

# WILDLIFE AT HEART?

Kenya's rich natural and cultural heritage – as well as its safaris and beaches – is now attracting travellers who want a holiday where meeting the people is as important as the scenery

**M**y Maasai guide, Amos, points to three large patches of flattened grass with his spear. 'This is where the lion slept last night,' he says. I scan the rocky outcrop, feeling a tingling of the spine as my senses instinctively sharpen, keenly alert to the sights and sounds of the African bush. Momentarily nervous at the thought of meeting the lions, which have long disappeared, I soon relax again to savour the magnitude of the wilderness – expansive Mara plains dappled in early morning sunshine, with a gentle breeze rippling through the long grass and distant views into Tanzania.

Amos works for Base Camp Masai Mara ([www.basecampexplorer.com](http://www.basecampexplorer.com)), a low-key permanent tented camp built along strictly environmental principles. It lies on a Maasai community-owned ranch adjacent to the Masai Mara National Reserve. A joint venture between a Swedish company and the Maasai, it employs people like Amos who live in the vicinity, uses solar power and recycles waste and water which feed a vegetable garden and a tree nursery which supplies fuel wood. It typifies a new vogue in Kenya where tourist lodges are concerned about the environment and involving local people. This movement has evolved from the increasing pressure on natural resources in wilderness areas brought about by a burgeoning population (it's increased four-fold in 40 years and now stands at 30 million), together with a worldwide recognition of the importance of biodiversity.

Historically, Kenya's tourism centred on wildlife safaris in national parks. From 1946 onwards, there was a preservationist approach to wildlife conservation, with the formation of national reserves (where people living nearby had reasonable access) and national parks where people and livestock were excluded altogether. Often wildlife areas were on land used periodically by nomadic pastoralists like the Maasai and Samburu. Leading transient lifestyles, at that time their needs were not an issue. In the tourism boom of the 1970s some reserves were given national park status. The government, whose main concern was to fill its coffers, gave scant regard to the welfare of local people. This was clearly demonstrated in Amboseli when the reserve was given national park status in 1974 and the Maasai lost their only per-



Watching a lioness with giraffe kill

manent source of water to the park. Understandably, this fuelled a conflict of interests between wildlife and people which still simmers to this day.

Encouragingly, during the 1980s, a shift in government attitude, coincided with a more pragmatic approach to conservation. Following the CAMPFIRE (Communal Areas Management Programmes for Indigenous Resources) concept, which started in Zimbabwe, it placed an economic value on wildlife: if local people derived an income from wildlife, then it was in their own interests to look after it. In turn, this benefited the environment, conserved the habitat, gave wildlife an extended safe zone outside the parks and community protection provided the best deterrent against poaching. Consequently, local people, through getting involved with wildlife tourism, became an integral element in wildlife conservation on communally owned land.

At the global level, the 1990s saw a growing need for responsible travel. Recognising this, forward-thinking players in Kenyan tourism formed the Ecotourism Society of Kenya (ESOK) in 1996. As Jake Grieves-Cook, chairman of ESOK, explains, 'Over the last decade the Kenyan travel industry realized that we had to develop more sustainable forms of tourism if we are to continue as a leading safari destination in the future. The Ecotourism Society of Kenya aims to improve and



A guide from Il Ngwesi points out animal tracks

**Men and women were bedecked in their finest jewellery – girls wearing tiers of flat, colourful, dinner-plate-sized beaded necklaces**

promote Kenya as a tourist destination by bringing together tourism, conservation and communities, promoting responsible and sustainable tourism and protecting the integrity of natural and cultural attractions upon which Kenya's tourism is based.'

As ecologically sustainable tourism and a concern for retaining biodiversity have gathered momentum, traditional game viewing areas have extended beyond the parks and reserves where, remarkably, over 75 per cent of large mammals are found on private land. 'In the 1980s some private ranches that were hosting large numbers of wildlife started accommodating visitors who were coming to enjoy the wildlife and were able to do some of the other activities which were restricted in parks and reserves such as night game drives, walks and horse-riding,' says Alan Dixon, managing director of Let's Go Travel and one of ESOK's members. 'With greater interest throughout the world in preserving the environment, cultures and wildlife, emphasis was put on smaller lodges which could give the clientele a more and unspoilt experience and allow them more time to absorb the greater issues of conservation and the benefits of it to the local communities where, in fact, their own livelihoods have been improved.'

