

# Our magical three-generation, family-friendly safari adventure

The Africa expert Sue Watt wanted to show her niece and five-year-old great-niece the beauty of the savannah in Kenya. Here's what happened



Sue, second from left, with her husband, Will, great-niece, Seren, and niece, Carys

WILL WHITFORD

Sue Watt

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**A** giraffe strides gracefully, almost in slow motion, across the plains of El

Karama. With quiet curiosity he stops and stares at us just a few metres away from our Land Cruiser. Five-year-old Seren turns to me, eyes wide with wonder and the biggest smile lighting up her face. “Is that Eddie?” she whispers.

We’d met Eddie two days earlier in Nairobi, some 150 miles from El Karama Wildlife Conservancy in central Kenya’s Laikipia region. The greedy dominant male of the Giraffe Centre that rescues and breeds rare Rothschild giraffes, he’d captivated Seren and her mother, Carys, as they fed him herby-smelling pellets by hand from an elevated wooden walkway. When they turned for a moment to look

at the camera, Eddie suddenly scooped his long grey tongue into the container and swiped the lot.

This is my niece Carys and great-niece Seren's first [safari](#), and it's also a first for my husband, Will, and me. My work as a travel writer specialising in Africa has afforded us numerous safaris over nearly 20 years — but we've never travelled with a child.

Not having kids ourselves, we've generally given them a wide berth on safaris, avoiding potentially boisterous youngsters scaring the animals or getting in the way of Will's photos. Our nieces and nephews, now in their thirties and forties, were into football, fashion or festivals when we got into wildlife, so travelling with them simply never happened. But when Seren came along, the first child of the next generation, I wanted to show her this wild world we love while she was still young, hopefully inspiring her to love it too, and Carys jumped at the chance of our "family" safari.

## What you need to know

**How to get there?** Emakoko Lodge in Nairobi National Park is a 45-minute drive from the airport. Then it's a five-hour drive to El Karama Lodge

**Who will love it?** Curious, adventure-loving children of all ages, from toddlers to teenagers, will love El Karama, as will their parents and grandparents

**Insider tip** For young children take plenty of snacks, easy-to-pack games, a diary and animal books with stickers. Children's binoculars were a huge asset

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## The magic of safari through children's eyes

Although excited to share our passion with them both, we were also slightly apprehensive — what if it's a disaster? I sought the advice of Mike Kelly, cofounder of the family safari specialist Coral Tree Travel. "You'll love it," he reassured me. "For us old timers, we're so used to safaris, we forget all the innocent stuff. Seeing it through a child's eyes, learning and enjoying it all is really special."

El Karama Lodge in the conservancy was already on my radar for its sustainable, family-focused ethos. But Mike suggested spending our first two nights at the Emakoko, a lodge bordering Nairobi National Park, allowing Seren a break from travelling after the overnight flight to the Kenyan capital and calling it “an ideal introduction to safaris”.



The Private House at Emakoko is perfect for families, says Sue Watt

SAM DAVIES

He's right. On our drive to the lodge, we pass gawky ostriches strutting around, zebras, warthogs and prancing impalas, and dainty black-backed jackals trotting beside the road. “Can I have a jackal as a pet?” she asks innocently, loving their cute, underrated beauty.

At the Emakoko we stay in the gorgeous Private House with two huge en suite rooms separated by a lounge and dining area. With a pool and friendly staff who instinctively put children at their ease, it's perfect for families.

Seren's fascination with wildlife begins to blossom on game drives with our guide Sila Muturi. We come across Oloshona, a seven-year old lion, roaring loudly and flashing his terrifying canines. “Ooh, he's fancy,” Seren says, enthralled but not at all scared. She loves watching giraffes munching on acacias. And she's intrigued

by the sweeping horn of a rhino grazing by the roadside against the quirky backdrop of Nairobi's downtown skyline. "I never thought we'd see so much here," Carys says. Neither did I.

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Our drive north to Laikipia takes five hours, leaving the sprawling city of Nairobi for the sandy terracotta-coloured tracks and savannah grasslands of El Karama Wildlife Conservancy with distant views of Mount Kenya.

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### A family-run, sustainable lodge in El Karama

Built from recycled materials and totally solar-powered, El Karama Lodge, the only one on this private 15,000-acre conservancy, has families at its core. The owner, Murray Grant, a wildlife sculptor, was born here and with his wife, Sophie, built the lodge in 2006. It remains family-run with a dedicated team of local staff. We're staying at Nilotica Private, an exclusive-use enclave within the lodge grounds that has four luxury tented cottages, a relaxing lounge with dining area and huge fireplace for chilly evenings, a refreshing chemical-free pool and our own chef, waiter and guide. With its soothing ambience and warm, friendly team, Nilotica soon feels like home.



