

CONNECTION TO KENYA

By Melody Wren



locals was one of genuine warmth. I felt secure at all times and very peaceful everywhere I stayed.

Once I got to Nairobi at the end of the Safari portion of my trip, security was visibly tight at hotels, museums and shopping malls which initially rattled me, then felt reassuring.

The small bits of Kenya I saw were beautiful, the people authentic and the abundant wildlife sightings incredible. What I didn't expect was the emotional connection to the land and the people emphasizing the connection we all have to Africa.

Kenya has a magic that deserves a special kind of trip. I thought I had seen a lot of the world but Kenya opened up my eyes and my heart.

Oi Malo Lodge is a privately owned game sanctuary on the banks of the Ewaso Nyiro River in Kenya's wild and beautiful North Eastern province – 5,000 acres of spectacular bush country overlooked by Mount Kenya and teeming with elusive antelope.

Oi Malo is part of a Samburu conservation park and part of the elephant migration route. Laikipia is Kenya's most extensive wildlife haven with the much talked about "big five," elephants, buffaloes, lions, rhinos and leopards.

Laikipia supports as many as 250 lions, a significant number of the estimated 2,000 remaining in Kenya. I managed to see four of the big five, missing only the sighting of a Rhino.

At Oi Malo Lodge, they have 350 to 400 cattle which they milk by hand. Enviably self sufficient, if they need something they figure out how to make it themselves, building their own jeeps and making wine glasses out of broken bottles.

Dry smoky air, pounding hooves and the constant snorting of wildebeests welcomed us as we loaded our gear into the waiting Safari jeep and drove on rough pot-hole filled gravel roads (our driver referred to the journey as the 'Kenyan massage') towards our lodge for the next couple of days.

The traditionally dressed Samburu guide greeted me in Swahili "Jambo (hello), my name is Lewya, think of Halleluiaah," he said with an enormous grin.

He met our small plane after a brief 45 minute flight crossing the equator, the landing a smooth one on the short Muridjo airstrip at Oi Malo Conservancy in Kenya.

I admit I had been very hesitant about going to Kenya because of recent events in the news but while there, the general vibe I got from the

Food was one of the many highlights of our stay. They grow their own vegetables, make their own yogurt, butter and cultivate honey from the 85 beehives they have on the property. When I mentioned that I was lactose intolerant, without skipping a beat, owner Andrew Francombe offered camel milk for my tea, a new and delicious experience.

By the river one day, we spotted herds of hippos and their babies swimming, an enormous crocodile laying nearby, and as we sat watching, a leopard darted past.

One afternoon we visited a Manyatta which is a homestead, enclosed by roughly hewn, carefully built fences. Housing the farmer, three wives, two sons, their wives and their children plus many cattle, goats, chickens. Samburu are allowed to have multiple wives but not all of them choose that option.

Walking around the Manyatta felt surreal. I had to keep reminding myself that the people actually lived there. It wasn't a set up like a historical village reenacting how people used to live. It felt so other-worldly that it was hard to imagine we shared the same world; they in their huts with very little and me in my multi-layered life at home.

Perhaps there were more similarities than differences, I wondered.

I spoke through my guide to a grandma, wearing black and white beads which noted she was a grandmother to two girls. My guide Lewya let her know I was a Nana too, to two girls as well.



She smiled for the first time directly at me and I felt a connection when I looked into her dark eyes. She kept smiling and asked me my name. Through the guide I told her, she smiled and told me in Swahili my name would be "Sungulia." I felt so honored. The guide told

and wealthier. The blue with the green signify rain. Black and white with green hanging off an ear indicates they have a warrior son. I shook their hands saying "Kisobut PI" emphasizing the PI, which means very pretty.

One of the guides said, "when God created heaven, he copied Kenya."



Melody Wren making friends

me it was good for her to see me as a person, not just a tourist.

The next morning guide Lewya greeted me "Jambo, Sungulia". Thinking I had missed a new Swahili word, I asked him to repeat. He laughed loudly and chided me "what, you've forgotten your Swahili name already?"

Women from different villages make placemats and beads at the lodge to sell at the shop. The beads they wear all have significance - lots of beads means they are older

Notes:

What I wish I knew before I went: check the season you are going. I went in late June and I was not prepared for the extremely chilly evenings as it was their winter. On Safari, the red dust gets everywhere and the dryness gave me frequent nosebleeds

How to get there: I flew KLM to Amsterdam and KLM Amsterdam direct to Nairobi. A visitors Visa is required that you pay for at Nairobi airport, \$50.00 U.S. I carried Kenyan shillings, handy for bartering for the beautiful beaded jewelry.

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ABOUT MELODY WREN

Melody Wren is a freelance writer because she believes that work and fun should not be mutually exclusive.

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