

CALL OF THE WILD

Smitten by the Kenyan wildlife, a couple set up the only Indian-hosted tented camp in one of the world's most prized wildlife arenas

Exploring the Porini Cheetah Camp

For Indians: \$350/450 per person per night, including stay, conservancy fees, food, drinks, day-and-night game drives, trip to the main reserve for a minimum of two nights



For children below 17 years: 60% of the adult rate

International rack rates: \$420-655 per person per night

PHOTOS: RIJU MEHTA

:: Riju Mehta

After 19 years of marriage, Nirmalya Banerjee found new love. He could have spurned it, as many middle-class Indians smug in their morality and content in their mid-life rut, are wont to do. Yet, this was different. The feeling was as primeval as the land in which it took root. His wife, Jui, knew of it, but didn't demur. After all, she too was smitten by the Kenyan wildlife.

The year was 2011 and the couple had been in the capital city, Nairobi, for barely a year. After the confined chaos of Bengaluru and mechanised mayhem of Gurgaon, they had moved to Kenya, following the trajectory that Nirmalya's corporate job set for him. An engineer from IT-BHU, Varanasi, and a graduate from IIM-Ahmedabad, Nirmalya was with Ericsson at the time. Little did he know that within a span of five-six years, he would give up his corporate moorings and set up the only Indian-hosted tented camp in one of the world's most prized wildlife arenas.

Here was a man inured to the bristling pace of work life and all but deaf to the call of the wild. Jui, on the other hand, had always been a wildlife enthusiast, quenching her sporadic cravings by visiting sanctuaries across India. In Nairobi, within sniffing distance of the piece de resistance – Masai Mara and other wildlife parks – it was inevitable that they visit these.

The Masai Mara game reserve, named after Masai, the local tribes of Kenya, is contiguous with the Serengeti National Park in adjoining Tanzania. It is globally famed for the Great Migration of the wildebeest between July and September, as also for its dense and diverse population of lions,

cheetahs, elephants, leopards, zebras, Thomson's gazelles, giraffes, rhinos, impalas, warthogs.

"Within a year I fell in love, as we started visiting the parks, especially the Nairobi National Park," says the 53-year-old Nirmalya, referring to the country's first park, barely 10 km from the Nairobi city centre. Kenya has around 22 national parks, 28 reserves and five sanctuaries, which are managed by the Kenya Wildlife Service. Then

there are 177 conservancies, comprising land leased by individual or community owners and managed by private groups. These have been a uniquely successful experiment in conserving wildlife, sustaining local communities and mitigating human-wildlife conflict.

The Banerjees visited a host of other reserves in the next five years. This, in a way, sealed their fate. "We became passionate about conservation. Our only son, Rik, also

ups were showing evidence of hypertension and poor lipid profile. A year after quitting job, his medical check-up showed all parameters to be normal. We both work far longer hours now but feel completely relaxed," says the 48-year-old Jui.

She, of course, had been exultant. As emotionally invested as she was in wildlife, being at the heart of conservation is what she really wanted. "If we don't stay here and get across the message of conservation, the Masai will be tempted to sell their little parcels of land to anybody who gives them a good price and we will lose the ecosystem," says Jui.

As an incentive to the community, nearly 25% of the camp's revenue goes towards lease rentals and salaries to rangers, and another 25% as salaries to camp staffers, all of whom are Masai. This is one of the main differences between conservancies and national parks, as the former also support the local communities.

It took about a year for the work permit, environmental clearances and tourist licence to come through, and another four months to set up the cheetah camp in the Ol Kinyei conservancy, which has six tents and opened in June this year. Why cheetah? "It is located in a designated hotspot for cheetahs. They have been hunted to extinction in India, which gave the cats their name. This is a small way of recognising the responsibility that Indians have towards conserving them," says Nirmalya.

Indians, at nearly 25,000, form the third largest safari tourist group in Kenya. "I want to make a difference by living in the camp and acting as a bridge between the locals and Indian guests, allaying their apprehension regarding food and upkeep," says Jui.

As the sun sinks into the silence of the savannah, silhouetting its vastness in zillions of photo ops, the wild couple regale their guests with yet another story they have scooped up in the past seven years. "As I woke up the other day, I saw a procession of nearly 50 elephants crossing just 20 metres away," says Jui. Or, the one where they heard the lions cry all night and found a wildebeest kill the next morning.

No, this is no juvenile infatuation. It's a love story that's not ending any time soon. ■

The cheetah camp in the Ol Kinyei conservancy



Nirmalya and Jui Banerjee



The camp staffers are all Masai

