior Lemagas and his dog look out across the Milgis Lugga in Kenya. Above left, Sala Carr-Hartley, seven, and Sammy, a Samburu, at Solio Lodge near Mount Kenya. Above, The camp owned by Anna Trzebinski and her husband Lemarti, on a bend of the Ewaso Nyiro river. Below, Lemarti with his daughter Tacha

If there's a reason to travel today, it has to be this: we want our hearts to be touched, our souls to be moved. If you want all this and you want to get beneath the skin of a country and to fall in love with it, then you can't do it by rushing about in a bubble of private jets and airconditioned cars. You have to share something of the life of the people who live there. And so this is what you do – you go walkabout with the locals. And in Africa there is no finer country for a walkabout than in and around the Matthews Range and Ndoto Mountains, high up in northern Kenya.

Home to some of Kenya's most traditional tribes, the Samburu, the Rendille, the Gabra, this is remote, fiercely beautiful country, little visited, without a Frette sheet or an infinity pool or a rose petal for hundreds of miles. But what it has is something much lovelier – awesome views, staggering landscapes, vast skies, great, wide luggas (dry riverbeds), green mountains and a noble people to hold you safe and keep you company. Walk with the Samburu through their ancient lands, where every bush and every mound has a story to tell, where the spirits of their ancestors still linger, and you will come back with much, much more than a tan – memories to cherish all the way down the years.

But you need somebody to take you there, somebody who knows every inch of the country, who has the organisational skills of a Rommel, the stamina of an ox and who is loved and accepted by the people themselves. In other words you need Helen Douglas-Dufresne, Kenyan born and bred, her partner Pete Isley, their team of gloriously robed and bejewelled spear-carrying Samburus – and we mustn't forget the camels. It's the camels, strange and

unfragrant creatures that they are, that carry the tents, the food and water, the comforts that make the whole thing a joy rather than an endurance test.

Helen doesn't waste time. You arrive by small plane from Nairobi, are decanted onto a tiny airstrip right by the Milgis Lugga that winds through the hills, and it's on with your shorts and walking boots, not forgetting the hat and the suncream, and up and off on the adventure. The large camel train of about 30 beasts goes ahead to find a campsite for the night. A smaller group of roughly five camels and their Samburu keepers accompany the walkers, ready with day packs, food, water and a ride in case it ever becomes too much.

The days have a sweet rhythm of their own. They start early, before the sun is up, with hot water for washing and tea and biscuits round the campfire. You set out in the cool early-morning light, watching the stars fade as the sun rises up through the trees. After a few hours you stop for a pukka breakfast with eggs cooked to order, pancakes, mangoes, pawpaws, tea and coffee, all under a shady acacia tree. Africa's wide skies are above you, the Nubian woodpeckers and the iridescent starlings are in the trees; the Samburu sing their tales of glories past and present while the camel bells tinkle. You never want to eat breakfast anywhere else ever again. Then you walk some more until early afternoon when you reach the campsite, where the tents are up, lunch is ready and soon it's time for a snooze or a good book. As the sun goes down, there's a glass of something chilled on a nearby hill and a shower, followed by supper round the fire under a canopy of a zillion stars.

Some days you walk along the luggas, sometimes up along the game tracks through



The Samburu sing their tales of glories past while the camel bells tinkle – you never want to eat breakfast anywhere else ever again



Left, bathtime at Lemarti's. Above, the camp's huge main tent. Above right, Sala Carr-Hartley and Tisa and Kinna, both three, at their family's property, Giraffe Manor, Nairobi. Below, Samburu warriors and local tribespeople dance in a village close to Lemarti's Camp



the acacia-scattered hills. Up here the only signs of habitation are the circular bomas – homestead enclosures that dot the dry land, looking like prehistoric, enigmatic communications with the spirit world, Samburu versions of crop circles. But down in the luggas we see sights that seem almost biblical. Rendille tribesmen arrive with hundreds of camels, fleeing the terrible drought in eastern Kenya and looking for water that lies below the surface in the luggas – trusting in a long tradition of hospitality in times of need. Some come with donkeys, with sheep, goats and cows. All are clad in shuka cloths and quite brilliantly bedecked in beads, feathers and headdresses. It's an unforgettable vision.

Gossip buzzes along the riverbeds. Some warriors who've been doing what warriors are supposed to do – which is flex their muscles for the good of the tribe – have been marauding cattle from the Borana and are escaping with their ill-gotten gains. And a Samburu who has stolen some camels tries to sell them off to Helen (she decides they are not for her).

