

THE SCOTSMAN

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Family pride

WENDY GOMERSALL

IF STV'S SAFARI DRAMA WILD at Heart has inspired you to take your cubs to Africa, Kenya offers lodges with special activities for kids - and plenty of game-spotting. "Look, there, look!" Half-a-dozen heads belonging to the other khaki-clad passengers in the safari jeep bob up like meerkats and, eyes wide, stare en masse to where the boy's finger is pointing.

Judging by young Sebastian's excitement, we expect to see a whole herd of elephant, a lion or two, or at least a few zebra. But I can see ... absolutely nothing.

"There it is!" The boy's outstretched arm waves at a spot on the ground just a few feet away. "It's a dung beetle, isn't he great?"

Sure enough, there he is, a shiny black, spiky-legged ping-pong ball struggling to roll a sphere of dirt three times his size along the hot, hard earth. Well I never.

"The female beetle lays an egg in the middle of the dung and the larvae feeds on it, you know," our little David Attenborough informs us, while his parents beam with pride.

What little sponges kids are, eh? Capture their imagination and there seems to be no end to the amount of knowledge they can quickly soak up, whether it's from a book, on the internet, or in the classroom. Television, of course, plays its part. But nothing replaces real-life experience.

The success of Wild at Heart - the drama about a British family who up sticks to run a private game lodge in Africa - has sparked a wave of interest in safaris suitable for children.

Seemingly taking it all in their stride, the young son in the TV show remains largely unfazed by dangerous critters great and small, even lions nosing around the camp, as he settles down to life in an exotic new environment.

Not so very long ago, safari holidays from the UK were strictly for adults, and fit, rather rich adults at that. Safaris are still comparatively expensive. But they're also unforgettable.

What's more, nowadays, more and more camps and lodges are not only welcoming children, they're positively encouraging them to come. Bouncing around in a four-wheel-drive vehicle spotting exotic wildlife would be enough adventure for many youngsters, but Heritage Hotels' properties in Kenya also offer extra facilities for younger visitors.

Guests aged four to 11 become members of the Adventurers Club; those aged 12 to 17 join the Young Rangers' Club. "Edutainment" is the name of the game - they learn about the local



flora, fauna and nearby communities through games and experiences. And you can bet a child is much more likely to be concerned about the conservation of endangered animals - elephants, leopards, rhinos - that they've actually seen in the wild.

They'll also grow up more inclined to support education programmes for the developing world having actually visited the school or village for which they've helped raise funds.

But apart from all that fantastically worthy stuff, safaris are fun. And with special programmes in place to keep Junior occupied, parents can sit back and enjoy their holiday too.

Each of Kenya's Heritage Hotels properties has a fully equipped Adventure Centre, staffed by guides trained in the art of keeping youngsters amused, and under control. So, for example, at Samburu Intrepids in Samburu National Reserve, you'll find Sammy Leseita.

Sammy, a 26-year-old Samburu warrior, comes dressed in the striking traditional red sarong-type wrap and beads galore. He's likely to be the most extraordinary person our young adventurers have ever seen, and with the confidence of the innocent they bombard him with questions: How big can a lion grow? Have you ever been bitten by a snake? Where do hippos live? How big are the spiders here?

Sammy, infinitely patient, speaks perfect English, too, and we adults are astonished to learn that he taught himself, from books and hearing the guests speak. And he is not only extremely knowledgeable about the park, but passionate about sharing his enthusiasm with his young charges.

I'm amazed to see a whole tribe of little guests gather serenely in the lounge and, all ears, quietly absorb information on a zoo's-worth of animals shown via colourful slides. Samburu has some "specials", they're told - the rare reticulated giraffe, the strange long-necked gerenuk antelope and Grevy's zebra. Sebastian turns to the girl sitting next to him.

"Did you know that zebras are missing an enzyme they need to break down grass in their tummies, and that's why they bottom-burp so much?"

We adults attempt to drown our sniggers by knocking back a big slug of dawa, a Kenyan cocktail made with honey, lime and vodka all mashed together. The kids look at us with mild disapproval, then turn back to the monitor screen.

