

# QANTAS

Spirit of Australia

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**Forget  
everything  
else**

The  
unbridled  
thrill of a  
walking  
safari in  
Kenya





PHOTOGRAPHY BY RYAN HEFFERNAN

IN THE HEART OF KENYA, LANCE RICHARDSON JUMPS OUT OF THE JEEP AND JOINS A WALKING EXPEDITION

THAT DRAWS HIS GAZE NEAR AND DOWN FOR A RARE VIEW OF AFRICA UP CLOSE.

## Safari of small things



# W

WHEN I land at Nanyuki Airfield in Laikipia, somewhere near the centre of Kenya, I've already been on safari for more than a week and I'm tiring of it. Not tiring of the wildlife, which is endlessly fascinating. But tiring of all the insulation – transferring from permanent camp to fortified vehicle then back again, like moving between protective air bubbles. I can see the wilderness outside. But I can't touch it.

Which is why I've come here – for the promise of something more hands-on. "They say that when you cross the equator your blood starts going the other way around," the pilot jokes through the headset as he pulls our eight-seater to a stop on the tarmac. We are directly on the equator, nearly 2000 metres above sea level. Acacia trees ripple in the shimmer of the brutal heat.

As a concept, a "walking safari" seems to break all the rules of commonsense animal viewing. Safari rule No. 1 is, after all, *don't get out of the car*. So to not only get out of the car but to then wander onto leopard-infested plains is a scenario that seems inadvisable.

Yet it is precisely what happens on a privately owned property called Tumaren in the north of Laikipia County. Community lands bordering Tumaren are home to livestock keepers, the Samburu and Laikipia Maasai people, who maintain a traditional semi-nomadic lifestyle. A walking safari here

follows their example. This means that for four days a visitor will say goodbye to permanent luxury camps, taking everything with them as they venture across a stark landscape with virtually no roads. It means the only fortified vehicle is an irritable camel with halitosis.

Itching to begin, I convene with some of my guides in the airfield car park. They usher me into a dusty four-wheel drive that will, theoretically, take me to the starting line, way out in the middle of nowhere, then leave me there. But when the driver goes to start the engine, he discovers the battery is dead.

Swahili words are exchanged. The driver gets out and recruits some people to push. Then he tries to start the truck again. He gets out again. Somebody else is recruited to drive. The original driver begins to push with the crew. They make it halfway across the car park and... nothing. The engine makes a sound like a plaintive bull: *leave me aloneeee*.

I begin to laugh because is there a more perfect way to kick off a long walk in Kenya? Even the jeep can tell it's no longer wanted.





## WAKE-UP CALL

I ROUSE to the sounds of Barcelona winning the football. More exactly, I wake to the sounds of somebody fiddling with a small transistor radio, which is blaring a game from some distant land. It is 6am: time to get up. Hot water has been left outside in a canvas basin. I freshen up, dress, shove everything back in my bag, go forth for French-press coffee. Within 30 minutes a small crew has disassembled the tents and loaded them onto the backs of grumbling camels. The entire camp – tables, outhouse, dining room, kitchen – vanishes like a mirage.

The crew is employed from local communities and my guides are genuine Samburu warriors – young, thin men in brilliantly coloured clothing and jewellery. Ntation Nkaiduri, an animal tracker with uncanny eyesight, wears sequins and beaded chains around his face. Gabriel Ewoi, the head guide, wears bright red and carries an imposing rifle in case he needs to fire warning shots. (Ewoi has been attacked by an elephant and a buffalo in his lifetime but assures me nothing will happen during our stroll.)

"When you're in the car you are relying on big animals," Ewoi told me last night when I asked him what I should expect today. "On a walking safari, it is the small things you notice." As if to prove his point, he shone a torch into a tree behind me, illuminating the eyes of a small primate – a bushbaby – watching us from high in the branches.

Now Ewoi sets out with slow, steady strides across a deeply cracked mud plain, trailed by a caravan of people and pack camels. The plan is to walk for several hours, ultimately arriving at a new camp site in the early afternoon. Then everybody will snooze until the temperature drops enough to become tolerable for a second jaunt in the evening. The going is not arduous, though several camels are equipped with riding saddles just in case.

It doesn't take long to realise how little I've noticed in the Kenyan landscape on previous safaris. I've become accustomed to looking out, looking quickly. Ntation and Ewoi draw my attention *near* and *down*, pointing out wild-dog prints in the dirt, snakeskins and small fruits, such as cherry tomatoes that work as a handwash when squeezed. They spot old bones, dung beetles and black ants with pincers large enough to use as makeshift medical stitches (nobody volunteers). They encourage me to feel the bark of trees and smell grasses scent-marked by hyenas. For much of the day, this is indeed a safari of small things – Africa up close, in miniature.

