

Soul Safari

Kenya's Masai Mara National Reserve has been described as one of the world's finest pieces of wildlife real estate. But safaris here are about much more than viewing wildlife.

Text Mark Eveleigh

It's a rare sight to see a European city kid milking a Maasai goat," says Maasai elder Dan Muli as he wraps his red-and-black shuka robes tighter around his shoulders. It's still surprisingly cool in the highland dawn and steam is gently rising from the bucket that my daughter Lucía (10) is struggling to fill.

Lucía grew up in Spain and prides herself on being an urbanite, but I hope that this trip to Kenya will be an ideal opportunity for her to experience other cultures as well as the African wilderness that has so completely enthralled me since I was her age. From my own perspective too, it promises to be a wonderful chance to see – first-hand – how sustainable tourism can benefit local communities. The little Maasai hamlet, which Muli has brought us to, is on the boundary of Ol Kinyei Conservancy. This 7,568-hectare wilderness area on the edge of the Masai Mara National Reserve (the Mara) was leased directly from the traditional landowners, and protects not only the treasured wildlife but also the Maasai pastoralists who call the area home.

Lion tracks in the dust

"You can't say that our people were exactly conservationists in the past," admits Muli as we set out from camp on a short walk into the bush. "But our lives have always been lived in tune with the wilderness." Looking at our two Maasai guides, with their flowing robes and vibrant beadwork adornments, I can understand why early European explorers referred to men like these as 'the lords of the savannah': even the lions have respect for the tall, athletic warriors with their long fighting spears. "In the past, most boys spent their childhood in the bush herding cattle, which are the wealth of our people," adds Muli's friend and fellow warrior Leintoi Tumanka. "We learnt to understand the ways of the big cats that prey on them. These days, our children are lucky because they can go to school to learn about other things."

Proof of the Maasai's traditional knowledge comes within minutes when Muli notices a set of paw prints converging on our track. As Lucía crouches down to measure her tiny hand against the soup-bowl-sized pugmarks, she says, "Are those really lion footprints?" The tracks of the three fully grown lions are intimidatingly big, but I'm reassured that with two experienced Maasai guides to look after us, we're in good hands. Both men are carrying heavy spears, which are the wilderness tools of all Maasai warriors. In the olden days, these men would have come of age by killing a lion with such spears. Fortunately, such brutality is no longer condoned, but it's said that, over the course of the centuries, the big cats have built up a natural respect for the distinctive red-and-black robes of the warriors, and as a result, tend to keep their distance from all Maasai people. Nevertheless, it's never a good idea to actively track lions on foot, so at the sight of the pugmarks, we slowly begin to retrace our steps.

"I knew there was no actual danger," Lucía says when I ask her over breakfast if she'd been nervous. "I knew those Maasai men would look after us." It's touching to hear her note of confidence, and at the same time, I'm pleased that she's had a chance to see how centuries of knowledge have equipped the Maasai for life in the wilderness. I hope that there will be lessons during this trip that Lucía will remember and that, as an adult, she too will try to make informed decisions to ensure that her travels benefit local communities wherever possible.

Empowering the traditional landowners

Even today in most of East Africa, it's the dream of young people in rural communities to go to the city. The old people complain that with each ceremony, the circle of dancers gets smaller. "When visitors come to stay in such conservancy areas, it benefits the local



Our guide notices a set of paw prints converging on our track



Mark Eveleigh (previous pages, top left, bottom left), Getty Images (bottom right)

Previous pages:
A Maasai man looks out across the Masai Mara National Reserve.

Right (clockwise from top left):
Mark and Lucía on top of an expedition-prepared Land Rover at the edge of the Amboseli National Park; a lioness plays with her cub; a group of Maasai people.



I see a puff of dust as the first animal launches down the bank

Left page:
A herd of wildebeest approach a crossing on the Mara River.

community directly,” explains Muli. “With the support of organisations like this, young Maasai are able to study tourism and wildlife so that they can stay close to their homelands and support their families.” Apart from a chance to support the community, our visit to Ol Kinyei Conservancy offers spectacular opportunities to get unusually close to wildlife.

