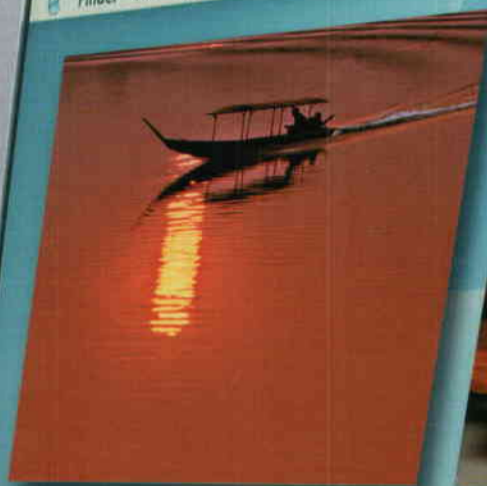


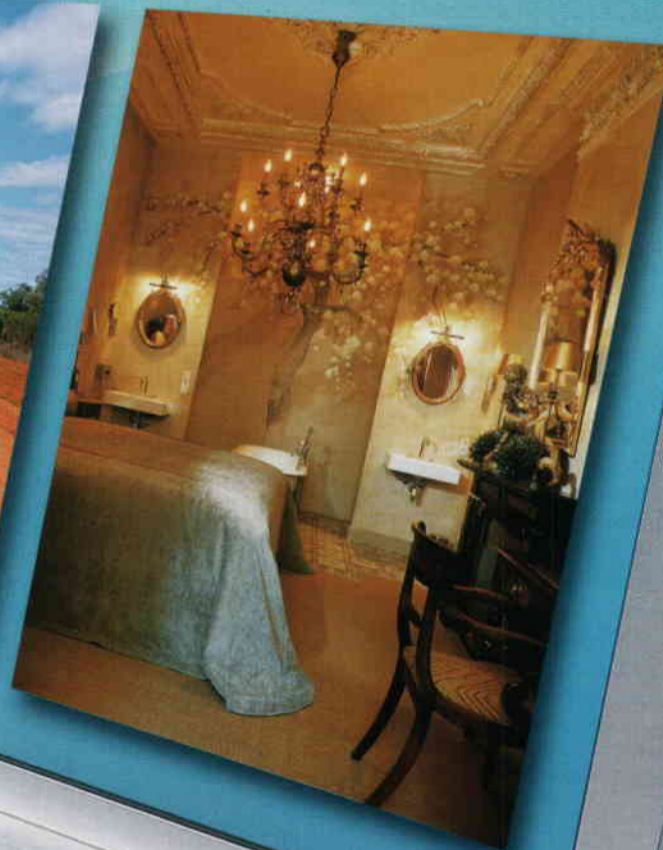
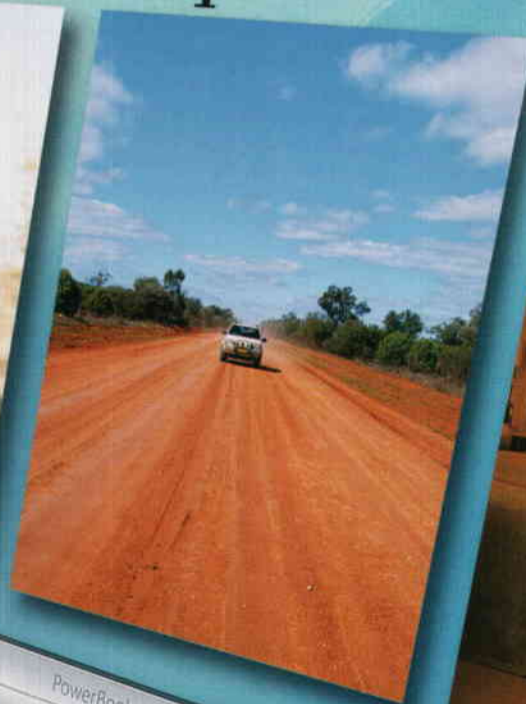
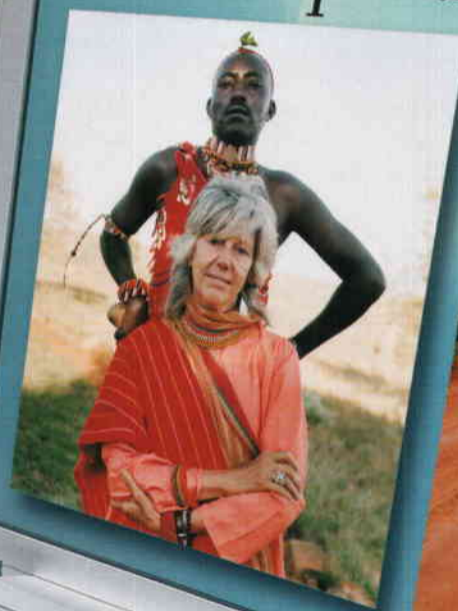
travel unravelled