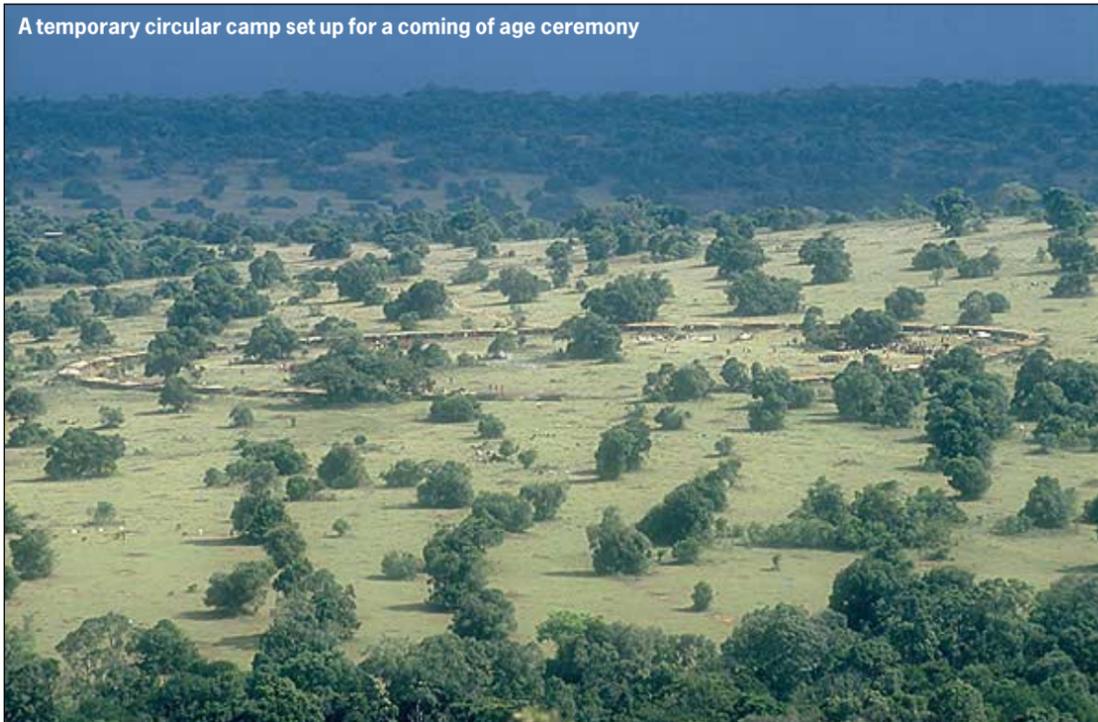
Efforts by ESOK to introduce higher industry standards for sustainable tourism have won the support of tourism operators

and membership now stands at over 140. An eco-rating scheme, a first in Africa, was introduced in 2002 providing a benchmark for good practice. Essentially, this is an environmental, social and cultural audit, covering aspects such as waste management, sustainable use of resources, educating tourists and the involvement of local people. It is not limited to small enterprises; some hotel groups like Serena and Heritage have a strong responsible travel element in their operation. 'So far over 20 camps, lodges and hotels have been awarded a Bronze Eco-rating and more are in the process of applying,' says Grieves-Cook. 'We have also encouraged a more individual, higher quality of safari guiding and the Kenya Professional Safari Guides Association has helped to uplift standards enormously in recent years.'