Our trip coincides with the start of the rainy season and there’s an unusually high number of young animals here. As we watch great herds of impala drift past with their gangly calves in tow, Muli explains that zebra foals are born with extra-long legs in a clever evolutionary gambit that makes it difficult for low-lying predators to spot the youngsters in a herd. We sit silently in our open-sided safari vehicle as herds of elephants move around us with their newborns that are yet to gain control of the unwieldy appendages that flap around in front of them, tripping them up as they walk. But the highlight for Lucia are the young lion cubs that we spot being carefully moved between dens in the mouth of their powerful mother.

Many first-time visitors on safaris mistakenly believe that it’s crucial to be as close as possible to the centre of the great parks if you really want to see wildlife in action. Very few of Kenya’s protected areas are fenced, so wildlife is free to roam into protected areas beyond the park’s boundaries, and conservancy areas are often an even better choice: while the wildlife density in the conservancies can often be equally as high as in the reserve itself, visitor numbers are markedly lower. During high season, dozens of cars might collect at a single sighting in the central sections of the Mara, but most conservancies limit the numbers, so you’ll usually be alone. Fortunately, most reputable safari camps in the main sections of Kenya’s parks make a sincere effort to work with local communities so, as long as you travel with an established and responsible operator (whether in the main Kenyan parks

or in conservancies) your holiday is almost certain to benefit the traditional landowners.

Learning Maasai skills

I’d heard that Rekeru Camp – located in prime wildlife area in the heart of the Mara – offers wonderful cultural activities for children alongside world-class wildlife sightings. On arrival, Lucia and I learn how to hurl the knobkerrie (throwing sticks carved from hardwood roots) and shoot a bow and arrow. During short walks within the camp, we learn how to clean our teeth with twigs, and how to use a camphor bush leaf as a deodorant. The leaf of the *Verbascum Thapsus* (common mullein) is particularly good as toilet paper, but don’t confuse it with the similar-looking *Cordia Monoica* (sandpaper saucer-berry, or snot berry), which is great for sandpapering. We also learn about medicinal plants – croton and acacia aids digestion we are told, and aloe heals cuts – and which roots, leaves and herbs can be used to flavour stews.

On my previous trips to Kenya, a lot of camps served antelope and warthog. Occasionally, you could even sample zebra and crocodile. A complete prohibition on wild meat of any sort means that our dinner today is a delicious slow-roasted leg of lamb followed by passion fruit and tamarillo mousse.

Most Kenyan camps are unfenced and Rekeru guests are always escorted to and from the accommodation by a Maasai security guard. And that makes for an interesting night. In fact, it’s a real privilege for Lucia to substitute her bedtime reading in our huge, tented suite for mysterious African ‘lullabies’: the comical honking of hippos down in the river and the howl of jackals on the plains. We strain our ears for the roar of hungry lions and the cackle of the bickering hyenas that follow them. And then, in the middle of the night, we awaken to the harsh hacksaw cough of a leopard. The sounds of the African wilderness, heard through a thin canvas wall, are never forgotten. >

Right (clockwise from top left): A Maasai woman creating beadwork; perfect camping conditions in a shady acacia forest on the shore of Lake Naivasha; a giraffe resting in the shade of a tree.

Maasai women embracing their future

In the morning, an older Maasai woman gives Lucía a unique chance to try her hand at the beadwork craft that’s an iconic part of the tribe’s customs. Traditionally dominated by men (and the Maasai culture even more so), increasing numbers of women – all over Africa – are now asserting themselves on the frontlines of the safari industry as guides and rangers, which is wonderful to see.