Samburu's kids' programmes are not just about sitting around looking at slides, though. Wouldn't your kids just love to make plastercasts of big cat paw prints? Have a go at throwing a spear? Jump as high as a Masai warrior? Create a bead necklace? Make a Masai toothbrush from a twig?

Maybe even - under supervision - learn how to make fire?

Any parents taking their kids to Africa are going to want sensible accommodation and safety, of course, and while Samburu Intrepids may not suit rough-tough adventurers out for a really wild and woolly experience, it's perfect for virgin safari-takers.

The five-star lodge lies deep inside the Samburu National Reserve, reached only by 50-minute flight followed by 20-minute drive, so there's adventure aplenty just getting there. The camp's

30 modern tents were completely refurbished last year - each has a big bed, proper loo, shower and a terrace, too, for family get-togethers at the end of the day.

The main lodge has a nice restaurant and menu - there's not many chicken nuggets, but how about roast lamb or beef Wellington, lemon meringue pie with strawberry mousse or banana-stuffed crêpe with ice-cream? Yum. There's even a well-stocked shop and bar, and comfy lounge areas.

Game drives usually run twice a day, one in the early morning and one in the evening, to avoid the hottest weather. You can book a special breakfast in the bush, or sundowners on a hill with spectacular views over the landscape. I challenge Sebastian to spot a dung beetle from here, but he has a sense of humour failure. Kids.

For in-between times, there's a pool for kids to play in and grown-ups to relax by. Or you can book a nice massage, very good value at only US 30 (£15) for an hour.

A particularly worthwhile experience for youngsters is to take a sortie out to the Samburu village of Kiltamany to see how the locals live. They're able to step inside a mud hut, have a go at trying to pump water, and see the school that was set up with a percentage taken from guests' fees.

Kenya is taking its environmental and social responsibilities seriously, with lodges as eco-friendly as they can be, and many projects launched to help local communities by complementing the family safaris.

Of course, Kenya isn't the only African country to offer family-friendly wildlife holidays. For some, South Africa is preferable as it has malaria-free areas. Wherever you visit, see your doctor well before your departure date, to check what medicines and vaccinations, if any, your family needs - and ensure you have proper travel insurance too.

You'll need high-factor sunscreen and mosquito repellent is essential, though mercifully we weren't plagued by the little blighters at all. But Kenya's big advantage over South Africa is that it's closer to the UK, so the flight is shorter - around eight hours. Plus, simply, its parks have more animals, so you're guaranteed to see something spectacular on each game drive.

At Tortilis Camp, another family-friendly set-up, in Amboseli National Park in southern Kenya, that something spectacular is snow-capped Mount Kilimanjaro, just over the border in Tanzania. Amboseli is renowned for its magnificent elephants, so Tortilis is a must for Babar fans. The Cheli & Peacock camp has 17 luxury tents and a fantastic pool.

The highlight of a stay here is a walk in the bush with a Masai guide - 80 per cent of the camp staff are Masai. Again, the camp has strong links with the local community, and your kids can visit a village - guests are encouraged to bring pens, paper and suitable gifts to share with the local children.

You'll also go on spectacular game drives, of course. Kenya's reputation for unparalleled game viewing is upheld, as within half an hour of our evening game drive we've seen bat-eared foxes, a couple of mongoose, a lone hyena and, joy of joys, even lions.

And we didn't need Sebastian to point them out.

FACT FILE

KENYA

PACKAGE

Africa specialist Cox & Kings has a seven-day/five-night package with two nights at Samburu Intrepids and three nights at Tortilis Camp, including all meals and two game drives per day. Tel: 0207 873 5000 or visit www.coxandkings.co.uk

Prices start at £1,795 per person, valid for travel between 10 April and 31 May 2007, and include international flights with Kenyan Airways, connections from Glasgow or Edinburgh and light aircraft transfers within Kenya.

AND THERE'S MORE

For more information, visit www.magicalkenya.com or call the Kenya Tourist Board, tel: 0207 202 6373.

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