

Lynne Leakey – Naturalist, Tour Guide Visits EG

By TIM FAULKNER

Hearing the two women describe East Africa says it all.

“The whole landscape goes on and on, everywhere you look you have nothing but raw nature, the colors, the birds—there is nothing to interfere with your senses,” says Toni Rottenberg.

“It’s getting in touch with your soul through awe and joy, feeling the profoundness of life and nature,” says Lynne Leakey.

The women share several bonds, but they are most passionate about Kenya.

“It’s a very spiritual place without being religious,” says Rottenberg.

The two discussed their love of Africa over morning coffee at Rottenberg’s home on River Run. They work together for a travel company and they were touring the area to promote the east Africa experience. It’s an easy sell considering they have many happy customers.

“Not one client, of the thousands I’ve sent there, that do not feel the same way,” says Rottenberg.

For Lynne Leakey, promoting Kenya comes easy, “I’m living my dream and sharing it.”

The Leakey name is closely

associated with Kenya. Famed British archeologist, Louis Leakey and several of his family members were prominent scientist and cultural advocates for Kenya. His research inspired several well-known female researchers such as Jane Goodall, Diane Fossey, and Birute Galdikas—a group later dubbed Leakey’s Angels

Lynne Leakey married Louis Leakey’s son Richard, establishing a new chapter in her love for wildlife. “He (Louis Leakey) ended up being my father-in-law instead of mentor,” she says.

Her interest in animals started at a young age. She was born in Burbank, California where she grew-up as a regular visitor to the Los Angeles Zoo. She befriended the zookeeper and was permitted to get close to many of the animals such as baby elephants.

A well-known movie also changed her life.

“When Born Free came to theatres, I watched it a dozen times. I vowed to marry a game warden,” she says, “I thought that was the life for me.”

In 1968 she traveled to Europe “as soon as I was able to get on the road,” where she joined an Irish show band to entertain



Toni Rottenberg, left, and Lynne Leakey plan one of their specialized natural history tours at Rottenberg’s River Run home last week.

PHOTO: TIM FAULKNER

U.S. Army and Air Force troops in Turkey. The air base was evacuated due to political tensions and Leakey was flown to Ethiopia and eventually to Nairobi, Kenya. Thus began her career in studying the wildlife, ecology, and people of East Africa. Yet, much of her education was on her own.

“I didn’t have the Discovery

Channel,” says Leakey. “I was a self-taught as a guide,” with some advice from game wardens. She developed a connection to the environment.

“I trust animals more than humans.” She says the animals, such as elephants, cheetahs, baboons, giraffes and lions, have many lessons to teach humans, especially on raising

children.

Her experience has made her the ideal tour guide. She knows how to respond to the environment and be respectful to the animals. She insists on working with local services and people.

When she is in the U.S., she can’t help but encourage others to visit her adopted home.

“I would stop people on the

street and say ‘do what you have to do get there’ it’s the experience of a lifetime you can’t duplicate.”

Rottenberg agrees. She has traveled to 147 countries on every continent, and Kenya is her favorite. “There are no influences from the outside world.”

Leakey says the land has a positive effect on visitors. “I see the people, the body posture starts to change. Everyone has this moment where they start to relax.”

A tour to the region typically lasts a week or longer. Rottenberg says that a package is available to fit most budgets. Accommodations are often in lodges or tents that hardly portray a ‘roughing it’ image. Most have many amenities of home, such as hot showers and comfy beds. The landscape, however, is hardly New England.

But, it’s not a go it alone journey. A seasoned guide is essential to navigate the land and assist with language and customs.

The safaris have been popular with tour groups and honeymooners. In a post 9/11 world, a trip to Africa has been the getaway of choice for many travelers.