“I was determined to go to school, but I had to do so without my parents’ permission,” recalls Evalyn Sintoya Mayetu, who’s been working as a guide in the Mara for the last six years. “Nevertheless, I think that my upbringing in a traditional Maasai community has been a huge help in my career as a guide. It’s good for young Maasai to see that visitors appreciate our crafts and traditions. They feel pride in the Maasai path and so the skills are passed on to future generations. I hope that, in future, more Maasai girls will see that, through the safari industry, it’s possible to play an active part in helping our people and protecting wildlife.”

The greatest wildlife show on Earth

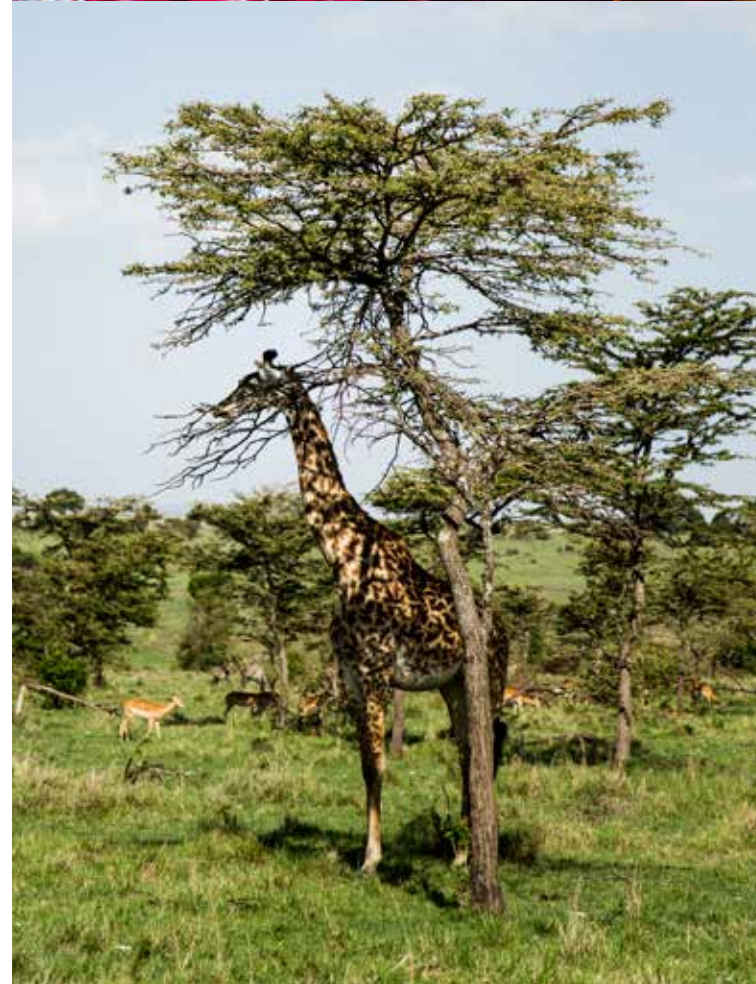
Africa has a way of surpassing expectations, but I’m not so sure if that’s a good thing because I’m starting to wonder if the safari experience might be too intense for my young daughter. I’ve visited East Africa several times around this time of year, which is when the Great Wildebeest Migration typically takes place. Although I’ve seen the great herds calving on the plains of southern Serengeti and amassing in the Mara for the journey south, I haven’t seen the migration in full swing yet. So, having just heard that now – on the last evening of our safari – great herds are gathering not far north of the camp, I’m worried and excited in equal measure.

Shortly after dawn the next morning, we’re waiting on the bank of the Mara River, gazing across at a jostling crowd of wildebeest on the

other side. The steep, sandy bank is an almost vertical 10m drop to the river, and it seems impossible that an animal will attempt that jump. “Can you hear them grunting?” Mayetu whispers to Lucía. “The ones behind are saying ‘go, go, go’ and the ones in front are saying ‘no, no, no.’” Through my camera’s zoom lens, I see a puff of dust as the first animal launches down the bank. Suddenly, the entire cliff face is in motion. Within the course of the next 40 minutes, around 30,000 wildebeest cascade – a writhing jumble of legs and horns – into the water from the bank directly opposite us. They plummet uncontrollably before stumbling into the river and swimming frantically to evade a flotilla of terrifyingly huge crocodiles. Finally, they scramble out of the water and gallop – within metres of our vehicle – onto the relative safety of the grasslands.

