

# T READ very carefully

WORDS EMMA GREGG

IN RURAL NORTHERN KENYA, YOU CAN TRACK THE NOTORIOUSLY FEISTY EASTERN BLACK RHINO, PICNIC WITH ELEPHANTS, AND EXPLORE MOUNT KENYA ON THE BACK OF A PONY — PROOF, IF EVER IT WAS EVER NEEDED, THAT NOT ALL SAFARIS ARE CREATED EQUAL



like a burglar on a suburban driveway, I wince at every little scrunch underfoot. While the breeze is in our favour and there's enough vegetation to conceal our movements, the parched earth presents a challenge. It's dotted with gravel. Desperate to steal a close-range glimpse of one of Africa's most impressive wild animals, I creep forward as softly as I possibly can.

We're tracking a rhino in the remote Kenyan bush, a delicate undertaking requiring stealth and absolute silence. The animal concerned is not a white rhino — the placid, wide-mouthed grass-eater; it's an eastern black rhino. They're critically endangered and notoriously feisty.

A black rhino's hearing and sense of smell are acute; even its eyesight isn't as feeble as hunters once thought. If you're close and it suddenly detects you, a black rhino may charge straight at you. An adult can hurtle through thorny bushes at 34mph, giving you scant time to react.

While eastern black rhinos are famous for their long, pointed horns, the lone male we're following has had his trimmed and implanted with a microchip to help keep him safe from poachers. Known as Loicharu, he's one of a small number of black rhinos that roam wild in

the arid thickets of Sera Rhino Sanctuary, Africa's first community-owned and -operated black rhino conservation project. Until now, protecting Kenya's rhinos from poachers and habitat loss has been the

preserve of government-run national parks and private conservancies, some of which currently have as many rhinos as they can support. Conservationists agree it's crucial to earmark new territory.

The presence of rhinos in this high-security, 41sq-mile sanctuary is something to celebrate, since prior to its creation in 2015 within Sera Wildlife Conservancy, a community-owned district of Samburu County, there had been no black rhinos in northern Kenya's community rangelands for over 25 years. Trophy hunting has been illegal in Kenya since 1977 but in Sera, as elsewhere, poachers simply ignored the ban. Eventually, the entire rhino population was eliminated.

In a triumphant turnaround, experts from the Northern Rangelands Trust, Lewa Wildlife Conservancy and the Kenya Wildlife Service translocated Loicharu and 11 of his compatriots from Lewa, Nairobi National Park and Nakuru National Park to Sera in phases, with funding from high-profile organisations including Flora & Fauna International and Tusk. Ten survived, two of which have calved, bringing the total to 12. Now they've settled in, paying visitors are permitted to track them on foot. It's a new departure for East Africa, and I'm among the first to try it.

We inch forward. Turacos (aptly, also known as go-away birds) almost blow our cover with their petulant call, but the rhino doesn't react. The breeze drops. Samburu safari guide Sammy Lemiruni shakes ash from a little bag to test its direction and confers silently with rhino monitors Joseph Lesanjore and Jonathan Lemeriuas. We're still safe.

The experience I'm sampling is aimed at serious conservation enthusiasts, keen to observe black rhinos

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face to face, on their own terms. Sera's full-time rhino monitors and guides, none of whom had seen a rhino in real life before their project training began, use a combination of traditional Samburu bushlore and radio telemetry to get close and stay close. While rhino tracks are tricky to detect in gravelly terrain, each rhino's microchip emits a unique frequency; by tuning in, the monitors always know where to find them. Crucially and somewhat controversially, unlike their colleagues in the anti-poaching squad, Sera's tracking teams are unarmed. The rhinos are so precious that they must on no account be shot, whether deliberately or by accident, in panic.

Accompanying the rhino monitors on patrol isn't intended to be an adrenaline activity, but nonetheless my heart is in my mouth. Walking safari guides usually advise that if confronted by a charging rhino, you should immediately take cover or climb a tree. Glancing around, I've already clocked that the young acacias and aromatic commiphora plants in our vicinity aren't exactly designed for climbing. They're low, slight and clad in vicious-looking thorns.

