

WILD SHOT SNAPS SUCCESS

A passion for photography and wildlife developed into an international career for a Kiwi grandmother. Robyn Preston shares the images which changed her life and tells her remarkable story to **Alexia Santamaria**.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **ROBYN PRESTON**



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SOME MAY THINK that after spending 28 years on a farm raising four kids in rural New Zealand, it might be a bit late to become an internationally recognised wildlife photographer in Africa. Not in Robyn Preston's world. The dynamic Kiwi is proof that it's never too late to follow your dream, whatever it is.

The area outside Dargaville where she spent most of her life is a sharp contrast to colourful Nairobi, where Robyn now lives upwards of six months of the year. She comes home to New Zealand to see her kids and grandkids, but it's obvious her heart is in Kenya. Sporting a new braided hairdo, her looks belie her 59 years. It's hard to tell if it's a physical thing or whether the joy of living this life gives her a youth that's far more than skin deep.

Robyn's story is extraordinary, and an inspiration to anyone who thinks they are too old or too unlucky to live the life they want. Aside from the fact she was a 'late bloomer' career-wise, there have been other events in her life which could

have caused insurmountable setbacks if she'd let them. She not only had a baby die at just four days old, her only photograph of this child was destroyed in a house fire. Later, her marriage broke down after nearly three decades, on top of which in 2005 she was diagnosed with a rare incurable condition called Langerhans Cell Histiocytosis. Often likened to cancer, the disorder – which creates lesions that eat holes in the bones and can affect the organs – required two long bouts of oral chemotherapy. She now has it under control using an alternative treatment.

“Those were tough times,” she says, reflecting on the period in life when she was single, miserable and alone, living in the small settlement of Baylys Beach. “Just because you leave a marriage doesn't mean it's easy to do so. It was lonely, and some weeks I wouldn't see another human being at all. I was really unhappy. It's amazing to think I now spend over half my year in this beautiful continent observing and photographing these incredible creatures.”

And incredible they are. Robyn's photos transport you instantly to the

Maasai Mara and other large game reserves. The zebras with the illuminated scarlet halo of an African sunset behind them; the cheetah cub staring deep into its mother's eyes; the majestic African elephants with the expansive Amboseli plains behind. Robyn dreamed of going to Africa her whole life, and derives great joy from being able to show people what it's like.

You get the impression that Robyn still doesn't fully understand her own talent. She has recently been picked up by international media content company Barcroft Media in London and her photos have been sold on to the *Daily Mail*, *The Guardian* and the

Daily Mirror in the United Kingdom, among others. She still seems amazed at people's reactions to her talent. “I guess when you're doing something you love, you don't really stop to think others will appreciate it too. It's great, but still quite surprising to see people get so excited over it all.”

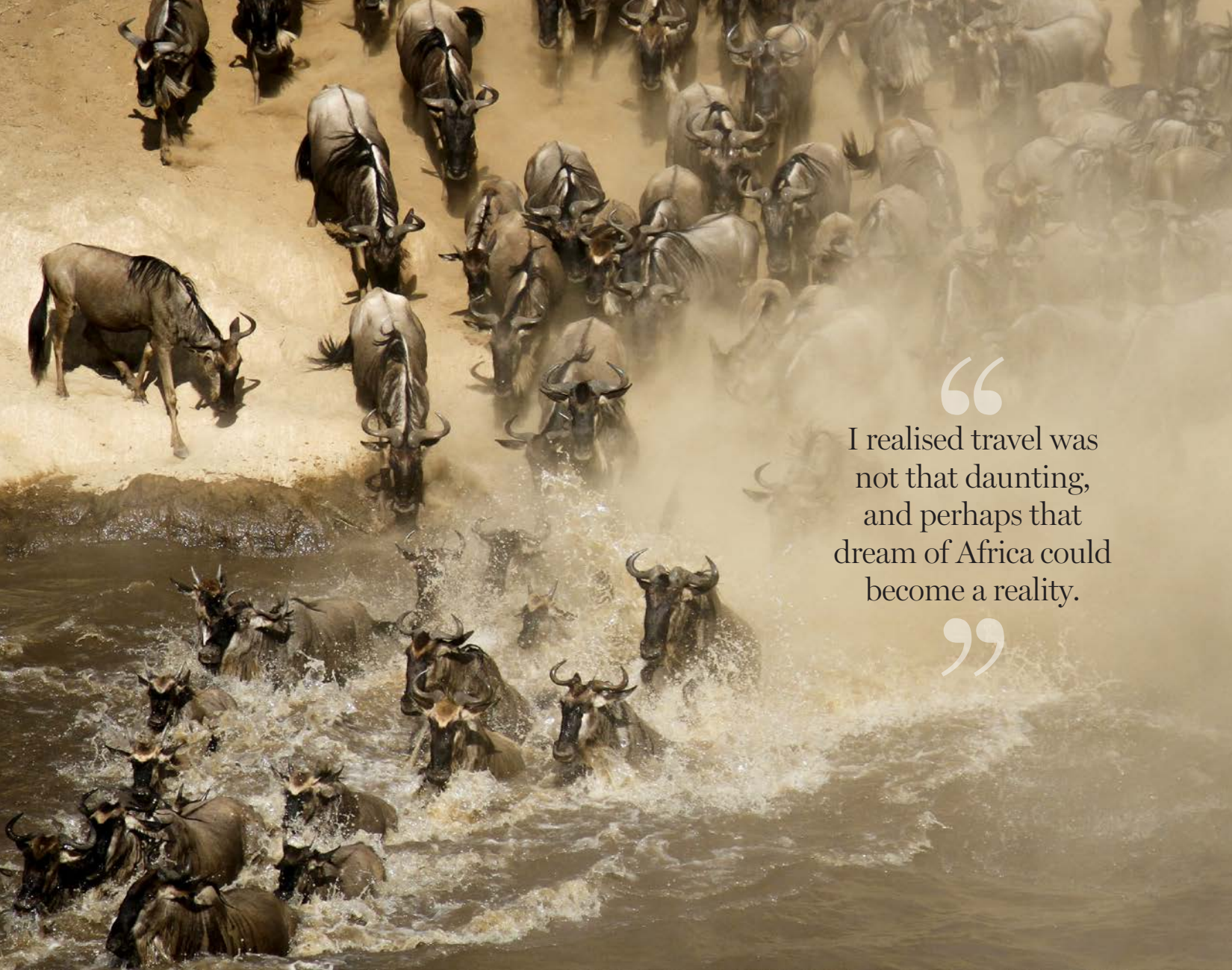
ROBYN'S LOVE FOR Africa is not a recent thing. From the age of 10 she drew pictures of animals, which her primary school teacher displayed at the front of the class. She never really knew why she was drawing African animals, but remembers being quite obsessed because

