

Where to stay

Reviews of the month ★ Kenyan safari camps ★ Oslo ★ Cumbria ★ Plus Suite talk

Kenya Sasaab

Kindred spirit

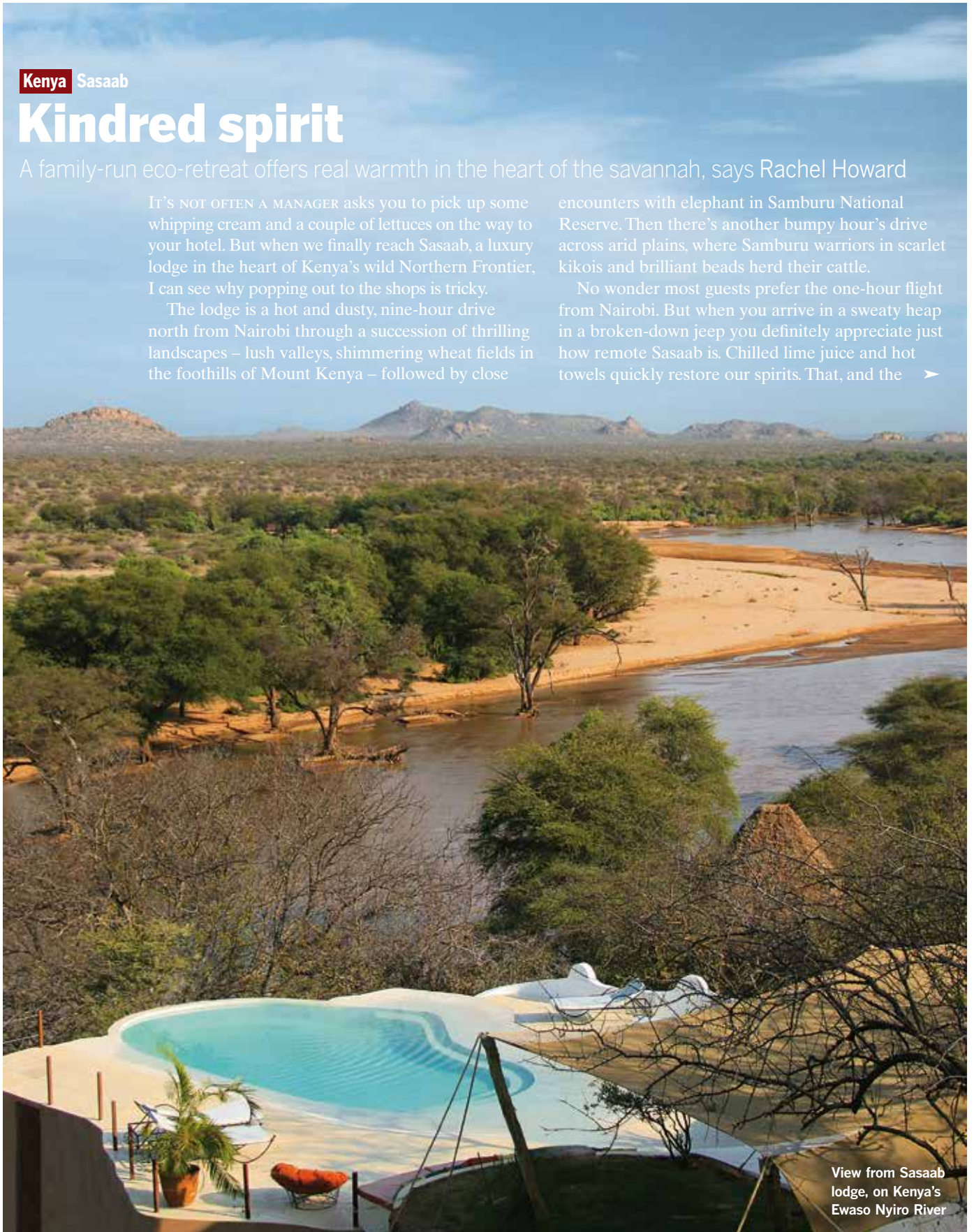
A family-run eco-retreat offers real warmth in the heart of the savannah, says Rachel Howard

IT'S NOT OFTEN A MANAGER asks you to pick up some whipping cream and a couple of lettuces on the way to your hotel. But when we finally reach Sasaab, a luxury lodge in the heart of Kenya's wild Northern Frontier, I can see why popping out to the shops is tricky.

The lodge is a hot and dusty, nine-hour drive north from Nairobi through a succession of thrilling landscapes – lush valleys, shimmering wheat fields in the foothills of Mount Kenya – followed by close

encounters with elephant in Samburu National Reserve. Then there's another bumpy hour's drive across arid plains, where Samburu warriors in scarlet kikois and brilliant beads herd their cattle.

