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LIFESTYLE | TRAVEL

Fostering care in Kenya

Animal orphanage visit culminates trip filled with up-close wildlife encounters

By Shannon Yogerst | 1:35 p.m. July 2, 2016



One of Elsa's great, great grandchildren at Menu National Park. Elsa was the lioness in the movie "Born Free." Shannon Yogerst photo

Turning heads with safari design...



My trip to Africa happened over spring break this year. But it really started in my mind back in sixth grade when Oprah did a story about Daphne Sheldrick, who runs an animal wildlife orphanage in Kenya, and I learned how you can foster baby animals there.

I made a deal with my father to earn money for fostering animals by goals scored in my field hockey and lacrosse games, and I also saved up money in other ways.

My first foster baby was Tumaren, a young elephant who was found standing beside her dying mother, who had been killed by ivory poachers. A year later, I adopted Maxwell, a baby rhino found wandering alone in Nairobi National Park. Maxwell is special because he was born blind and will never be able to leave the orphanage. My third "foster child" is Kamok, an infant elephant who walked into a ranger camp when she was just 1 day old. Nobody ever found out what happened to her mother.





Shannon Yogerst meets baby elephant Kamok, one of the animals she adopted in Kenya through the wildlife trust established by Daphne Sheldrick. *Joe Yogerst*

So I flew from California to Kenya in April hoping to meet several of the animals that I had gotten to know so well over the years through Daphne Sheldrick's website and her monthly newsletters.

Excited as I was to meet them, a visit to the orphanage was not my first stop. My dad and I had made sure that we would be able to make the most of the 31 hours of air travel by planning an itinerary that included visiting three game parks in northern Kenya (Meru, Lewa and Loisaba), the huge national park where Tumaren now lives (Tsavo) and finally the Sheldrick orphanage near Nairobi.

Meru National Park

On the short drive between the airfield and Elsa's Kopje Lodge, I experienced my first glimpse of African wildlife, including a large herd of giant elephants (including one that charged our vehicle), some scattered giraffes stretching their long necks to munch on the tops of thorny trees, families of zebra and exotic birds.

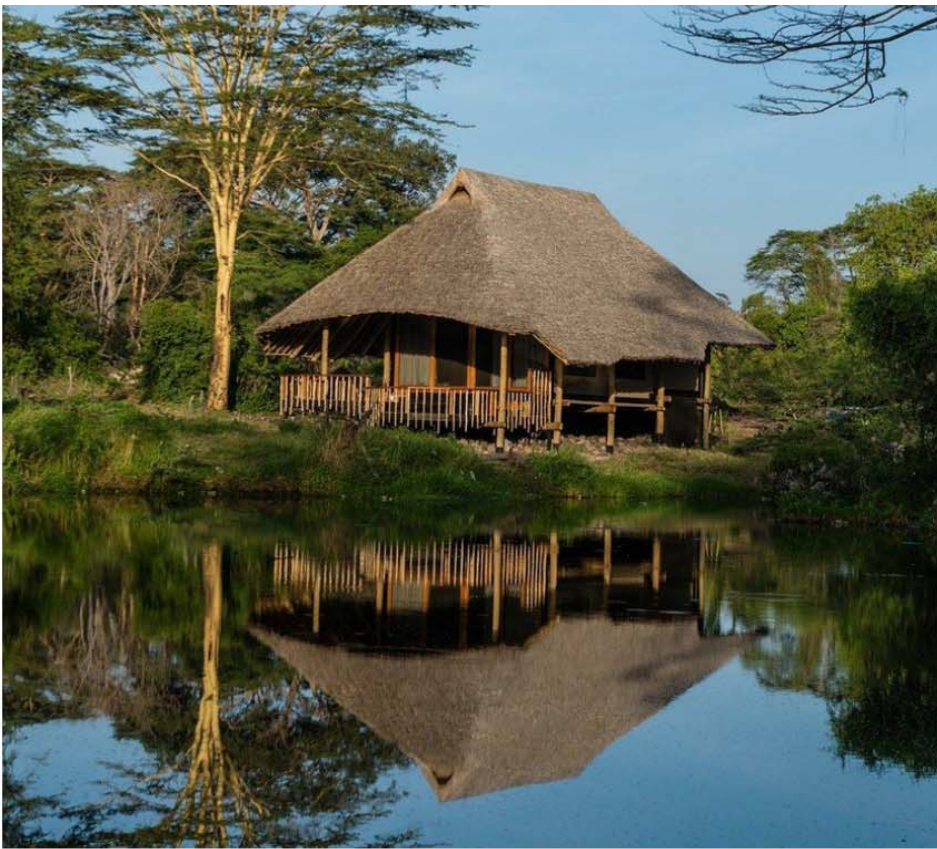
It was also apparent that some wild animals have no trouble making themselves right at home at the lodge, especially the fat little hyraxes who even lounge in your bathroom and on your deck. The lodge where we stayed is named for Elsa the lioness from the movie "Born Free," who was raised nearby by George and Joy Adamson.

The first game drive at Meru set high expectations for the rest of the trip. We started out tracking a herd of more than a hundred elephants and watched them get spooked by thunder and retreat into a dusty huddle. That was followed by a close interaction with three lions who were relaxing, looking totally unthreatening and getting a quick nap in as night approached. We finished off the drive by spotting a bush fire caused by lightning and watching as the rangers extinguished it.

