

HEART OF THE



SAVANNAH

The song of Africa whispers of an untamed land bathed in intense colours where man and beast strive for balance. PRACHI JOSHI answers the call of the wild in Kenya.



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ay 1992. It was the summer of many firsts. The first time I got on a plane. My first trip abroad. The first time I fell in love with travel, and with Africa. There have been many plane rides since then, many countries and cities where I left a piece of my heart, but you never forget your first love, do you?

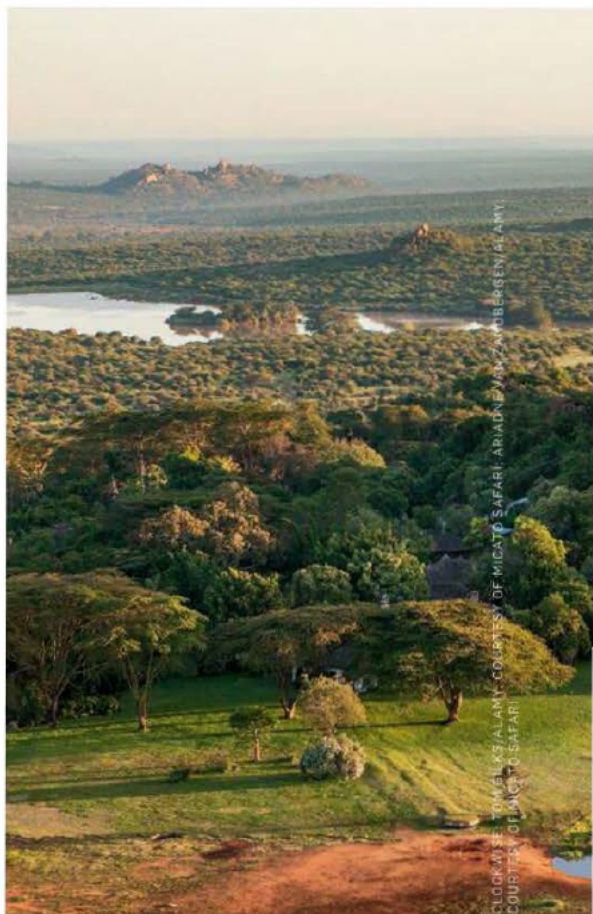
It has taken me 25 years to return to Kenya. As I step off the plane onto the tarmac of Nairobi's Jomo Kenyatta International airport,

I feel the same excitement as I felt all those years ago. The last time was a family holiday; this time I'm alone and ready for an experience with Micato Safaris—a Kenya-based, family run safari operator that was founded more than 50 years ago.

I breeze through immigration and customs, and meet Denis Simi, my Micato Safari Director who will be my guide for the next ten days. Over the days, I meet more Micato employees and realise that almost everyone has been with the company for 15-20 years, if not more. It's testament to the family atmosphere created by Jane and Felix Pinto, the owners of Micato Safaris. Their passion for Africa and love for India (the Pintos trace their roots to Goa) comes through over lunch at their expansive Nairobi home. This is not a special honour accorded to me as a visiting journalist, but something that all guests experience—an elaborate, homemade Goan lunch followed by a musical welcome to the Micato family with Denis and other staffers singing the 80s hit Kenyan pop song, *Jambo Bwana* (a song I well remember from my previous trip).

I spend a couple of relaxed days in Nairobi, visiting the popular Giraffe Centre (where you can hand-feed giraffes), checking out a noisy and colourful local farmers' market, and indulging in a spa treatment at Fairmont The Norfolk Hotel where I'm staying. One of my favourite experiences in Nairobi is visiting the David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust, where I spend a happy evening amongst more than 30 adorable baby elephants. I also get a chance to adopt one of them—I choose Mteto, a playful one-and-a-half-year-old female calf found abandoned in Tsavo East National Park, possibly orphaned by poachers.

The next day, Denis and I climb into a Twin Otter propeller plane for a short 30-minute flight, which takes us from Nairobi's Wilson Airport to Nanyuki town, flying north over Nairobi National Park. The jagged peak of Mount Kenya looms ahead, the country's highest mountain and the one that gives it its name. I'm staying at Fairmont Mount Kenya Safari Club, which stands bang on the equator and a line running



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: PLANT; COURTESY OF MICATO SAFARI; ARIADNE; JAMES AND BERGEN; AL AMU; COURTESY OF MICATO SAFARI



Clockwise: A young Maasai man in the Mara region; onlookers enjoy the sighting of an African elephant on a game drive; the black rhinoceros is an endangered species with only 700 left in the world; aerial view of Ol Jogi.