All the while we walk, somewhere up to nine miles a day, and as we walk the Samburu sing their haunting songs of what they've done today and plan to do tomorrow. (Though it's best not to enquire too closely of what they sing; when Peter Ilsley asked on one occasion he got a most prosaic reply: 'We're wondering how we're going to get all the fat ladies over the hills.') Their nomadic way of life and the austere nature of their land has made them courageous, resilient and strong, perfect companions on what for us is quickly turning into the adventure of a lifetime. How long and how far you >





Right, Samburu tribespeople on the move. Bottom, Boniface, co-owner of Lemarti's Camp, plays a traditional game with guests, family and staff

People find something so compelling here, so meaningful, they come back time after time



◁ walk is up to you; Helen and Pete tailor it for their guests. Best of all is to come for six to 10 days and to walk all round the Ndotos, or over the mountains with porters, or up to Lake Turkana, so you can look back and say: 'Wow, we did that!' It's not for everybody – most particularly not 'for people who want to do a bit of this and a bit of that,' as Helen puts it. It's a deep, immersive experience; you need to love to walk in wild and lonely places, to want to get to know the nomadic people whose land it is and to understand that there's very little game and what there is is shy and skittish. But it may reassure you to know that some of the world's most powerful people – kings and queens, vastly successful industrialists and tycoons – find something so compelling here, so meaningful, that they come back time and time again. One visitor summed it up perfectly: 'Aching feet and smiling hearts... we couldn't have felt more privileged.'

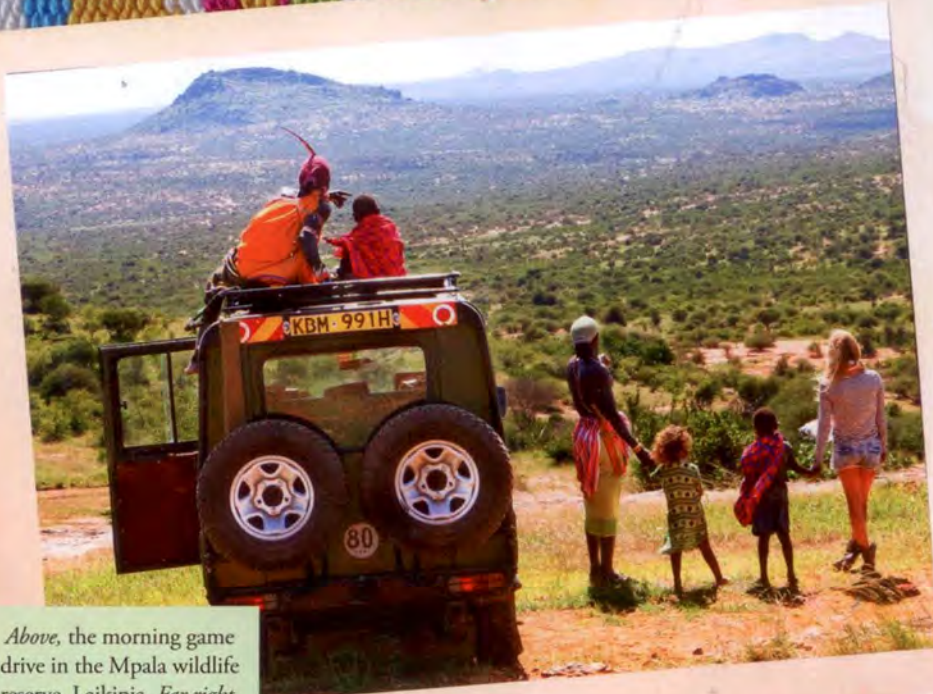
But of course you can't come to Africa without seeing the animals, so what you do next is to go and see them with Tanya and Mikey Carr-Hartley, third-generation Kenyans both. Mikey's family trekked up to Kenya from South Africa and his grandfather pioneered the art of game capture in Kenya; *King Solomon's Mines*, *Mogambo* and *The Snows of Kilimanjaro* were filmed on their land and Mikey's father was the young star of *The Adventures of a Jungle Boy*. In other words, they know what they're doing and where to

take you. What they've done is build their own lodges in some prime game-viewing areas and what they like to do is look after you from the minute you set foot at Jomo Kenyatta airport to the moment you leave. Up in the north, along the Ewaso Nyiro river in Samburu land they have Sasaab – all Moroccan flourishes, infinity pools, fine views and considerable indulgences, but they also have a fly-camp where they've replicated the sort of wilder, more adventurous camping experiences that they both had as children.

Here they are completely integrated with the local Samburu community; go exploring with them and their Samburu compatriots. If you're desperate to see rhino, then they'll take you to their new lodge, Solio, close by Mount Kenya, where they are engaged in a magnificent effort to preserve this wonderful prehistoric creature. You can't avoid the rhino – at any one time there are some 200, both black and white, being bred to preserve the species and to translocate to other parks. Solio is beautiful and Ava Paton's food is worth walking over hot coals for.