No wonder most guests prefer the one-hour flight from Nairobi. But when you arrive in a sweaty heap in a broken-down jeep you definitely appreciate just how remote Sasaab is. Chilled lime juice and hot towels quickly restore our spirits. That, and the ➤



View from Sasaab lodge, on Kenya's Ewaso Nyiro River

PHOTOGRAPH: STEVIE MANN

Where to stay



Left, one of the nine tented rooms at Sasaab and, below, the Moorish-style lounge

► sensational view from the 'mess', a Moorish lounge on a ridge above the Ewaso Nyiro River. Apart from a thatched *makuti* roof, it's open to the elements and overlooks a savannah landscape that melts into the distant peaks of the Matthews Range. There's a telescope, but you don't need it to spot baboons loping along the dry riverbed.

'My father would come here to bag oryx,' says Mikey Carr-Hartley, matter-of-factly. Soft-spoken Mikey is one of a long line of Carr-Hartleys, East African explorers, hunters, and now conservationists. Clark Gable and Ava Gardner stayed at the family ranch while filming *Mogambo* in the early 1950s. Now Mikey and his wife Tanya have created this glamorous eco-retreat, worthy of today's Hollywood stars and

This is not exactly camping: the four-poster bed is draped in richly coloured fabrics; a footpath leads to an outdoor rain-shower


fashion royalty including Calvin Klein and Donna Karan. Skincare supremo Liz Earle was so smitten with Sasaab that she opened a spa here and is working on creating therapeutic products made from local plants.

Today, we have the place to ourselves, but with only nine rooms accessed by private footpaths, Sasaab will always feel exclusive. Although my enormous 'tent' has a zip-up mesh entrance to keep insects and wildlife at bay, this is not exactly camping: the four-poster bed is draped in richly coloured fabrics; a footpath leads to an outdoor rain-shower and wraps around it like a snail's shell; a hyrax is sunbathing by the plunge pool.

A spotted genet with a stripy tail joins us for a candlelit dinner beneath a ludicrously

starry sky. Over feta samosas, lamb tagine, and sticky date pudding, Carr-Hartley explains how a percentage of the revenue helps finance local schools, mobile clinics and businesses. The land is leased from the Samburu, who will eventually inherit the lodge. The Carr-Hartleys' ethos is as much community as conservation. Their next project is Giraffe Manor in Nairobi, famous for its resident herd of Rothschild giraffes, which will reopen this summer after a brush-up. In December, they will open the first and only lodge in Solio, a private game reserve founded to protect the endangered black rhino.

At 6.30am, with a gentle '*Hodi*', my butler brings tea and biscuits. Activities are tailor-made. We opt to visit a local village with Daudi, our Samburu guide, who shows us how women bleed camels for blood milkshakes and build round huts from cow dung, hide, twigs and mud. After a bush breakfast of muffins and muesli, Daudi shows off his game-spotting skills, honing in on a Somali ostrich and her six chicks several kilometres away, and a herd of Grévy's zebra, rare beauties with fluffy round ears.

As dusk falls, we peel our sun-baked selves from Sasaab's infinity-edged pool and ride off into the sunset on some rather truculent camels. Our destination is a kopje with 360-degree views across the savannah. At the summit, beaming staff are waiting with barbecued sausages and ice-cold Tusker beers. Now that's what I call anticipating your guests' needs. 



4 MORE FAMILY-RUN SAFARI CAMPS IN KENYA

WILDERNESS TRAILS

Lewa Downs has been in the Craig family since 1922. Determined to reverse the damage done by their game-bagging grandmother, Ian and Will Craig created a conservancy famous for its endangered black rhino. Karamushu, a Masaai guide, leads safaris on foot or horseback; Will takes intrepid guests for a spin in his biplane. www.journeysbydesign.com. From £430 per person

RICHARD'S CAMP

Richard Roberts grew up in the Mara: his parents helped bring together the Masaai communities to create this conservation area. Their former home is now an intimate camp with seven solar-powered tents and a resident pride of lion. Every stay is tailor-made, but communal meals are convivial affairs hosted by Richard's nephew, Jay MacLeod. www.richardscamp.com. From £335 per person



ELEPHANT WATCH CAMP

Near Iain Douglas-Hamilton's Save the Elephants research centre in Samburu National Reserve, his wife Oria has created this eco-camp on the banks of the Ewaso Nyiro river. It has just six, fabric-swathed tents, so only a privileged few can observe the herds at close range with guides who know each elephant by name. www.elephantwatchesafaris.com. From £350 per person

COTTARS 1920S

The Cottars, East Africa's first safari outfitters, introduced the Queen Mother to the bush. Calvin Cottar operates this elegant camp on 22,000 acres with his wife Louise and their children. The 10 tents are lit with kerosene lamps, and furnished with antiques, family heirlooms and brass horns to summon room service. Each party has a dedicated guide for activities, which include fishing expeditions and night drives. www.cottars.com. From £335 per person

SASAAB, KENYA (00 254 20 251 3166; WWW.SASAAB.COM; WWW.THESAFARICOLLECTION.COM). DOUBLES FROM US\$530 PER PERSON PER NIGHT, INCLUDING MEALS AND ACTIVITIES