EVEN WITHOUT STEPPING OUT OF THE COMFORT OF MY BED, I CAN SEE GIRAFFES, ZEBRAS, IMPALAS, ELANDS, AND THE RELATIVELY RARE AND RATHER ELEGANT GERENUK GAZELLE.

through it helpfully informs me whether I'm standing in the North or South hemisphere. The resort has a nine-hole golf course, a large pool, landscaped gardens where peacocks and marabou storks wander about, a hedge maze, and two jet-black Labradors named Tusker and Grammy who are only too happy to accompany you on your walks. The highlight is the Mount Kenya Wildlife Conservancy and Animal Orphanage next door. I spend an afternoon at the orphanage, feeding sweet potato vines to the endangered bongos, patting the 150-year-old tortoise, admiring the lithe cheetahs (in their cages), and trying to stay out of the way of the two ostriches skulking about.

The next morning, before heading onwards to Ol Jogi, Denis and I are bundled into a safari vehicle and driven to a clearing in the woods where an elaborate champagne breakfast awaits. The morning sun caresses my (rapidly tanning) face as I contemplate the rugged beauty of Mount Kenya. Our server Raphael brings us plate after plate of breakfast delicacies—juices, granola, eggs and sausage, fruits, breads and pastry, coffee, and of course, the champagne. There may be better ways of starting the day, but I can't think of any.

Later, we head further north towards the Laikipia plateau driving past miles of golden-brown scrubland, dotted with acacia trees. At one point, the tarred road ends abruptly, and our sturdy safari vehicle bumps along a dusty path. Amidst the flat landscape, dramatic rock outcrops called *kopje* rise up. We slow down near a pair of zebras and I notice that they look a bit odd. "See those Mickey Mouse ears? These are Grévy's zebra, the most endangered of the three types of zebras," Denis informs me. Apart from the distinctive ears, they have thinner stripes compared to the more ubiquitous plains zebra. Less than 2,500 of Grévy's zebras remain, of which 400 live in Ol Jogi, the largest population in any one place.

A large *kopje* rears up ahead, and spread at the base is a series of thatched-roof cottages. "Welcome to Ol Jogi," says Jamie Gaymer, the conservancy's wildlife manager who receives us. Ol Jogi looks like a tropical paradise with cascading bougainvillea of every imaginable colour, natural streams and fountains, and chirping birds. There are 13 suites spread over the cottages, a large sitting and dining room, a fitness centre, a pool, and a spa with hammam. For more than 40 years, the entire 'house' was the private home of the Wildenstein family, a Franco-American dynasty of art dealers. It's only in 2013 that it was opened to guests, though it's still family-owned and run. The Willestein family clearly had a taste for flamboyance—each suite is individually designed and decorated with handcrafted furniture, exquisite artefacts, and elaborate stained-glass windows with animal

motif, not to mention the luxury linen and Hermès amenities in bathrooms that come with Jacuzzi and rain showers. I have the Mbogo suite, one of the two master suites, with a huge picture window in the bedroom that looks out over a watering hole and salt lick that attracts a steady stream of animals. Even without stepping out of the comfort of my bed, I can see giraffes, zebras, impalas, elands, the relatively rare and rather elegant gerenuk gazelle, and later in the evening elephants and hyenas. It's easy to lose my way inside my suite: a large central circular lobby has several doors leading to the master bedroom, the junior bedroom, separate 'his' and 'her' bathrooms, separate walk-in wardrobes, and a study. My boudoir-like bathroom is bigger than many standard hotel rooms and is done up in white marble laced with 18 karat gold.

