

## Reflections on a fantastic family half-term in Kenya

Monday morning - back to earth with a crashing thump. Children back to school but hey what a truly amazing half term we've all had.

A few weeks ago I was struggling to explain to my 9, 11 and 13yr old sons what to expect from a safari in Kenya – “what will Kenya *look* like” they kept asking...closely followed by “everyone at school says we will get Ebola.....”

A quick geography lesson and look at a map leaves them reassured. Nairobi is about 3,300 miles from Liberia and Sierra Leone in West Africa - more than 4 times further, I tell them, than Devon is from Spain. And I try not to be swept in too much by the press myself, knowing Kenyan Airways was one of the first to suspend flights to West Africa in August. En-route to the airport more news. We'll be screened and temperatures taken as we arrive at JKIA. Wondering exactly what this will involve, we groan at the thought of delays. But at least, I feel, the Kenyans are taking it seriously.

**Friday night** - An easy flight - a blessing perhaps that TVs don't work and the children get some sleep - then we're landing at JKIA. As we enter the airport building we queue to have temperatures taken by laser ear thermometer. All very efficient and easy - '36.4 you're fine' the lady calls and we're swiftly waived through, breathing a sigh of relief there are no mid-term colds to contend with!

Visas issued, efficiently met by our driver, we wait for bags to appear. Then a reviving coffee and breakfast overlooking Nairobi National Park before gathering ourselves together. We're truly off on our adventure.

It's quite a long drive to Nanyuki but the children's first time in a 3<sup>rd</sup> world country and we're keen they get a sense of where they are. I hope the views we pass make an impression - there seems too much chat about cricket and the films they wish they'd seen, to take any of it in right now!

Heading out of Nanyuki, we hit the dirt road and start winding through true bush. Excitement rises as we spot the first zebra and giraffe, then more still as we skid and slip-slide on roads muddy from yesterday's rain. Finally, anticipation rising by the minute, the Sosian sign! We cross a bridge and at last we're there, all piling out desperate to see what Kenya is really like.



Assuming everyone would be little jaded after the journey, we'd decided not to ride on our first evening so after tea and cake, it's a leg stretching walk instead. Simon leads us along a pretty route to the river, we stop to watch hippo wallowing. We're far above them but I can't help an involuntary jump as a big male heaves himself half out of the water and lunges forward. Wow, he's big. Then much hilarity on the way home as one of the boy's leap across a boggy stream falls a good few yards short - as does mine ugg!

**Sunday** - Never (we're learning) one to shirk a challenge, Simon agrees to take the whole motley crew riding. 3 families, ages ranging from 9 to 63, a group of 19 in all with our guides and several backstops - what a sight, what a miracle. I'd never have thought it possible a few months ago as my boys sat silently through their riding lesson trying to remember heels, reins, aids...We made it!



The gorgeous little grey Birthday is perfect for my 9 yr old and soon they become leader of the pack.

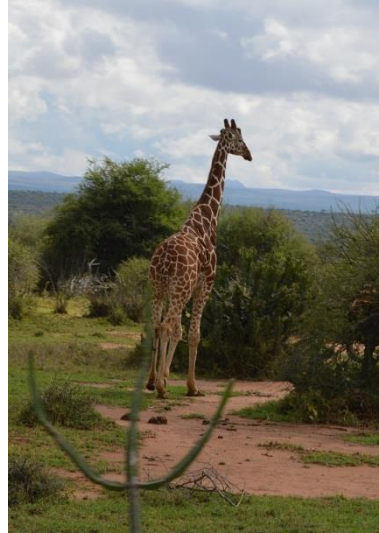
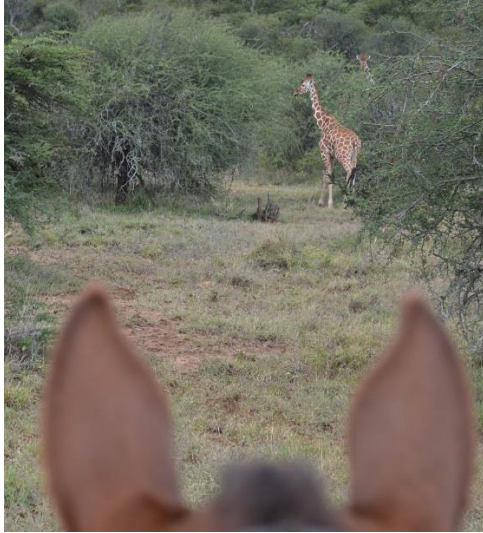
Back to base for lunch, a swim and how easily we slip into the pm siesta routine. Then, grogginess banished with tea and chocolate cake, it's great to catch up with Tristan and Archie who have flown in to say hello - and we all head off on an evening game drive in search of the wild dog with new puppies denning close by.

