

The conservation message is loud and clear as you come face to face with some of Kenya's iconic wildlife

WORDS ANGELA MCKEAN

TRAVEL

BLACK or white?" Joseph tested how much attention we had been paying. We had seen a white rhino first, extremely close up too, casually grazing while we excitedly took pictures. That's the first clue. Black rhino are much more nervous and aggressive, and you don't want to get close. Second clue, the shape of its back. Finally, look at the mouth. It turns out 'white' was coined by happy accident many years ago, when the Afrikaans word for 'wide' was mistaken and the name stuck; in contrast, the black rhino bears more of a beak-like lip.

So with colour no clue, we steadily approached another of Kenya's most iconic wildlife, and as it treated our arrival calmly, we reasoned correctly it was white and enjoyed another few minutes of wonder as a golden light slowly fell across the savannah. Sadly the few rhino we were lucky enough to see are part of a declining population - though, fortunately, there are many battling to save them.

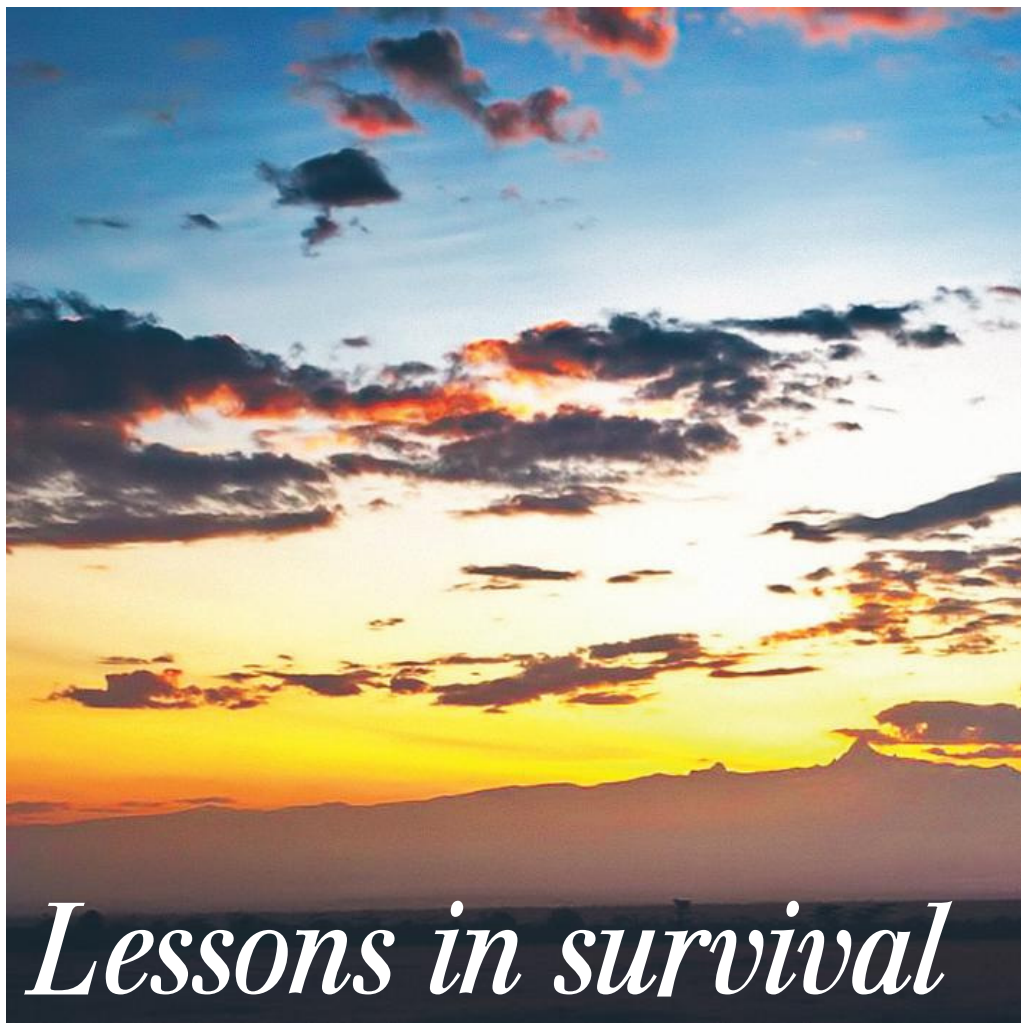
Our trip was organised from Edinburgh by Farside Africa, whose passionate support for conservation efforts enabled us to get right to the heart of, and contribute to, projects in Kenya. First stop was Lewa House, part of Lewa Wildlife Conservancy, a private reserve a short hop by turbo-prop north of Nairobi. Joseph, our guide, met us at the airstrip and needlessly explained that we would see much more than rhino; no more than 100 metres either side of the runway gathered zebra, a couple of giraffe and an ostrich.