I've yet to make out the distinctive shape of a rhino through the vegetation when Sammy gestures for me to listen. Somewhere in the near distance there's a deep, rhythmic crunching sound, like a horse eating carrots. Sammy beckons me forward and I catch an exciting glimpse of Loicharu, less than 15 metres away, grazing on some unappetising-looking vegetation. From ground level, I'm acutely aware of his bulk. Although black rhinos are the smaller of Africa's two species, an adult can weigh 1.3 tonnes — as much as a small car.

Unaware of our presence, Loicharu ambles towards us, munching as he goes. I'm thankful for the breeze in my face; it's unlikely he'll pick up our scent. He stops, puffs



**CLOCKWISE FROM  
TOP LEFT:** Gingerly  
approaching black  
rhinos; shaking a bag  
of ash to test the  
wind direction; rhino  
monitor with telemetry  
equipment during an on-  
foot black rhino tracking  
expedition, Saruni Rhino



IMAGES: EMMA GREGG

abruptly and listens for a response, in case there's a rival on the prowl. When no answer comes, he seems to relax. But then, just as we're climbing a termite mound for a clearer (and safer) view, he detects us at last, and dashes away.

### THE HERD GATHERS

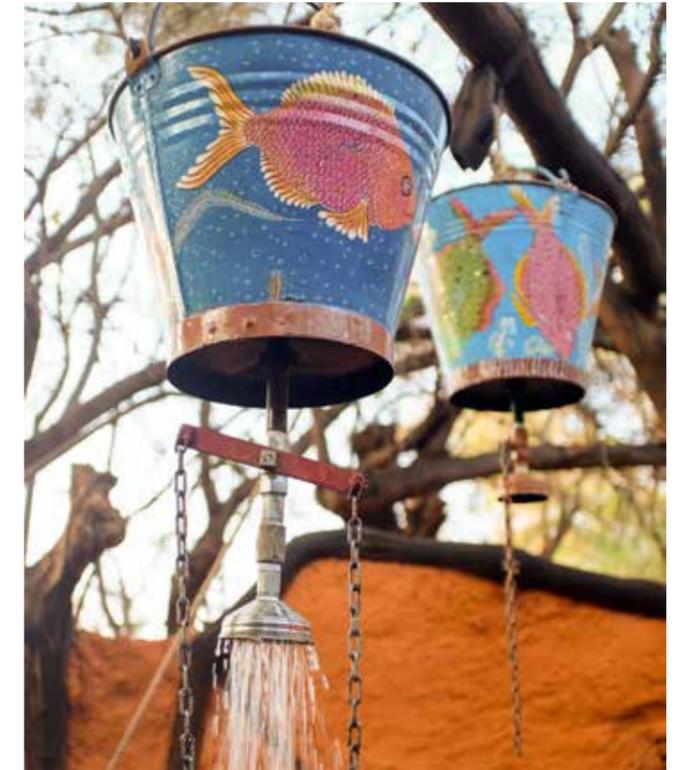
Having flown 155 miles north from Nairobi airport to Kalama airstrip, I'd opted to break my onward journey to Sera by driving 22 miles further north for a stay at the Kalama Community Conservancy, chilling out in style at Saruni Samburu — a dramatically beautiful bush hotel with diligent service and some of the finest views I've seen in Africa — before continuing to its new little sister, Saruni Rhino. Driving through the mid-morning heat, we rattled across vast community lands bracketed by hills, their rocky tops streaked with the guano of vultures and eagles. As we crossed shady riverbeds, camels with softly chiming bells lolloped along the banks. Occasionally, we passed settlements of makeshift huts and had to stop to avoid goats herded by wide-eyed children wearing collars of beads. Cows — the focus of the northern pastoralists' world — were noticeably absent. "This is the season when they drive their cattle far away in search of pasture," said Sammy. After months without rain, barely a blade of grass remains.