Even more of a treat when Archie and Simon load up the children, with all their chatter, in one vehicle and we make the most of Tristan's encyclopedic bird knowledge in the other. Lilac breasted rollers, Verreaux eagle owl, magnificent Crowned Cranes, Ibis, Egrets, a fish eagle and numerous colourful smaller birds. As always in Africa, bird watching is transformed.

Then it's sundowners, the wild dog den and a fascinating half hour watching them play before heading back to the lodge. The children's supper is ready when we get back and they have fun at the pool table, whilst we enjoy a very good - delicious, fun, generous - very Sosian dinner.



**Monday** - Two opt for a lie in and Tristan and Archie join us for a ride. At the river, we're surprised the hippo count is now 12 where yesterday there seemed just 4, then on through the bush we see elephant, rare Grevy's zebra and a beautiful group of Reticulated giraffe, a Laikipia special and everyone's favourite so far.



Tristan has to leave us - performing a superb fly-by in the process - and we enjoy the rest of our morning ride, the motley crew improving noticeably by the minute as we all canter home!

After breakfast, we pack swimming costumes and head to the waterfall.... its roaring, rushing, gushing, tremendous, heart-stopping fun. The boys just love, love, LOVE it!



A late lunch, short rest, then off again on an evening game drive and to surprise the children with a night at fly camp by the river. Flickering firelight, a table set for dinner – always such a treat.

After delicious sticky chicken and games around the table, everyone is soon ready for bed, wonderful cosy bedrolls open to the night sky. Its easy to snooze but what's this? I turn as the rain begins to patter; I pull the canvas bed roll over my head, conscious that Simon has gallantly jumped up to put covers on children and vehicles. We settle again, I doze but the patter becomes louder, more persistent and Oh NO a downpour! Agg. Shouts to get up and we pile sleepy children into vehicles, fumbling to button up canvas tops, wipers working overtime as Rosie drives us back through gushing puddles to Sosian's warm, welcoming beds.

**Tuesday** - Waking up to a still damp morning, I'm glad our night was under cover! The sleepy vote last night was for a leisurely start, a walk for those who want - so, leaving the boys to lie in, we stumble up at 7am. Once tea is drunk it's a gorgeous morning, bush-air fresh with rain and sun shining again - perfect for an exhilarating morning walk. I feel vaguely guilty that back at the lodge we've left Rosie with all 9 children but, of course she has everything under expert control. Eggs, bacon, as many pancakes as they can eat and the children are happily playing in the pool when we return. Phew, breakfast in peace on the veranda.



Then we round them up again and head off to find the camels...



All too soon it's our last evening at Sosian - and Simon is on a mission. Where ARE those lions.....? Bingo! A pride of 12 all around. Fantastic!

**Wednesday** - Always sad, we have to leave this lovely place, but tinged with anticipation and excitement at the long ride ahead. We wanted the children to get the feel of a 'real' safari, a journey from place to place, so we're riding to our next camp, Steve & Annabelle Carey's Laikipia Wilderness. It's about 18 kms as the crow flies and given the varied pre-trip levels of riding enthusiasm and ability we've made contingency plans to allow some to ride, some walk and others to drive.

