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.
bead neck adornments

Two girls with traditional bead neck adornments

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

A Maasai musician plays the flute by firelight

A Maasai Manyatta

Lewa Wildlife Conservancy, northern Kenya

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) 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 and breakfast 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-2000, resulting in a loss of biodiversity. Two other ecologies, Ol Donyo Wuas and Kambli 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 eco-lodge 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 sugalofa dome of Ol Odolokwe. 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 dawn, then up at break 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. 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 Kakaha.

Another flagship eco-lodge is Shompole (www.shompole.com) which opened in 2002. Breaking new boundaries with its chic design, it set a precedent as the first Kenyan lodge built by 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 seemingly 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 Naton, 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 Mourni river and works closely with the local Pokot tribe. Rising to 3,300 metres, the Cheranganius 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 Stelto, 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
specs of alluvial gold, and to visit Pokot homesteads and colourful traditional markets.

In the Karisia hills, near Maralal, Samburu Trails (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 wilderness 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) 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 cooperation 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) monitors maneless lions with the Taita Discovery Centre in southern Kenya, and Grevey’s zebra with Lewa Wildlife Conservancy in Laikipia. In Samburu, Elephant Watch Safaris (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.

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

Claire Foottit

Maasai warriors running at a coming of age ceremony

Maasai children take a look at a tourist’s camera

Sue Cunningham; Claire Foottit