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Where the kids can run wild

By Sophy Roberts



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Guests dine under the fig tree that dominates the camp

Last autumn I spent a night at the One&Only Cape Town. There was much to like but, as I found my way around this glitzy mega-resort, I also felt depressed. The kids' club comprised a series of rooms of rather less square footage than the penthouse suite they put me in (knowing I was a journalist). And when I put my head around the door, the most popular diversion for older kids was clearly the movie and video game lounge. What a sad indictment of privilege, I thought: on holiday – in Africa, for goodness' sake – some people choose to deposit their offspring in an air-conditioned bubble of hyper-real super-heroes competing for

world domination.

When I got home, I resolved to book flights to Kenya for my own family – a week-long trip with my husband and our sons: Danny, six, and Jack, three. Travelling with three other families including eight children under 10, we would take over Lemarti's Camp (it can also be booked room by room) in Laikipia, northern Kenya. We weren't going on safari to see the "big five" – lion, elephant, leopard, rhino and buffalo. So I wasn't concerned that the region did not have a strong reputation for its big game. I wanted my sons to experience Africa in a fundamental, transformative way, and this relatively new camp had set itself up as one of the most culturally immersive on the continent. Guests are looked after almost entirely by Samburu warriors. Safaris mostly consist of walking hunts for bones, insects and honeybees, and the swimming pool is a deep brown river.

The children would be too young to take it in, said the naysayers. Not so, I argued. If my three-year-old can buy iPad games with neither my permission nor assistance, he can surely appreciate one of the world's most densely textured cultures.



Lemarti's Camp is remote, a one-hour private charter flight north of Nairobi, or an uncomfortable eight hours by road (in other words, fly). But despite the rugged territory and lack of electricity, this is the height of luxury. There are five huge cedar and canvas tented suites with sides rolled up by day to reveal the deep

Ewaso Nyiro River, its green banks trimmed with fig and yellow fever trees. Bathrooms are open to the sky with long-drop toilets and tin baths filled with buckets of hot water (not basic, but elegantly pulled off with elephant jaws for toilet seats and steaming hot showers). The main tented area, and heart of camp life, is furnished with sheepskin rugs, Moroccan throws, kerosene lanterns, feather-trimmed pelts and tables made from ostrich eggs and shipwrecked dhows. This is where communal feasts are served three times a day and where tribesmen gather to play music around a crackling fire beneath the biggest fig tree of all, its vast girth and spread dominating the camp.

“It was the tree that brought us here in the first place,” says Anna Trzebinski, the camp’s designer who also runs a successful fashion business from Nairobi, her bags and jewellery sold at smart private sales in London and New York. Anna is a *muzungu*, or white Kenyan, and a household name in the moneyed enclaves of east Africa, partly because of her fashion but also because she was married to the artist Tonio Trzebinski, who was murdered in 2001.

Anna now belongs to a radically different world from the grand Lake Naivasha mansions of her childhood. She is married to Loyapan Lemarti, a Samburu warrior she met while walking in the bush in 2002. They have a three-year-old daughter, Tacha, and have set up this Samburu community-run camp, where 22 local men and women are directly employed. The local Samburu benefit from a \$50 per guest per day charge, as well as \$500 a month ground rent. “We made in the region of \$80,000 for the community last year,” says Anna. “That’s just out of 20 acres. It’s not enough – we need to make more – but this model should be viable.”

However, Anna is only a small part of the experience and, besides, her fashion interests mean she is not always present. Beyond the aesthetics and food (Anna has taught the Samburu warriors to cook as if they have been brought up in the bosom of some Sicilian mamma), the business of running the camp belongs to Lemarti and his childhood friend, Boniface Parsulan. Their approach involves culture by immersion of a rigorously authentic kind, although done with enough polish to satisfy a roster of glittering clients, including Uma Thurman and Daniel Craig.

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ts' son with his warrior guide

On arrival my elder son is handed a small machete in a red wax sheath. I disapprove but am reassured by Lemarti that every child is being assigned his or her personal warrior, whose role is to keep the children safe. A barefoot warrior-nanny with a spear? Danny's eyes are on stalks. I remain apprehensive, even though the spoken English of these warriors, every one of them done up like a peacock in traditional feathers, beads and cloth, is better than I have found at some of the smartest five-star resorts.