At the forefront of rhino conservation in Kenya, Lewa currently has 71 black and 56 white rhino, more than ten per cent of Kenya's total rhino population - counted daily by a team of rangers stationed throughout the reserve. Huge resources have been channelled into their protection, but unfortunately the poachers still occasionally win the day, their reward guaranteed by a buoyant Asian market where the price of black rhino horn exceeds that of gold, its medicinal powers believed to be strong. Tragically the horn is no different to a human fingernail - it would grow back, but the animals usually perish for this 'treasure'.

All visitors to Lewa are encouraged to see and learn about the projects, so we snapped up the chance to talk to the security team. We were treated to a demonstration: from the scent of a single footprint, an English bloodhound expertly tracked a 'poacher' through the scrub, a training exercise that has helped the dog-team make hundreds of arrests, from petty criminals to armed poachers. The nearby communities appreciate this extra resource; the symbiotic relationship between conservancy and its surroundings also provides development in health and education, in return for a first-line of defence against poachers.

Lewa House itself is perched on a hill, secluded cottages with dramatic vistas across the rolling landscape: mighty elephants trundling along the horizon, a zebra wandering through your garden. Guests gather for lunch by the pool or dinner in the house, where Calum and Sophie welcome guests like extended family.

Sophie's family are the heart of Lewa, her grandparents the first to embrace conservation



Lessons in survival

on their farmland. After a decade in Scotland, she felt Africa calling and returned with husband Calum, a zoologist with many years working in African tourism. Dinner table conversation offers a rich resource of Kenyan history and wildlife.

They have steadily built a sumptuous base for exploring at Lewa House: alfresco baths to enjoy under the stars are just one example. And Lewa certainly offers the opportunity to explore. Not as dense in wildlife as the famous Masai Mara, but far less populated with tourists, so sightings are enjoyed in solitude. We saw more than we could have hoped: graceful reticulated giraffe, endangered Grevy's zebra, large families of elephant, no less than four species of eagle, and much, much more. And of course the rhino.

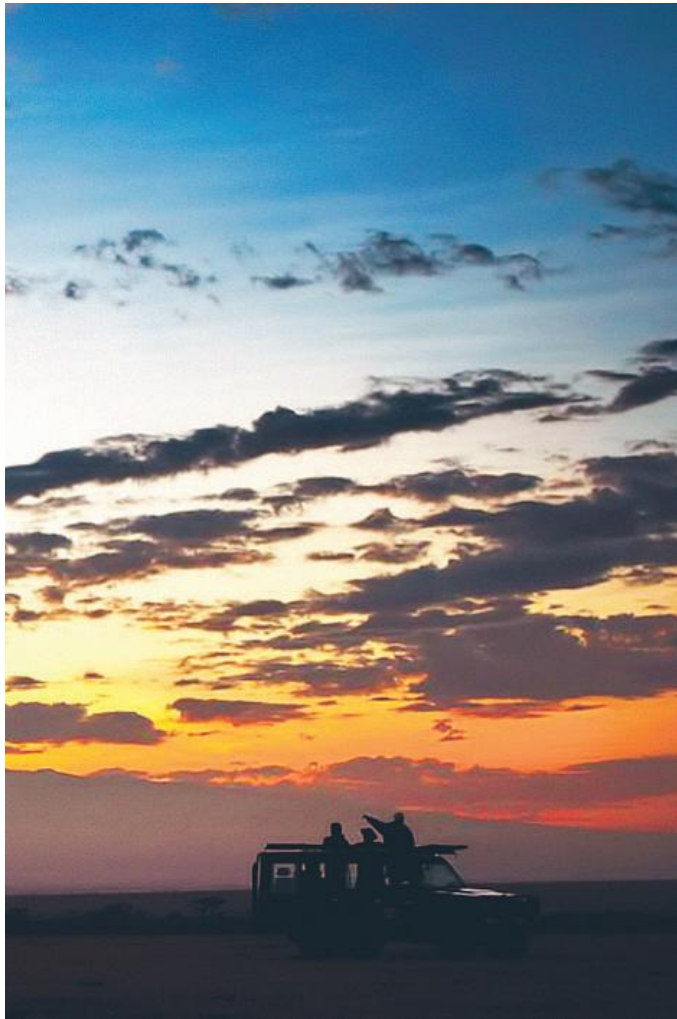
Alas, we were not to see a big cat as the grass was high after the rains, and although Joseph did his best, following every sign he could, they proved elusive. As the sun dipped behind the hills at the end of each fantastic day, he simply extended the moment and presented us with blankets and wine to enjoy the serenity of the wilderness and enthralling conversation about all things Kenyan and cultural.

The second half of our safari was a couple of hours' drive away, in Laikipia, at Ol Pejeta Conservancy, another private reserve dedicated to the protection of rhino and the development of local communities. While Lewa relies heavily on donors, Ol Pejeta is striving to create a sustainable project and, together with income from tourism, uses innovative ventures in combining livestock and arable with wildlife.

