



SAFARI STYLE

Wildlife meets the good life in a remote corner of one of Kenya's most majestic national parks **BY PAUL FERRISS • PHOTOS BY PATRICK KING**

There's nothing like the sound of a hippo plowing through the underbrush and crashing into a pond at 2 a.m. to remind you that you're not at home anymore.

Home was in fact eight time zones and more than 12,000 km away. Until that moment, the closest I had come to encountering wildlife in the wee hours of the morning was when raccoons knocked over my recycling bin. Here in Kenya, inside Tsavo West National Park, creatures both great and small are free to roam, roar and go for a post-midnight dip unafraid of, and nearly untouched by, human contact. We—myself and photographers Patrick King and Tom Martin—had come to Kenya looking for an authentic African experience. Clearly, it didn't take long to find.

My first glimpse of the African savannah came as our flight to Tsavo West took off from Nairobi's Wilson Airport. The land is flat for miles, punctuated by red-brown soil, patches of scrub grass and dense green bush (which I would later find out held multiple varieties of acacia trees). As we climbed, the clouds opened directly in front of us to reveal the peaks of Mount Kilimanjaro, one still partially covered in snow in late May, far in the distance.

When we landed at the Finch Hattons lodge (see "Who was Finch Hatton?" on page 32), we were greeted by Thomas N. Ole Sululu, a Maasai warrior who had been born in a village about 12 km away. Over the next few days, Thomas would become our driver, safari guide and wildlife expert.

Of course, wildlife is plentiful in Tsavo West. I had hoped to see a lion up close and, if possible, an elephant. Considering we were only going to be at Tsavo for three days, those seemed like pretty modest goals. Surely, lions and elephants would be plentiful in a

massive, protected, government-run game reserve, wouldn't they? As we set out on our first game drive from Finch Hattons that afternoon, with Thomas at the wheel of our Toyota Land Cruiser, he tempered my expectations by reminding us that a game drive is, well, a bit like a game. "Sometimes you'll see everything you want, sometimes you won't."

Almost immediately after clearing the gates of Finch Hattons, we saw baboons and zebras gathered near a watering hole. Some baboons were more curious than others and would sit and stare at us as our truck stopped on the road next to them. Others would make a beeline up a tree or scoot across the dirt and observe us from afar. Zebras, on the other hand, would freeze when we got close to them, gaze at us and, just at the moment when we thought they were comfortable in our presence, bolt from the road and run until they could look back at us from a safe distance. Next we encountered giraffes ambling through the forest and oryx rambling through the bush. Not bad for our first trip into the wilds of Africa. But no lions or elephants. Yet.

We returned to the lodge for lunch, plotting our next foray into the park. Based on the image of British adventurer Denys Finch Hatton (he was portrayed by Robert Redford in the film *Out of Africa*), Finch Hattons combines luxury accommodations with outdoor camping, African-style. A lunch of green salad, Nile perch, strawberry mousse and strong Kenyan coffee was served on a terrace overlooking a freshwater pond frequented by hippos, crocodiles and egrets hoping for a free ride on a hippo's back. Lunch conversations were punctuated by the snorts and grunts of the hippos as they lounged in the pool.

From our table, I could also see some vervet monkeys bouncing on the deck chairs outside my tent. They've paid particularly close attention to my tent almost from the moment I arrived. Jonathan Mutisya, the manager at >>



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WHO WAS FINCH HATTON?

Denys Finch Hatton was a British adventurer, safari guide and hunter who spent much of his adult life in Kenya, beginning in 1911. He liked to live in style and was the inspiration for the 1992 development of the Finch Hattons lodge.

Located in a remote corner of Tsavo West National Park, Finch Hattons has 33 tented cabins that combine the luxuries of a five-star hotel room with outdoor camping—you can see vervet monkeys, hear the call of hadeda ibis and watch crocodiles and hippos lounge in the pond.

"It's like [Finch Hatton's] house in the bush," says manager Jonathan Mutisya, "with all the comforts of home."

Guests live as well as Finch Hatton did, enjoying seven-course dinners that can include French onion soup, grapefruit sorbet, braised lamb and Black Forest cake.

Mutisya says changes are afoot for Finch Hattons as it works to keep up with the shifting tastes of the luxury market. Similar camps have popped up since it opened, catering to people looking for a true Kenyan experience. But, says Mutisya, regardless of any changes, Finch Hattons will continue to offer luxury with a taste of the wilderness.



Finch Hattons, thought the previous guests might have fed them, a definite no-no. The monkeys are the main reason Finch Hattons only offers room service by special request. Even coffee or tea service is tricky—monkeys will happily sample any leftover drinks and then, just as happily, smash whatever cups or glasses remain.

By the time the 35 C heat began to subside, we decided to head out again, looking for lions. As we moved farther into the park, "fever" trees (a variety of acacia tree that early colonialists mistakenly believed caused malaria) abound, their yellow bark easily standing out from the landscape. A giant baobab tree stood like a sentinel with Mount Kilimanjaro as a backdrop. Thomas knows this terrain well and steered us off the road and through the bush, following the noise of a distant commotion. We passed eland (a member of the antelope family), and dik-dik

(also an antelope, about the size of a small dog) darted across the path in front of us. When we reached a spot next to a riverbed, we saw two male lions standing in a small clearing. Thomas killed the engine, whispering to us that there were probably females up ahead, stalking some prey. He carries the scars from a lion attack, so he knew to approach them with caution. The males noticed us but were unconcerned with the attention, despite the fact that we were in a truck just a few metres away. One laid down in the dirt while the other walked on, seemingly trying to shake us. We followed only to see six females ahead, all resting in the grass, watching us. If they were stalking prey, they're now waiting for a better opportunity. We drove back to Finch Hattons as the sun set, and Thomas reminded us how lucky we were to have seen so many lions together.

TRAVEL FEATURE

We enjoyed a seven-course dinner and the next morning ventured into Tsavo West again, this time for a short visit to Thomas' village. There, villagers greeted us with a song and gave us a tour of their huts, made from tree limbs with roofs and walls covered in mud and cow dung. As we drove across the park, the hunt was on for elephants. Then, as we approached Finch Hattons, there they stood: two bull elephants just off the road, pulling limbs and bark off some fever trees, their hides covered in the distinct red-brown soil of Tsavo. We approached quietly to get a closer look. They paused briefly, then continued eating. Other than the sound of crunching bark, the forest was remarkably quiet. After all our pictures had been taken, we headed to the lodge.

◀ Tsavo West National Park is home to vervet monkeys and zebras; a Maasai woman lives in a village a short distance from Finch Hattons, which offers guests fine dining and accommodations in outdoor tented cabins

I tallied up the animals we had seen, pleased that the two at the top of the list were spotted so easily. Just then we found out that two more elephants had walked onto the Finch Hattons property, at the far edge of the pond. We raced over and watched from the deck of a tent as they made their way to the water for a drink, then moved back through the thick underbrush on their way into the park.

We returned to our lunch, marvelling at how close we had been able to get to lions and elephants during our safaris. In case we needed a reminder, the hippos ran through their repertoire of noises, making sure our list was complete. **CAA**



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