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KENYA, AFRICA
—

IN PLAINS SIGHT

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FEW SAFARIS ARE AS SATISFYING AS THIS ONE

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BY LISA ALLEN
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JOURNEYS

never knew of a morning in Africa when I woke up that I was not happy.

– Ernest Hemingway

Amboseli National Park's legendary super tusker, Craig, was one of Africa's most photographed animals. When he died in January, Kenya went into mourning – even though his death from natural causes at the ripe old age of 54 was also a victory for conservationists. His life had not been cut short by a poacher's bullet. Craig may have been a mammoth bull elephant with tusks that weighed at least 45kg each, but he was loved for his gentleness and willingness to pose for tourists' photos.

Since his birth in 1972 he had roamed the 39,206ha Amboseli National Park, south of Nairobi, beneath the snow-covered peak of Mount Kilimanjaro on the border of Tanzania, along with around 2000 other elephants.

Craig's death sent many a staffer at nearby Ol Donyo Lodge, one of Kenya's most exclusive safari lodges, into deep despair.

Located in the heart of the Chyulu Hills, on 111,000ha of private land comprising Mbirikani Group Ranch, which is owned by the Maasai community, Ol Donyo is positioned between Tsavo and Amboseli national parks.

Unusually for an African lodge, Ol Donyo – the creation of celebrated filmmakers and conservationists Dereck and Beverly Joubert – has a Relais & Chateaux badge.

I've stayed at safari lodges throughout South Africa's vast Kruger National Park, Botswana's Okavango, and Zambia's Lower Zambezi and Kafue, but Ol Donyo, positioned in thick woodland, is a standout. Villas are cleverly camouflaged into walls of local stone and offer sweeping views of Africa's highest peak, Kilimanjaro, at 5895m.

Outdoor activities include swimming in your own private plunge pool, horseback safaris and close encounters with wildlife – either from safari jeeps or from Ol Donyo's sunken hide, where you can sit watching super tuskers, zebras and giraffes coming to drink from the waterhole out front of the resort. Staff will ensure you have a glass in hand, if required, to watch these wildlife experiences. (You can even observe the animals' activity at the sunken hide from your home on Ol Donyo's livestream camera.)



Three staff attended our villa, including a private butler, housekeeper and dining manager. Our ranger and guide, a Maasai from a local village, drove us to Amboseli in a 4WD, passing Maasai herding hundreds of goats or cows on the two-hour journey. Come January, the seasonal Lake Amboseli is richly populated with hippos and thousands of pink flamingos attracted by increased rainfall and rising water levels, creating vivid pink landscapes against Mount Kilimanjaro's majestic backdrop.

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Thrills: a big tusker; Ol Donyo Lodge; horse-riding with zebras

On our day trip to Amboseli there is no excuse not to turn photographer, given Ol Donyo's open-top Land Cruisers are kitted out with Canon cameras with 400mm zoom lenses – a boon for guests unable or unwilling to hoick heavy cameras and lenses around Africa.

After a hectic day photographing hundreds of elephants and flamingos we arrive back at Ol Donyo to dine in the well stocked wine room. But first we relax around the lodge's firepit, sipping

chilli margaritas as we view the Chyulu Hills and Mount Kilimanjaro at sunset. Ol Donyo offers two game drives per day, with a third night-time one on offer to view lions, elephants, giraffes and hyenas under the starlit sky.

We are told our three-room villa, "Asali", meaning honey, has the best views of Kilimanjaro. It's one of 10 villas, each with yoga mats, hand weights and lavish open-plan bathrooms – including indoor and outdoor showers, a loungeroom with fireplace, and a

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JOURNEYS

four-poster canopied bed with a deck overlooking Kilimanjaro.

Upstairs there's a private rooftop "star bed" for those adventurous enough to spend the night outdoors under a sky full of stars and cocooned by a mosquito net – but no doubt hearing the distant roars of lions, the whooping of hyenas and the growls, snarls and purrs of marauding leopards.

We also spend time at the Australian-owned and operated Ololo Safari Lodge and Farm, on the edge of Nairobi National Park, against the quirky backdrop of Nairobi's city skyline.

