

# UNDER African SKIES

To truly experience the magic of Kenya you need to live it – and there is no better way than sleeping under the stars in luxury safari camps, far from the madding crowds, writes Philip Briggs

Here: happy campers at Amboseli Porini in the Selenkay Conservation Area, a 15,000 acre private game reserve. The camp comprises spacious, comfortably furnished tents, complete with electric lighting and en suite bathrooms

**I**t's not quite 5.30am, and the sun sits a good 30 minutes below the horizon as, bleary-eyed, we stumble out of bed to drink a pot of coffee on our verandah. There is a tangible stillness to the air; the nocturnal chatters have evidently wound down for the night, while the pre-dawn chorus has barely cranked into first gear. We pull on light jumpers, load up our camera gear, and make our way to the waiting 4x4, where Wilson, our Masai guide, asks whether we heard lions calling in the night. We were too busy sleeping, we confess, as we bump down the track on our first morning game drive out of Porini Mara Camp.

Almost as soon as the sun rises, basking the savannah in its soft golden light, Wilson's unerring eyes pick out a solitary female lion basking openly on a distant slope. Soon, we find ourselves surrounded by the largest pride I've encountered in three decades of regular African travel. At least 25 individual lions, most of them cubs, cavort in the morning cool, stalking, pouncing and tumbling over one another, while their mothers look on, exuding leonine nonchalance.

It's an invigorating sight. We know from previous visits that large lion prides are a speciality of the Masai Mara. But what is unique, in our experience, is that we have this sighting all to ourselves. For two hours we watch and photograph before the mid-morning heat drives the pride into the shadier thickets.