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how to spend it special travel edition



PowerBook G4

the rift that heals



Above: Kuki Gallmann at an artificial lake in Kenya's Laikipia Nature Conservancy
Top right: Inside Kuki's home at the edge of the Great Rift Valley



Author Kuki Gallmann has known both intense joy and tragedy in Kenya's Rift Valley. Her experiences have inspired her to reinvent the African wilderness holiday, she tells Lucia van der Post. Photographs by Axel Bernstorff.

Kuki Gallmann, whose moving chronicle of love and joy, loss and sorrow, *I Dreamed of Africa*, became an international bestseller and was turned into a (rather bad) movie, now has another very different dream. She is dreaming of new initiatives for the Africa she loves. She wants, more than anything, to make sense of the tragedies that have engulfed her and to inspire those who come to Africa to engage with its land and its people in a newer, richer, more interesting way than anything they've experienced before. In short, she is dreaming of creating a new academy for the arts centred on one of the least populated places on earth, Africa's Great Rift Valley. "I want to create beauty," is how she puts it. As dreams go it seems about as wild and far-fetched as any, but what Kuki dreams of has a way of coming true.

For Kuki (and for many others), the Great Rift Valley is one of the world's special places. It's a vast fissure in the earth's surface stretching all the way from the Lebanon to Kenya (where it can be seen at its most dramatic) and down through Africa as far as Mozambique and even South Africa. But apart from its dramatic beauty, the Great Rift Valley has a greater significance because it is generally regarded as "the cradle of mankind" or "the place where man began". For many it is also a sacred place, a place where you are brought face to face with the fact that you are part of something much bigger than your own world.

It so happens that Kuki's ranch, Ol Ari Nyiro, the place where she lives, is up on Kenya's Laikipia plateau, right on the edge of the Rift Valley. It's a magic land of 155sq miles of thick, impenetrable bush, untouched primeval cedar forest and steep, dramatic gorges. One can see why it quite took Kuki and Paolo Gallmann's breath away when they first saw it way back in the early 1970s. There it lay, with extraordinary vistas up to rolling hills, over valleys and into forests and, as her book lyrically describes, to "craters and volcanoes made purple and pink by the heat and the distance, as in a trembling mirage, and [down to] Lake Baringo shimmering with all its islands, 3,000ft below". There are "blue

hills and groves of acacia; open savannah dotted with trees". And besides the land and the views there is the "cool light air, dry and golden, and the feeling of being at the top of the world". The ranch, which when they bought it ran thousands of head of cattle and sheep, was also teeming with game, with everything from rhino – which they spotted trotting away on a hilltop on that first visit – to lion, giraffe, elephant, buffalo and leopard. No wonder it tore at the heartstrings. No wonder Kuki and Paolo – then two young people newly in love, recently recovered from a terrible car crash in which he'd lost his wife and she'd been badly hurt – knew that they had to have it, knew that this was where their African adventure would begin.