We lunch Aussie-style on prosciutto pizzas and pavlovas around the pool, surrounded by acacia trees and superb starlings, native to east Africa. Lunch guests here are often joined by a ranger with a slingshot and pellets to fire at a marauding troop of olive baboons should they come too close and try to steal the food.

The hotel manager asks me if a baboon has been in my room because a shredded paper bag with damaged toothbrushes was found outside it. There was only one suspect – a member of a thickly furred baboon family living in a dry river canyon just below Ololo. This olive baboon, so named for the green and brown tinge to her fur, apparently knows how to turn keys in locks.

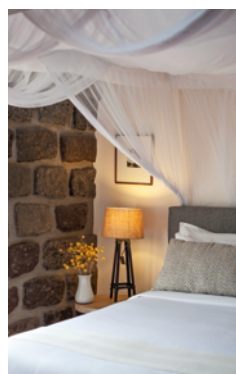
The baboons have long fancied Ololo, which was originally an old Kenyan homestead and has since been converted to a family-run lodge. It is accessed by a long footbridge and is perfectly situated on the banks of the Mbagathi River, which forms the southern border of the greatly under-appreciated Nairobi National Park.

Out on safari we note plains (Burchell's) zebras and four white rhinos, including a 12-month-old

calf. There are also Nile crocodiles, hippos and giraffes, and we find a lion sitting atop a stone monument as we drive out of the camp at 6am one morning. The park also has vervet monkeys, which enjoy peering down through the Old Stable Room's skylights at guests.

Ololo is close to the famous Sheldrick Wildlife Trust's Nairobi Nursery in Nairobi National Park for orphaned elephants' daily mud bath and milk feed. Apart from game drives, Ololo offers visits to the historic Karen Blixen Museum, once home to the renowned *Out of Africa* author. There are also bush walks.

The Chapman family, tea tree farmers from northern NSW, bought the property in 2008 when it was just a farm with an old homestead. Five years later, Ololo was opened with beautifully decorated rooms – no surprise, given the owner, Joanna Chapman, is an interior designer. While still a student at Bond University, one of Chapman's sons, Jim, founded Nice Coffee Co., with profits from every kilo helping provide scholarships and support to educate kids from Africa's largest slum, Kibera, just outside Nairobi.



Close to the city: Ololo Safari Lodge and Farm

CHECKLIST

Getting there: Qantas has direct flights from Sydney and Perth to Johannesburg. From there you can take a direct flight on AirLink to Nairobi's Jomo Kenyatta International Airport. From Nairobi, Ol Donyo is a short flight on a 14-seater Cessna Grand Caravan, which lands at the lodge's own air strip – watch out for zebras on the runway. Ololo Safari Lodge & Farm is a 45-minute drive from Nairobi's Jomo Kenyatta International Airport; the lodge sends its friendly rangers in 4WDs to pick guests up.

Stay: At one of Ol Donyo's 10 individually designed villas, two hours from Amboseli National Park. Or stay at Ololo Safari Lodge & Farm, which has a mix of Stable Rooms, a three-bedroom cottage and tented cottages. In Cape Town stay at the funky Dorp Hotel perched at the top of Signal Hill overlooking the Atlantic and Indian Oceans. In Johannesburg, my pick is the Fairlawns Boutique Hotel & Spa with its Balinese style massage rooms – perfect after the 14-hour flight from Sydney.

Eat: At Ololo enjoy a barbecue night around the pool overlooking the famed Nairobi National Park. While at Ol Donyo platters of share plates arrive for lunch including "reverse seared chicken thigh with mustard jus" and "passion slices with honeycomb". For dinner we chose between duck leg with orange and star anise sauce, and oven baked king fish with Provençal sauce. Dessert is a hot chocolate fondant. Drinks are included in Ol Donyo's rate and include premium South African wines.

Do: Take both the early morning and late afternoon game drives at Ol Donyo and Ololo. And relax poolside in between.

More: The Classic Safari Company, classicsafaricompany.com.au