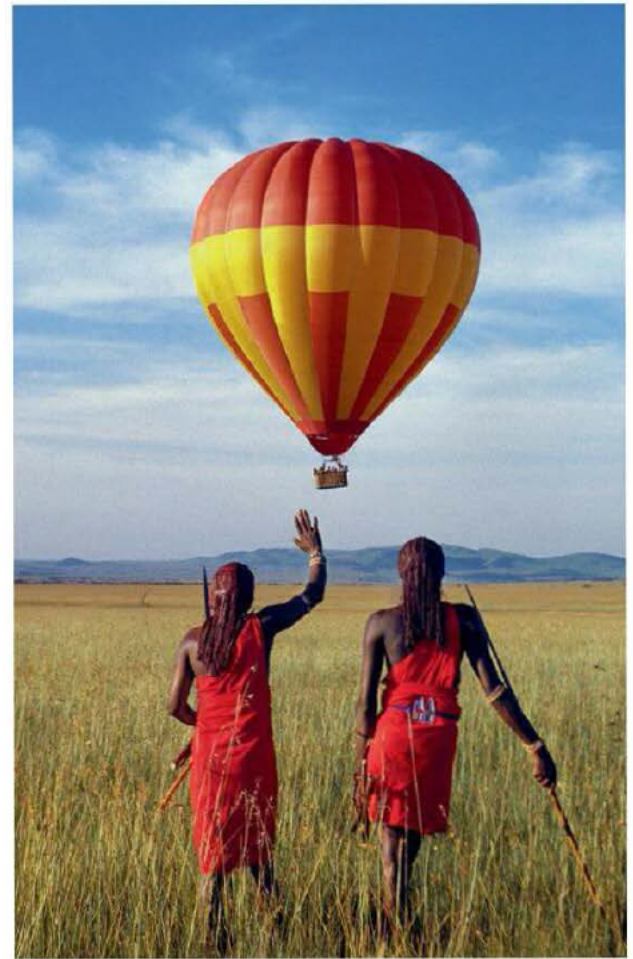
Meals at Ol Jogi are elaborate. An antique Murano chandelier dangles over the main dining table, while the other more informal seating is the veranda with views of the watering hole and Mount Kenya beyond. French Chef Sylvain Bel and his team whip up local and international dishes, all of which are served on custom-made dinnerware that changes for every meal. The meal settings also change—one night, we cross a candle-lit suspension rope bridge to an island in the Nanyuki River for a bush dinner preceded by a Maasai dance. The next afternoon, after a rigorous trek through the Ol Jogi 'Grand Canyon' (a unique ochre landscape created by



The view from a bedroom at Ol Jogi Simba Cottage. Below: Tourists photograph a baby elephant at the David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust.



Clockwise: Get traditional Maasai jewellery; ride a hot air balloon at Maasai Mara to enjoy the aerial view of the landscape; tourists at the Great Rift Valley in Nairobi; Micato Safari has experienced rangers who help you spot rare animals on game drives; you can hand-feed giraffes at the conservancy.





SHOPS & ACTIVITIES

Collectors Den Get Kenyan souvenirs at this quirky store that sells everything from handcrafted jewellery to carved animals and masks, and soapstone figurines. *Ground Floor, Hilton Hotel, Nairobi: +254 733/511 368*

Noorjehan Collections For exclusive jewellery and accessories made from traditional African beads, visit Gemini Desai's intimate store and workshop located in the outhouse of her home. *Muthaiga, Nairobi: +254 713/090 080*

The David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust Spend some time with orphaned baby elephants; arrive before 5 pm to watch them return to the orphanage for their evening milk bottle. You can even choose to foster a baby elephant (US\$50 for one year). *sheldrickwildlifetrust.org*

TOUR OPERATOR

Micato Safaris This safari specialist offers customised itineraries, supported by local partners and dedicated safari directors. Be prepared for exclusive experiences, surprise picnics, and world-class service. The company runs a non-profit, Micato AmericaShare, that works with disadvantaged children across Nairobi's slums. Through their One For One programme, Micato Safaris sponsors education of one Kenyan child for every safari they sell. *micato.com*

centuries-old water erosion), we arrive at a hilltop to a Mongolian barbecue lunch with a view of the entire conservancy spread below us.

And then there are the game drives. Jamie, Denis, and I set out in an open-sided, four-wheel drive custom-built jeep, driving around the 58,000 acre conservancy where we spot a gaggle of baboons, herds of impalas, grazing zebras and giraffes, a huge herd of buffaloes that assumes protective position as soon as it spots our vehicle, small herds of elephants, and two mama rhinos out on a walk with their babies. Ol Jogi is a private rhino conservancy and home to 53 black rhinos and 22 white rhinos. Jamie reels off horrifying statistics about the endangered animals from more than 20,000 black rhinos in the 1970s down to just 700 today, the animal is facing an unprecedented human threat. Hunted relentlessly for its horn (one kilogram can fetch US\$65,000), the rhino needs all the protection it can get. At Ol Jogi, more than 150 rangers guard the conservancy, armed with weapons and attack dogs, to keep out poachers and also for visitors' security. They also rescue and care for abandoned rhino calves, one of which is Meimei who was born blind in March last year and was separated from her mother. Her eyesight is fully restored after treatment at Ol Jogi's veterinary clinic and she is hand-raised in a special pen. It is a truly unforgettable experience to bottle feed her as she hungrily devours the fortified milk formula before enjoying an afternoon mud bath.

Back at the house, Jamie guides me past the bar and down a staircase into a long underground tunnel that ends with a black curtain. I push past the curtain and into a hideout where eye-level windows offer me an up, close, and personal view of the animals just a few metres away at the salt lick. I find myself here at all times of day and night, fascinated by the giraffes splaying their legs to bend down and lick the salt, the elands chomping like there's no tomorrow, and the skittish



Clockwise: The lounge at the Fairmont Mount Kenya Safari Club; ethnic group of Samburu in the Laikipia Plateau; exterior view of the Fairmont Norfolk Hotel; spot the spotted leopard at Maasai Mara.

zebras that seem to start at my very breathing. The best part about Ol Jogi? I have the entire house and the 58,000-acre conservancy all to myself. Ol Jogi exclusively lets out to small groups (minimum four people), which means you have complete privacy and your own exclusive safari experience, without five other cars and camera-toting tourists as is common in other game reserves in Africa.

