

TRIPS!

»TRAVEL NOW: GREAT GETAWAYS AND DISCOVERIES | Edited by Sheila F. Buckmaster



A stay at Giraffe Manor, in Kenya, includes quality time with the resident giants.

Animal Kingdoms

Africa's private wildlife sanctuaries offer safari alternatives. **By Olivia Stren**

Acacia trees spread across the horizon like parasols. Laura, a young giraffe, lingers in the shade with the grace of a Henry James heroine at a garden party. Her seven-foot-tall, eight-month-old son, Gordon, glides through blond grasses, while weaver birds career through jacarandas like winged lemons.

At six p.m. sharp, Cosmos Mutinda, a staffer at Giraffe Manor—an inviting fig-bearded baronial pile near Nairobi,

Kenya—calls to the animals: It's snack time. Lynn, Mac, and Annie appear with ears cocked from behind a tangle of olive trees. They join Laura and her baby and wander to the windows, sticking their necks in for their nightly nibble. With a G&T in one hand, giraffe kibble in the other, and Lynn gazing at me through movie-star lashes, I suddenly feel like I'm in some fantasy land between the *Chronicles of Narnia* and *Gosford Park*, half expecting the

giraffes to ask me for a tippie of brandy.

The manor serves as a sanctuary for these Rothschild giraffes—an endangered subspecies characterized by their horns (the male has five) and coat (they don't have any spots below their knees).

Places like Giraffe Manor entice travelers seeking encounters with animals without the bump of a four-wheel and the obstruction of a zoom lens. Giraffe Manor was built as a country estate in 1932 by Scottish toffee magnate David

Duncan. Some four decades later, Betty Leslie-Melville (a former model from Baltimore) and husband Jock Leslie-Melville snapped up the property. The couple then made it their mission to save Kenya's Rothschilds and started by bottle-raising a couple of baby giraffes, playing with them on their front lawn like they would any other pets. After Jock died, in 1984, Betty decided to turn her home into a six-room "girafferie" for travelers—a fundraising tool for her work with animals. Giraffe Manor's Karen Blixen Suite, named after the *Out of Africa* author who lived a few miles away, sports the writer's Danish-pine furniture; walls are decorated with illustrations by Blixen's cook, Kamante.

Breakfast and cocktails come with giraffe visits. Guests also can go on guided strolls through the sanctuary, home, too, to antelope, warthogs, and some 180 species of birds.

Betty died last year, leaving the property to son Rick and his wife, Bryony.

"It's almost as though the house was designed for giraffes," says Bryony as her two Jack Russell terriers trot about her feet, their five puppies close behind. There are now ten giraffes in residence here.

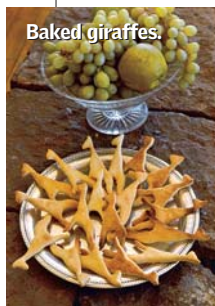
"Each giraffe has its own personality," Bryony says. "Laura is shy. Jock

[the 19-year-old dominant male in this matriarchal society] is gentle, and Lynn's greedy. We'd make excuses—she's growing, she's a teenager, she's pregnant—but we finally realized that she's just greedy."

After Lynn indulges in one more handful of kibble, the sun sinks behind the Ngong Hills. The giraffes glide away into the night. But they'll sashay back tomorrow morning for their breakfast, ever the lords and ladies of the manor.

■ www.giraffemanor.com.

Montreal-based **OLIVIA STREN** wrote "48 Hours: Quebec City" (October 2006).



Baked giraffes.

"Ellies," Cats, and More

A trio of private havens for Africa's grand four-leggeds.

David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust

NAIROBI NATIONAL PARK, KENYA Visit this elephant orphanage and you'll feel like you've entered the kind of magical landscape where Babar and Celeste met: Warthogs, impalas, eland, zebras, and black rhinos gambol about the penny-red earth, birds cut through the air, and a group of infant "ellies"—trunks linked—



march toward their morning mud bath and milk bottle. The Trust is open to visitors 11 a.m. to noon every day, allowing travelers to witness the ablutions. You might also get to meet Trust co-founder Dr. Dame Daphne Sheldrick. Recently knighted by the Queen, Sheldrick was the first person to perfect the milk formula essential for raising newborn orphan elephants, a very difficult process. Sheldrick has hand-reared dozens of elephants, repatriating most into the wild.

"An elephant child is like a human child," Sheldrick says with maternal devotion. "The little boy elephants like rough-and-tumble games, and the little girl elephants like to look after the new babies." Sheldrick continues: "The most important thing to an elephant child is its family: These little orphans need 24-hour care and affection."

Many of the charges are here because of poachers. The baby elephants "keepers" sleep on beds of hay in the stalls, waking up every three hours for feedings.

The integration into the wild is a slow process. All involved acknowledge that it is sad to see them move on, but also very satisfying to witness a broken orphan elephant come back to life and take steps toward becoming wild.

■ www.sheldrickwildlifetrust.org.

Mount Kenya Wildlife Conservancy

NANYUKI, KENYA Perched on the slopes of Africa's second highest peak, the 1,216-acre Conservancy is populated with some 2,000 animals and 26 different species (most of which you'd be lucky to glimpse on safari). This sanctuary is also home to one of the largest animal orphanages in Africa, claiming about 70 rescued babies at a time.

"We have just about every animal here; you never know what you're going to find," says Conservancy co-founder Don Hunt.

"My wife, Iris," Hunt continues,

"was recently raising a baby chimp and a baby white zebra [its stripes barely visible] at the same time. They became pals."

The ranch is most famous as host (and rescuer) of the endangered Kenyan mountain bongo, a caramel-color antelope with white pinstripes. With help from the United Nations and the Kenyan government, the Hunts initiated the Mountain Bongo Repatriation Program in hopes of reintroducing the bongos into the wild. Visitors can watch the animals being fed, bathed, groomed, and nurtured. "You could help bottle-feed them, if you'd like," adds Hunt. ■ www.animalorphanagekenya.org.

Cheetah Conservation Fund

OTJIWARONGO, NAMIBIA There are some 12,000 cheetahs worldwide and 3,000 of them freely roam about Namibia's vast thorn-bush savannas. Magnificently poised between Namibia's capital, Windhoek, and Etosha National Park, CCF is home to cheetahs that have been orphaned or injured.

Wildlife conservationist Dr. Laurie Marker founded the conservation center—open every day of the year—in 1990, after 16 years spent studying the speedy cat at a wildlife park in Oregon, where she ran the veterinary clinic. Boasting a 100,000-acre wildlife reserve, which includes a teaching farm, cheetah enclosures, and a research center, CCF works to "achieve best practice in the conservation and management for the world's cheetahs."

"We try to keep the cheetahs living free, though some come in as bottle babies and live out their lives at the center's 200-acre sanctuary. Without their mothers' care, they can't return into the wild," Marker explains.

If you make advance arrangements, you can sometimes see cheetahs chugging along at up to 70 miles per hour, but the most memorable thing to do here is go on a "cheetah safari." Dr. Marker takes visitors on hikes through the bush with her 10-year-old pet cheetah, Chewbaaka. She raised him from the time he was three weeks old.

"Chewbaaka, calm and composed, purrs all the time, and he walks about with what seems to be great pride. It's as if he knows that he's the ambassador here," Marker says. ■ www.cheetah.org. —O.S.



Conservationist Laurie Marker and rescued cheetah Chewbaaka take five.

STEPHEN MORGENTHAU/CONRIS (TOP); LIZ GILBERT/CONRIS (MIDDLE); CHRIS JOHNS/MSGS