Beyond the big five: a new safari in Kenya

On the Laikipian plateau, Enasoit safari camp is pioneering a new model for the wilderness experience, enlisting great minds – from policymakers to rock-art experts – to forge a deeper understanding of contemporary Africa. Lucia van der Post has a first look

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We'll be waiting for you up the Parsaloi lugga near the gorge, with a few camels and some lunch – you can't miss us," comes the message, and I can't remember when I was last so excited about a lunch date. We have a rendezvous with Helen Douglas-Dufresne, her partner Pete Ilsley, a few of her 70-odd camels and her coterie of Samburu warriors, way up in northern Kenya, in between

the Matthews and Ndoto mountains. We are flying in by helicopter from our base, the Enasoit ranch in Laikipia, to one of the most awesomely beautiful places on earth, to talk to Moses Lesoloyia, a university-educated Samburu who has chosen to leave the bright lights of Nairobi to spend his life among his own people.

We're here because Ina Astrup, who comes from a distinguished Norwegian family and has recently taken over the running of private game reserve Enasoit, has devised a new kind of safari – one for those who have seen and done the "big five", who have been excited by it all, but who long to dig a little deeper, to know more and understand better the Africa that has wound its way into their hearts. She calls it the Thinking Man's Safari.

If you've been blessed, as I have been, and had the chance to wander round much of east and southern Africa, then you'll know that just as memorable as the encounters with lions and buffalo, with rhinos and rare birds, are the ones with the extraordinary, often eccentric characters you run into around the campfires in private homes and safari lodges: the poets and romantics, the rangers and adventurers, the researchers and zoologists, the tribal leaders and their warriors. These are the people who provide context to the ever-changing drama of Africa – its wildlife and its peoples – and bring its history to life. It's always struck me as sad that many of those who pay thousands and thousands for trips to Africa never get to meet them, instead spending most of their time with their own family or friends and a (no doubt very well-informed) guide in a 4x4. While they may well learn a lot about the natural world and probably something about conservation, they seldom get a chance to explore deeper.

Astrup and her family have had a long history in Africa, so she and the Enasoit team have connections to Kenyans in many different circles, from wildlife conservation to government and business. Astrup's notion is to offer guests the opportunity to engage with Kenya-based experts,

all the while enjoying the wilderness around them. It's what the Thinking Man's Safari is all about – and we're here as the very first guinea pigs.

Since I'm fascinated by indigenous cultures, we've come to talk to Moses Lesoloyia about his people, their cultural heritage and how he sees their future. I'm keen to know more about the problems they face and to what extent they want to move into the mainstream modern world. These days Lesoloyia manages the Milgis Trust in Samburuland, which was set up by Douglas-Dufresne and Ilsley primarily to stop the degradation of the environment and encourage the return of elephants to the area from which they had almost completely disappeared due to poaching in the 1970s and 1980s. The trust employs 31 rangers and 33 informers to guard the wildlife, and is also home to a school, a dispensary and various water projects. The idea is to protect wildlife, habitat and the pastoral way of life, while increasing the people's access to education and raising their awareness of conservation issues, causes in which Lesoloyia passionately believes. After graduating from university, he decided Nairobi wasn't for him. "Those of our people who go to Nairobi usually come back in very bad shape," he says. He sees many positive things in Samburu culture: "Traditional medicines, for instance, can be more effective than western medicines for anything that isn't a trauma or a critical illness. And our culture of hospitality means that you can cross the entire country without having to spend a dollar – you will be looked after, fed and given somewhere to sleep."

The Samburu people have shared their lands with elephants for generations. But when I was up here three years ago, we saw just three elephants in five days. Today, in the nearby luggas (dry river beds), they are gathering in their hundreds doing what elephants are supposed to do – which is to say, breeding happily, feeding their way through the thick forest, creating pathways that allow the locals to access the high pastures with their livestock, and producing the dung every Samburu household needs for fires. We spend some happy hours mulling over all these

things before we leave Lesoloyia up on El Kanto, the hill given to Douglas-Dufresne by the Samburu people and from where Lesoloyia now manages the day-to-day running of the Milgis Trust.

Back at Enasoit, we spend lunchtime enjoying some remarkably frank talk from John Ngumi, an investment banker who is involved in many enterprising ventures, most particularly presiding over the Konza Technopolis Development Authority, Kenya's so-called Silicon Valley project, and seems to know everybody in both the political and the financial worlds. Talking to a banker who appears to have successfully circumvented the many minefields of doing business in the country's challenging circumstances is fascinating. For his part, Ngumi can't think of a more exciting place to live than Kenya at the moment – "it's a world of extreme possibilities, a grand experiment that could easily go wrong. We live in quite a dangerous time, but if we get it right, it could be spectacular. We have a population that mostly speaks English, that is outward-looking, that believes in education and has very high aspirations. But first and foremost we need to get proper governance; we need to get rid of the corruption that is in the DNA of the political system."