#### FAME AND FORTUNE

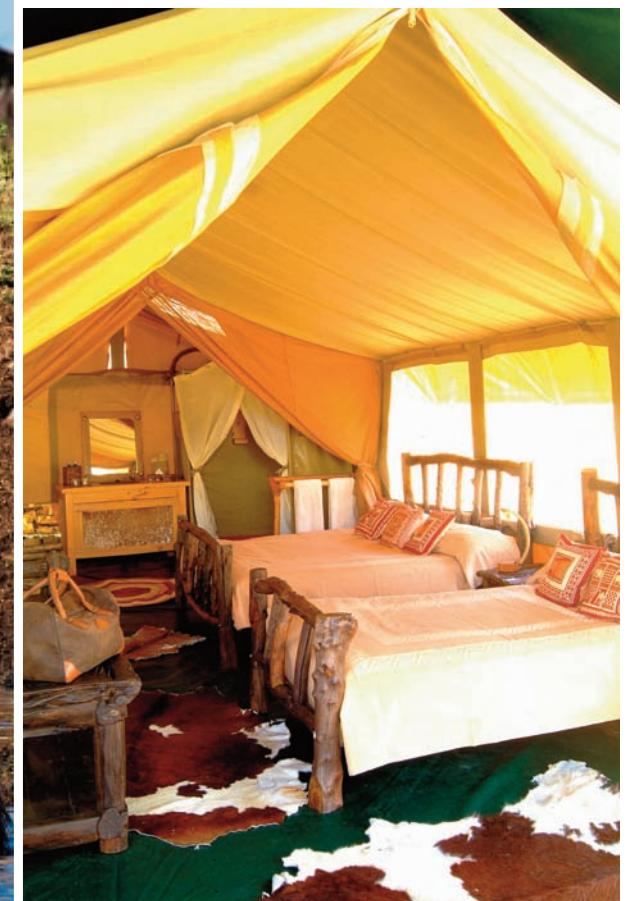
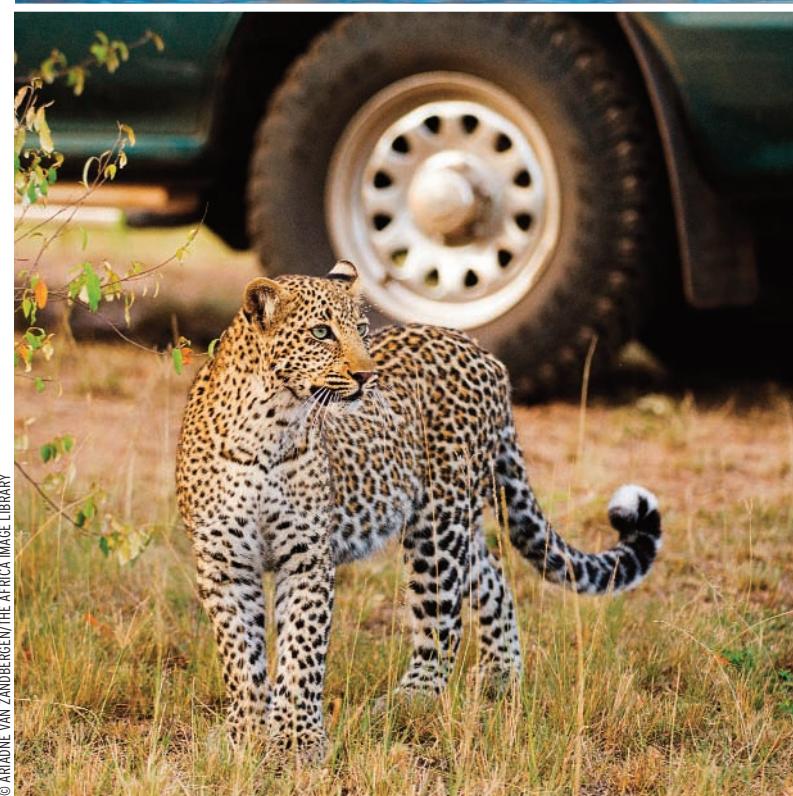
Over four previous visits, totalling perhaps 20 days, I've acquired mixed feelings about the Masai Mara. A northern extension of Tanzania's Serengeti plains, it is justifiably Kenya's most famous safari destination, thanks in no small part to the seasonal crossings of the Mara river undertaken by migrating wildebeest. What's more, it offers some of Africa's best predator viewing, particularly lion, leopard and cheetah, the subjects of the celebrated BBC documentary *Big Cat Diary*, shot here in its entirety.

Like so many fine game reserves, however, the Masai Mara is in some respects a victim of its own popularity. What the filmmakers avoid showing their audience is that big cats all too frequently become the focal point of what feels like a makeshift parking lot. Some of the cheetahs have learned to use these vehicular aggregations as a hunting blind, while the reserve's sanguine leopards are regularly trailed by convoys of 4x4s, all jostling for the best viewing angle!

Porini Mara Camp is different. Sleeping a total of 12 guests in six static tents, it is the only camp set within the Ol Kinyei Conservancy, and it has exclusive access to this



**Soon after departing from Porini Mara Camp, we find ourselves surrounded by the largest pride we've ever encountered in three decades of regular African travel**