And then for a dead-certain sure immersion in Africa's most thrilling animals – the lion, the leopard, the elephant, the buffalo – they will take you to Sala, their camp in the Maasai Mara. All the while, you get the Carr-Hartley family inside-track experience alongside Tanya, Mikey and their three blonde and bubbly children – in essence what you're doing is dropping in on the Carr-Hartley way of life. ▷





Above, the morning game drive in the Mpala wildlife reserve, Laikipia. Far right, Helen Douglas-Dufresne's camel train



◁ But you can't leave Kenya and Kenya's more colourful residents without calling in on Anna Trzebinski and her Samburu husband Lemarti. They have a magical small property called Lemarti's Camp, built on a bend in the Ewaso Nyiro river on land owned by a Samburu community. The five tents are big and wonderful, filled with African artefacts and everything you could possibly need, from a late-night whisky to binoculars and guidebooks. You bathe in a tub under a fig tree while you watch the kingfishers, the herons and the bee-eaters dart about the river. You eat, divinely, in a huge open-sided tent at a table carved from an old dhow. But best of all you are looked after by the Samburu tribe that gave Anna refuge and a place to build a future in the dark days after her husband, the artist Tonio Trzebinski, was murdered. 'The chief came to me and said, "What will you do? How will you live?" And then he led me to this wonderful place and asked me if I'd like to come here with my children. And then I met Lemarti and he made me feel very safe when I felt so very unsafe everywhere else. So we built a home here and then a camp to share with others.'

Today she has a different and very busy life, a new husband in Lemarti and their lovely baby Tacha, who has inextricably bound Anna's Kenyan world with Lemarti's Samburu one. 'Now my dinner parties are under the sacred fig tree with the elders of the tribe,' she laughs. Lemarti and his great friend Boniface, who run the camp, are deeply traditional Africans, with a strong regard for their culture and their customs. The charm is that they want to share their world with us. 'What I want to happen here,' says Anna, 'is for our guests to understand the heart and soul of the people.'

Bathe in a tub under a fig tree watching kingfishers and bee-eaters dart about the river

Lemarti's Camp provides work for many, and food for many, many more. Anna's panache and style have married with her husband's authentic connection to the land to make it a special experience. We are taken to the local villages where they welcome us with dance and song. We spend an evening away at a simple mobile nomad camp where they kill a goat in our honour. For them it is a ritual act, filled with meaning. They suffocate it, plunge a knife into the jugular, and the warriors then put their mouths into the hot, fresh blood ('It tastes rather like clear consommé,' says the photographer Hugo who, more bravely than I, was prepared to try it) and then they roast it. This is an ancient practice not often shared with strangers. Sometimes Anna and Lemarti take guests to witness secret ceremonies, depending upon the season. Just across the river is Mpala, a wildlife reserve of some 50,000 acres filled with fauna of all kinds. We take a Land Rover there one day and it's packed with singing Samburu, young and old, Anna and ourselves, and though we don't see lion we see almost everything else – herds of elephants having dust baths, eland, zebra, giraffe, Thomson's gazelles; later, Hugo and Lemarti see 34 wild dogs hunting back and forth across the river. But when we leave it is the people who will live longest in our hearts.

Of all the trips I have been on in Africa this was one of the most mindblowing. Here, we learn, life is lived more vividly. Listen to the stories and you get the measure of the place. How could you not be in awe of a country where a man's idea of celebrating his 70th birthday is to walk across the Chalbi desert, a place where even the indigenous Gabra struggle to survive? Where the real-life dramas are more vibrant than anything back home, with tales of snake bites and of men gored by wounded buffalo, of an elder whose hand was chopped off by an angry Kikuyu whose cattle he'd stolen, and of Helen's mother who survived an encounter with a man-eating crocodile. Hair-raising tales that make London dinner-party chat seem tame and beside the point.

So when you go to Kenya, don't just go for the wildlife, wonderful as it is. Go for the stories, the people, the history. Though it's only fair to add that this should come with a health warning: you, too, may catch that well-known malady 'le mal d'Afrique', a sickness for which there is no known cure. □

BOOK IT

Lucia van der Post travelled with Africa Travel (africatravel.co.uk or 020 7843 3585). A similar trip, flying with British Airways and staying three nights full board at Wild Frontiers with Helen Douglas-Dufresne, two nights full board at Solio Lodge, two nights full board at Lemarti's Camp, and one night with breakfast and dinner in Nairobi at Ngong House, costs from £5,955 a person, based on two sharing.