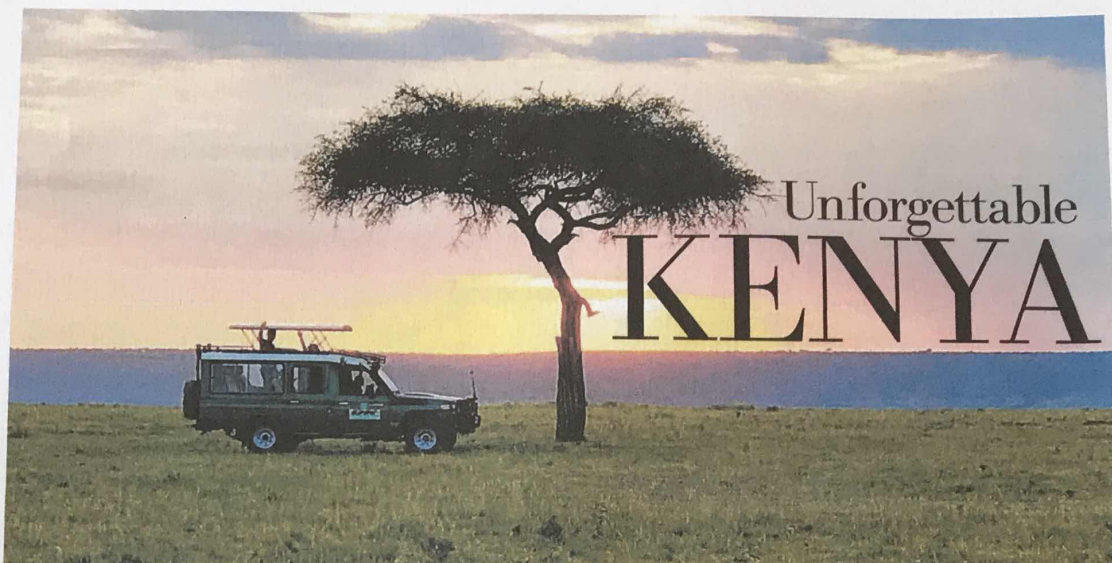


travel



HAWAII'S BACKYARD
A couple nurtures a healthy lifestyle and medicinal garden on Kauai >> E6

SIGNS OF HAWAIIAN LIFE >> E2
LAS VEGAS ADVISOR >> E3



Kenya offers an extraordinary safari experience for all tastes with flourishing game parks and luxe accommodations and cuisine

Story and photographs
by Julie L. Kessler
Special to the Star-Advertiser

Our guide Daniel whispered to our driver, "Pinduka kushoto, haraka," Swahili for turn left, quickly. Seconds later, at lightning speed a cheetah pounced on an unsuspecting gazelle. Clutching the startled prey by the neck, the cheetah bore down, ending the herbivore's misery while dragging it to her waiting 18-month-old cubs. With Darwinian angst, my 20-year-old daughter Remi and I watched the three felines completely devour the elegant, doe-eyed creature. The satiated, bloody-faced felines then licked each other's faces clean to avoid attracting their own predators: hyenas.

For good reason Kenyan safaris are on many travelers' bucket lists. There are few places where you can witness the animal kingdom's magic unfold amid majestic vistas and sunsets, then have cocktails, dinner and retire in marvelous comfort while often serenaded by monkeys squeaking, hippos grunting or hyenas laughing.

Kenya comprises 43 tribes unified by Swahili — a linguistic marriage of Bantu and Arabic. Kenya's other official language is English, making travel easier while permitting sojourners to more than scratch the surface culturally. Kenyans are also undeniably friendly and welcoming.

For this 10-day jaunt I used Daniel "X-Ray Eyes" Kikemu of DK Grand Safaris. He was our trusted guide, inspiring wildlife professor and continuing practical jokester. When we weren't in animal accommodation or alimentary awe, we were heartily

laughing.

There are many game parks and many types of travelers and DK can tailor the experience so that it will be, as Remi uttered, "life-changing."

Here are several combinable options to forge an extraordinary Kenyan safari experience.

For the curator

To view local culture and traditions, nothing beats Samburu. In this northern Kenya region, we stayed at Larsen's Tented Camp located within the reserve.

Larsen's 20 "tents" have king-sized beds, hardwood floors, mirrored makeup tables (not that one would consider donning makeup in the bush), armchairs, teapots, complimentary minibar and massive bathrooms with walk-in showers. From our Ewaso River-facing veranda, elephants came to



One of the many peacocks go out for a stroll at Fairmont Mount Kenya Safari Club Hotel in Nanyuki, Central Kenya.

drink, impalas grazed and monkeys frolicked. The camp also features an inviting lodge, bar and swimming pool.