Saruni Rhino, Sera Wildlife Conservancy's first eco-lodge, stands six miles outside the rhino sanctuary. Tiny and blissfully intimate, it's the only accommodation for miles. My open-fronted *banda* of local stone, thatch and foraged timber looks out onto dry, sandy riverbed etched with wildlife tracks and shaded by monumental *doum* palms with long, shaggy fronds that swish gently in the breeze. There are rustic swings and sofas to lounge in, made from upcycled crates and dugout canoes dressed with Swahili fabrics. The Indian Ocean may be 300 miles away, but it feels as if I'm staying on the beach.

A beach with elephants, that is. As I settle into my *banda*, a herd gathers at a water hole a few hundred metres away. The lodge and the water hole — fed by a solar-powered pump — were designed and built in 2006 by 15 young British volunteers led by TV presenter Nick Knowles; their feat was filmed for BBC series *Mission Africa*. Although run by wilderness lodge operator Saruni as a conservation safari base, the site belongs to the local community, which uses its share of the revenue for local development projects.

"Perceptions of East Africa as a safari destination are changing," says Saruni's CEO, Riccardo Orizio. "Kenya has always had character, but we also offer style and a tangible, sustainable connection with local communities." He's staffed Saruni Rhino with a small, highly professional team of young Kenyans who, like most of the people I encounter in this remote rural region, dress meticulously in strikingly colourful *shukas* blankets and beads, imbued with meaning. I'm impressed by their skills, which are bang up to date. Between them, they mix gin-and-limoncello cocktails, whip up luxurious modern Italian meals, share tales of life in the northern rangelands and lead eye-opening excursions.

Sammy drives me through the rhino sanctuary's buffer zone, a belt of parched, uninhabited scrubland where herders graze and water their livestock. We've come to see Kisima Hamsini, an array of 200-year-old, hand-dug wells. "This place used to be a battleground," Sammy says. For generations, Sera's rival tribes — Samburu, Rendille and Borana — clashed over access to scarce



resources, settling scores by stealing each other's cattle. Declaring their rangelands a conservancy in 2001 helped heal old wounds; democratic processes now ensure that each section of the community takes turns to draw water and each is represented on the rhino sanctuary payroll.

As we watch, thousand-strong flocks of sandgrouse arrive to drink from the pools. We later observe young warriors with muscular shoulders climbing down into the wells, their buckets scraping against the bedrock as they scoop up the water — setting the pace by chanting haunting, rhythmic songs.

That afternoon, we visit the rhinos once more. Surrounded by an electric fence, their sanctuary is tufted with enough pasture to allow elands, impalas and rare Grévy's zebras (unique to northern Kenya and Ethiopia), to thrive alongside them. Compared to the buffer zone, the landscapes are bucolic; outside the fence, the grass is bitten to the quick.