This migration is said to be ‘the greatest wildlife show on Earth’ and I’m aware that we’ve been incredibly lucky to catch it during one of its most dramatic moments. At the same time, however, I’m horrified by the thought that the dust will clear on this apparently suicidal frenzy to reveal what could only be heartbreaking slaughter and carnage. But wildebeest must be among the most spectacularly resilient creatures on the planet because, after the mad rush is over, I count only five animals that look to be seriously injured.

As the great herd fans out across the savannah, bound once more for the calving grounds of the Serengeti, Lucía and I turn reluctantly northwards on the drive that will take us back to Nairobi for our flight home. “Maybe one day I’ll get to bring my kids here,” she says. “Maybe they’ll get to milk goats with the children of the Maasai and see the babies of the same lion cubs we saw.” Right then, it dawns on me that Lucía had come to intimately understand Africa’s celebrated ‘circle of life’, which is a fitting end to an enriching experience for both of us. >



We learn how to clean our teeth with twigs

Mirjam Bleeker (top left, bottom left), Mark Eveleigh (top right)

Africa has a way of surpassing expectations



Keep exploring

Ol Kinyei Conservancy

A safari at Porini Mara Camp offers a wonderful opportunity to get close to wildlife – on foot as well as in vehicles – in the company of expert Maasai guides. The five large Hemingway-style tents are built on timber platforms and have small private verandas, offering a blissful spot in which to relax and watch the game and birdlife that gather along the shade of the acacias. It almost seems a pity that there are so many irresistible activities – drives, walks, visits to Maasai villages, and even hot-air balloon flights – to tempt you away from a camp that very quickly begins to feel like home. Every stay at Porini Mara directly benefits the local Maasai community. gamewatchers.com

Central Masai Mara

Rekero Camp's location is hard to beat. One of the Mara's most luxurious camps, Rekero is idyllically situated on the banks of the Talek River, so guests are often blessed with spectacular crossings of wildebeest and zebra from the lodge's viewing deck. Rekero's accommodation, among the biggest tented suites in the Mara, brings new meaning to the word 'camping' but, along with the world-class wildlife viewing, it's often the opportunity to interact with the property's Maasai guides and staff (both in camp and in village visits) that makes a stay here particularly memorable. asiliaafrica.com

Samburu National Reserve

While the Mara (along with Amboseli National Park) is probably Kenya's greatest tourist attraction, Samburu National Reserve is making a name as the country's most exciting – and relatively unknown – wildlife frontier. Many years ago, I covered Saruni Samburu's 'Warriors Academy' for a magazine. While the activities (in collaboration with the Samburu community) are designed for families, the experience can be



personalised to appeal to even the most intrepid traveller. In the interests of chasing the story, I'd breakfasted on 'warrior milkshake' (milk and cow blood) and even undergone an intensely painful Samburu scarification ceremony that featured acacia thorn puncture wounds. On many levels, Samburu National Reserve is a place that gets its hooks into you. saruni.com

Nairobi National Park

This must be one of the world's most underrated national parks, and Nairobi Tented Camp is perhaps my all-time favourite 'big city bolthole'. This is an unexpectedly luxurious camp in a shady acacia forest that is so wonderfully secluded that you'll scarcely believe you're 20 minutes from the throng and bustle of Nairobi city centre. Few people even realise that within half an hour of the baggage carousels at Nairobi international airport, you can find yourself sitting in a wilderness area that's home to four of the Big Five (the park is too small to support elephant herds). kws.go.ke

Left page: Hot-air balloons floating over a herd of wildebeest.

Above: Elephants grazing in a section of savannah.

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