Chris Foot is the son of a British colonial officer. His father fell in love with Kenya and its people and became one of the first Kenyan citizens at independence, while his mother was a businesswoman from a prominent Kalenjin family. He's on the board of Enasoit and is helping Astrup to make it a singular destination. Over a lunch of smoked salmon and salads one day he gives us a skilful summary of the convoluted history of Laikipia and the problems it faces.

On another day, Dr Max Graham, a conservation scientist who's been based in northern Kenya since 2000, flies in to talk elephant matters. He brings with him *Evening Standard* co-owners Alexander and Evgeny Lebedev, and Amol Rajan, the editor of *The Independent*, who, through their newspapers, have been sponsoring his charity Space for Giants. Graham tells us that

Laikipia once had very few elephants and that there are still people who remember when more began arriving in the area. They came fleeing the massive rise in poaching in the north in the 1970s and 1980s and found safety on the well-protected and watered private ranches in Laikipia. They now form one of east Africa's largest single populations, numbering over 6,000. But all is not well in what looks like Eden. Up to 100 elephants are killed every single day across the continent. In Tanzania's Selous Game Reserve alone, a population of 55,000 in 2007 was down to 13,000 last year. According to Graham, these great giants of the forest and the savannah, which have been around for 2m years, could, at current poaching rates, be extinct from the wild within many people's lifetimes. He tells me a number of things I never knew – for example, that elephants never stop growing, so size is very much related to age – and outlines some of the ways he and his colleagues are going about resolving human-elephant conflict and implementing anti-poaching measures.

Another afternoon is spent in the company of David Coulson, a leading expert on African rock art and a longstanding Astrup-family friend. Rock art is widespread across Africa; it represents the continent's history and opens a window onto thousands of years of culture and identity. We fly up into remote parts of Samburuland to the north, where he shows us a well-preserved rock gong – almost always made for spiritual or ceremonial reasons – covered in cup-like handmade indentations; when it's struck, the sound echoes round the lonely outcrop. After another half-hour flight, we visit a cave where Coulson shows us a combination of what you might call "rock art" (very old) and graffiti (very new) – a fascinating insight into how the impulse to adorn walls has survived down the centuries.

It was an intensive and gratifying tutorial on the intricacies of many of Africa's issues, and yet there was so much more that we could have done and learnt. There were still many more tribal challenges to be looked into, as well as Lake Turkana to explore – and some days spent walking in the Milgis area accompanied by Douglas-Dufresne's team of Samburu guides and a camel

caravan would have been wonderful. It must be stressed that the Thinking Man's Safari is entirely bespoke: you can choose your subject from a list of Kenya-related topics, including wildlife and conservation, culture and history, politics and current affairs, and the private sector and social enterprise. You can't book it on the spur of the moment, however, as these are world-class experts – and therefore busy people – who Astrup and her team plan to bring to the table.

But if your notion of happiness is to do nothing more than loll in comfort, contemplating the animals as they come down to the watering hole to drink, Enasoit itself is a lovely place to do just that. A ranch bordered by the Lolldaiga hills not far from Mount Kenya, it can take up to 16 guests in double or twin tent-cottages and has a mess tent and, a short drive away, a pool house. Though small (some 4,500 acres), the camp sits within a natural game-rich corridor. In our first 24 hours we tracked down a pride of some seven or eight lions and a pack of about 14 wild dogs, and these were quite apart from the family groups of elephants wandering over the ranch and the continuous parade of zebras, buffalo, Grant's gazelles and giraffes. The helicopter is on hand for excursions of almost every kind. One morning we flew up to the cool lakes near the top of Mount Kenya; the fishing enthusiasts among us reeled in some trout and we breakfasted beside the clear blue water. Some days we flew to picnic sites on top of other high mountains, and took our coffee breaks in deep gorges, out-of-the-way caves or simply awesome open landscapes.

Enasoit is doing something new, with its offering of the experts, the helicopter and the natural wonders that surround it. The learning possibilities, the excursions and the unforgettable moments to be had are myriad. Just be sure to plan it all well in advance.

> Lucia van der Post was a guest of Enasoit (www.enasoit.com) and Africa Travel (020-7529 8550; www.africatravel.co.uk). Africa Travel can arrange a five-night bespoke Thinking Man's Safari at Enasoit from £8,900 per person, based on eight people travelling, including international flights to Nairobi,

onward private-aircraft transfers, two visiting expert speakers, daily helicopter safaris, guided game drives and walks, horse riding, massages, meals, drinks and conservation fees. A classic five-night Enasoit safari costs from £3,250 per person.