We met livestock manager Giles Pettijohn, who passionately extolled its virtues, not only for diversifying income, but demonstrating that grazing cattle also regenerate grasslands and give back to the wildlife. He explained how



SAFARI SETTING The wide plains of Laikipia are host to many of Kenya's wild animals, including the rhino, and camps where creature comforts come first



the model is proving so successful that they are hoping to extend it to other reserves. Ol Pejeta has the added responsibility of protecting four of only seven remaining northern white rhino worldwide. They are in an enclosed reserve with added security, their horns trimmed to be less enticing to poachers, and it is hoped a recent mating will prove successful.

We were hosted at Kicheche Camp by Andy and Sonja, who greeted us with lunch by their watering hole. This proved to be a treat in every way as delicious food and warm conversation was only interrupted by a herd of elephants casually wandering by for a drink. By 'camp' you may read 'canvas', but the comparison with traditional camping ends there; the couple have designed a cosy retreat with all creature comforts and personal touches. The only reminder we were in a tent came from our obvious proximity to a variety of animal calls that pierced the night.

The landscape at Ol Pejeta is drier and flatter than at Lewa, and perhaps we saw more wildlife as a result on the wide plains. Swathes of warthog were an obvious addition, along with many jackal and a solitary hyena.

Oh, and we ticked the big cat box too. Both by day and by night drive, we encountered lion, witnessing what incredible beasts they are as they sauntered majestically through their kingdom. Somewhat lazily, they gave chase to some baby warthog and resting ostriches, and came away without a catch, but our immediate proximity to each event was exhilarating.

So that was us satisfied - four of the 'big five' animals ticked off and with only the leopard left on the list, we concluded that there was at least one major reason to return. And a few smaller ones besides; not least some fascinating people, some worthy projects and some unforgettable experiences. ■

SCOTLANDonSUNDAY May 12, 2013

FACT FILE

Edinburgh-based Farside Africa (0131-315 2464, www.farsideafrica.com) specialises in tailor-made safaris and holidays. Three nights at Lewa House and four nights at Kicheche on a fully inclusive basis, including internal flights and transfers, starts at £2,758 per person. International return flights cost from £550 per person. Safari Link (www.flysafarilink.com) operates daily flights to numerous destinations across Kenya.

DO NOT DISTURB HARTWELL HOUSE HOTEL, BUCKINGHAMSHIRE



ONE of three hotels owned by the National Trust, Hartwell House, in the Vale of Aylesbury, was first mentioned in the Domesday Book as belonging to a natural son of William the Conqueror. But the stunning building that stands there now, with its Jacobean and Georgian aspects, dates from the early 17th century.

Its setting in 90 acres of garden and parkland were designed in the style of Capability Brown, there is a ruined private church, a lake, an equestrian statue of Frederick, Prince of Wales, a Great Hall that is a masterpiece of English baroque design, and more grandeur than you can shake a stick at.

Recent visitors have included Bill Clinton and the Emperor and Empress of Japan, but its most famous resident was the exiled King Louis XVIII of France, whose queen was said not to enjoy Hartwell, finding the Jacobean carved figures on the staircase menacing, and who was said to be "bad-tempered and drunk most of the time". I couldn't possibly comment. ■

WINING AND DINING The elegant yellow dining room has elegant menus to match, and our dinner featured Isle of Lewis smoked salmon, breast of wood pigeon with smoked Valrhona chocolate sauce, followed by loin of



venison, local lamb cutlet with braised shoulder and crispy sweetbreads, and nougat parfait with ginger and lemon foam. And, of course, the wine list is extensive. Breakfast is suitably substantial, but the best part of Hartwell House for me was not the glorious interiors in which to have a drink and consider the menus, but the terrace looking up the south lawn, for afternoon tea, and coffee.

ROOM SERVICE The smallest rooms are on the second floor, but they are still large, and there is the benefit of a sheltered roof terrace, once used by the French émigrés for growing vegetables and keeping chickens and rabbits, but now a sunny spot where guests can relax, while the rooms and suites on the first floor are simply huge. The Queen's bedroom - bad-tempered and drunk, remember - is double aspect with a large bay, and what feels like acres of carpet. There are also rooms in the 18th-century coach house, with access to the spa and conference centre, all decorated in traditional country house style.

WORTH GETTING OUT OF BED FOR The spa is housed in a building modelled on an orangery and there is a good-sized swimming pool, steam room, saunas, gymnasium and treatment rooms, plus a cafe. In the grounds there are two all-weather tennis courts and a croquet lawn, and beyond Hartwell there are Blenheim Palace, Waddesdon Manor and, of course, Aylesbury and Oxford to explore.

BUDGET OR BOUTIQUE Neither. There are 30 rooms in the main house, with rates for a double room from £215 a night.

LITTLE EXTRAS Crabtree & Evelyn toiletries for a taste of tradition and free wi-fi for the modern traveller

GUEST BOOK COMMENTS The setting and house are unique, you benefit the National Trust by staying here, and it is conveniently less than an hour from Heathrow.

VALERIE JAMES

Hartwell House Hotel, Oxford Road, Near Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire (01296 747444, www.hartwell-house.com)