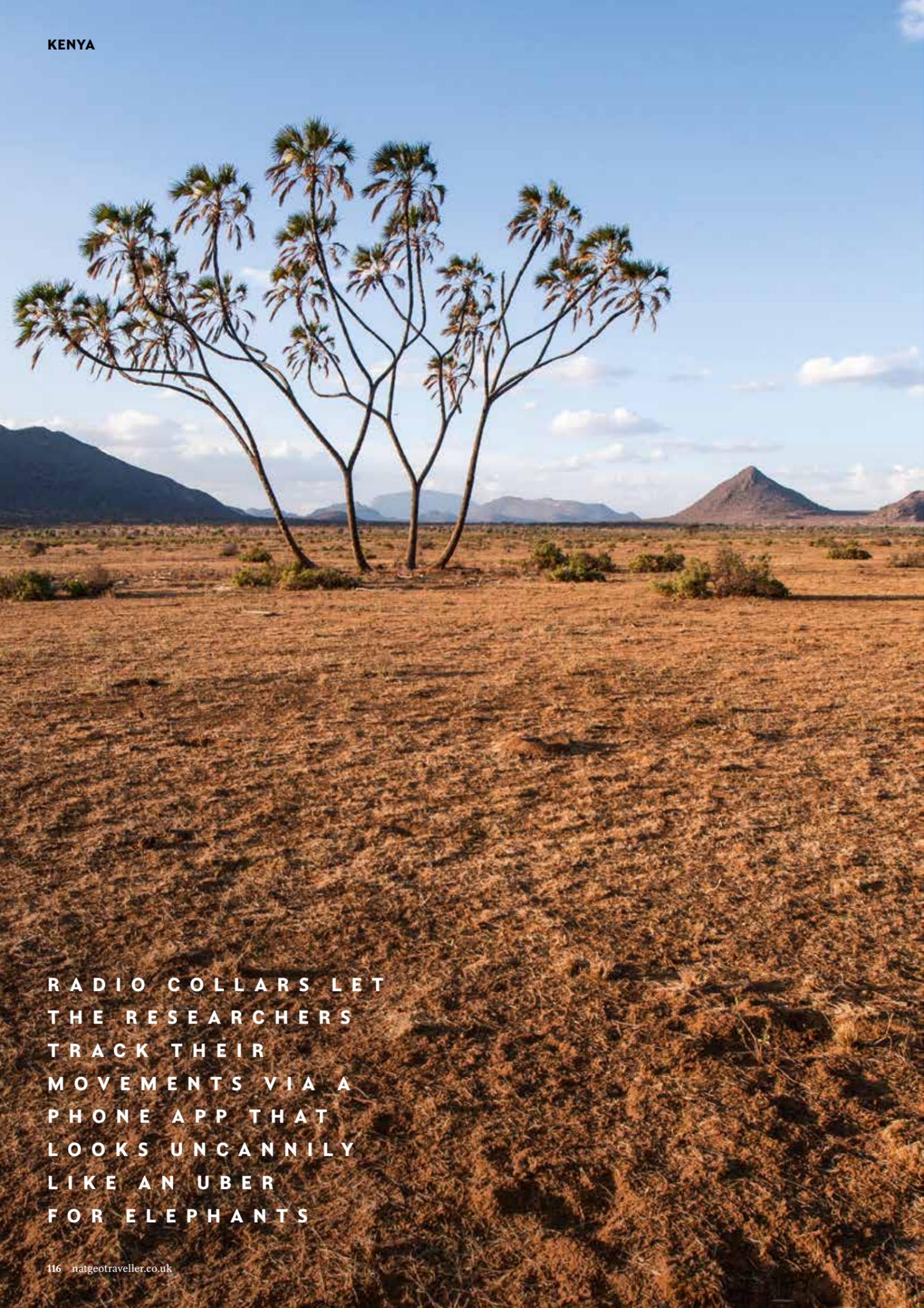
I ask rhino monitor Jonathan Lemerius whether he feels that restricting grazing is a worthwhile sacrifice. "I'm a Samburu and of course I love cows," he says, "but a herd of cattle just benefits the owner. Our rhinos are benefitting the entire community, through visitor fees and jobs — not just for me and my colleagues, but for security officers, craftworkers and others as well."

### BODY LANGUAGE

Elsewhere in northern Kenya, the conservation safari model is well established, and evolving. At my next stop, Samburu National Reserve — a popular haunt for wildlife researchers — I bump along sandy tracks in a safari vehicle whose doors are adorned with elephants hand-painted in a whimsical style. "We like to do things differently here," says Samburu guide Bernard Lesirin.

**OPPOSITE, FROM TOP:** Books at Elephant Watch Camp; elephants on their way to the water hole beside Saruni Rhino eco-lodge

**ABOVE:** Hand-painted bucket showers at Elephant Watch Camp



RADIO COLLARS LET  
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IMAGES: EMMA GREGG

FROM LEFT: Doum palm in the dry season, Samburu National Reserve; Samburu staff member from Elephant Watch Camp



**ABOVE:** Watching elephants on a conservation safari, Elephant Watch Camp, Samburu National Reserve

“We wait until the other safari operators have finished their early-morning game drives and returned to their camps for brunch, then we go out exploring. We take a picnic lunch, and take our time. Often, we have the whole reserve to ourselves.”