After two days of luxuriating at Ol Jogi, we catch another light-plane flight from Nanyuki and land at Angama Mara's private airstrip (dispersing a herd of zebras nonchalantly grazing nearby). *Angama* means 'suspended in mid-air' in Swahili, and true to its name the safari camp stands on the rim of the Oloololo Escarpment arising from the floor of the Great Rift Valley and overlooks the western part of Maasai Mara. The flat grassland is punctuated by acacia and desert date trees (the iconic flat-topped ones), that resemble spots. Hence the Maasai called this land the Mara—the spotted land. My tented suite comes with floor-to-ceiling windows from where the bed, the sofa, the reading nook, and the freestanding bathtub all look out over the view. The room opens on to a patio and once in a while a curious baboon or rock hyrax drops by on the deck. In the mornings, I can see colourful hot air balloons on the horizon, and in the evenings, the setting sun splashes the sky with a kaleidoscope of orange, pink, and purple.

Over three days, I go on several game drives along with Denis and Alice, our guide and driver, and I manage to spot the Big Five. I catch sight of the most elusive of them all on my very first safari. I'm photographing a herd of zebras when the jeep's wireless crackles with the news of a leopard sighting. Alice steps on the gas and I hang on for dear life as we fly across to the southern section of the Mara, to arrive at a tree where four other vehicles have already formed a semicircle at a respectful distance (the rangers do not allow more than five vehicles to congregate near any animal). The leopard is up in the tree, chomping on the leg of a zebra. I watch fascinated as the sleek animal methodically

chews through his kill. I train my camera at him just as he lifts his head and looks straight into my lens. A shiver passes through me as I click the shutter on autopilot. More goosebumps are in store for me on the next morning's drive when a majestic male lion ambles past my jeep in the languid pursuit of a lioness that is a few metres ahead. We chance upon a herd of buffaloes enjoying a spa day lounging about in a muddy pond, and I lose count of the number of elephants that cross our path. Only the rhino eludes us till the very last day when we finally see a young male slowly making his way into the bush.

One morning, we leave the camp at 6.30 am to drive south to the Kenya Tanzania border where under the shade of a desert date tree, Denis, Alice, and I have an elaborate picnic breakfast (complete with a red-checked tablecloth). The cobalt blue sky shines down on the golden savannah as we look out at Tanzania. Only a white stone marks the dividing line between Maasai Mara and the Serengeti. But the border is only for the humans; the animals come and go visa-free, as they have done for centuries. ■

THE DETAILS

GETTING THERE

Etihad Airways operates daily flights from Mumbai and Delhi to Nairobi via Abu Dhabi. It's mandatory to get a yellow fever vaccine and a oral polio vaccine at least three weeks prior to travel. Apply for an e-visa (₹3,252) at evisa.go.ke.

HOTELS

Fairmont The Norfolk Hotel One of the oldest hotels in Nairobi. The Norfolk has charming colonial-style architecture, spacious rooms, and several dining options. *Doubles from ₹11,700; fairmont.com.*

Fairmont Mount Kenya Safari Club Set amidst 100 acres of landscaped

gardens and with magnificent views of Mount Kenya, the club resort is an ideal base in Nanyuki. *Doubles from ₹22,111; fairmont.com.*

Ol Jogi The uber-exclusive, all-inclusive ranch is located within 58,000 acres of a private rhino conservancy and is available for bookings only for groups from four to 20 people. *From ₹1,04,055 upwards per person per night depending on group size and season; oljogihome.com.*

Angama Mara Perched above the floor of the Great Rift Valley with a spectacular view of the Maasai Mara, this safari lodge has two intimate camps of 15 tented suites each. *Doubles from ₹1,10,556; angama.com.*

RESTAURANTS

Tatu The Norfolk's signature restaurant, Tatu is one of the best fine dining venues in Nairobi. It serves innovative Kenyan cuisine with a contemporary international touch. *Entrées ₹780-1495; fairmont.com.*

The Talisman An expat favourite, The Talisman has a cheerful, laid-back vibe and serves a mix of African, European, and Thai flavours. *Entrées ₹390-650; thetalismanrestaurant.com.*

Haandi If you're craving a taste of home, head over to Haandi for some delectable North Indian cuisine. *Entrées ₹325-975; haandirestaurants.com.*