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**Title:** Wild thing; Saba Douglas-Hamilton spent her childhood helping her father to study elephants in Africa, and is fronting the BBC's latest wildlife series. Is she the new David Attenborough?

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When Saba Douglas-Hamilton was six weeks old, her mother, Oria, introduced her to their extended family. This 'family' included a young female elephant called Virgo. After Virgo had gently touched the baby with her trunk - a sign of welcome - she introduced the pair to her own newly born calf. So began Saba's lifelong love of animals.

Saba, 33, is being hailed by the BBC as the new David Attenborough. She was born in Kenya, the daughter of the renowned conservationist, Iain Douglas-Hamilton, and she and her younger sister, Dudu, spent their childhood travelling Africa on the trail of their father's conservation efforts to save elephants. Their mother is the author of *The Elephant Family Book*.

It was this pedigree that attracted the BBC to Saba, for whom she has now made half a dozen wildlife films. Next month, she will front *Wild*, a series of three programmes on BBC2. So, does she see herself as taking over from Attenborough?

'Nobody is going to be the next David Attenborough,' she says loyally.

'He's a godlike figure; I used to watch his documentaries avidly.' But she adds, 'These days, there's less money around, and filmmakers can't spend a lot of time with the animals, studying their behaviour. Viewers are also a lot more clued-up about what animals do. They want more.' Saba believes that the way to satisfy this appetite for 'more' is to make anthropological films about different cultures. Broadcasters, though, have so far resisted making this type of programme. 'I'm told there's no market for anthropological films,' she says. 'I don't agree. It's an unexplored frontier in storytelling. I would like to make programmes not as a voyeur, but as a participant.' Accordingly, she recently spent two weeks living alongside the Sami nomads of Lapland, who follow the reindeer migration to the coast in the summer and into the mountains in the winter. She slept in a tent with the Samis, caught reindeers with a lasso and survived on a diet of reindeer meat.

Saba has made her name through a willingness to endure the hardships associated with inhospitable environments. Last year, she filmed the video diary *Going Ape* with The Blue Planet producer Alastair Fothergill.

The pair lived with chimpanzees in the Ivory Coast's Tai National park, a rainforest. In temperatures of more than 30[sup.1]C and humidity of 90 per cent, they lived on the

same diet as the animals they were studying. 'We ate termites, fruit and ants, and drank any water we could find,' Saba recalls, 'even if it was covered with slime.' Saba has a Kenyan passport - 'I'm part Italian, French, Scottish and Irish; I swear in Italian' - and home is Nairobi, the Kenyan capital. 'I base myself there because I need access to phone lines for email,' she says. 'It's where I pack and unpack my bags.' Her nonchalant reply makes more sense when I learn that 'home' is a giraffe reserve in the Nairobi suburbs. 'A leopard calls outside my window at night and warthogs eat in my garden. My family are all dotted around there,' she adds. 'Most of the time, I'm out in the bush or on our farm, which is two hours away.' Saba is very close to her family. 'My father moves around between Nairobi, the farm - where my mother lives - and his research camp up in the Samburu National Reserve, where he studies elephants,' she says. 'My mother has a tour up there called Elephant Watch Safaris.' Saba's intrepid pursuit of adventure comes from her maternal grandparents. They left Italy in the Twenties to travel through Africa. 'They walked across Africa for more than a year, shooting elephants for ivory and trying to see if they could prospect for gold,' she says. Eventually they settled in Kenya.

Saba was born while her father was studying elephants in Lake Manyara National Park in Tanzania, and the first decade of her life was spent in Tanzania and Kenya.

But when Saba was just ten years old, her father took the momentous decision to take his work into the newly opened up, post-Idi Amin Uganda, to try to find out how the country's national parks had fared under the dictator.

It was a brave decision - Uganda was still politically unstable - and one that had a profound impact on his young daughters. Although Saba and Dudu spent much of their time at school in Nairobi, they regularly visited their father in Uganda. 'It left a deep impression on us,' Saba says. 'My parents didn't try to shield us from what was going on there.' Was she frightened?

'Not at all. It was wonderful. Down below us was the Nile and a big family of hippos lived there. Our house was a shell of a building. There was no glass in the windows or doors. At night we'd have to put camp chairs in the doors to stop hyenas coming in to get our food. Our fridge was a canvas basin filled with water where we put the cheese and the butter to keep it cool.'

Saba's free spirit and sense of adventure proved a big obstacle when she left Africa for boarding school in England when she was 13. 'My sister and I had to change 100 per cent to survive - nobody understood anything about our lives.' Although Saba won't name it, she clearly loathed the first boarding school she went to. 'It was like being in a prison,' she recalls. 'The pettiness of the rules drove me insane. We even had all our letters read so you couldn't ever write anything home that was too negative. The other thing I found absolutely shocking was the snobbery.' Saba was relieved to move, aged 16, to the more relaxed atmosphere of the United World College of the Atlantic in Wales. From there, she went on to spend four years at St Andrews University in Scotland, where she read anthropology. Her dissertation on the Bajuni people on the north coast of Kenya gave an indication of her later ambitions.

After university, Saba worked for the Save The Rhino Trust in Namibia, a conservation project in Tanzania, and she set up Save The Elephants with her father, an organisation of which she remains a trustee. She also spent time in California, visiting the deserts outside Los Angeles, an experience that, surprisingly, she relished.

'I love LA,' she says. 'When you're in Africa, you're always dealing with quite big issues - life, death and poverty. In LA, you're totally unfettered.'

You think about putting on rollerblades and cruising around Venice Beach and you live in this wonderful bubble.' Since childhood, Saba has always enjoyed an idyllic lifestyle of travelling widely. 'I've always liked not knowing what I'm going to be doing six months ahead,' she says.

But there are signs that her live-for-the-moment ethic is starting to change. 'For the first time, I'm beginning to think about more long-term stuff,' she admits.

'It's asking a lot of somebody to put up with an intermittent relationship. You have short bursts of wonderful holidays with somebody, and it's always exciting, like a honeymoon. So far, this is very much how it has had to be for me with my relationships.' When I ask her whether she is in a relationship at the moment, there is a long pause, nervous laughter and a mumbled, 'I don't know', before she admits that she plans to return to London at the end of the year to pursue a romance.

'One of the things I've found most difficult is finding somebody who has the same ability to move between two very contrasting worlds - my African life and my European life,' she says. 'You can meet wonderful people in Africa who can't live in Europe, and you can meet people in Europe who can't live in Africa.'

'When you start meeting the same kind of nomadic types as yourself, who are either in the same industry or people who have had a similar upbringing, that's when you start finding something that's more compatible.' This may well be the way ahead for Saba, given that she wants her own children to have the same kind of upbringing as herself. 'I would love to have children, and I would love them to have access to different cultures, too. It's a confusing gift, but I wouldn't switch it for anything.'

'The most important thing that I would like my children to have is the ability to be multicultural in a more extreme way than being, for example, an English Francophone. That's what Africa has given to me - the ability to feel at ease in most things.'

'Wild - Search for Polar Bears' will start on BBC2 on October 12 at 5.30pm.

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