But it wasn't just chance that brought them to Africa. When she was still just a young girl living in her grandmother's house in northern Italy, Kuki was given to dreaming. She dreamed of a "hot land of unending horizons, herds of animals in the savannah... camping out at night on a river bank... where people lived who spoke strange languages and were still close to nature and knew its secrets... dusty red tracks in the thick bush, ancient lakes with flamingos, lions roaring in the vast darkness and snorting buffalo... sunsets of gold and fire with silhouetted giraffe and drums in the night". It was, of course, of Africa that she dreamed, Africa that stirred and moved her long before she ever saw it. Her dreams were so powerful that when eventually she and Paolo came upon this ranch, she found "the profile of the hills seemed inexplicably familiar, as if I had already been there. It was more than I could have

dreamed, yet it was, at the same time, exactly what I had dreamed." It was a vision she and her second husband Paolo Gallmann were to share, and which together they made come true, but the price was terrible... Paolo, the love of her life, was killed in a car crash driving up from Mombasa with a crib for their eagerly awaited baby; and Emanuele, the clever, studious, beautiful child of her first marriage, who refused to give up his deadly passion for collecting snakes, died of a last, fatal, snakebite, just as he was blossoming into a man. Kuki and her daughter Sveva, born several months after her father's death (she's now 24 years old), were left surrounded by all that beauty but filled with almost unendurable grief and with leftover life to live.

And that is how Kuki came to dare to dream again. "Out of all the tears and all the loss, I felt I had to make something creative happen. This is the part of the world where so much happened to me and where I lost almost everybody I loved, so I felt I had to do something I would never have done if all that hadn't happened to me, if I'd just led an ordinary, conventional life."

Which has led Kuki to feel that it is time for a new initiative. "I want to see artists coming back to the cradle of mankind," she says now, "to produce some original art inspired by the beauty of this place and by each other. Africa has seen so much tragedy, what with wars and terrorism, poverty and Aids, that I want to show the world that there is another Africa, an Africa filled with creative talent that has so much

to offer to the world at large. I want to create here on Ol Ari Nyiro an artistic and natural refuge where people can have a different sort of African experience."

For many years now, the traditional way for tourists and foreigners to explore Africa has been the safari. Tourists come to meet face to face the Africa they've already met in the books of the great adventurers and the tales of the big white hunters. They come to see the iconic animals, the lion and the leopard, the rhino and the elephant. They come for the adventure, for the nostalgia, for the heady air and for what they perceive to be an exotic experience. But for some time now there's been a growing feeling that it's an out-of-date model for engaging with modern Africa. As Kuki herself puts it, "If we want to preserve the Africa we love, we have to do things in a new way. I have always felt that there was more to Kenya than the giraffe, the lion and the elephant. Africa, and particularly the Great Rift Valley," she says, "is also about healing. It's a place that people from inner cities – with all their urban pollution, their overcrowding and their stress – badly need. They need peace, they need time to reflect – time simply to be in a place of unparalleled beauty. I want the world to see how important it is to keep the natural world as a source of inspiration."

It is increasingly difficult for people to find untouched, pristine wilderness. As Kuki puts it, "Places like Ol Ari Nyiro are among the few remaining untouched spots on the planet. They are the real monuments of the world because what is manmade can be

Below: Kuki, centre, with Jemps tribespeople currently sheltering on her land. Right: Kuki shows off a scrap-metal elephant sculpture by Kenyan artist Kioko Mwitiki.



reconstructed – witness the Phoenicia theatre in Venice – but once the forests go and the elephants go and the savannahs go, that is the end of it. They cannot be remade.”