her aunt gave her the book *Serengeti Shall Not Die*, which she still has today. She couldn't read it or understand it, but she knows now her aunt had picked up her strong connection to Africa even back then.

It would be another 43 years before Robyn would see those animals in the flesh. “We didn't travel a lot as a family, and despite having no obligations once I was living on my own, I was too scared to venture out of New Zealand. The thought of travelling abroad solo terrified me. My daughter had just started her OE and used to regularly tell me to get out and travel, but I always told her, ‘No way!’”

Whether it was her daughter Aimee's insistence or the fact that she knew something had to change, Robyn eventually relented, and in 2007 booked a package tour to Europe. She was utterly petrified, especially when she arrived in Copenhagen and had to go to another counter for excess baggage just as a full load of passengers disembarked from a cruise ship. She decided in that moment if she could navigate her way through all those people and chaos, she could do anything.

She did it and more, giving her confidence and the knowledge that she was far more capable than she realised. “That was the start of it,” says Robyn. ►



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Robyn and Maasai friends
from Manyatta Camp.

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Before long, it did. She went on her first safari in 2009, starting in Cape Town with the Nomad Company, and travelled through South Africa, Swaziland, Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Malawi, Tanzania and Kenya. She only spent two days in the Maasai Mara but for some reason knew she needed to come back.

As luck – or destiny – would have it, the following year a friend won a trip for two to Africa, and off she went again, this time tacking on a two-week volunteer conservation programme. And, even luckier, in 2012 Robyn herself won a competition. This was a very

poignant trip as she did it carrying the ashes of a woman she had met on her first excursion. “I got very friendly with a Dutch woman on that first tour; she died of cancer in 2011 so I took her ashes back with me for her family and scattered them in all her favourite places. She never made it to the Maasai Mara so I took her there and lay her remains to rest under a beautiful tree. Every time I go there now and pass that tree I still say hi to her.”

More trips followed and it was clear by this point that Africa was destined to be a big part of Robyn’s new life. She started researching animal behaviour and doing further conservation courses each time she went. This year she has actually rented a place in Nairobi so she

has a base for doing safaris. She’s also applying for residency to make local logistics easier.

“I just feel so at home here and it’s hard to leave,” she says.

As a devoted grandma, Robyn made sure she was in New Zealand for the births of all seven of her grandchildren. She does miss her family immensely, but living in Africa has changed her, and coming home and watching people get worked up over seemingly trivial things is hard. She sees people in Nairobi leaving home at 4.30am to walk to work on construction sites, and others selling mangoes for next to nothing just to feed their families. “These are real woes, not the materialistic problems people create in First World countries.” ➤





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Robyn enjoys the friendliness of the people in Africa immensely and feels very at home. She has learned a bit of Swahili and is treated like a princess at the lodges she regularly stays in – something she finds surreal, having spent so much of her life looking after others. It’s obvious this is a woman who has truly found her calling. When questioned about what it’s like to be 30 or 60 days on safari, not sleeping in your own bed, she doesn’t see anything remotely challenging in this.

“I love it all,” she says, eyes wild with excitement. “I have an amazing driver and we go out at 7am and don’t come back until 6.30pm every day. He’s great, and has eagle eyes. He knows how to spot what I’m looking for and doesn’t

bat an eyelid when I decide I want to wait five hours for a leopard to come down from a tree!”

This seems to be the key to Robyn’s entrancing images. Most people on safari come through for a few days – and maybe only a few hours each day – but being based there she has the time to sit around and wait to capture incredible moments, like hundreds of wildebeest crossing a river simultaneously or a mother cheetah playing with her eight offspring. This is just not possible if you are on a tight schedule.

While not formally trained, Robyn has a keen eye and incredible natural composition skills. She’s always loved photography, but it was only ever a hobby. When her kids were young she

didn’t think their school photos were up to much, so she asked the principal if she could have a go. This lasted 13 years and she went on to do several weddings and family portraits. She knew people were pleased, but never imagined her interest would become more than that, much less capturing African wildlife images on a daily basis.

Robyn’s current existence and zest for life at a time when many are slowing down proves that setbacks and age should never prevent you from achieving what seems impossible. People in Africa still get a shock when they find out she has four kids and seven grandkids, but it’s clear that, to her, age really is only a number. On the cusp of turning 60, Robyn’s life is only just beginning. ■