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Travels among Uganda's
misrepresented tribe

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Loretu Lesamana, a *mzee* (junior elder) of a Samburu community from the plains near Mathews Ranges in Kenya's Northern Frontier District.



Samburu women perform a welcome dance at a manyatta near Samburu National Park.



The way of the WARRIOR

The Samburu have traditionally been known as the aristocrats of the East African wilderness. Mark Eveleigh heads off into Kenya's Northern Frontier District to learn 'the way of the warrior.'

Loretu Lesamana squats on the trail, casting a practised eye over what I've come to think of as 'the morning newspaper'. The print he's scanning doesn't follow neat lines of black ink however. The thick bangles on the Samburu warrior's forearm clatter as his fingers trace a jumble of sandy scrawls. His brow furrows as he deciphers the order in which the hieroglyphics were laid down on the parchment of African dust.

The "news report" tells of the fatal dance of predator and prey through the life-and-death hours of the Kenyan night. The small print this morning describes the passage of striped hyena, bushbuck, mongoose, porcupine and baboon along this trail. The warrior smiles as he delivers the 'headline news': "Chui kubwa," he says. He nods his head again in confirmation. The ochre-matted locks of his hair swing across his chiselled cheek. "Chui kubwa sana!"

A big leopard passed this way during the night. A very big leopard. Its tracks are planted purposefully on top of those of the luckless porcupine. I've travelled to Kenya's Northern Frontier District in search of Africa's most elusive cat and I am hoping that bad news for the porcupine could be good news for us.

There are melanistic (darker) variations of most spotted cats. Regardless of whether they are South American jaguars or African or Asian leopards, they're commonly known as black panthers. The leopards in this part of Kenya live in particularly deep, shadowy forest, so the black variation has become more common

than usual. In fact, the Mathew's Ranges mountain chain is considered one of the best places in the world to catch sightings of black panthers.

We've spent several days on the trail of the black panther, and I'm fast realising that tracking here on the rocky slopes of the Mathew's is a very different prospect to following clearly scripted trails across the sandy plains around Samburu National Reserve, farther west. Samburu tribal territory stretches across the savannah that lies along the northern flank of Mount Kenya.

Along with their more famous Maasai cousins, the Samburu were traditionally considered Africa's tribal aristocrats and their fearless warriors – permanently bedecked in gaudy finery – are an icon of the Kenyan wilderness. Throughout the seven years that a young man lives with his warrior brotherhood, he will never eat or even take a sip of water without sharing with his fellows. And of course, he would lay down his life for them without a moment's hesitation.

"These men are utterly fearless," wilderness guide Willem Dolleman told me as we drove from his home at Joy's Camp towards my first meeting with the Samburu. "They'd rather die than be seen to run away."

Dolleman spent many years on anti-poaching patrols deep in the bush and has tracked with Samburu warriors all over northern Kenya. As the Landcruiser hauled a cloud of dust across the lizard-baking plains, he told me of an incident when he and a group of warriors

inadvertently found themselves between a lioness and her cubs. The lioness charged, as mothers are sure to do under such circumstances.

"In an instant, the Samburu gathered around me," Dolleman said. "They had their shuka robes wrapped around their forearms, and were shouting with that strange hollow roar they make. Luckily the lioness thought better of the attack. She skidded to a halt just a few metres away and circled around us to her cubs. I've no doubt that any one of those warriors would have been ready to sacrifice an arm just to slow her down."

According to folklore, a boy could not traditionally enter manhood without first killing a lion with his spear. While lion-hunts did go on until recent times (and perhaps still do in some places), few experts believe that the rule was ever rigidly adhered to: it stands to reason that if every warrior had killed a lion, the cats would long since have been exterminated.

Nobody is really sure how many centuries ago the ancient tribe descended from the Nile, clad in their lion-mane headdresses, ostrich feathers and colobus monkey robes. South of Lake Turkana they split into two factions and, while the Maasai continued south, the Samburu remained to follow the rains across these northern deserts. Neither faction ever hunted for meat and both still traditionally look down upon 'less noble' hunting and fishing communities.

Today, the Samburu recognise the need to ensure schooling for their children, and in many cases are adopting a more sedentary lifestyle to remain close to the backcountry school-houses that many see as the tribe's only hope for the future. This region is too arid for farming and the responsibility rests more than ever on the shoulders of the young warriors who must drive the cattle ever farther from their villages.

