

# samburu

## survival





Main: A greeting dance welcomes visitors to a Samburu village  
Above: Elephants in Samburu Reserve

You'll see more lions than tourists on safari in Samburu – and an impressive heritage of tribal culture, finds Ewen Bell.

**Samburu National Reserve** is not as well-known as the big African game parks. There are no annual migrations, no balloon rides above the savanna and no 18-wheeler trucks filled with Spanish overland tourists.

Samburu is a small reserve in the company of several other parks to the north of Nairobi located on the far side of Mount Kenya. The landscape here is varied, with floodplains, valleys and broad savanna in which elephants roam in the red dust. Accommodation within the bounds of the reserve is limited to a few campsites, lodges and a luxury tented camp. The reserve is home to more varieties of wildlife than there are people who visit.

Any great Kenyan safari experience begins with a great guide. Meet Kaka, an experienced African-wildlife guide whose depth of knowledge is born of a deep affection for the local animals. He loves to see them in the wild and tell you about their lives.

Kaka never gets tired of the places he visits, as there's always something unexpected around the corner. On our first afternoon visiting Samburu National Reserve, we join a pod of elephants down by the river at sunset: half of them are rolling in dirt while the other half takes baths. It's a tranquil scene. We keep plenty of distance between our group and the bull elephants and can sit quietly in admiration.

Then all hell breaks loose: a leopard has walked into the party and the elephants are not happy. Dust flies as the bulls shake up the ground, stomping their feet and flapping their ears madly. The leopard knows he can't stay here: it's too dangerous for him to be on the ground among the herd, so he climbs to safety. To the annoyance of the big males, this leopard has picked a very large tree with a nice view of the river bank.

One of the elephants is furious and, unable to affect the intruder, he turns his focus to our van. Kaka starts the engine – he knows a tense situation when he sees it and is keen to keep out of harm's way. We reverse slowly as the big male steps forward. Now, his ears are going, his trunk is raised and he sounds his threat.

I ask Kaka if he's ever had his van trashed by an elephant. Kaka laughs and says, "Yes, it just keep rolling and rolling, over and over! That elephant was having some fun, I tell you. So when I say to put on the seatbelt, you do it, OK?" Then he laughs so hard, he stalls the engine.

That is the last leopard we see in a week of travelling through Kenyan wilderness. There are never guarantees of seeing particular species, especially the big cats. Cheetahs are shy of leopards, leopards are shy of daylight and lions are scared of nothing. They are the

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one cat you can't avoid; they sometimes even sit along the roadside, as though counting traffic, or hide behind our vehicles as a means of sneaking up on prey.

I've never been to a reserve in East Africa and not seen a pride of lions, if not dozens of them. Yet I've never grown tired of their majestic presence – every new encounter is as memorable as the first.

It's not just the dangerous beasts that capture the spirit of Samburu. Unusual antelopes that you might see on a Samburu safari include the gerenuk or Waller's gazelle, a lanky animal that looks oddly elongated, and Kir's dik-dik, a tiny little fellow with antlers smaller than its ears. Dik-dik are terribly shy and hide easily behind shrubs they feed off. Gembok, Grant's gazelle, impala, Beisa oryx, wildebeest, hartebeest, topi and ostrich are just some of the



other residents that roam free in the plains of Samburu National Reserve. It's hardly plain at all.

Samburu is a place where the quirky creatures of Kenya do very nicely. Even the humble zebra has a local twist in this tale. The common Burchell's zebra, with large black stripes that make one-of-a-kind patterns across its white body, is the one we see most often across Africa. Grevy's zebra, found in the Samburu region, is a distinctively more elegant creature with finer lines that create delightful details set against a vast, open wilderness.

Grevy's zebra have a hint of brown to their stripes, rather than true black. When young, the mane of a zebra can

take on vibrant hues of orange, and the Grevy's never quite lose that earthy tone. Up close, they are curiosities of the savanna, their overly large ears lined with fur, neatly aligned stripes that arrange into patterns along their flanks, and little tufts of mane that run the full length of their backs to meet with their tails.

There is order in the wild, it seems. Even the manic monkeys back at the campsite don't seem wild and savage, just a little rambunctious and cheeky. While our cook puts together a wood-fired feast, the Vervet monkeys entertain us with antics around the tents. They wrangle and leap about, occasionally taking time to stop and eat the flowers.