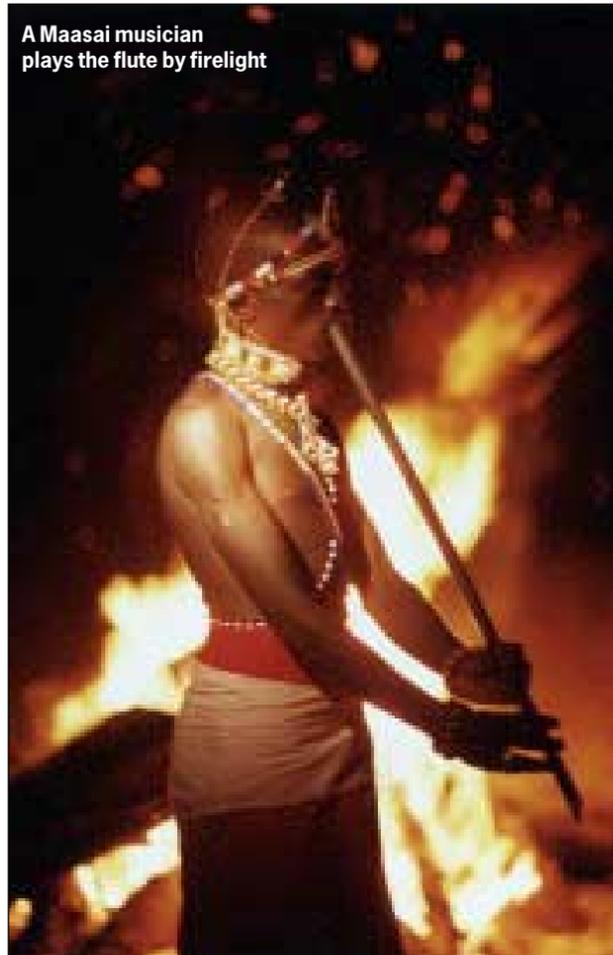
This transformation in Kenya's tourism industry not only contributes to the feel-good factor of giving something back to the country while on holiday, but has also given rise to a huge spectrum of choice, both in the style of accommodation, the variety of activities on offer and the means to experience them. With a swing away from an obsession with the big five – lion, leopard, buffalo, rhino and elephant (a hangover from the major trophy species of hunting days) combined with a sandy beach at the coast, emphasis is now placed on appealing to visitors who are interested in gaining an enlightened view of Kenya's rich natural and cultural heritage.

Tourism provides much-needed employment throughout the country and, increasingly, local communities are beginning to get a share of the tourism cake. Fortuitously, in Amboseli, a previous hot-bed of animosity between the Maasai and wildlife, there have been exciting new initiatives between private operators and communally owned Maasai ranches. Tortilis is an award-winning tented camp, where excellent guides take game drives in open vehicles to Amboseli National Park and the surrounding area. Here you can see elephants wallowing in the marshes and exquisite birdlife, while there's also a cultural dimension, visiting villages in the lea of Mount Kilimanjaro to gain a glimpse of the traditional Maasai lifestyle. Our visit coincided with a young man's circumcision ceremony, where a party was in full swing. Both men and women, some with ochred faces, were bedecked in their

A temporary circular camp set up for a coming of age ceremony



A Maasai musician plays the flute by firelight



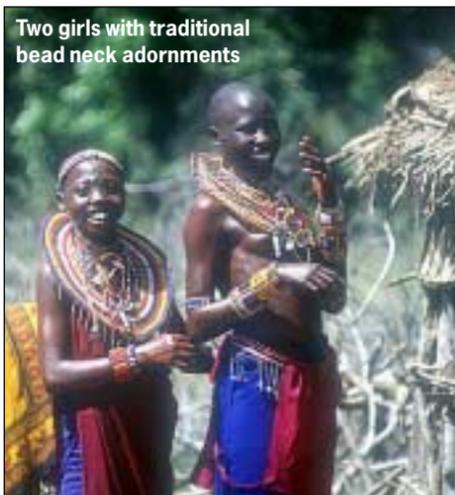
Lewa Wildlife Conservancy, northern Kenya



Four Maasai warriors from the Siria Maasai Manyatta



Two girls with traditional bead neck adornments



finest jewellery – girls wearing tiers of flat, colourful, dinner-plate-sized beaded necklaces. Another exciting development near Amboseli is the Selenkay Conservancy, where Porini Ecotourism ([www.porini.com](http://www.porini.com)) has leased 6,000 hectares from the 81,000 hectare Eselenkei Maasai ranch. Here, emphasis lies in wildlife management, while a small tented camp gives a bed-night levy to the community who are employed as camp staff, guides, game scouts and a road maintenance team. Apart from game drives, which include excursions to Amboseli National Park, there are superb walks with the Maasai, following dry river beds and learning about the medicinal use of plants, and excellent night drives where caracal are often caught in the spotlight.

