



## Getting away from it all

*Travel writer Amber Hunter explains why her family chose to take time to travel in the outdoor classroom of Africa when their son was a toddler*

I sat up in the dark, feeding Saxon, as I had done countless times before. Except this time, we weren't at home, we were in the far northern reaches of the Serengeti — and a lion was padding around our tent. My husband, our 18-month-old son and I had spent the last week traversing the Serengeti National Park, just as the first wildebeest herds began moving from the central plains toward the Western Corridor.

The song of crickets and the whooping of hyenas had lulled us to sleep. Now, the thumping of my heart was deafened by a lion's call that reverberated through my bones. In years past, this moment would have thrilled me, but that night the canvas suddenly felt flimsy, and our expedition into the bush with a toddler weighed on me like an elephant.

Some time ago, we decided to go all in on travelling. The pandemic in Melbourne had been stifling, and what was once the 'best city in the world' now felt fractured. In its place emerged frank conversations about the childhood we wanted for Saxon, one akin to our own — simple, barefoot and in Africa.

In the bustle, life moves too quickly. Rhythm gives way to rush and presence becomes fleeting. In a blink, Saxon was no longer a baby, and time felt like a quick-handed thief. But, out here in the bush, our pace slowed to an amble — spotting birds, searching for dung beetles and watching baboons.

We often heard, 'But he won't remember it.' Yet we went, certain these small encounters would leave an imprint. Since becoming parents, our pull to Africa has only grown — and, with it, a shared call to adventure together.

### LIFE LESSONS

In the last two months, we've reconnected with loved ones in South Africa, danced with the Maasai and followed elephants in the rain. We've chased fast-moving crabs on Nosy Komba and combed the orangewood forests for tiny chameleons and crowned lemurs on Nosy Ankaio, off the coast of Madagascar.

On Tanzania's Mnemba Island, we watched a green sea turtle nest under the moonlight. In the dark, we dashed from our bed to the beach to see an exhausted turtle cover her eggs with sand before dragging herself back into the water. Her species has a one in 1000 chance of survival and, despite laying and covering her eggs, she'll never return. Saxon watched on in awe — and it felt visceral.

The fragility of life is evident in scenes across our travels, from rural villages to street corners and out in the bush. But there's a humanness to Africa that we haven't encountered elsewhere, and exposing Saxon to its rawness feels natural because, through it, there are lessons in resilience, strength and connection.

In this pursuit, we'll continue trading routine for small discoveries — watching a trail of Matabele ants and listening to the wild at night. We'll step away from the noise in search of perspective. And we'll pack up our earthly belongings, again and again, if it means saying 'yes' to experiences that stretch us as a family.

That night, as Saxon slept soundly, I realised in the glow of sunrise the lion spoor would thrill him. He'd lead me by the hand and trail the prints in the dust, and it would be another story tinged with nostalgia that we'd regale when he's grown.

As for what's next, the list grows. We plan to return to South Africa, Madagascar and Botswana, and explore lesser-visited regions of Kenya, Uganda and Rwanda.

And maybe he won't remember our travels in the same way we will, but perhaps instead in fragments that will shape his subconscious, laying the foundation for a curious, well-grounded, adventurous life.



ALL PHOTOS: AMBER HUNTER

## Splendid isolation

*Fern Montgomery extolls the virtues of going exclusive*

Travelling anywhere with children can be stressful, not just because you want them to have an amazing holiday, but also because you worry that they might ruin someone else's.

Are they being too loud? Are they splashing too much? Are they asking too many questions? Are they annoying other guests? All of this goes through your mind (on repeat). This is why, when we took our children to South Luangwa in Zambia, we opted to stay in exclusive-use houses, namely Robin Pope Safaris' Robin's House and Luangwa Safari House. This meant that Noah (12) and Casey (10) could be themselves 100 per cent of the time and, consequently, we, as parents, were more relaxed.

Staying in an exclusive-use property offered us the home-away-from-home that we needed. It also meant we could adapt our trip to suit us (or the kids). On days we needed to slow down, we could, by skipping a game drive and choosing to watch the wildlife from the privacy of our balcony or from the edge of the pool. And on days where they had more energy, we could add extra activities; fishing ticked this particular box.

The teams at both properties were incredibly welcoming and spoil us in every way. Casey is an particularly fussy eater, and is also self-conscious about it, so having a chef who could understand her and cater for this easily made a huge difference to both her and us.

### CONNECTIONS

Our guides, Obi and Yona, built relaxed relationships with us all and they managed to bring the bush to life for the kids; a year on, they still quote Obi and retell his funny stories.

There are many memories from our trip that bring a big smile to my face. One in particular was when the team had surprised us with a bush breakfast on the banks of the Luangwa River. The kids had filled up on rusks during our morning coffee stop while out on safari, so weren't hungry, leaving Jeff and I to enjoy the delicious food together. At one point, we watched Noah and Casey, in the distance, living their best life, playing in the sand — under the watchful eye of Obi, who ensured they didn't become crocodile bait.

Even the simple things made a difference, like the kids running around the property exploring and laying rights to a bedroom, and discovering the 'hidden kitchen team', who always had a delicious treat to share with them.

Perhaps the biggest benefit, though, was the ability to turn the Wi-Fi off. This allowed us to reconnect in a different way. We played games, talked and just enjoyed hanging out as a family, away from all the distractions of technology.

ALL PHOTOS: FERN MONTGOMERY

