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A life in the day of a safari guide

Toby Fenwick-Wilson, 37, safari guide, on sunsets, psychobabble and crotchety camels



Toby always explores on foot, sleeping on a mat and eating maize porridge

http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/travel/holiday_type/wildlife/article6987837.ece

Cockerels wake me at dawn — if they haven't been attacked in the night by genets. My four-year-old, Sita, jumps into bed with my wife, Polly, and I throw open the shutters to watch the dawn break and listen to the birdsong. Then I make tea and sit down with the night watchman to find out what happened in the night. Very often a hyena or a leopard will have come into the garden, or giraffes will eat the flowers off the walls of the house.

We live on a terrace on the side of a hill that looks down for ever across the Kapiti plains towards Kilimanjaro. In this boiling cauldron of a place I live in a beautifully cool farmhouse, built by Italian prisoners of war. Slate floors, terracotta tiles and lavender shutters. It's straight out of Umbria.

I'm a shareholder in an enormous co-operative of 6,000 Wakamba tribesmen. We're so marginalised here. Our land is dry and arid and very little grows. People are living off fumes. We need famine relief, but we're just not a fashionable tribe. Every day we have people at our door needing medical help, schooling, or transport to get what little maize they have grown to a market. The idea of being a safari guide is terribly glamorous, but a lot of my time is spent doing amateur social work, sitting under trees in the baking sun, trying to thrash out these problems. We're not wealthy, but we do what we can. We've raised money to build a clinic and when guests come they often bring suitcases of clothes and books.

Before breakfast I take myself off on a walk through the hills, checking my camels first. I love camels. They're often filthy tempered, but so would you be — I've done trips where they've carried everything and haven't been fed or watered for 14 days. I love the smell of them. They smell of leather and the dust of the desert. Then it's back to the house for a full English with freshly baked bread and fruit — mangoes, bananas and pawpaw. Almost everything we eat we grow. At lunch time we pick what we need from our shamba [smallholding]. We've got eggs and honey from our hives. The only things we buy are meat and flour.

My passion is exploring areas where no one else goes: parts of northern Kenya, southern Tanzania, northern Ethiopia, that's my parish, and the new frontier, southern Sudan. War and plague have preserved amazing wildernesses in Africa, but the people are not used to pale faces like me showing an interest. I have the trump card of being an eccentric enigma. I'm a kind of freak show passing through. If I'm on a recce, I'll spend three or four weeks exploring, always on foot, living exactly as a local would. I sleep on a herio [mat] and eat maize porridge and drink camel's milk, boiled with ginger and cardamom. Very salty and nutritious. It's the Guinness of the milk world. And I always take tea, sugar and chewing tobacco as gifts.

Most of my clients are cash rich, time poor; few want to experience Africa the way I do. Once I've got access to an amazing wildlife or cultural experience on foot, the rich and famous go in in helicopters. I'll have sent in vast tents, filled with linen and fine china, staffed by men I've trained up as waiters, butlers and cooks. Lunch and dinner is whatever clients have requested — maybe delicious green salad, feta and a glass of chilled rosé. There's an expression: "Any fool can be uncomfortable in the bush."

Every safari is tailor-made and we provide everything our clients ask for. Very often I'll visit them in London or LA beforehand. They say: "We want to see people unaffected by modern life." But there's a lot of fear. Some want their surgeons sent out, others send aviation specialists to check the helicopters.

My favourite tribe are the Gabbra, camel herders who drift back and forth over the Ethiopian-Kenyan border. Their life is about finding water for their cows, travelling for days over harsh mountainous terrain to get it to them, then doing it all again. It's a very pure, elemental existence. After a week here the priorities of the industrialist or the celebrity have been rejigged and you can see the pressure sloughing off.

Sunset in Africa is a huge thing for man and beast. You can actually sense the animals contemplating night. For people it's a nice whisky soda and a chance to discuss the day and each other. There's a special atmosphere here. This is the cradle of mankind, it's where we all sprang from, and if you're a sensitive soul, you pick up on it. At night over dinner we become amateur psychobabblers. When the bottle runs dry, people exhausted from sensory overload drift away. If I had to leave Africa tomorrow, my strongest memory would be going to sleep listening to leopards rasping and the quiet banter of the night watchmen, burbling round the camp fire.

• *Toby is a safari guide for Abercrombie and Kent*