Kuki links this deep need of mankind to return from time to time to wild places with her own experience of what Africa did for her. When she first arrived there, all those years ago with Paolo, she felt as if she was coming home. When she talks about it now she is not surprised, for she sees it as a profound inner compulsion, a “yearning to return, a nostalgic inherited need to migrate back to where our ancestors came from... a memory carried in the genes. The urge to fly home, like the swallows.” It may sound fanciful but she’s not alone in thinking this. Dr Ian McCallum, a South African doctor who is a specialist psychiatrist, has found from long experience with many patients that wilderness is the finest antidepressant he knows. It’s the best cure, he says, for some forms of chronic low-grade depression. He believes a sense of who we are is linked with an inner historical memory of landscape and that some mild depressions can be attributed to a “homesickness” for these landscapes. “This isn’t to say,” he warns, “that wilderness is a cure for all depressions or that people who live in wild areas don’t get depressed, but it does add another dimension to the notion of what a holiday could mean – a journey to landscapes that feed the soul.”

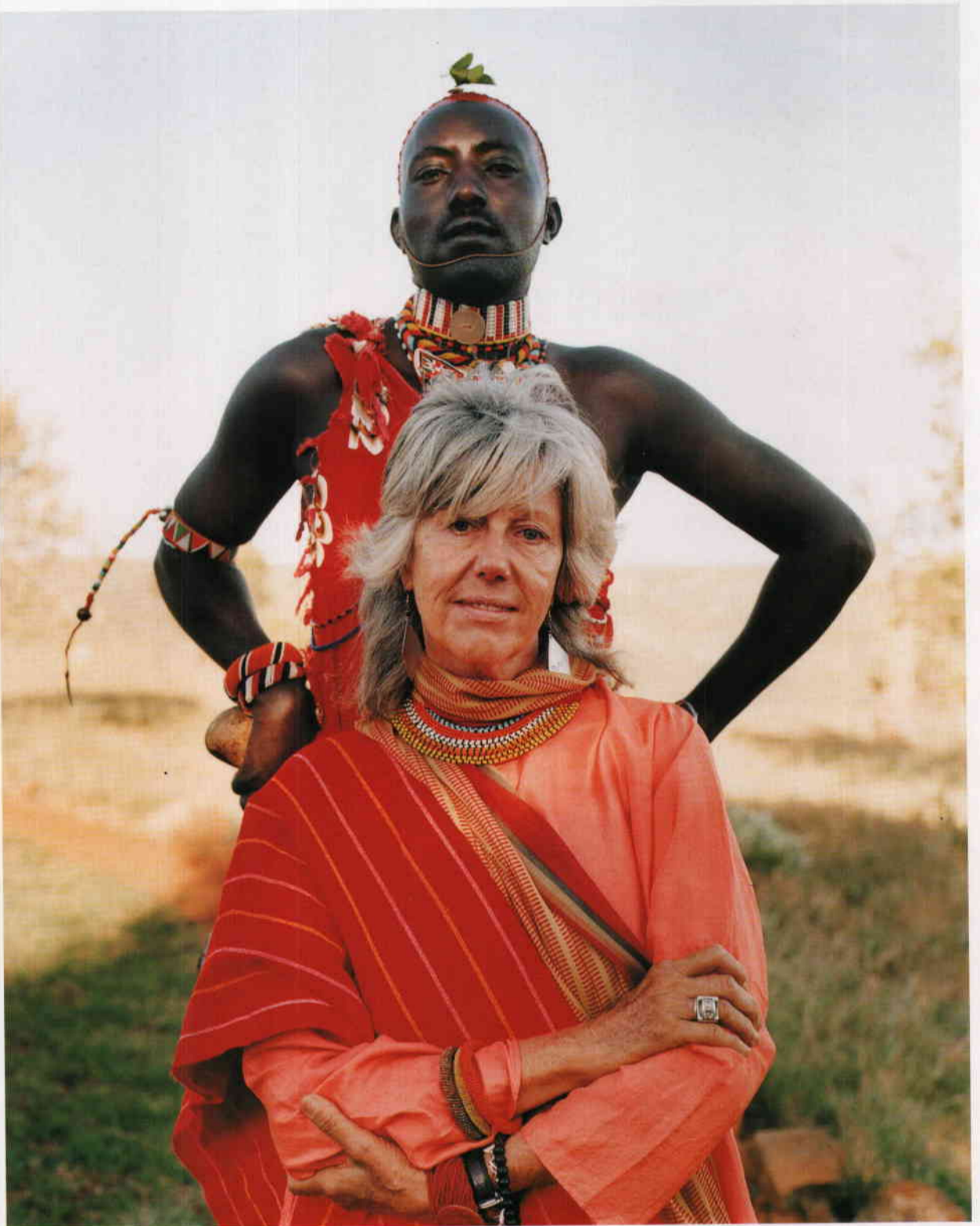
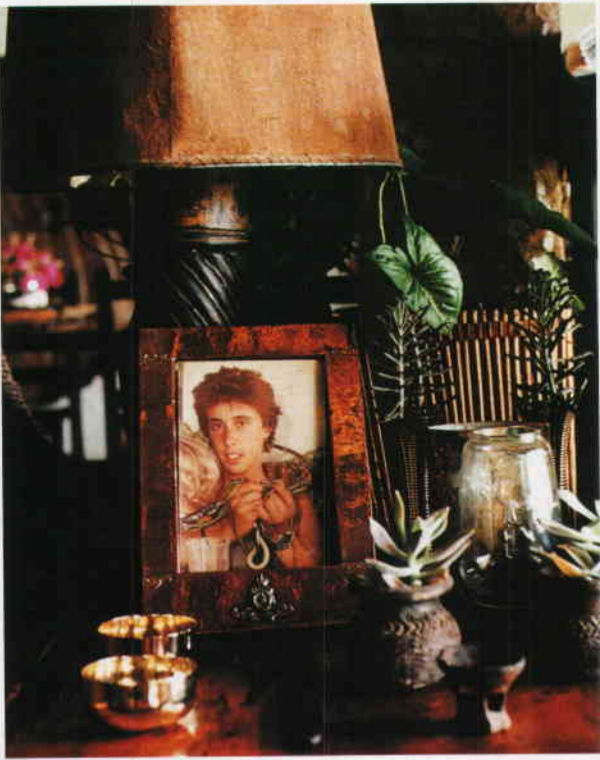
These landscapes Africa has in abundance, but if they are to survive, then new action has to be taken. Such landscapes are disappearing daily. Which is why Kuki has put immense thought into the future and how to preserve what