But, what do you know, everyone's loving it so much, we all mount up to set off together.

Baboon rock in the distance looks miles but it's high spirits all round and a fantastic morning with rivers to ford, long sandy tracks to canter up and Simon, the boys' hero, in true Harrison Ford form!

Almost an hour and a half in, we see breakfast tables laid out ready and waiting by the river.



Then back on the horses for the final stage and just as we get the first of the 'how much further's' we spot camp ahead, perched in a gorgeous position on the hill above us. We've made it!

Hot and sweaty, after a quick drink, first stop is definitely the river for a swim. Then a sad farewell to Simon, Charlotte, our wonderful horses and grooms who are taking them back to Sosian, before lunch overlooking Laikipia's glorious panorama.

It's easy to settle into the Carey's lovely little tented camp - a real gem for a family group, there are few like it in Kenya - and whilst grown-ups relax over a cup of tea, Steve, Byron and the camp staff impress the boys with their football skills, then load them onto vehicles and drive to the river for an evening of fishing - small boy heaven.



**Thursday** - Wake up is early at Laikipia Wilderness to get the best of the game. We grimace at the thought of 5.30am but a cup of tea in bed, the lovely wilderness view and the gorgeous sun rise make it well worth it. A short drive so we can get to the ridge, then we set off walking with Steve whose informative but gentle and laid back style keeps everyone's interest and the children's questions coming.



Back home for breakfast - the action doesn't stop and its kayaks and tubes for a journey down the river...followed by an evening walk watching elephant coming down to drink

**Friday** - Its going too fast, our final morning at Laikipia Wilderness. We split up to fish and rock climb (boys' choice) or walk and look for wild dog (grown-up choice). We're right on track for the dogs and what a thrill to follow the pack on a kill. Steve radios to check on the fishermen - over-inquisitive hippo have cut short their plans so they come and join this most fantastic, once in-a-lifetime experience.



Finally, the dogs are heading back to feed puppies in their den and we're heading to camp for breakfast and to pack for the next leg of our trip.



Now we're off to Borana. Still in Laikipia, we chose to avoid internal flights, but if memory serves me right, it's going to be very different. Another quite a long drive via Nanyuki with the last part on a very bumpy road but we're good at this now and it's great to feel we're on a journey.

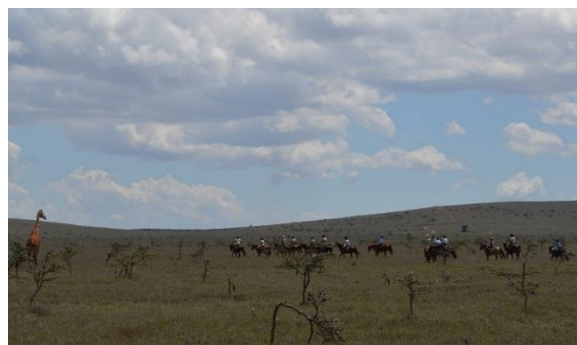
Half term in Kenya too and Borana is busy. There's a bit of a scrabble when we arrive deciding who goes where and what we do - but before long, decisions are made and we're having tea by the pool. The children just want to hang out and swim, we're keen to make the most of every moment so it's a small group evening ride. We don't have long, it's 5pm already but the area around Borana is more open than Sosian and the gallop-like tracks are the perfect way to clear the journey from our heads.



**Saturday** - Our cavalry's re-united, we're all riding today with Nicky leading the way and local guides David and Joseph - both great with the children - to help. The small boys have wonderful little ponies sent over from Michael's parents - I want to take them home - and the bigger children are on super steady, safari horses all geared out with comfortable new saddles and locally tanned Borana sheepskins!