To learn more

You can learn more about how to foster an orphaned animal at the David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust website, <https://www.sheld...>>





One of the tented camps at Finch Hattons in Tsavo National Park. The camp is named after Denys Finch Hatton, one of the main characters in the book "Out of Africa."

Lewa Conservancy

I thought nothing could beat the experience in Meru, but I was in for another surprise. Lewa is famous for rhinos and its efforts to protect them from poaching with 24/7 guards, electric fences and community education. During our two days staying at Lewa Safari Camp, we saw a lot of rhinos.

On one of the mornings, as we had breakfast in the bush by a water hole, our table was surrounded by vervet monkeys that were curiously watching us eat. Also looking on was a family of the most unfortunate looking warthogs you have ever seen, and an impatient rhino that was waiting for us to leave so he could get a drink from the water hole.

The most unsettling sighting at Lewa was seeing five lions all chowing on a domestic camel they had stolen from a local man who does camel rides for tourists. While watching, I realized this was just the circle of life in its rawest form. They looked so self-satisfied as they took turns drinking at a nearby water hole between bites.

As the sun was setting, we saw a young elephant that was obviously upset about two male gazelles fighting each other. He repeatedly charged at them and trumpeted until the gazelles called a truce.

Loisaba Conservancy

The drive from Lewa to Loisaba took about six tedious and uncomfortable hours, most of it on really bad roads through a desertlike region. Along the way we visited the Mount Kenya Animal Orphanage in Nanyuki, where you actually got to feed the ostrich, bongo antelopes, colobus monkeys and other animals, and hang out with the cheetahs.

At Loisaba Tented Camp, we were greeted by a guide dressed in traditional Samburu tribal clothing. Instead of driving everywhere, we got a chance to hike through the bush with a ranger who carried a rifle, just in case we came across a lion, buffalo or something else that might attack us. It's a whole different experience seeing an elephant on foot rather than from the safety of a safari truck, but luckily it was busy eating and ignored us.

The next morning our guide spotted a dead gazelle that had been dragged up into a tree, which he said is a sure sign of leopards. The kill was relatively fresh, so he figured that we could come back later to try to see this big cat, which is notoriously difficult to spot in the wild.

That evening, just as the sun was setting, we spied a spotted yellow creature pacing back and forth on a hillside near the tree — a female leopard looking right past us because we were blocking her route to the food. We waited patiently for the leopard to move closer, but she was more patient and waited us out. When day turned to night, we lost sight of the cat, but we knew she was nearby.

we were sitting in the truck.





Samburu guides dressed in traditional clothing pose for a photo at Loisaba Tented Camp. Shannon Yogerst photo

Tsavo West National Park

Tsavo West is unique because of the dramatic landscape that consists of green trees growing out of volcanic rock and Mount Kilimanjaro in the background. One day after it rained, you could see a double rainbow on one side and a dramatic mountain scape on the other.

We stayed at a place called Finch Hattons Camp. It's named after Denys Finch Hatton, one of the main characters in the book and movie "Out of Africa." He is credited with creating the first photo safari in the late 1920s. The tents at this camp are built around a spring, so you can sit on your deck and watch hippos, crocodiles, large birds and other animals that seem to live in harmony around and in the water. Sitting in my room during the afternoon, I watched vervet monkeys pull each other's tails and chase each other around my deck.

While staying in Tsavo, we got to visit the local town, where we met traditional Masai warriors and villagers. Even though we couldn't communicate with them, one motioned for me to sit beside him under a tree and contemplate life for a while. The highlight of the day was climbing up the top of a mountain and watching the sun set next to Mount Kilimanjaro.

The next day, we flew around the park in a four-seater plane, through the valleys and around mountains, close enough to the ground to see elephants. Then we visited a famous hippo pool, where we ran into a group of Kenyan college students who all wanted to take selfies with me. We finished the day having drinks on the balcony of a hotel next to a water hole, watching the night-time dwellers like hyenas and jackals stopping by for

a drink. Hyenas really do look like they are made from the spare parts of other animals!

Meeting my orphans

It wasn't until the very end of the trip that I finally got to meet my orphans. One of the first things you see when you enter the animal orphanage, established by Daphne Sheldrick through the David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust, is a large pen created for Maxwell, the rhino. He was relaxing until he heard us coming. Because he's blind, Max is very sensitive to sounds, and he perked up when he heard us. He slowly made his way over to the bars, where we got to pet him.

After watching Maxwell eat, we made our way down to the forest to meet the baby elephants. We didn't see anything for a few moments and then all of a sudden we were surrounded by more than 20 small elephants — eating, playing, rolling in the mud and scratching against the trees.



Young male lions in the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy keep a watchful eye on the author. *Shannon Yogerst*

Kamock, my other foster baby, was playful and mischievous. While I was petting her, she would start to sway her head back and forth, then all of a sudden she would knock me into another elephant and run away as if she already knew she had misbehaved.

The elephants all have very distinct personalities and all care for each other. All of these orphans seem to create their own tribe in which they protect the younger ones and help each other grow up.

Walking back to the orphanage with the herd, we got to watch all of the elephants run into their own pens for bedtime. The younger ones were so wiped out from the day they fell asleep before the sun went down, while the other, older ones ate their dinners.