



LEADERSHIP AWARD

AMAZING GRACE

Grace Leonard Waithaka, General Manager for Elewana Collection's spectacular Elsa Kopje camp in Kenya, recently received the Extraordinary Leadership Award at the We Are in Africa Travel ceremony in Cape Town. The award honours individuals who have excelled in growing Africa's reputation as a high-end travel destination and shaping the continent's future for the better. Although being a woman is irrelevant, the fact that Grace received the award serves as a great inspiration to many girls and working mothers. She spoke to us about what the award meant to her.



Q TELL US ABOUT YOURSELF

I am the General Manager for Elewana Elsa's Kopje located in Meru National Park. I spent the first 10 years of my career in telecommunications before shifting to hospitality 14 years ago. I am known for being a detail-oriented and well-organised team player. I rarely miss deadlines; I am a good communicator and talented story teller, and I can juggle multiple tasks at once. In my performance reviews, my immediate supervisor always notes that he appreciates my professionalism, warmth and enthusiasm for the job.

WE NEED TO ENSURE WOMEN ARE INVOLVED IN CONSERVATION, PEACE-BUILDING, CONFLICT PREVENTION AND MITIGATION. WE ALSO NEED TO NARROW GENDER GAPS IN EDUCATION, TRAINING AND EMPLOYMENT

Left: One of the dreamy cottages at Elsa's Kopje in Meru National Park

Opposite: Elsa's Kopje is sculpted into Mughwango Hill, above the site of George Adamson's original camp

Q AS A FEMALE KENYAN RUNNING A LUXURY SAFARI LODGE, YOU ARE ONE OF A RARE BREED. WHAT SKILLS AND TALENTS SET YOU APART FROM THE REST OF THE COMPETITORS FOR THE AWARD?

I believe my competitors are skilled, smart and talented. Deep down, I believe the Extraordinary Leadership Award bore the fact that I am an active and committed conservationist and also a mother working away from home for a long duration of time. Working mothers, the world over, will understand and relate to the juggling game we play. However, few of us can comprehend the additional pressure of a job that takes you away from home for months on end. Therefore, school-going African girls who love hospitality and conservation are part of this award.

Q YOUR JOURNEY MUST HAVE BEEN PHENOMENAL. WHERE DID IT ALL START?

Growing up in the small town of Maralal in Samburu County humbled me. My fondest memory is walking to school (approximately 2km away) each day with my friends and classmates. Maralal was then a small tourist town.

The late Wilfred Thesiger (one of the last 'great explorers') lived there, as well as the late Tony Fitzjohn – one of George Adamson's personal assistants. Human and animal conflict was an issue, with buffalo and elephant raiding farm crops. Most of my classmates were put through school with support from conservation companies, as well as donations from the tourists who visited the area.

A lot of tourists came, the majority with driver-guides. One day during the annual Camel Derby, hosted by Yare Safaris, I saw ladies guiding the guests, plus one who was in charge of the activities that involved the camels. I was in shock! It was the first time I'd seen ladies in such positions. When I went home, I couldn't stop asking my mum about the ladies' roles and whether it would be possible for me to take on such a role. It was game-changing. Being exposed to those female guides, as well as witnessing the work of Kenyan environmentalist Wangari Maathai – the first African woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize – shifted my beliefs.

Q GENDER EQUALITY REMAINS A BIG CHALLENGE IN EAST AFRICA. TRUE? HOW CAN THIS BE ADDRESSED?

There is a lack of safe

spaces for women and girls to live free from gender-based violence, as well as a lack of participation of women in decision and policy-making at all levels. We need to ensure women are involved in conservation, peace-building, conflict prevention and mitigation. We also need to narrow gender gaps in education, training and employment, and improve access to credit facilities and market opportunities.

There are practical issues too. It is difficult to have a family – a husband and children – and still work in bush lodges. For us to balance this, we have to trust a third party to take care of the children. Fortunately, Elewana is one of the most supportive companies. But we need to educate communities so that females working in hospitality and conservation can be focused and take care of their families while remaining committed to their spouses.

Q WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU OFFER UPCOMING PROFESSIONALS? Accept that you won't be perfect. Recognize your limitations. Create a schedule. Communicate clearly. Instill accountability. Check in with yourself.

Q WHAT DO YOU KNOW NOW THAT YOU WISH YOU KNEW 10 YEARS AGO? Your attitude is an attribute of your mindset. New priorities, new lifestyles, new challenges can be scary, but the best part about change is that you will grow, you will learn, you will be challenged, you will be forced to make very hard decisions on your own, but in the end, everything will grow closer to achieving your full potential. Don't be afraid to fail. You learn from your mistakes. Relationships. Relationships. Relationships. Find a mentor. Set your goals high and don't stop until you get there. Then, set some more and raise the bar.

Elsa's Kopje: Relive the romance and history of *Born Free*

Set in the spectacular rugged and remote Meru National Park in central Kenya, Elsa's Kopje is sculpted into the Mughwango Hill, above the site of Joy and George Adamson's camp where they raised and released Elsa the Lioness of *Born Free* fame. The only permanent lodge in the park, guests enjoy the 215,000-acre national park and rhino sanctuary, well known for large elephant herds, lion and birdlife and more diversity of species than any other park in East Africa, pretty much to themselves. Elsa's is one of Africa's most renowned elegant lodges. Every cottage is unique in design, but all enjoy the breathtaking vistas that reach as far as Mount Kenya, the Nyambeni Hills and the Eastern Plains. Six spacious cottages, one family cottage, three honeymoon cottages and a private house compliment a magnificent bar and dining area, along with an infinity pool and massage cottage, both with spectacular outlooks over the park.

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