These tough young men – recognisable as much for mirror and jewellery as they are for sword and spear – are far more than just wilderness dandies. Their fearsome reputation as warriors means that some young men work as security guards and night watchmen in Nairobi and because their roving lifestyle has attuned them perfectly to the wilderness, a few lucky

DESTINATION KENYA

Samburu have found work as guides in Kenya's unparalleled safari industry. I had come to Saruni Samburu Lodge to experience their 'Warrior for a Week' programme and to spend some time training and learning from some of East Africa's most knowledgeable trackers and bush survival experts. The lodge (rated by the 2011 *Good Safari Guide* as one of Africa's best safari properties) has been benefiting the 2,000 Samburu who live on the

Kalama Conservation Area by helping them to earn an income from tourism for the first time in their history.

Mzee Letur (also known as Chris) is a head-guide at Saruni and one of the new generation who seems able to respect the traditions of his people while at the same time finding an honourable way to embrace the new Kenya. Officially, he is a junior elder: his shaved head denotes his status as an elder in the village, yet he chooses to retain his warrior regalia at work as a guide rather than dress in the traditional olive drab of the park service.

First-time visitors on an African safari are often unaware of the great fundamental difference that a top quality guide can make to their overall experience. A knowledgeable and experienced guide is able to track down unforgettable sightings by reading the mysterious small-print that is stamped all over the African wilderness, and by deciphering clues in the interaction of the wildlife and habitat around. The barely audible cough of a nervous kudu could lead to that unforgettable leopard sighting. The sudden appearance of a distant vulture, silhouetted against an African sunset, can point to the hunting grounds of the local pride several kilometres away. Inexperienced guides, however, will often simply cruise around looking for an opportunity to follow a good guide. **Mzee Letur** is known as one of the best guides in Samburu Reserve and it is his lead that many lowly drivers follow.

The reserve is a spectacularly wild landscape that is free of the crowds of Kenya's more popular southern parks. As we drove for hours among craggy hills and across wide-open savannah the colour of a lion's hide, we rarely saw another vehicle. At a dusty luggah above the Ewaso Ng'iro River – the only permanent water in this region – we tracked a lioness leading her three tiny cubs on their first foray out of the birth-den.

In the shadow of a rocky kopje, we watched a hungry leopard prowling with a hopeful eye on cautiously browsing antelope. Several miles up a desiccated riverbed, **Mzee Letur** spotted the spoor of a pack of 13 wild dogs (one of Africa's rarest predator sightings) and we spent an hour watching these beautiful 'painted wolves', - once slaughtered as pests by white farmers and Samburu nomads alike.

Early the next morning, just as the sun was rising out of the dusty haze of the east, **Mzee Letur** and I drove to the little manyatta (village) of Lolkerdeed. The villages are traditionally



built by the women and as they welcomed us, they gathered to perform their traditional dance. Their voices rang out across the mist-shrouded bush in a hauntingly hypnotic rhythm as they sang about warriors and battle, and love and cattle. As they danced, the heavily beaded necklaces bounced around their throats and it was impossible not to notice the similarity of the movement with the swaying dewlap of a plodding bull.

The first thing you notice when you arrive at a Samburu manyatta is

the thick fence of thorny acacia branches that surrounds it. This boma is designed to keep lions and leopards away from the cattle and goats. Spears stand to attention in the doorways of the huts, ready for action should predators come prowling. Samburu traditional life has always revolved around their livestock and nothing – neither predator nor human enemy – is ever allowed to interfere with the precious herds. Because of the harshness of the desert territory here, just a few miles north of the equator, many Samburu also herd goats, sheep and camels, but the real love of their lives remains their cattle and most Samburu men can recite the name of every cow in their herd. According to tribal folklore, all the cattle in the world once belonged to the Samburu but they were systematically stolen over the centuries by other tribes.

During colonial times, Samburu territory was off-limits to anyone but government officials, but law here was always hard to implement because of the Samburu's belief that they were not cattle-rustling but simply claiming back what had originally been theirs. Although this region is still often known by the old name of Northern Frontier District, it is now a peaceful area, as famous for its hospitable people as it is for its unforgiving landscapes and spectacular wildlife.

In the centre of the village, another inner acacia boma serves effectively as the local parliament. Here, the elders - men who have served their seven years as a warrior and seven more as a junior elder - sit and discuss the problems of the village. These days the problems they discuss often relate to what many fear as an approaching end of their way of life.

It is sustainable tourism initiatives like the one at Saruni Samburu and others all over Kenya that could be the only solution to the problem of how young Samburu like **Mzee Letur** and ace leopard tracker Loretu will be able to pass on the ancient skills of their tribe. And the important thing is that the old ways should be passed on not only to privileged tourists, but also to future generations of Africa's traditional aristocrats. ☘

Saruni Samburu (www.saruni.com) offers a four-day Samburu Reserve Luxury safari – including internal flights from Jomo Kenyatta International Airport, from \$2,305 per person. Accommodation is on an all-inclusive basis in one of Saruni Samburu's six wonderfully luxurious villas, and activities include two game drives daily and guided bush walks.