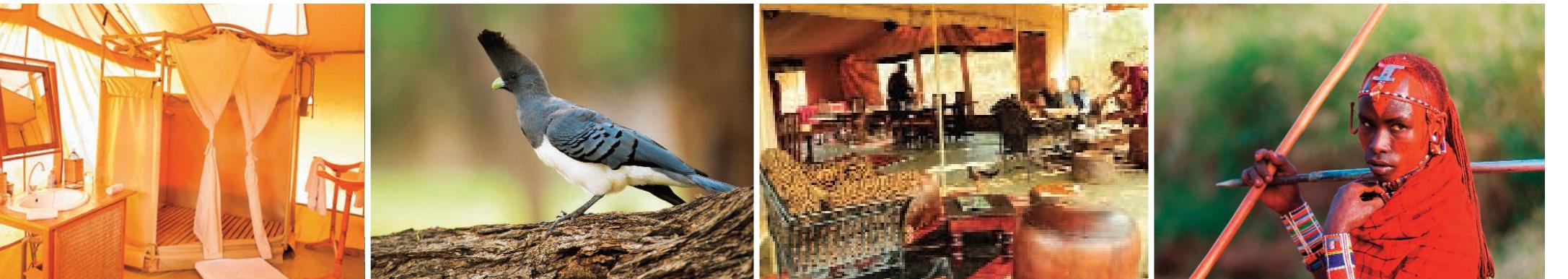


Clockwise from left: Burchell's zebra drink deep, Masai Mara National Reserve; a very des res at Porini Mara Camp in the exclusive 17,500-acre Ol Kinyei Conservancy on the north east border of the Masai Mara; lion with cubs, Masai Mara National Reserve; a leopard prowls metres away from the safari jeep





Clockwise from left: game drive through Amboseli; blue wildebeest migration, Masai Mara; Amboseli Porini warrior; young elephants in Amboseli National Park; luxury living at Porini Amboseli Camp; a white-bellied go-away-bird at Selenkay Conservancy; campers enjoy home comforts at Porini Amboseli Camp



unfenced 17,500-acre tract of wild, hilly savannah. So, while Ol Kinyei effectively borders the Masai Mara, and it offers similarly superb wildlife viewing, it totally lacks the crowds – a rare combination that led it to be named Kenya's top community conservancy in the 2011 Eco Warrior Awards.

The wildlife at Ol Kinyei is truly fantastic. We see plenty of lion, buffalo, elephant and giraffe, along with the usual cast of antelope and other grazers. Porini Mara Camp, although very comfortable, is also winningly down-to-earth. Here, the emphasis is firmly on interpretative guiding, intensive wildlife viewing, and a holistic bush experience, rather than the chic décor, fusion menus and infinity pools, which characterise Africa's trendiest safari lodges. Indeed, were the camp to be broken down tomorrow, little trace of its existence would survive a few months later.

Our next stop is Porini Lion Camp, which lies about 10km east of Musaria Marsh – core territory of the *Big Cat Diary*'s famous Marsh Lions – and is one of only three small camps set in the 20,000 acre Olare Orok Conservancy. The game viewing here is breathtaking, as

It was a flawed and unfair system, one that tended to sideline local communities not only from conservation areas, but also from the tourist industry associated with them. The marginalisation of these communities, who perceived themselves to possess fewer rights than the wildlife in neighbouring parks, often helped nurture their participation in the commercial poaching that devastated Kenya's elephant and rhino populations in the 1970s and 1980s.

By contrast, Ol Kinyei and Olare Orok, founded in 2005 and 2006 respectively, consist entirely of community land, voluntarily set aside for conservation. They operate on a kind of tenancy system, wherein the Porini camps pay a direct fee to stakeholders within the community, and try to source all staff from their families. In ecological terms, these and other similar community-owned conservancies have effectively doubled the Masai Mara's area, while also restoring migration corridors to outlying areas such as the Loita Hills and Mau Escarpment.