The Samburu people are seminomadic pastoralists. At Samburu Village, Chief Josphat — whom I met during a prior visit — showed us around. Now with 160 inhabitants, polygamy was the norm in Josphat's father's generation and is still legal. Some men marry as many as 10 women and have dozens of children. But when I asked Josphat if he added any wives in the past three years, he shook his head chuckling saying, "too expensive for more." (Each wife costs the groom 10 cows.)

We were invited inside a traditional boma — a low thatched hut, with a dirt floor, open fire pit and dung or rice bag roof. Stopping at the children's area, preschoolers sat under acacia trees singing Samburu nursery rhymes. We watched elders play entolito — a checkers like game played with stones — and were treated to traditional marriage dances which seem more athletic than romantic.

The most likely sighting during game are gerenuks — a kangaroo wannabe — Grevi zebras, reticulated giraffes, Somali ostriches and beira oryx. Also in abundance are dyk-dyks, grand gazelles, elephants and leopards, sometimes sprawled-out high atop an acacia tree.



The sun sets over the Maasai Mara as a tour's trusty jeep stops momentarily before going back to camp, top. A pair of lion cubs keep a close watch on their mother, above.

IF YOU GO...

Kenya safari

Getting there: Delta offers round-trip connecting service from Honolulu to Nairobi starting at \$1,647. DK Grand Safaris can customize safaris from seven to 14 days starting at \$2,555 per person, including all accommodations, meals, guides, drivers and game park fees, excluding international air. DK also can include trips to neighboring Tanzania and Uganda. DKGrandSafaris.com. Tel 877-409-0897 (6 a.m.-6 p.m.).

WHERE TO STAY:

- >> In Samburu, Larsen's Tented Camp wildernesslodges.co.ke
- >> In Maasai Mara, Karen Blixen Eco Camp, karenblisencamp.com
- >> In Mount Kenya, Fairmont Mount Kenya Safari Club, fairmont.com
- >> In Tsavo West, Finch Hattons, finchhattons.com

PACKING:

Pack light! Kenya's domestic flights have a 33-pound weight maximum. Best to use soft duffel bags. Three changes of lightweight clothing are sufficient as lodges offer free or very low-cost laundry service. DK provides complimentary large luggage storage in Nairobi. Wearer of contacts should tote extra travel size cleaner and artificial tears as bush dust can sometimes irritate. Leave jewelry and makeup at home.

Made-in-Kenya lightweight, suede safari boots that protect against the bush's famous two-inch thorns, which easily permeate traditional walking or running shoes, can be purchased at Bata in Nairobi's Capital Centre Mall on Mombasa Highway (\$20-\$40 depending on style). Next door to Capital Centre Mall on Wednesdays from 10 a.m.-6 p.m. is a wonderful open market with several dozen stalls of traditional Kenyan paintings, carvings and beaded handicrafts.



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KENYA

Continued from E1

For the adventurer

For an action packed few days that races one's pulse, the Maasai Mara is a must.

We flew into Mara in an 11-seat Cessna Caravan. Within five minutes of setting down we saw lions, topi antelopes standing atop their pointed mounds, Maasai giraffes, herds of common zebras, wildebeests and various animal bones — reminders that bush law is always supreme.

At Karen Blixen Eco Camp, we were greeted by an unforgettable sight: a dozen, partially submerged hippos lollygagging in the Mara River facing the camp. The camp has 22 well-appointed tents, each with a river view, large veranda and enclosed outdoor shower. At dusk several matriarch elephants and their newborns came riverside to quench their thirst.

One marvelous aspect of Mara game drives is the variety of animals communing: topis, warthogs, zebras, impalas, banded mongoose and Maasai ostriches in harmony. Nearby a large community of Rock hyrax scampered by while 10 minutes away we came upon a den of nine cubs frolicking by their lioness moms.

A huge herd of Cape buffaloes grazed and five minutes later we came upon a lioness and her two-year-old cubs devouring a just-killed warthog. Apparently the warthog didn't go down easily: one cub bore an enormous shoulder gash — the warthog's tusk's futile defense.

There were also continuous surprises of the human variety. Daniel secretly arranged for a campfire, hors d'oeuvres and a full bar in the bush. Shades of persimmon burned the vista as the sun sank beyond the acacia-laden horizon. It was hard to imagine a more blissful evening.