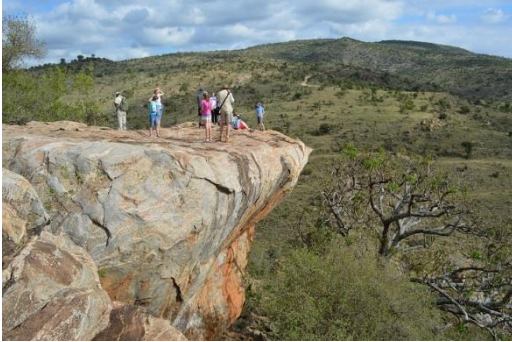


Such great open space - we're missing Simon dreadfully but all agree this is as-good-as-but-different-to-Sosian and we just love it! There's lots of game too. A big herd of buffalo and black rhino on our first ride keeps everyone very happy.



A game drive tonight - giraffe, elephant, waterbuck, zebra, impala, jackal, Jackson's hartebeest and lots of birds of prey. The children are still desperate for leopard or cheetah but no cats today. Oh well, I say, you never know, we've plenty of time. How can I tell them it is SO unlikely!

**Sunday** - Up early - what a treat to watch elephant from our huge bedroom window - with a plan to walk to Pride Rock. Lawrence our guide is full of information and the armed ranger with us keeps careful watch as we head as silently as we can along paths with elephant browsing on either side. Up onto the rock and lots of Lion King poses - a lovely spot for a group photo.



Two of the children are flying home to go back to school so we drive through the Lewa Conservancy to meet their flight at Lewa's airstrip. The fences between Borana and Lewa have just come down and the whole area is now a massive game conservancy. It is exciting to see a mother and baby white rhino, lots of giraffe, buffalo, Grevy's zebra, ostrich and much more on the boys' final game drive. We wave them onto the Safarilink plane back to Nairobi where they'll be met by friends before their evening flight home.

Back to the lodge for lunch, bags quickly packed, then to the stables for our ride to fly camp - we're going to try again! As we get into the vehicle, unbelievable - the heavens open again - is someone trying to tell us something? Much needed rain I know - Borana had virtually none in May - but I do so wish it could wait another week....

Nicky's optimistic, the rain is very localised and will move quickly on, fly camp is dry we hear, so coats on, we mount up and set off. But moods have changed with the rain and I'm trying to jolly on three grumpy children used to set-in rainy Dartmoor days and not at all keen to ride. We press on.

Radioed messages are now that it is raining all over Laikipia and with a 3 hour ride to camp ahead and slippery going underfoot, we finally decide camping's off. We'll go tomorrow. David and I head home with the smallest in the group whilst the others carry on for a short evening ride under the glorious rainbow overhead.





As the boys and I drive back to the lodge, Albert our guide tells us he's spotted something.... My bush eyes are hopeless; Albert's are razor sharp. Breath held, oh my goodness, a cheetah! (Camera still in my saddlebag of course...)



We spend a wonderful half hour watching him stalk impala and gazelle - he's not quite in the mood to complete the hunt, but what a sight. The boys worry their brother is missing out so we make urgent radio calls to tell Lawrence where we are and as soon as they're off the horses, the others come to join us. Beaming smiles all round, a fantastic ride with loads of galloping they say - and now this! We've had our view so we leave them to watch, Albert explaining that Borana's maximum is 3 vehicles at once to avoid stressing the game. Our reward on the way home is a rare striped hyena setting off on his evening hunt!

And lion the next day....

**Monday** - Glorious blue-skies and we're off to our abandoned fly camp. A 3 hour ride, the best of our trip with everyone relaxed, laughing and keen to GO. At camp we leap off the waterfall, swim in the river, have a delicious lunch and snooze in the sun. Bliss all round. Then all back on board to ride a different way home, racing up the hills as evening draws in - what a day!



**Tuesday** - I thought they'd be tired but the whole gang want a last ride. Michael is with us today - pulled in all directions its great he can sneak out for our final ride - and in no time, has the boys jumping logs and heading up the hills with zebra all around.

Our last view of Borana - quite simply stunning.





What'll they say at school when asked what did **you** do at half term?