#### PARK LIFE

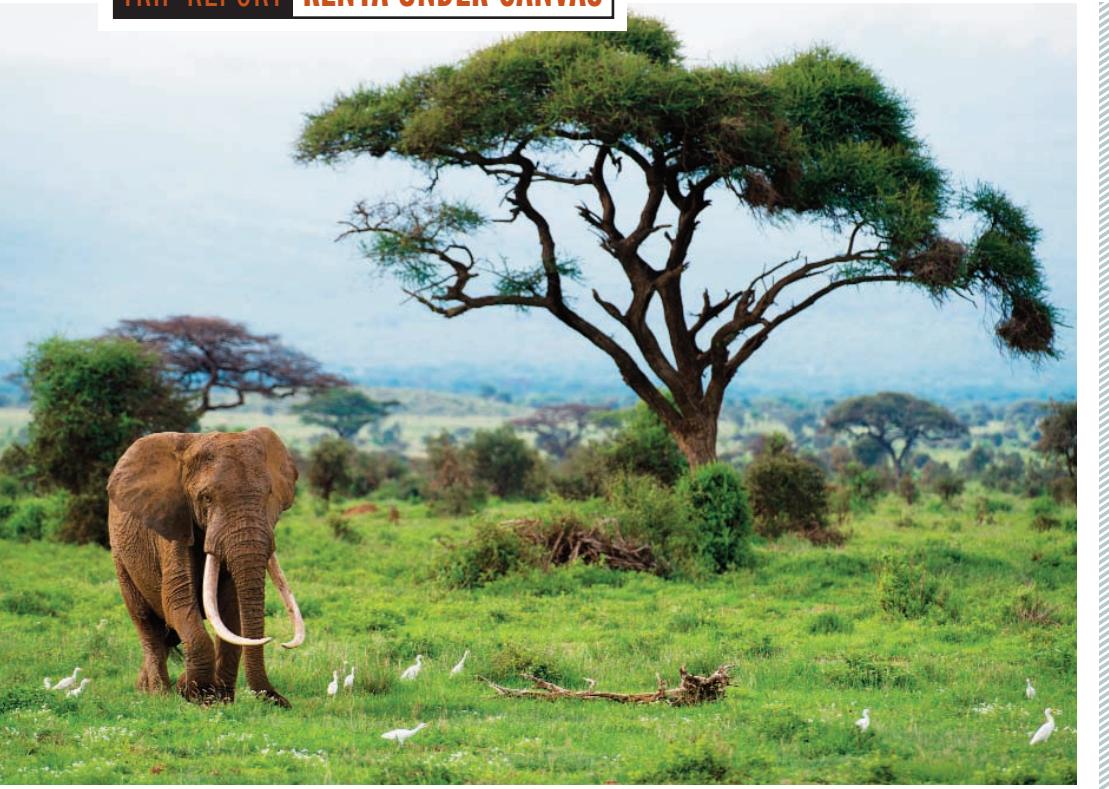
The model for these two Mara conservancies is Porini Amboseli Camp, set in the Selenkay Conservation Area, a 15,000-acre tract of bush leased exclusively from the local Maasai community since 1997. Named Kenya's top eco-rated facility at the 2011 Eco Warrior Awards, Porini Amboseli lies in a wildlife dispersal corridor, 15km north of Amboseli National Park, which is set at the base of Mount Kilimanjaro.

We arrive at Porini Amboseli just as the rainy season kicks in, but despite the damp introduction, we're immediately struck by the prolific wildlife. On the short drive to camp, we come across two of East Africa's most elusive dry-country antelope. These are the skittish lesser kudu and the oddball gerenuk, the latter notable for its narrow head, elongated neck, and goat-like habit of feeding while standing on its hind legs, which allows it to reach the high leaves most other browsers cannot. The camp itself is refreshingly unpretentious, set in a stand of gnarled acacias where ground squirrels scurry between their burrows, and white-bellied go-away-birds squawk and flop on the lower boughs.

It's an hour's drive from the camp to the national park, so we make a full day of it, arriving at the park boundary at first light. Within minutes, we are treated to the unusual sight of three spotted hyena pups playing outside their den alongside a couple of adolescents and adults. From here, we head towards the park's perennial swamps, which are fed by subterranean rivers that rise on the slopes of Kilimanjaro. The water-associated birds here are dazzling – foppish crowned cranes, delicate lily-trotting African jacanas, gem-like malachite kingfishers, numerous species of heron, and busily foraging African spoonbills and sacred ibises.

What the Masai Mara is to big cats, Amboseli is to elephants. The Amboseli Elephant Research Project, founded by Dr Cynthia Moss in 1975, is the longest running study of its type, monitoring some 50 elephant →





families whose range centres on the national park. Moss's pioneering work has been instrumental to our modern understanding of pachydermal behaviour, and it ensured that Amboseli was largely unaffected by the outbreak of ivory poaching that afflicted East Africa in the 1980s.