A nighttime game ride with an infrared torch — so not to startle or blind the animals — brought into view nocturnal spring hares, jackals and hyenas on the prowl for Thomson gazelles. As the jeep hummed, its swaying motion made me sleepy while realizing that bush nights are some of the planet's darkest.

Daniel offered a sunrise hot air balloon ride. Preferring instead to keep my feet grounded while sleeping in, our breakfast reward was a breathtaking site of several elephant families, at least 25 members, drinking from the Mara River as we drank Kenyan coffee.

For the unwinder

For travelers happy to go along provided they can relax in a beautiful new setting,



Mount Kenya is the place. Located just south of the equator, Mount Kenya is Africa's second highest peak after neighboring Tanzania's Kilimanjaro.

This region, with its verdant green hills and valleys, is inhabited mostly by Kikuyu people and is Kenya's breadbasket.

At Fairmont Mount Kenya Safari Club, there are 120 beautifully appointed rooms on more than 100 acres of breathtaking grounds with enough activities to keep guests busy for days. There's golf, tennis, croquet, horseback riding (eastern saddles), an animal orphanage and beautiful pool, all with Mount Kenya as the panoramic backdrop.

After feeding the horses, I enjoyed the well-equipped gym and spa. There are also plenty of storks, baboons and neon-tailed peacocks strolling this gorgeous property. No small wonder it was originally the private retreat of founder actor William Holden who spent time there with his longtime girlfriend actress Stephanie Powers. Powers still has a home on the property and remains very involved with wildlife conservation.

Ol Pejeta Rhino Conservancy is a 30-minute drive. While there are only three Northern White rhinos left in the world — the

fourth "Nola" died at the San Diego Zoo in 2015 — here there are 110 black rhinos and 30 white rhinos including the remaining three Northern Whites. During our one-hour game drive we saw 20 of these magnificent, massive beasts ambling or resting, along with plenty of giraffes, gazelles, warthogs zebras, oryx, impalas and dozens of Cape buffalo.

The conservancy also hosts Sweetwaters Chimpanzee Sanctuary started by the Jane Goodall Institute in 1993 with three orphans from Burundi. There are now 36 rescued and orphaned chimps living at the sanctuary. The tragic stories these incredibly intelligent animals suffered prior to their rescue and placement here is well documented at the sanctuary though not for the faint of heart.

For the epicurean

For bush travelers, game viewers and birders who wish to eat fabulous fare on fine china served on white linen, drink paired wines in crystal and sleep in perhaps the most luxurious "tents" on the planet, Finch Hattons in Tsavo West National Park is the place. In Southern Kenya, it's set in the Chyulu Hills with Tanzania's Mount Kilimanjaro on the horizon. In addition to elephants, leopards, Cape buffaloes, dyk-dyks and lesser kudu, dozens of Tsavo's nearly 500 bird species joined our game drives.

Our tent had hardwood floors, luxurious bedding under a cut crystal chandelier, indoor and outdoor showers, copper soaking tub, dual granite vanity, a zebra-skin trunk bar complete with tea service and homemade cookies. The enormous veranda overlooked a pond covered in river cabbage.

We had dinner under the stars where talented chef Sammy George prepared a six-course meal of delicacies including smoked sailfish, tree tomato sorbet and grilled pork chops paired with New Zealand and Chilean wines. Meals here were remarkable for freshness, diversity and exquisite taste in an atmosphere like no other, coupled with service so impeccable that royalty would be satisfied.

For the chameleons

For those who relish new opportunities, uncommon experiences and are comfortable in a variety of settings, a Kenyan safari will be utterly unforgettable.

As Henry Miller once said, "One's destination is never a place, but a new way of seeing things." With DK's knowledge, kindness and humor, your worldview will never quite be the same.

Julie L. Kessler is a travel writer, attorney and legal columnist based in Los Angeles and the author of the award-winning book "Fifty-Fifty: The Clarity of Hindsight."

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or less) and medium to long-haul AirAsia X flights (which service Honolulu) are non-stop, diminishing the need for significant human resource, physical infrastructure and facility costs at most transit destinations. As an example, Singapore functions as a virtual hub but AirAsia is among the country's top 10 airlines in terms of destination passenger traffic.

Innovative use of technology has also played a key role in AirAsia's success story, beginning with online booking. It was the first airline in Asia to go ticketless in 2009, allowing guests to pay for their bookings

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