

Guiding stars

On a trip to Kenya with her six-year-old grandniece, Sue Watt sees how safari guides greatly enhance the experience, forming enduring bonds and fuelling her fascination with this unfamiliar world



Don't be alarmed if you hear hyena howling loudly when you're next in Liverpool. That will likely be my six-year-old grandniece Seren, who heard them calling while we were fly camping under Kenya's starry skies a world away from her hometown. Our guide Robbie taught her to mimic their call and she passed that on to her friends. Six months on, they still speak hyena, starting quietly then culminating in a wild cacophony of whoops.

In May, my husband Will and I took our niece Carys and her daughter on their first safari, to Laikipia's El Karama Conservancy. I'd pondered whether Seren might be too young to take in all the wildlife wonders I'd wanted to share. Happily, she's proved me completely wrong.

SPEAKING MY LANGUAGE

We stopped first at Nairobi National Park and the relaxing Emakoko lodge, recommended by Mike Kelly of family safari specialists Coral Tree Travel as an "ideal introduction to safaris", and a handy break in the journey from Liverpool to Laikipia.

Within 10 minutes of arriving, our guide Sila Muturi had shown Seren gawky ostriches, dainty jackals and dumpy warthogs. She was mesmerised when he pointed out giraffe browsing acacias and white rhinos with sweeping horns. Often shy with new people, she took to Sila instantly, bonding over this wild new world.

"Sila was very friendly, wasn't he?" Seren reminisced, smiling broadly and chatting incessantly when I told her about writing this story. "I drew him a picture of Eddie," she said as she remembered the greedy dominant male at Nairobi's Giraffe Centre scooping up all the pellets in her hands. "And we saw that fancy lion roaring, and zebras and those ginormous giraffes."

Sila would teach Seren simple Swahili and she taught him Welsh in return. "Nos da," he said ('goodnight') as we returned to Emakoko. She'd reply with those lovely lullaby-like words "Lala salama" ('sleep well').

On our last morning, Sila surprised us by asking how we were, in perfectly pronounced Welsh, having Googled the phrase overnight. It was a small gesture, but it meant a lot to a little girl. "He learnt "Sut wyt ti? specially for us," Seren recalled.

BUSH SCHOOL

After our five-hour drive to El Karama – a beautiful lodge that focuses on family safaris – Robbie Omungiasi took on the mantle as our guide – and as Seren's teacher in its inspiring Bush School. There, she could take part in nature walks, fishing, breadmaking, Maasai beading, sculpting, reading and riding a chestnut pony called Smudgie.

Left: Taste of things to come. Seren and her mother Carys visiting the Giraffe Centre, while staying at The Emakoko outside Nairobi National Park
Opposite: Bonding moments. Sleeping in the "flying tent"; around the campfire with guide Robbie Omungiasi; enjoying hugs with chef Jane Mwanika, all at El Karama in Laikipia

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"Me and Robbie made a rabbit out of clay and my hands got really muddy," remembered Seren. "But my favourite thing was making my bead bracelet with him. It makes me happy when I wear it."

Born and bred on El Karama Conservancy, Robbie is passionate about his work. "This is my dream job, combining my love of wildlife with teaching," he told me. "I just pretend to be a kid, really."

We stayed at Nilotica, an exclusive-use enclave within the lodge grounds, with four luxury tented suites and a pool. Along with Robbie, private chef Jane Mwanika and head waiter Gerald Mutua all contributed to the success of Seren's safari.

Her curiosity was now unbridled, and Robbie nurtured that, pointing out strange gerenuk antelopes with ridiculously long necks, rare Grevy's zebras, and grumpy buffaloes covered in mud. She loved studying giraffes through her yellow binos and watched in silent wonder as nine lions rolled in the grass near our vehicle.

"Our night camping out was the best thing," she said, giggling as she recounted their "flying" mosquito-net tent suspended on poles a metre above ground. We drank G&Ts around the campfire while Seren played games with Robbie, and Jane and Gerald prepared our meal. Everything about that evening was pure joy: the delicious roast lamb dinner, the glowing flames, the company of happy, gentle people, and the child-like excitement we all seemed to share under the star-filled sky.

WHEN I GROW UP

Listening to those hyenas whooping in the dark, it dawned on me how important Sila and Robbie were in unlocking this whole new world for Seren, influencing not just this first safari but possibly her future travels. Like school, children become interested if teachers make learning fun. If not, they've lost that chance to inspire and encourage curious young minds. Under their watch, Seren's fascination with Africa's wildlife flourished – as did her confidence.

"When I'm grown up, I'm going to come back and work with Robbie," she said, crying quietly as we left El Karama. Her diary that day read: "Sad I was leaving" and "hugs goodbye".

Today, she still wants to work with Robbie, draws giraffes and says *lala salama* at bedtime. But she can never remember 'goodbye' in Swahili: *Kwaheri* was one word she never wanted to say...

Sue Watt travelled to Kenya courtesy of Coral Tree Travel, The Emakoko and El Karama Lodge.



ALL PHOTOS: WILL WHITFORD