Sure enough, within a couple of hours of arrival, I have lost sight of both my children. When I track them down, Danny is beneath an acacia, threading coloured beads – tribal necklaces to wear over his chest. Danny's transformation is fashion-led – he's already given up his western clothes in favour of the red-and-blue chequered cloth, worn by the Samburu. "She killed a hyena, mum," he tells me of the woman who speaks no English but helps my youngest, Jack, sort the blue from the yellow beads. I wink. "She did, Mum. Boniface told me. She killed a hyena. It had a man's leg in its jaw. It's true, isn't it?" he says, seeking the approbation of one of the warriors' sons sitting alongside. The boy, called John and exactly the same age as Danny, doesn't respond.

Not that language gets in the way. The first evening, Danny sketches his Dorset farmhouse, while John draws his hut. When Danny draws the beach near his home in Lyme Regis, John draws an antelope. Danny tries to teach John chess; John shows Danny *mbau*, a game played with pebbles and a wooden board. On the fifth day, John takes Danny to his school where he sits through a class. When the children go out with the warriors each morning, John helps Danny find bones scattered about the scrub. Only later do I learn from John's father Boniface that his son is completely bemused by this English boy's obsession with

the bleached vertebrae of giraffe. But still, he is happy to collect them for Danny because somehow, without a shared language, they have worked out what rocks each others' boats.



A living area at the camp

Sentimental, perhaps, except such emotions don't have a place at Lemarti's Camp. On day three, the four oldest children partake in a ritual killing of a goat, in which the boys drink the warm blood from a fold of skin in the animal's neck, their faces smeared in blood. It is a step too far for Danny, who backs out, and for me, if only because I am preoccupied with the sight of my three-year-old splashing about the river with his personal warrior. This is the same river that at night is alive with wildlife – Grévy's zebras, warthogs and whooping hyenas coming to drink. Even though I am told there are no crocodiles, I remain nervous. Because the animals come close – very close. While I'm having a massage one afternoon, I hear a small gathering a few metres from the tent. Toisan, Jack's warrior, has speared a cobra and the children have gathered to inspect the corpse.

Not that much wildlife is usually found on the camp side of the river. Most of it is located on the far bank, Mpala, a private ranch of which I had no idea before coming here. Guests at Lemarti's Camp now have exclusive access to this protected, 48,000-acre area and we were among the first people to tour it. In return for a \$60 per person donation to the research foundation, we are able to ford the river and pick up vehicles on the other side. From there we watched 30-40 elephants at a watering hole and for an hour we followed a pack of rare African wild dogs. For a wildlife experience in Africa, it doesn't get much better than this.

Anna Trzebinski and husband Loyapan Lemarti, who run the camp, with their daughter Tacha



But more than anything, it is the romance of the place that arrests me – the adventure of camping at another dry riverbed site, the complete contentment my three-year-old displays in the arms of his warrior around the fire. I feel rested to the core, and the children’s minds are as alive as I have ever known them, having replaced Super Mario with a real-life superhero, the Samburu warrior. I am on my third book, my husband is on his fifth, and our friends are sitting around quaffing wine as 10 children stand in a row learning how to shoot a bow and arrow. When I see Jack running towards me, I wonder what’s up. Breathlessly he stops in his tracks. “Where’s my warrior?” he asks, and then, with the sight of his idol hiding behind a pillar, Jack is off. Probably to swim with crocodiles. Probably to hear talk of the bare-handed killing of hyenas. Probably to do things boys should do out of the sight of their middle-class English mothers. But then as the local helicopter pilot, Humphrey Carter, puts it: “These people read the Earth like we read a newspaper. To experience the Samburu culture – well, it changes your world for ever.”

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Details

A two-week private Kenya safari with [Journeys by Design](#), including seven nights at [Lemarti’s Camp](#), costs from £6,232 per person.

Sophy Roberts travelled with [Kenya Airways](#) which offers return flights from London to Nairobi from £536