Selenkay lies on an ancient elephant migration route between Tsavo and Amboseli. Now that the area is safe, it is again being used by elephants. These migration corridors are vital for maintaining the integrity of ecosystems, otherwise the parks will become isolated islands, the equivalent of mega-zoos, resulting in a loss of biodiversity. Two other ecolodges, Ol Donyo Wuas and Kampi ya Kanzi are similarly involved with the Maasai in wildlife tourism and conservation.

Heralded as a blueprint for community involvement in tourism is Il Ngwesi, which opened in 1996 on a 14,500 hectare ranch. It stands out as the first ecolodge owned and managed by

a local community and has won a cluster of international awards, including an Equator Initiative Award in 2002 for efforts to reduce poverty through conservation and the sustainable use of biodiversity. Nestling on a hillside at the foot of the Mokogodo escarpment, there are panoramic views across the aridlands of northern Kenya to the sugarloaf dome of Ol Ololokwe. This lodge is unique for its free-form architecture which follows the twisted shapes of ancient Newtonia trees under a grass thatch, with open-plan rooms on stilts. Activities start early – a wake-up call at daybreak to set off on a guided bush walk or morning camel trek. Our bush walk revealed the fresh spoor of buffalo and lion and the discarded strips of sansevera, a spiky succulent known as the elephant's chewing gum. On a camel trek we walked alongside the camels on sandy tracks, occasionally opting to ride for short periods. From an elevated viewpoint, I could see for miles across a canopy of thorns, while the craggy slopes of Mount Kenya loomed above the Laikipia plateau, etched against a cloudless blue sky. Before building the lodge, the Il Ngwesi community was entirely dependent on an income from pastoralism in an area where cattle rustling and poaching was rife. Encouraged to venture into tourism by their neighbours on Lewa Wildlife Conservancy (which was not easy as initially the community was

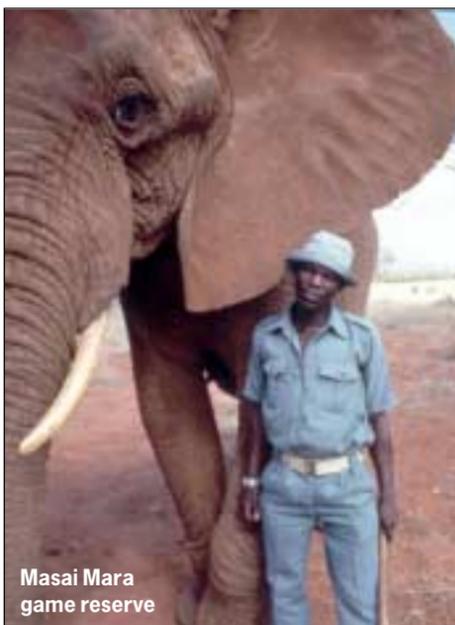
deeply sceptical that this was a ruse to take their land away for a park) Il Ngwesi has shown that wildlife tourism can be far more profitable than livestock in areas of marginal rainfall. Proceeds from the lodge have paid for eight schools, a road, cattle dips, higher education bursaries, two medical clinics and a team of community game scouts resulting in better security both for the people and wildlife. These tangible benefits have resulted in a change in attitude towards wildlife which in turn has led to improved land management and less conflict between the community and wildlife. The Il Ngwesi now have a conservation area – a cattle-free zone – around the lodge and grassland severely denuded by overgrazing is being reseeded. Improved security has attracted wildlife back into the area: where previously elephant poaching was a problem, there are now over 600 elephant on the ranch and recently three rhino were translocated from Lewa Wildlife Conservancy. Il Ngwesi's success has been the catalyst for other community-owned lodges and camps in northern Kenya – Tassia, Sarara and Kalacha.

Another flagship ecolodge is Shompole ([www.shompole.com](http://www.shompole.com)) which opened in 2002. Breaking new boundaries with its chic design, it set a precedent as the first Kenyan lodge built between a local community and private investor where ownership of the lodge will revert to the

community at the end of a 15-year lease. Set in an area of rugged beauty, with a backdrop of the towering Nguruman escarpment, part of the Rift Valley wall, it overlooks searingly hot salt-crusted plains and Mount Shompole with its dramatic sunsets. Nearby is a Maasai village, where we visited a women's beadwork project before continuing to Natron, a soda lake with numerous flamingos silhouetted against its silvery waters. Walking on the plains, zebra and gazelle are common, and already there's been a significant increase in wildlife numbers since the 14,000 hectare conservancy was formed.

