

HOW TO BE A GUIDE

Sue Watt spends a week with the team at Alex Walker's Serian in Mara North Conservancy as part of their annual Pyramids of Life refresher course. She learns about animal behaviour and what it takes to be a guide



ROBIN ALLEN / ALEX WALKER'S SERIAN

ABOVE: Serian's Pyramids of Life course focuses on the smaller details, such as this tortoise beetle. TOP: A yellow pansy butterfly. OPPOSITE: The team studies leopard claw marks on a tree in the Olololo escarpment, overlooking the Mara North



WILL WHITFORD

An army of hundreds march through the mud in a solid black line, dutifully following their leader. We follow too, mesmerised from the moment they leave their home territory until the massacre comes to its gruesome conclusion. Their attack is swift, a sting operation designed to cause maximum chaos. It ends in carnage, with each assailant carrying at least one soon-to-be-eaten corpse back to base.

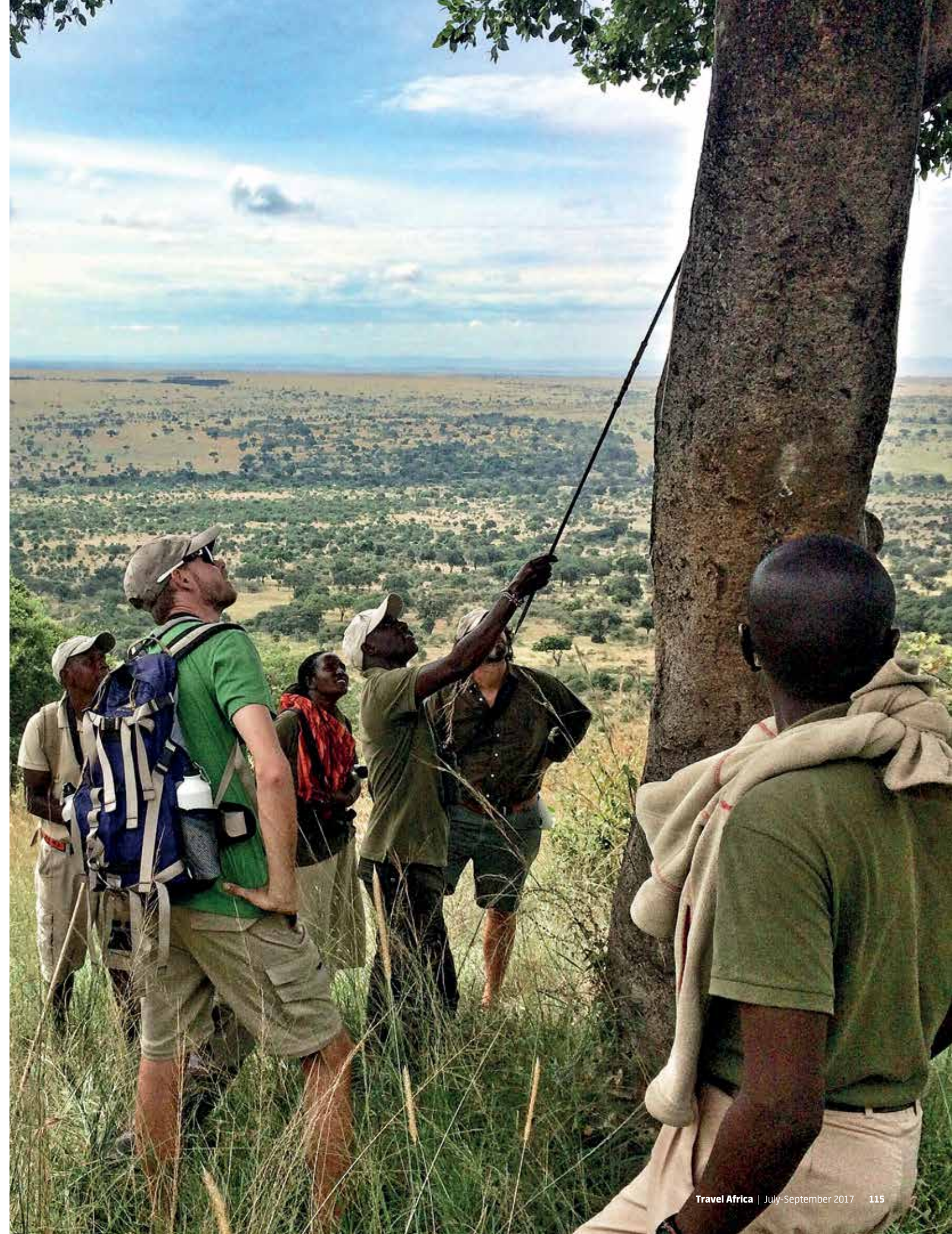
We're witnessing a wildlife phenomenon that is astounding in its ferocity and focus, yet few people take the time to study Matabele ants hunting termites. They're called sizzling ants in Kenya's Masai Mara: we blow on them, and hear their collective hiss that's intended to deter predators. "Those ants are definitely the highlight of the day!" Judy, one of our 10 guides, enthuses. It's a strange choice perhaps since we'd earlier seen a gorgeous young leopard preening herself. But she's no ordinary guide, and this is no ordinary safari.

