



HILLS BALFOUR

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Safari chic's the name of the game in Kenya

LIZZIE CATT leaves her fears behind as she dons khaki for a five-star experience in the magnificent Samburu National Park

MAULED by lions. Trampled by elephants. Constricted by a boa, charged by a cheetah. Chomped by a croc – there were many sticky ends I imagined for myself as I tried to nod off on the eight-hour night flight from London to Nairobi.

Prior to the holiday I was heading for in Kenya's Samburu National Park, my experience of dangerous animals had been limited to Big Cat Diary on the telly and visiting the grumpy-looking tiger in London Zoo. Yet here I was, khaki trousers in knapsack, heading off for two nights under canvas surrounded by all manner of beasts red in tooth and claw. And tusk. Oh, and horn.

The only reason I had agreed to accompany my friend Helen, who I'm certain only wanted to show off her impressive collection of safari chic, was an assurance that these were no ordinary tents and that this was camping the five-star way.

However, as George, our super-capable driver dispatched by tour company Private Safaris, navigated us through Nairobi's manic traffic, past the base of Mount Kenya and into the camel-populated flatlands

leading up to Samburu, I remained quietly convinced that I was about to meet my maker.

We passed the zebra-striped gates of the park as the day was drawing to a close and a soft golden glow hung over the

scrubland, gently bathing the mountains in the distance. George popped the top on the mini-van, advising us to break out cameras and binoculars. We were on safari.

The butterflies in my stomach turned to a thrill of excitement as we bumped along. It was a scene we've all witnessed time and again on television, yet to experience the real thing was surreal.

Not five minutes in, George told us to look to our left. Almost camouflaged against the yellow earth was a family of eight giraffes, nibbling at the treetops as a baby strained to reach the lower

branches. If George was amused by the sight of two grown women bursting with excitement, he was kind enough not to show it.

Minutes later we were lucky enough to catch sight of two very rare Grévy's zebras with their distinctive narrow stripe and white stomachs. After George pointed out several antelope-type creatures (forgive me if I failed to remember the names of each species; I eventually grouped them all together as "lion lunch"), we had the thrill of the day when, as the dipping sun set the sky alight and blackened the mountains, we spotted a lone bull elephant trudging through the grass.

All this before we'd even reached camp, which I had convinced myself would resemble the leaky old porch tent from Guides, only

this time circled by lions. I'm not sure it could have been possible for me to be more wrong.

While some may relish the prospect of waking up with King Mufasa from The Lion King poking his giant head into their digs, I was beyond thrilled to see the electric fence ringing the property. I was even more delighted to step out of the dusty mini-van and wander into a mirage of a hotel.

Ashnil is a small camp with 24 deluxe individual tents. The hub of the hotel – the reception, restaurant and bar – are housed together under soaring palm canopies and open on all sides to make the most of the spectacular vista. All the refreshments, from a pre-game drive coffee in the dark at stupid o'clock, to glorious dinners that ensure there's still plenty of padding on your seat for

tomorrow's bumpy excursion, are eaten in the light and airy buffet restaurant.

We made a habit of sitting on the wrap-around terrace, where curious Vervet monkeys and hornbills perched nearby hoping to score a morsel from the bountiful cooked breakfasts or hearty curries and stews. The relaxed bar is dotted with easy chairs and makes the perfect spot to swap stories with fellow guests of nearly-spotted cheetahs, troupes of elephants





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turning over trees and crocs poking their snouts from the muddy river.

The tents are the icing on the cake. Shaped like mini big tops, they are constructed from cream canvas and raised off the ground, sporting balconies which are just perfect for a sundowner. There's a varnished wooden floor, a gleaming bathroom with a walk-in shower (and, yes, plenty of hot water) and a proper flushing loo (complete with friendly grasshopper).

There is also a writing bureau and a comfy double bed with crisp white linen, soft duvet and pillows like clouds. Relief from the heat of the day is adequately provided by a simple fan.

Best of all, the view of the surrounding mountains is not through double-glazing but the fine gauze of a mosquito net. Admittedly, it takes a while after lights out to adjust to the fact that the "walls" are flapping gently in the breeze and monkeys are scampering across the roof, but this soon becomes a bush lullaby.

One afternoon Helen and I decided the lure of a few hours enjoying the camp was too strong to fight and decamped to the small pool to read novels, sip pineapple juice and take cooling dips. Helen even wandered off for a massage. Even so, there was still an abundance of animal life.

Cheeky Vervet monkeys and their babies scuttled up to the pool to drink, chilled out on the sun loungers and at one point even made off with Helen's suncream.

A group of fearsome-looking baboons hopped the electric fence and invaded camp to feast on the windfall fruit from the hotel's trees.

And the highlight of the afternoon: a large bull elephant meandering across the Ewaso Nyiro River and coming right up to the fence to munch on fallen palm

fronds. Keeping a hushed and respectful distance, Helen and I almost felt sorry for the rest of the guests out in the mini-van as we watched this incredible wild

creature from my balcony.

The end of our stay came all too quickly, in spite of me begging for a job at the hotel. On our return to Nairobi after three magical days, I realised I'd be more likely to come to harm dancing through the kamikaze rush hour traffic than camping out Ashnil Samburu style.

THE KNOWLEDGE:

Kuoni (01306 747008/www.kuoni.co.uk) offers a 10-night tailor-made Kenya package from £2,340pp (two sharing). Includes two nights at The Norfolk, Nairobi (B&B), one night at Treetops, Aberdare National Park (room only), three nights at Samburu Intrepids Camp (full board), and four nights at Diamonds Dream of Africa Hotel, Malindi (all-inclusive). Price also includes return flights with Kenya Airways (www.kenya-airways.com) from Heathrow. Ashnil Samburu Camp (www.ashnilhotels.com/samburu) offers doubles from £112 per night (two sharing), full board. Price includes three game drives. Kenya Tourist Board: 0207 367 0931/www.magicalkenya.com



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CALL OF THE WILD: Visitors don't have to travel far from camp to experience the excitement of watching and photographing animals in their native environment



STYLISH RETREAT: One of the 24 deluxe tents at Ashnil Samburu, all boasting balconies with savannah views