

Focus on the joy in Kenya

MELODY WREN
SPECIAL TO THE CJN

Lewya takes long strides, his beads glimmering in the hot sun as I scurry to catch up with him. The traditionally dressed Samburu guide greeted me in Swahili “*Jambo* (hello), my name is Lewya, think of Hallelujah,” he said with an enormous grin.

He met our small plane after a brief 45-minute flight crossing the equator, the landing a smooth one on the short Muridjo airstrip at Ol Malo Conservancy in Kenya.

Dry smoky air, pounding hooves and the constant snorting of wildebeests welcomed us as we loaded our gear into the waiting safari jeep and drove on rough pothole-filled gravel roads (our driver referred to the journey as the “Kenyan massage”) towards our lodge for the next couple of days.

I admit I had been very hesitant about the safety of going to Kenya, but while there, the general vibe I got from the locals was one of genuine warmth. I felt secure at all times and very peaceful everywhere I stayed.

Once I got to Nairobi at the end of the safari portion of my trip, security was visibly tight at hotels, museums and shopping malls, which initially rattled me, then felt reassuring.

The small bits of Kenya I saw were beautiful, the people authentic and the abundant wildlife sightings incredible. What I didn’t expect was the emotional connection to the land and the people that emphasized the connection we all have to Africa. Kenya has a magic that deserves a special kind of trip. I thought I had seen a lot of the world but Kenya opened up my eyes and my heart.

As I climbed up into the jeep, Lewya urged that I go “upstairs” and motioned to another bench set higher up on the roof level to catch get a bird’s-eye view of everything on our drive to Ol Malo lodge.

Ol Malo Lodge is a privately owned game sanctuary on the banks of the Ewaso Nyiro River in Kenya’s wild and beautiful North Eastern Province – 5,000 acres of spectacular bush country overlooked by Mount Kenya and teeming with elusive antelope. Set on a rock escarpment on the edge of the Laikipia Plateau, it borders the tribal heartlands of the nomadic Samburu people.



The Francombe family and their Samburu neighbours have created a home for themselves and a dream destination for a privileged few who seek a glimpse into the true heart of Africa. Ol Malo is part of a Samburu conservation park and part of the elephant migration route. Laikipia is Kenya’s most extensive wildlife haven with the much talked about “big five” – elephants, buffaloes, lions, rhinos and leopards. Half of all endangered black rhinos are found in Laikipia, which also supports as many as 250 lions – a significant number of the estimated 2,000 remaining in Kenya. I managed to see four of the big five, missing only the sighting of a rhino.

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A Samburu woman beading, above and a grazing giraffe. MELODY WREN PHOTOS

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People are an integral part of experience

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Unusual geography makes Laikipia distinct from the rest of Kenya. Its south east border is marked by Mt. Kenya, its west demarcated by one of the world's national wonders – the 6,000-kilometre long Great Rift Valley running from Lebanon's Bekka Valley to Mozambique slowly splitting the African plate in two.

My spacious stone cottage was filled with chunky *Flintstones*-like furniture, stone-lined showers, and stone walkways, with a view of the conservancy and ever-changing wildlife. One afternoon, I relished the idea of a brief 20-minute nap and heard a thudding followed by frantic scrambling of animals on the thatched roof of my cottage. I sat up, grabbing my camera to see a family of baboons perched in a tree peering through the window at me. The next morning, while in the shower, I heard a persistent smacking noise. A bird with an enormous bright orange curved beak was repeatedly smashing his beak into the window while his mate sat on the tree looking at him as if he was completely mad. Our guide, Lewya, called them "banana birds" and said they smack into the window to wake people up.

One afternoon we were taken up in a tiny helicopter sweeping over mountains that stand over the enormously long winding Ewaso Nyro river. We flew towards enormous rocks perched at the top of a hill. Andrew, the lodge owner's son, suggested we take a closer look, and startled all of us by landing on the frighteningly narrow top rock so we could walk around. As the helicopter dropped off the

edge, my heart plummeted along with it as we were literally falling off the edge of the cliff. It was so exhilarating, I wanted to do it again.

We landed back on the conservancy as the sun was setting, the air cooler, and a clearing was set up for a "sun-downer." Red Samburu blankets covered rocks and logs to sit on while we nibbled on snacks and enjoyed cold drinks. Moments later while I was still processing the helicopter experience, Andrew insisted I hop on a camel while the sun was setting. Giggling like a schoolgirl at the rocky ride, I was led around by a Samburu guide. Without any lights, after stumbling around in the midnight darkness, we located it and drove into the night for yet another incredible meal.

The next day, as we drove through the plains, animals were pointed out and we stopped frequently to take photos of impalas, zebras, elephants and their young, ostriches, and the awe inspiring giraffes, their sizes continued to startle me no matter how many I saw. One day we came across a grouping of nine reticulated giraffes, the only type in this area, one dark and one light, and we sat in our jeep and watched them as their necks stretched to eat leaves, then slowly and elegantly clomped from one spot to another, their dazzlingly beautiful eyes staring. By the river one day, we spotted herds of hippos and their babies swimming, an enormous crocodile laying nearby, and as we sat watching, a leopard darted past.

People are an integral part of the Laikipian-Kenyan experience. Warm and friendly, with a wry sense of humour, they

are easy to chat to and happy for you to learn everyday bits of their Swahili such as *Sopa Pi* (very nice to meet you, the *Pi* is emphasized as you shake hands). *Lala Salama* (good night). *Karibu* is "you are welcome," and *Asante* is "thank you."

Kenyan people are tribal with a total of 44 tribes, Samburu and Masai being the major ones. Swahili is the national language brought in as a trading language, and they are all taught English in school. Samburu speak a similar language to Masai. The Samburu moved from North Kenya to the Laikipia Plateau and the Masai moved south because of cattle disease. Samburu wear greens and Masai traditionally wear reds and both wear their swords in different ways. Samburu women learn how to bead at a very young age. All women wear beading, and the different colours beads and the places they wear them tell a lot about their lives, such as how many children, grandchildren, and whether they are married.

I was sad to leave the Samburu area and chatted to Lewya as he loaded the jeep to take us back to the runway. I admired one of his many beaded bracelets, which he slid off and gave to me to wear. "Asante," I said. He answered "Karibu." ■




How to get there: KLM to Amsterdam, Amsterdam to Nairobi

Just the facts: A visitors visa is required and can be obtained at Nairobi airport for \$50 US. (cash only). Carry Kenyan shillings (for the best deals when bartering) or U.S. dollars

Ol Malo Lodge; www.olmalo.com, info@olmalo.com

Safari company: Maniago, www.maniagosafaris.com, info@maniagosafaris.com

Additional information: check the season you are going. I went in late June and was not prepared for the extremely chilly evenings. On safari, the red dust gets everywhere, and the dryness gave me frequent nosebleeds, which could have been rectified if I had a tube of Vaseline with me. I always carry a tiny flashlight when I travel and used it frequently on this trip to walk from my tent or cottage to the main lodge for meals. Packages of travel wipes were invaluable to get the red dust off me repeatedly during the day.


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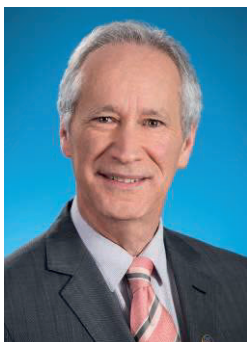
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