But there are plenty of animals, too: an ostrich protecting her young by trying to divert our attention away from the nest; Grévy's



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## A MILLION-STAR BED

Sleeping under the stars seems like a romantic idea until you find yourself sharing a pillow with an army of bugs. At Loisaba Conservancy ([loisaba.com](http://loisaba.com)), located not far from where the walking safari ends, somebody has

come up with a genius idea that circumvents all the discomforts of camping. It's called a Star Bed.

Imagine a hotel room with a thatched roof and hardly any walls, built into a hillside. Down below, elephants and zebras frequent the Kiboko Waterhole. Now add a bed with a wide

canopy of mosquito netting and put it on wheels. Each night, Loisaba staff roll the bed onto an open terrace so you can see the stars above. If it starts to rain, the staff will gently pull the bed back beneath the shelter while you sleep.

It's a strange experience, exciting for the familiarity (a luxury bed) in a wild, inhospitable setting. But the best part is dawn. You wake inside the sunrise, engulfed by colour, seemingly floating above the African plain as wildlife greets the new day down below.

zebras rolling in the dust; secretary birds – so named, some say, for the feathers on the head that look like quills tucked behind a person's ears; and dik-diks, tiny antelopes that make a mad dash for cover whenever we draw near. These encounters feel charged and meaningful because you're seeing the animals at eye level, on their terms.

As the sun approaches its zenith, we pass a giraffe lazing beneath a parasol-shaped tree. Impalas graze in the shade. I begin to feel the effects of walking in the heat, a meditative quality that is a little like daydreaming.

But then I'm snapped back to attention. "Elephants have poor eyesight and good smell," whispers Ewoi, gesturing towards a grey shape blocking our path ahead. "We have to stay downwind but sometimes they sense our footsteps through vibrations in the ground so *pole pole* [slowly, slowly]."

Elephants are extremely unpredictable. Ewoi watches with his rifle ready as the caravan moves around the animal in a wide arc, using bushes as cover. The elephant soon lumbers off, oblivious to our presence, but Ewoi stops us again so he can check the coast is truly clear. It's thrilling, even

unnerving, to get this close in the wild. One of the camels seems to agree: he hovers at my shoulder, chewing cud like somebody eating popcorn during a tense movie.

That night, camp is reassembled near some fever-trees on the banks of the Ewaso Nyiro River. An open-air tent is prepared for hot bucket showers. Halfway through washing away the day's accumulated sweat, I look up and catch sight of the Milky Way. The sight is so dazzling, so unexpected, that I stand there, gobsmacked, until the water runs out.

## NOMADS

LATE THE following afternoon, I wake from a long nap in my comfortable tent to find Ewoi waiting outside. "There is a ceremony in a village nearby," he announces. "Some young warriors are being inducted into the community as elders. They will be smeared with red ochre. The people have slaughtered four bulls and some goats. It is a big celebration that happens only rarely. There will be wine made of honey and aloe vera roots. We go after tea?"

Of course we go. To reach the village, we need the jeep, which is stashed nearby for emergencies. But rather than being tiresome, the jeep now seems utterly transformed: I'm riding with five Samburu warriors who are delighted by the novelty of vehicular safari. Everything is reversed. When we come across another elephant, Ewoi idles the engine for a moment so the men can pull out phones and snap their own tourist photos.

Eventually we arrive at a *boma*, a homestead comprising several mud houses surrounded by a circular wall of thorns. Two dozen boys are dancing outside, exquisitely dressed in flowers, beads and chains that jangle as they jump up and down rhythmically, their braided hair flying. Facing them is a group of young girls bobbing their heads. The two groups come together and dance off in a kind of conga line. They will do this, Ewoi tells me, for much of the next two days.

The warriors then take me inside the boma and introduce me as though I was simply the new guy in town. Nobody bats an eyelid. Everybody is welcoming. Honey wine is offered in the chief's hut and it's tasty. On the way back to camp, a Samburu warrior unveils a giant chunk of beef that he's procured from the feast. A machete also appears. "You like smoked meats?" asks Ewoi.

Spontaneous moments like these are one of the pleasures of a walking safari. You can come to a creek to find cowherds taking a break from the heat. Buy jerry cans full of milk that's fresh from the Maasai cattle. You can stop at a waterhole and watch animals on the other side pick up your scent and scatter in confusion.

On my final morning, I hike to the very top of a rocky outcrop behind the last camp. The land of Tumaren and neighbouring properties are mostly flat so it feels like climbing into the sky. Mount Kenya sits on the far horizon. A cool wind blows from the north. But Ntation touches my shoulder: again, I'm looking out and up when I should be looking *near and down*. Because down below, not far from the path we took on foot only yesterday, a leopard stalks the plains. ●

### Flight path

CPT

Qantas flies from Sydney to Johannesburg, where you can access connections to Nairobi. [qantas.com](http://qantas.com)

Bench Africa's four-day Kenya Walking Safari – Classic includes air transfers, meals, local drinks, conservation fees, camels and Samburu guides. The company also offers a three-day extension at Loisaba Star Beds – Kiboko. Visit [benchafrica.com](http://benchafrica.com) for details.