she has up in the Great Rift Valley, not just for her and her daughter Sveva (“we are just caretakers – very fortunate caretakers – but that is all we are”) but for the world. In *I Dreamed of Africa* she quotes my father, the writer Sir Laurens van der Post: “...every bit of unspoilt nature which is left, every bit of park, every bit of earth still spare, should be declared a wilderness area as a blueprint of what life was originally intended to be, to remind us...”

As Emanuele lay dying in her arms, Kuki saw reflected in his unseeing eyes the passing sky and a falling leaf and she thought then, “We are not important – it is nature, life that is important. It must go on.” She decided then to do something meaningful in his memory and establish the Gallmann Memorial Foundation (www.gallmannkenya.org), which is committed to preserving all the hundreds of acres of untouched wilderness at Ol Ari Nyiro as a refuge for all who want to come and “as a blueprint of what life was originally intended to be”. She stopped ranching (“the land is very precipitous and wasn’t good cattle country, which is why it was one of the last ranches to be sold on Laikipia, and I didn’t come to Africa to be a third-rate rancher”) and turned the land over to wildlife. But Ol Ari Nyiro isn’t just a private ranch – Kuki, as I’ve already pointed out, sees it as belonging to mankind. She has two lovely lodges where guests may stay. Mukutan has three immensely large and luxurious cottages with stunning views over precipitous gorges. Makena’s Hills (so-called because Makena is the name the Samburu people gave her daughter Sveva) was originally built to house the many guests who came to





Ol Ari Nyiro for Sveva's wedding a few years ago. It has amazing views right across the Rift Valley and down over Lake Baringo. Here there are immense and equally luxurious rooms for six couples and sweeping verandas on which to rest and read.