Tourism benefits are not restricted to those living alongside wildlife. In north-western Kenya, the Marich Pass Field Studies Centre lies at the foot of the Cherangani hills on the Moruny river and works closely with the local Pokot tribe. Rising to 3,500 metres, the Cheranganis are inhabited by Pokot farmers who have a centuries-old irrigation system for watering their crops of bananas and millet, while Pokot pastoralists living on the plains below water their livestock in the river. Primarily catering for students, the centre is an ideal base for exploring the area. Superb walking country, there are magnificent views of Mt Mtelo, revered by the Pokot as the home of their deity, and excursions to climb Mt Koh. Less strenuous hikes give the opportunity to watch goldpanners searching for

Masai Mara game reserve



specs of alluvial gold, and to visit Pokot homesteads and colourful traditional markets.

In the Karisia hills, near Maralal, Samburu Trails ([www.samburu.com](http://www.samburu.com)) takes camping expeditions through ancient forests to the aridlands of Samburu. Here the terrain is too steep for camels (the serious camel treks normally follow the dry river beds along the valley floor), and donkeys with wicker panniers are used as pack animals, deftly managed by their Samburu minders dressed in traditional attire. These remote wildmess treks are not for the faint-hearted, but the scenery is breathtaking. A steep climb up forested slopes leads to elephant trails along the ridge before descending through thick, often thorny bush to scramble down to the hot Samburu plains below.

At sea-level, on the south coast, several excursions from beach hotels help local communities: Charlie Claw's Wasini Island Restaurant supports a village fund, where snorkelling in the coral gardens (with the chance of seeing dolphins and hump-backed whales in season) of Kisite-Mpunguti Marine National Park is followed by a Swahili crab feast, after which visitors are guided around the village and taken along a boardwalk through a coral maze in the mangroves. Mwaluganje Community Elephant Sanctuary, has large elephant herds with cyclad forests and giant baobab trees. It supports the Duruma people who get revenue from visits to the sanctuary and, since an electric fence was erected, can now continue their daily lives without the threat of elephants raiding their crops.

On the north coast, Eco-Resorts ([www.eco-resorts.com](http://www.eco-resorts.com)) incorporates volunteering at a children's orphanage near Malindi with a beach holiday and there are turtle conservation projects on Watamu and Lamu beaches which work in co-operation with local fishermen. Hotels are advised of imminent nest hatchings, where you can watch tiny black turtles, burrowing their way out of the white sand and miraculously scuttling down the beach to face the challenges of survival in the Indian Ocean.

Increasingly there are opportunities to participate in conservation projects. Earthwatch International ([www.earthwatch.org](http://www.earthwatch.org))

monitors maneless lions with the Taita Discovery Centre in southern Kenya, and Grevy's zebra with Lewa Wildlife Conservancy in Laikipia. In Samburu, Elephant Watch Safaris ([www.elephantwatchesafaris.com](http://www.elephantwatchesafaris.com)) generate funds for the local community and elephant conservation, focusing on the elephant families and bulls studied by the Elephant Research Project under the renowned researcher and campaigner Dr Iain Douglas-Hamilton. Among these, 'The Royal Family', headed up by the matriarch, Queen Victoria, is found near the camp. The thrill of watching wild elephants within touching distance of an open vehicle is magical. It captures the essence of all Kenya has to offer visitors beyond the traditional safari circuit and the new ethos for responsible travel bodes well for the future.

*Claire Footitt is author of Kenya: the Bradt Travel Guide*

For further information, including web links to the destinations mentioned above, contact: Kenya Tourist Board (020-7202 6373): [www.magicalkenya.com](http://www.magicalkenya.com) Ecotourism Society of Kenya: [www.esok.org](http://www.esok.org)



Maasai warriors running at a coming of age ceremony



Masaai children take a look at a tourist's camera

Sue Cunningham; Claire Footitt