Amboseli is too small to feed the 1,000-odd elephants that depend on it for drinking water, so most herds venture out into neighbouring Maasai community land to forage at night, and return to the park's swamps by day. In this context, the importance of conservancies such as Selenkay is impossible to overstate. Amboseli, far more so than the Masai Mara, has a long history of conflict between the conservation authorities and neighbouring communities. But this has changed with the creation of private community reserves, which have given local communities a strong stake in conservation-based tourism (the concessions yield a higher per-acre return to their Maasai custodians than they would as pastoral land) while also creating a significant buffer zone for Amboseli's perambulating pachyderms.

Because the elephants of Amboseli were spared the traumatic social disruption that comes with large-scale poaching, they have little fear of vehicles, and it's easy to observe behaviour at close quarters. As we set off back towards camp, we reflect on the day's almost non-stop action: a group of stonking bulls foraging shoulder deep in the marshes, a grand matriarch and her tiny newborn walking tail-in-trunk across the dusty plain.

As dusk approaches, Amboseli has two last treats in store. First, the cloud dissipates to reveal the snow-capped dome of Kilimanjaro towering above the plains. Then, arriving at camp, the drama of the day gives way to the mystery of the African night: just us and two other guests, a campfire, a cold beer and a dazzling night sky, in an isolated tented camp seemingly a million miles from the air-conditioned lodges that populate the national park itself.

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### COST RATING ★★★★☆

**SAMPLE PACKAGE TOUR:** Gamewatchers Safaris are offering an eight night/nine day safari, comprising three nights at Porini Amboseli Camp, two nights at Porini Mara and three nights at Porini Lion. Prices start from £2,750 per person sharing, or from approx £345 per person per day sharing. This includes all return flights to Porini Camps, meals and accommodation, drinks, walking activities from camp with Maasai Warriors, morning and night game drives in open 4x4 vehicles with excellent driver-guides and a visit to an authentic Maasai village. [www.porini.com](http://www.porini.com)

**GETTING THERE:** Several carriers including British Airways and Kenya Airlines operate flights between London and the Kenyan capital Nairobi, from where domestic flights go to the Masai Mara, Amboseli and other parks, although it is also possible to drive. It is conventional to book all ground arrangements and accommodation with the same operator.

**VISA REQUIREMENTS FROM THE UK:** Visas are required by most nationalities, but they can be issued on arrival at all land borders and international airports for a small fee.

**TIPS & WARNINGS:** Kenya is generally a safe country, but central Nairobi has a bad reputation for crime, so best to stay in the suburbs. The FCO currently advises against travel to Lamu and the coastal belt near the Somali border. Malaria is present and prophylactics are strongly recommended.

**WHEN TO GO:** Game viewing is good all year round, but the best period is late July to early October, when the wildebeest migration is in the Masai Mara and large herds of wildlife aggregate on Amboseli's swamps towards the end of the dry season. It may also be possible to see lesser-known species, such as caracal, African wildcat and gerenuk.

### TOUR OPERATORS:

- **ALL CAMPS FEATURED ARE OPERATED BY GAMEWATCHERS SAFARIS,**  
Tel: (UK) 0870 471 7122; (US) +1 877 710 3014;  
(Kenya) +254 774 136 523; [www.porini.com](http://www.porini.com)
- **TRIP AFRICA TRAVEL,** Tel: 01606 215 549;  
[www.tripafricatravel.com](http://www.tripafricatravel.com)

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*Above: an African elephant strides through Amboseli National Park. Below: striped hyena pups near Porini Amboseli Camp. Bottom: Selankay Conservation Area lies in the shadow of Kilimanjaro*



**The cloud dissipates to reveal the snow-capped dome of Kilimanjaro towering a full 5km above the plains**