Had I been solely focused on big cats and Samburu’s distinctive antelopes — slender-necked gerenuks, elegant beisa oryx and tiny, pretty-eyed dik-diks — this could’ve been a disappointment (by mid-morning, the light is hazy and the heat has chased predators deep into the shade). But, like most visitors to Elephant Watch Camp, I have elephants on my mind. Quirky and colourful, this pioneering eco-lodge was founded by Oria Douglas-Hamilton, wife of the eminent zoologist Iain Douglas-Hamilton, whose research base, Save The Elephants (STE), is nearby. Having monitored Samburu’s elephants closely since 1997, the Douglas-Hamiltons and their team have an exceptional rapport with the herds. Key animals wear radio collars, allowing the researchers to track their movements via a phone app that looks uncannily like an Uber for elephants. But Bernard doesn’t need sophisticated technology to find elephants close to the lodge — he knows all their favourite spots.

In a thicket near the Ewaso Ng’iro River, we discover seven elephants from the Virtues family relaxing beneath a strangler fig, flapping their ears gently to keep themselves cool. Amity, the matriarch, is kicking at palm shoots and twirling her trunk to pluck them; Verity is dusting herself with showers of sand. Carefully, Bernard steers towards them until we’re very, very close, then turns off the engine. We’ll be staying with them, quietly, for a while. To my astonishment, they don’t appear to mind a bit.

Supremely relaxed, the family are gentle company. I watch in fascination as other elephants stroll up and are

greeted tenderly, passing our vehicle so closely that I can see every fleck of mud on their crinkled flanks. Some suckle their young, or simply snooze on their feet.

Even the approach of Darwin, an enormous bull elephant in musth, doesn’t make them anxious, although I don’t feel the same: the ripe-cheese reek of his hormonal secretions indicates he could be in a dangerous mood and I turn to Bernard and his colleague, Rosemary Lengunai, alarmed. Unruffled, they carry on preparing lunch. They can read Darwin’s body language and know we have nothing to fear.

I’m overwhelmed by the intensity of the experience. You can watch wild elephants in almost any park or reserve in Africa, but rarely as vividly and intimately as this. By offering extraordinary encounters, Elephant Watch Camp has become a funnel for philanthropy; its guests are often so moved that they donate generously to Save The Elephants’ research and conservation efforts, on the spot.

South of Samburu, where the counties of Laikipia and Meru meet, the terrain is higher and the air is cooler. This is northern Kenya’s conservation safari heartland, home to famous wildlife strongholds such as Segera, Ol Pejeta, Lewa and Borana. I spend a peaceful couple of days at one of its lesser-known eco-lodges, El Karama Eco Lodge in eastern Laikipia, taking bushwalks on the Laikipia Plateau — a wild sweep of lion country; its open landscapes studded with whistling thorn acacias and ancient boscia trees. Distant herds of zebras and reticulated giraffes watch us calmly as we pass. Then, I head for the forested slopes of Mount Kenya, Africa’s second-highest peak, for a pony trekking trip with a difference.

With a Swahili name meaning ‘friend’, Rafiki seems like the kind of pony I can trust. Sure-footed, his coat brushed to a gleam, he paces confidently behind the leader, Nyota, meaning ‘star’. Five more ponies follow us in



an orderly file. Selected for their unflappable nature and hardy constitution, these Ethiopian ponies belong to the Mount Kenya Trust (MKT), an organisation dedicated to protecting the forests and wildlife of Mount Kenya, and my fellow riders are mounted rangers. Once again, I've joined a conservation team on patrol.

Our route winds into a grove of ancient cedars, where shafts of light beam down as if through cathedral windows. "For a long time, I dreamed of setting up a mounted patrol to tackle illegal grazing, logging and wildlife snaring on Mount Kenya," says MKT's executive officer, Susie Weeks, as we pause to gaze up at the trees. "It seemed the ideal way to cover more ground than we could on foot."

I've already seen hard evidence of the Horse Patrol Team's effectiveness: an old bundle of wire snares — confiscated by this agile, eco-friendly force — hangs like a trophy in the stable yard. In just five years of daily operations, poaching has dropped dramatically.