Almost everybody who comes does so because they've read the book and been moved by its story. Kuki does almost no PR or marketing. They come to see Kuki's Point, to see the views where she first fell in love with the ranch. They come to see the graves of Paolo and Emanuele, the place where Emanuele kept his snakes and the hills over which Paolo used to ride. They come to see a remote and pristine part of Africa. They come to be part of a life which for most westerners seems wild and strange, a million miles from their daily rounds.

Sveva, after studying at St Paul's and Oxford and entering into a very young marriage that didn't work out, is now back in Kenya, living at Ol Ari Nyiro, as committed as Kuki to finding a new way to engage with the Africa that is their home. She has a grant from the Ford Foundation and the Nando Peretti Foundation to try to work with the tribal communities – the Pokot, the Samburu and the Turkana whose ancestral lands are all around the ranch – to help them preserve their tribal stories, their creation myths, their rituals and their oral history. This knowledge is hugely precious because it is vanishing at an alarming rate.

Main picture: Kuki with a young warrior from the Samburu tribe. Top left: a photograph of Kuki's son Emanuele, who was killed by a snakebite. Above left: the memorial to Kuki's late husband.

It was never written down and contact between children, who are busy at school, and the elders who pass on the knowledge is often scant. Sveva tracks down elders and persuades them to tell their stories and pass on their lore to the new generation. "When one of these old men speaks, time goes still,"

says Sveva. These elders are now national treasures for, as Kuki puts it, "Unpolluted humanity is today an endangered species. One of the things I love about the Great Rift Valley is that we have humanity that hasn't been infected by western ideas. We are surrounded by tribal communities that are still relatively intact." Visitors to Ol Ari Nyiro have the chance to engage with them, to join Sveva in her work. Almost every day the ranch plays host to groups from Kenya (Kuki is currently providing shelter to 195 Jemps tribespeople, after their homes were raided by the Pokot tribe) and around the world who would otherwise have no notion of what true wilderness is really like. "Unless the new generation learns to love and understand wilderness, we will have no chance of preserving it," says Kuki.

For the western holidaymaker seeking a different sort of African experience, they will find it at Ol Ari Nyiro. As well as traditional wildlife-viewing (which never fails to thrill), there is also a chance to engage with the women helping Kuki to harvest essential oils from the leleshwe bushes. Artists come for three or four weeks just to

paint, to sculpt or to write. This February Kuki and Sveva held the first of what is to be an annual festival bringing together artists of world stature – both local Kenyans and foreigners – who will learn from and help each other, and visitors to the ranch will be able to join in this festival. They have ambitious plans – a major architectural talent will be commissioned to build a centre for the academy, a Greek-style amphitheatre is to be built, and artists from around the world will be encouraged to come and pursue their vision in Africa. In this way, as Kuki sees it, "All the tears and all the loss" will have had a purpose. "They will have come to something." ♦

ART OF AFRICA

Lucia van der Post flew courtesy of **Kenya Airways** (01784-888 222; www.kenya-airways.com), which operates a daily service from London Heathrow to Nairobi; economy from £470, and a flat bed in Premier World from £1,730. Flights to Africa can also be booked through **World Options** (020-7204 6637).

Lucia van der Post was a guest of **Journeys by Design** (01273-623 790; www.journeysbydesign.co.uk), which has close links with the Kenyan highland families. A tailor-made two-week Kenya safari, combining three nights on Kuki Gallmann's Ol Ari Nyiro ranch, with four nights in the wildlife stronghold of the Masai Mara and six nights on a remote Indian Ocean beach, costs from £3,200 excluding flights. This itinerary can be combined with the annual cultural festival on her ranch, which next year takes place in February.