Judy is a member of the award-winning guiding team at Alex Walker's Serian camps in Kenya and Tanzania, and we've joined them on their annual refresher course called Pyramids of Life, which has recently opened up to guests.

"The point of Pyramids of Life is to take the passivity out of what safaris have become, sitting in a jeep being driven from sighting to sighting, and then going home," Alex Walker, founder of Serian, tells me. "We want to encourage guests to see through the eyes of a guide, to open their minds to a lifetime of curiosity and fascination. It's an invitation to take time, to dive deeper."

In March each year, all of the guides from the five camps in the Masai Mara and Serengeti come together for this three-week course to brush up on their guiding skills and learn from each other, under the tutelage of experts Clint Schipper and Chris Stamper. There are no rigid lesson plans here, no strict timetables, not even a normal classroom. "This is our classroom," Clint says, as we look over the Mara North Conservancy panning out before us in all its wild glory. School was never so beautiful. →

FRED SWIFT / ALEX WALKER'S SERIAN





CHRIS STAMPER / ALEX WALKER'S SERIAN

First, the nightjar chirrup before going to bed, then gradually others join in. Ring-necked doves, striped kingfishers, guinea fowls and African cuckoos among countless other songbirds take their turn, some shrill or rattling, others melodic or single-pitch, all seeming to know their part as they build to the final crescendo of Africa's greatest choral performance



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OPPOSITE: Hungry tawny-flanked prinia nestlings at Serian 'The Original' camp
FROM TOP: Exploring the Mara North after dark in search of nocturnal wildlife; the lioness, Numba, with her five-week-old cubs

Our course is totally immersive: we see what's out there, let situations evolve and learn from them," he tells me as we all head out in two Land Cruisers on our first morning. We drive a short distance from our beautiful camp on the banks of the Mara River, our home for the week. It's still dark and the cool morning air is heavy with silence. But not for long. "Imagine how your guests will feel on their first morning after a long journey and they come here," Clint whispers to his 10 guides. "We can say to them: 'The idea is just to sit quietly – let's listen to the waking of the day.' Then we just let it happen..."

First, the nightjar chirrups before going to bed, then gradually others join in. Ring-necked doves, striped kingfishers, guinea fowls and African cuckoos among countless other songbirds take their turn, some shrill or rattling, others melodic or single-pitch, all seeming to know their part as they build to the final crescendo of Africa's greatest choral performance. Occasionally, we hear a hyena whining, a zebra barking, a human tummy rumbling, a hippo laughing – our world is waking up and I'm waking up too, to a new connection with nature: I've heard dawn choruses before but never quite like this.

I feel nervous on my first morning, not wanting to appear stupid. "We don't expect guests to be experts," Clint reassures me. "Primarily, Pyramids is a guiding course but it's also for guests interested in the whole wildlife experience beyond the Big Five. It's good to have them along, to ask questions and join in."

Serian's guides in Mara North have various levels of experience, ranging from two to 14 years. Many have been trained at Koiyaki Guiding School in nearby Naboisho Conservancy; others have simply absorbed information through life in the bush. Pyramids is a blending of their scientific knowledge and ancient bushlore: it's about the old school and the new, learning and teaching together.

And the former is never-ending, particularly where birds are concerned. Clint is an avid ornithology expert but my own interest in our feathered friends has hitherto been limited to the big and the beautiful. Our trainer's enthusiasm for all things avian is contagious and we're soon enthralled by a constant stream of what he calls 'wow facts' from both trainer and his team – facts, he explains, that make the guests go "Wow!" →

GREAT GUIDES: Ngare Nyuki (right) and Mzee Godfrey (left), two of Serian's Maasai guides participating in the annual Pyramids of Life course

5 FUN FACTS I NEVER KNEW

1 The dawn chorus is all about sex. Male birds wait for the time they can pitch in, then sing their hearts out making the most of their chance to attract a mate. Scientific studies have shown that the order of the birdsong is the same every morning. Different species won't block each other's voices, but will join another if it has a different pitch.

2 Buffalo will kill young lion cubs instinctively even though they're too small to cause them injury — it's an insurance action against future potential attacks.

3 In Egyptian mythology, an Egyptian goose is highly revered since it is believed to have been responsible for 'laying' the earth, hence they're often seen on hieroglyphs. They lay several eggs — between five to 12 at a time.

4 Baby giraffe drop up to 1.5m from their mothers when they're born. They grow 20cm in their first month of life, slowing to 2.5cm a month thereafter.

5 Pied kingfishers stay in couples but have an unrelated male as a helper. Scientists have discovered that there are more males than females so the gooseberry male hangs around in the hope of stepping into a dead male's shoes in the event of his demise.

The guides eagerly suss out the birds' identities and chip in with their own power facts — such as the only difference between a perched lesser and a common kestrel is the colour of their toenails; southern ground hornbills are so strong they'll break glass with their beaks if they see their own reflection; and the northern wheatear, a nondescript LBJ (little brown job), migrates all the way from Alaska to East Africa in just 45 days.

