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Title: Spotlight: Saba's on the trail of a jumbo friend

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ACHILD wanders through the African bush, within a few yards of a herd of elephants. It sounds like a recipe for disaster, but Saba Douglas-Hamilton had no ordinary childhood.

She was used to running wild on her family's Kenyan farm, climbing waterfalls and tracking elephants. One animal in particular stood out, and now Saba is going back to Africa to search for her old friend.

Saba, seen two weeks ago in the BBC1 documentary *Going Ape*, is filmed trying to find Virgo the wild elephant.

'Virgo is very special,' says the 31-year-old conservationist. 'She is amazing because she actually dared to cross the boundary between humans and elephants. She would come up and greet us. I remember, as a child, standing very close to Virgo, totally trustingly. She would put her trunk in my hand and smell me and she would bring her calf forward to be introduced.'

That's why Saba returned to Lake Manyara in Tanzania, just over the Kenyan border, in *Elephant: The Search for Virgo*, screened on Sunday on BBC2.

She was born on the seventh day of the seventh month, at 7pm in 1970, so local Africa tribesmen named her Saba, which means seven.

Saba later went to school in Britain and studied anthropology at St Andrew's University. She now lives in Kenya again and works for Save the Elephants, the charity run by her father, Iain Douglas-Hamilton.

It is 10 years since she saw Virgo, but she vividly remembers their last meeting.

'We first knew Virgo in the '70s. Then Tanzania changed and the border was closed with Kenya and we couldn't go back to Lake Manyara. There was terrible poaching all over Africa, particularly in Manyara. We went back in 1990 and the elephants had all gone. And then, out of the thick, tangled undergrowth, Virgo suddenly appeared in our path. We immediately recognised her - she has a look about her that is unlike any other elephant.'

'Although Virgo hadn't seen us for 16 years, and her family had been decimated by poachers, when my father began calling her she just stopped in her tracks. She just stood there for about 10 minutes as he talked to her. It almost looked as though she was remembering. And I sat in the car with tears pouring down my face. Finally, she remembered her own family and disappeared into the bush.'

In the film, Saba tries to find Virgo again with the help of experienced game reserve guide Ernest.

'He taught me a fantastic trick, which was that the best way to approach elephants on foot was to pretend to be a baboon! He taught me that if you make quick grabbing movements with your hands and move your head around and shuffle and bob a bit, then you look like a baboonish thing. The elephants aren't disturbed and it works like a dream.'

Saba is so used to the African bush that she feels lost when she visits her sister in London.

'I never wear shoes in Kenya and whenever I arrive in England I always feel like a shoeless country bumpkin. My sister, who is very cool and fashionable, takes me out and I'm always completely inappropriately dressed. And I am also horrified by the amount of money people spend on things. After a couple of weeks I kick into gear and go shopping, but I'm always a little dazzled by the neon lights!'

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