

the Magic of



Reticulated giraffe, Lewa Wilderness Conservancy



Samburu warrior



Sabuk Lodge, Laikipia



Loisaba Starbeds



Lion cubs



Laikipia

Alexandra Matts falls under the special spell of Kenya's Laikipia Plateau.

“Once you've felt African soil under your feet, you'll always long to return.” I'd heard it said a thousand times, but when I went to Kenya I found it was true. On my first visit I was enthralled by the broad savannah of the Masai Mara and the majestic elephants of Amboseli, and quickly realised I'd have to come back.

The Laikipia plateau, an area in the centre of Kenya that is becoming a favourite with returning visitors, is not a national park or government-protected reserve. Rather, the people of this wild and beautiful area - Maasai and Kikuyu, European and Samburu - have joined together to protect the wildlife and land that they live on. Instead of flying between camps, tucked away in the depths of the remote bush, visitors are welcomed into the communities, and in many cases the homes, of those who live in Laikipia.

Arriving in Laikipia, your plane is met by a sturdy four-wheel drive, and a short game drive back to your lodge or camp quickly reveals the mouthwatering possibilities outside the vehicle. Laikipia is a place to walk in the African wilderness, trek with camels from lodge to lodge, and ride through the African bush on horseback. This is the place to see Kenya through the eyes of those who live there.

The Lewa Wildlife conservancy is the home of the Craig family, and Will and Emma are the charming hosts of Lewa Wilderness Trails. Formerly a cattle ranch, the conservancy is now celebrated for its work in protecting rare white and black rhinos. There's a wonderful variety of things to do here, including day and night game drives, walks and camel treks. Worth a particular mention is the riding at Lewa. Exploring on horseback, it's

possible to get close enough to spot oxpeckers searching for morsels on the backs of rhinos, and canter alongside giraffes as they head across the rolling downs. Watching misty sunrises over the hills and chatting to Samburu warriors over dinner, it's easy to imagine Karen Blixen sitting here alongside you.

Bordering Lewa is the Il Ngwesi group ranch. Built by the Laikipiak Maasai in 1996, Il Ngwesi lodge supports over 600 families from the local community. In return, visitors are shown the area, often by the same Maasai who built the lodge. To see larger animals like elephant and giraffe it's possible to do game drives across the ranch, but the lodge really encourages guests to experience the sights and sounds of the wilderness on foot with a Maasai guide who will teach you how to read the signs of the bush. Placing a hand down next to a giant paw print, you can feel the warmth of the African soil beneath your fingers. Brightly coloured birds flit amongst the bushes and on a breezy day you'll hear the sound of cow bells ringing from the manyattas.

Heading northwest of Il Ngwesi, another community-run project offers a magical sleeping experience. The Koiya and Kiboko starbeds are built on simple platforms deep in the Laikipia bush, and as dusk descends four-poster beds are rolled out underneath the darkening skies and a mosquito net is all that falls between the bed and the stars. At night you'll rarely hear a sound beyond your Maasai hosts stoking the fire, and the occasional footfall of an elephant in the bush. The ultimate way to experience the starbeds is to trek between Koiya and Kiboko on camels, the traditional means of transport in this arid area. Along the way your guides will



teach you the uses of each plant and bush, and tell you tales of the animals and birds. Often you stop beside the river to find a shady spot, to fish, to snooze, and to shelter from the midday sun.

Lewa, Il Ngwesi and the starbeds are just three amongst many tantalising options on the Laikipia Plateau. For those who have Africa in their soul, Laikipia offers endless possibilities for adventure and immersion into the bush; I will definitely be returning, and I cannot recommend it any more highly than that.

Alexandra Matts
Kenya Specialist

FACT FILE

A two week trip to Kenya, including a week in Laikipia and a week at the coast costs from approximately £3,700 per person. Please contact Alexandra for details on 01993 838 512.