Keen to raise funds, and awareness of MKT's work, Susie is now inviting visitors to join the team in the field. She's onto a good thing — my ride is a delight. While the rangers scan the surroundings for anything suspicious, I simply enjoy the scenery. And as we ride out of the forest onto beautiful moorland, dotted with mountain heather, I learn more about the landscape.

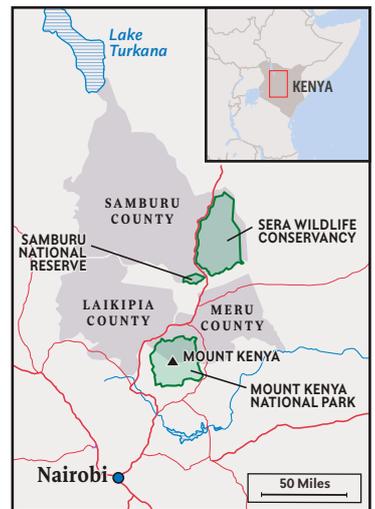
"Mount Kenya is the heart and lungs of the country," says Susie. "Its biodiversity is unmatched in Africa. I honestly can't think of anything more important to Kenya than doing this — and sharing it with others." □

**ABOVE:** Samburu staff member from Elephant Watch Camp

## VISITING LAIKIPIA COUNTY

Much of Laikipia (south west of Samburu) remains peaceful, but in the remote north west, localised and sporadic armed conflicts between ranchers and farmers have escalated in recent months. At the time of writing, overseas visitors haven't been directly affected and Laikipia, Samburu and Meru (including Sera, Kalama, Samburu National Reserve, Mount Kenya and Lewa Wildlife Conservancy) remain outside the area to which the FCO advises against all but essential travel.

## ESSENTIALS



### Getting there & getting around

Kenya Airways and British Airways fly daily from Heathrow to Nairobi. [ba.com](http://ba.com)  
[kenya-airways.com](http://kenya-airways.com)

Driving times from Nairobi: Nanyuki (for Mount Kenya and Laikipia) 3-4h; Saruni Samburu 5-6h; Elephant Watch Camp 5-6h. Saruni Rhino is 1.5h from Saruni Samburu. Safarilink flies from Nairobi's Wilson Airport to Samburu and Nanyuki. [flysafarilink.com](http://flysafarilink.com)

### When to go

July-October and January-February are the best safari months. It's generally hot and dry except during the 'long rains' (late March-early May, when some safari camps close) and the 'short rains' (November).

### Where to stay

Saruni Samburu, Kalama. [sarunisamburu.com](http://sarunisamburu.com)  
Saruni Rhino, Sera. [sarunirhinotracking.com](http://sarunirhinotracking.com)  
Elephant Watch Camp, Samburu. [elephantwatchportfolio.com/](http://elephantwatchportfolio.com/)  
[elephantwatchcamp.com](http://elephantwatchcamp.com)  
El Karama Eco Lodge, Laikipia. [elkaramalodge.com](http://elkaramalodge.com)  
The Emakoko, Niarobi (on the edge of Nairobi National Park). [emakoko.com](http://emakoko.com)

### More info

*The Rough Guide to Kenya*. RRP: £16.99.

### How to do it

**THE ULTIMATE TRAVEL COMPANY** has a 12-day Kenyan bush and beach conservation safari, with stays at Elephant Watch Camp, Saruni Rhino and Pepni Hotel (Lamu island), from £6,920 per person, based on two sharing. Includes full-board accommodation, domestic flights, transfers, national reserve entry fees, activities and return flights from London. [ultimatetravelcompany.co.uk](http://ultimatetravelcompany.co.uk)

**EXPERT AFRICA** has a six-day Kenyan safari, including Saruni Samburu, Saruni Rhino and Lewa Wilderness from £3,610 per person, excluding international flights, based on two sharing, with full-board accommodation, domestic flights, transfers, fees and activities. [expertafrica.com](http://expertafrica.com)