Always with a mind to the guest experience, Clint gives tips on how best to interpret animal behaviour to safari newcomers. We find a lioness with three five-week-old cubs and park nearby. "It blows guests' minds that they can get so close to these animals and that they're not going to kill you," Clint comments. Dashing in and out of a large bush, the cubs tumble around, tugging at their tails, climbing and falling off branches like kittens on speed. "This is their happy place," he says, explaining that the youngsters will stay here in the safety of this bush for up to three months from their birth.

Like our fingerprints, every lion has a different whisker pattern and we learn how to identify them from whisker spots. Comparing images on our LED screens with those on the Mara Lion Project's information sheets, we identify the mum as CHEaF1, the code given her by researchers. Our guides decide to call her Numba after the forest in which she had her cubs, the first born near Serian in recent years. "Lions' names should tell their stories," Clint explains.

Throughout our game drives, we learn about the bush, as teacher and guides interpret animal behaviour, picking up nuggets of knowledge from each other. "Introduce sightings to the guests and then just be quiet while they take it in. Then explain what's happening," Clint suggests. "That's my style; you'll develop your own."

We watch a sick impala being ostracised by her group because she's too much of a liability: as hyena prowls furtively nearby, she stands perfectly still to disguise her frailty, "pulling off the bluff of her life". We see the precarious first steps of a tiny newborn giraffe, the placenta still hanging between her mother's legs, and watch her suckle. "Look, she's still wet. This is probably her first drink..." And from the tender to the truly weird: we learn that the female hyena has a false 'penis' dangling between her legs, the product of extraordinarily high levels of testosterone. "It's actually an external clitoris," we're told. →

Night drives take us to another dimension. We learn about planets, constellations and Greek mythology. We meet quirky nocturnal creatures such as the noisy bushbaby with huge, gawky eyes that help it see in the dark, and the zorilla, not a cross between a zebra and a gorilla but a striped polecat that resembles a skunk.

On our final night drive, we follow two lionesses as they hunt, closely followed by several sly hyena. From time to time, our guides whisper their commentary, interpreting events. First, the predators somewhat ambitiously stalk a lone buffalo caked in mud, but he's wise to them and hides among the shrubs. As darkness falls, the lion spot a topi lying on the plain, oblivious to their presence. Our eyes slowly adjust to the dark only to see the hunters skulk right alongside our vehicle, furtive and fearless but utterly silent – fortunately, their focus is on the topi. Suddenly, the hapless hyena shatter the silence and cackle out loud as the topi runs away to see another day.

Our bush walk Q&As are all about the little things, such as that sizzling ant sortie. We're fascinated by the yellow pansy butterfly feeding on mongoose poo, the trail of an aardvark's tail, and the African bullfrog's enormous eyes peering through water as damselflies dance around a pond. We have a geology lesson too, studying shiny black pieces of obsidian rock, a volcanic glass formed when lava flows hit water. Once used for Stone Age tools, today's Maasai often wear it as jewellery. These ambles never take us far, but distance is irrelevant: it's the detail and sense of discovery that draw us in.

"We love the Pyramids of Life course," our guide Steve tells us, as we drive to the airstrip on our last morning. "It gives us a chance to learn from each other, to share experiences and bond as a team." I love it too, not only for what I've learnt but also for the chance, as Alex said, to simply take our time and to dive deeper into this fascinating, wild world. 🐾



WILL WHITFORD



SAFARI PLANNER

■ **Getting there** Kenya Airways has direct flights to Nairobi. The writer travelled with grateful thanks to Alex Walker's Serian, Ololo Lodge and Aardvark Safaris. The latter offers tailor-made trips, including international and internal flights, airport transfers, Mara North Conservancy fees and full board accommodation on Alex Walker's Serian's Pyramids of Life itinerary. Minimum stay on the course is five days.

■ **Where to stay** Serian 'The Original' and Ngare Serian are in Mara North Conservancy and Serian's Nkorombo is in the Masai Mara in Kenya. In Tanzania, the company's camps are Serian's Serengeti North and Serian's Serengeti South, with mobile camps in both regions. Ololo Lodge in Nairobi National Park is a convenient stop-off before an early morning flight from Nairobi.

■ **When to visit** The Pyramids of Life course runs annually for three weeks in March.

■ **Things to do** Activities include game drives, night drives, fly-camping and walking. The course also covers social media and photography, and includes visits to local conservation projects.

■ **Read more** Bradt's *Kenya Highlights* by Philip Briggs; Footprint's *Kenya Handbook* by Lizzie Williams; or visit the Kenya Tourism Board website at magicalkenya.com.



A MOTHER'S LOVE:
A giraffe nuzzles her baby on the plains of the Mara North Conservancy
OPPOSITE, FROM TOP: As a woman, Gladys Letulo has overcome both cultural and professional barriers to be part of Serian's guiding team; two cheetah cubs in motion in the reserve

PHOTOGRAPH BY WILL WHITFORD