An outdoor dining area at El Karama Lodge

On game drives Seren, often peering through her yellow children's binoculars, provides running commentaries on the surrounding wildlife, emulating our guide Robbie Omungiasi's style, albeit lacking his detail. "There are ostriches at 12 o'clock, impalas here and zebra there, and there's a bird in the sky..." When she sees muddy buffaloes, they're "covered in poo" and every giraffe "looks like Eddie". She's full of questions too, like why peculiar-looking gerenuk antelopes have such long necks — "because they eat trees and shrubs so they need to reach up high," Robbie replies. And why hippo poo is "so messy" — apparently they flick their tails as they defecate, splattering their scent all around.

What distinguishes El Karama from many lodges is that rather than merely tolerating children, here it positively nurtures them. Its Bush School activities include fishing, walks and farm visits. But Seren chooses to read books on wild animals with Robbie, feed not-so-wild rabbits in the farm pen, sculpt a model of one of these rabbits from termite clay, and make a bracelet with beads like the local Masai women. She rides a gentle 24-year-old chestnut pony called Smudgie along El Karama's running track, led by their friendly horseman Adam. And with the head chef, Jane Mwaniki, she makes bread in the shape of Eddie the giraffe (obviously), with pumpkin seeds for his patches. We eat it with lunch, but she saves his tail for Robbie.

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Seren meeting Eddie at the Giraffe Centre in Nairobi

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Nilotica's team plays a starring role in our safari and, much to my relief, makes it all so effortless. They're all local, with long connections to El Karama: both Gerald and Robbie's parents worked on the conservancy, with Robbie actually born here. And all three progressed through the ranks as gardeners and cleaners to where they are today. Their sense of joy and pride in what they do shines through.

The bond between Seren and Robbie is wonderful to see. "I just pretend to be a kid, to be on their level," he tells me, explaining this dream job combines the chance to teach with his passion for wildlife. The head waiter, Gerald Mutua, is always smiling, always gentle in their conversations, even when he's teaching Seren to use a catapult for scaring off monkeys determined to snatch our breakfast. And Jane teaches her to make scrambled eggs during a surprise bush breakfast, braids her hair, and is as generous with cuddles for Seren as she is with our delicious meals.

This safari is for Carys too, and she has her own treats. One afternoon she relaxes with a massage in El Karama's bush spa while Will and I help Seren to write her diary. And she loves safari sundowners, when we stop our Land Cruiser at a beauty spot and Robbie lays out cold drinks and nibbles. While he entertains Seren, playing football or boules, we grown-ups chat and chill with the sun setting behind the hills and the perfect G&T.



Carys and Seren in their 'flying tree tent'

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One night we camp out in the bush. Both Carys and Seren are wide-eyed when they see their "flying tree tent" tied between three posts and suspended about 1.5m off the ground, with domed mosquito nets for canvas. Will and I choose the more traditional bell tent with camp beds and room to stand.

Gerald pours our sundowners around the campfire, then we're treated to Jane's superb roast lamb dinner and crumble for dessert, all served on a linen-covered table. Back around the campfire for nightcaps, Robbie is declared champion of the addictive "magnetic chess" puzzle after beating Seren and Will. We eventually go to bed full of happiness under a sky full of stars and in the dark I hear the distant roar of a lion and the whooping of hyenas calling their clan.

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“What does a hyena sound like?” Seren asks in the morning, and I do my best to impersonate the unpopular predators as she writes “OO-WUP, OO-WUP” in her diary, getting full marks for creative spelling.

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## Finally... lions

On our last afternoon she gives Robbie a yellow clay lion she’s made with a bright orange mane. “It’s a lucky charm, so that we can see lions,” she says. Robbie places it prominently on the dashboard as we head off on our drive. Within half an hour the charm works: there by the roadside just ahead of us lies a pride of nine lions, dozing in the sun. Worried she might get overexcited, I remind Seren she has to be quiet when lions are around and she behaves perfectly, respecting the animals and just taking in this beautiful sighting like a safari pro.



A pride of lions at El Karama

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Mike’s words come back to me as we leave El Karama with heavy hearts — our family safari has been truly special, more than any of us could have imagined, and

there are hugs all round with Robbie, Jane and Gerald. “Seeing Seren experience everything, seeing her interest in the animals and her confidence grow — it’s just magical,” Carys says, holding Seren’s hand while she sits quietly in the Land Cruiser with tears rolling down her cheeks. “When I’m grown-up, I’m going to come back here and work with Robbie,” Seren announces.

**Sue Watt was a guest of Coral Tree Travel, which has six nights — two nights’ full board at the Emakoko Lodge, three nights’ full board at El Karama’s Nilotica Private House and one night’s B&B at Four Points by Sheraton Nairobi Airport — from £5,460pp, including flights, transfers and a visit to the giraffe centre ([coraltreetravel.com](http://coraltreetravel.com))**

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