Left: Local transport among the Samburu villages  
 Opposite page from left: A Samburu villager;  
 A reticulated giraffe

It's all fun and games until the big, bad baboons spoil the party. With their sense of humour buried deep inside furrowed brows, the baboons chase away the fun-loving Vervets; after a round of rampaging, the camp returns to quietude. Unlike ourselves, the baboons never get a hot cup of tea at the end of a day's safari – which is a shame; they might find it elevates their mood.

Samburu National Reserve shares

its name with the indigenous people of the area. Over 100,000 people of the Samburu tribes can be found in the valleys around Mount Kenya, many living along the borders of the reserve. They are related to the Maasai tribes found to the south but have their own unique customs and dialect. Above all, they are people whose lives centre on cattle.

Life for the Samburu people is nourished by the milk of their cows

and, for special occasions, the meat is eaten, too. Living a nomadic life in the plains and deserts of Kenya's north places them in direct conflict with wild predators. The mood-swings of baboons are the least of a tribe's worries: if not for the fence of thorns that encircles their stock, cheetahs could easily claim the cattle for their own.

Kaka tells us, "A wealthy Samburu man has many cattle. The more cows he owns, the more wives he may

experience

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# Africa



Sitting under an acacia tree on the Serengeti plains enjoying a picnic lunch with a glass of Vasse Felix surrounded by thousands of wildebeest, zebra and giraffe grazing while looking out for lion, leopard or cheetah hunting for their lunch.

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possess." The women of a Samburu tribe wear brightly coloured beads that reveal their marital status or their popularity as single girls. Young men impress the young ladies with gifts of necklaces and, by the age of 15, most Samburu girls are both ready for marriage and weighed down with gifts.

Samburu people travel in groups of families, keeping their cattle and other livestock fenced in together from dusk, and posting sentries to keep watch all night for the more determined of big cats. From a distance, a village of the nomadic Samburu people may look like little more than a dustbowl but up close, a great deal of work is evident in these traditional camps.

Huts are made from grass and mud to keep their occupants cool, children are corralled when it's time to study, and livestock stay close to the homes in makeshift pens. During the day, herders take the animals out to feed, returning in the afternoons for the safety of the village.

Life on the edge of a national park is a mixed blessing for the tribes. It can mean access to good grazing strips around the reserve or it can place the livestock within harm's way, at the mercy of predators. Not all the creatures in the Kenyan wilderness are as shy as a dik-dik or gentle as a reticulated giraffe.

Samburu people are respectful of their natural home and the beasts that live in the park. As beautiful and elegant as the landscape may be, it is still a place in which wild animals survive, rather than thrive. •

*Photography by Ewen Bell*

Below: An impala in Samburu Reserve



## travelfacts

### gettingthere

Kenya Airways has frequent codeshare flights to Nairobi via Hong Kong or Bangkok. Phone 1300 787 310 (Australia) or 0800 737 747 (New Zealand) or visit

**[www.kenya-airways.com](http://www.kenya-airways.com)**

South African Airways flies to Johannesburg from Sydney and Perth, with connecting flights to Nairobi. Phone 1300 435972 or visit **[www3.flysaa.com](http://www3.flysaa.com)**

Emirates schedules flights to Nairobi via Dubai. Phone 1300 303 777 or visit

**[www.emirates.com/au](http://www.emirates.com/au)**

Thai Airways International flies to Nairobi via Bangkok. Phone 1300 651 960 or visit **[www.thaiairways.com.au](http://www.thaiairways.com.au)**

### gettingaround

African Travel Specialists, phone 03 9576 1980 or visit

**[www.africatravel.com.au](http://www.africatravel.com.au)**

Bench International, phone 1800 221 451 or visit

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GAP Adventures, phone 1300 796 618 or visit **[www.gapadventures.com](http://www.gapadventures.com)**

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### wheretostay

Larsens Camp is located in the heart of Samburu National Reserve, where the wild animals come to the Ewaso Nyiro River and the guests can watch them from the Jacuzzi. Phone 1800 251 958 or visit **[www.slh.com/larsenscamp](http://www.slh.com/larsenscamp)**

### tips

- At the time of writing, AU\$1 = 57.58 Kenyan Shillings (KES)
- Long rains soak Samburu during April and May but it gets wet from October to December, too.

### furtherinformation

For information on Kenya, phone the Kenyan Tourist Board on 02 6247 4788 or visit **[www.magicalkenya.com](http://www.magicalkenya.com)** or **[www.kenya.asn.au](http://www.kenya.asn.au)**