



SAFARI SOCIETY: TH

Eco-tourism has long been a safari buzz-word but now there is a new type of camp which is owned and run by black Africans. Can it resolve the conflicting interests of the wildlife, indigenous peoples and tourists, asks Lucia van der Post.

There are few more emotive words in the English language than “safari”. Just the word (taken from the Swahili meaning simply, to journey) is enough to trigger a whole chain of iconic imagery gleaned from our childhood reading – the month-long journeys into wild and lonely lands, the long chains of porters carrying trunks through rivers, swamps and bushland, the tents, the mosquito nets, the tales of adventure and derring-do, the close encounters with lion and buffalo, leopard and elephant, the white hunter in his khakis... These are powerfully romantic images that are very hard for many to let go of. They lie dormant in the subconscious of the mind, just waiting for the trigger word “Africa” or “safari” to bring them back to life and set the imagination stirring. So when we arrive on our very first safari, quivering with anticipation, and find a different world, with no porters, no wild bush, few encounters with wildlife and a series of minibuses trundling camera-slung tourists to and from their modern lodges, the sense of disappointment is hard to bear.

And yet, if the African wildlife itself and the habitat it needs are to survive, if tourists are still to find that world beguiling, then we must all learn to embrace a new, more contemporary sort of safari. Now that few of us would ever even contemplate a hunting safari we will never be able to experience the particular adrenalin-rush that played such a key part in the old hunters’ tales. Yet a contemporary safari can be every bit as glamorous, can get you to just as remote places and can bring with it other experiences the hunters of old missed out on.

Think about it – on the typical old-style safari, all the indigenous peoples of the countries the hunters travelled through had only bit-parts to play. The safari-goer wafted through the country as if in a semi-concealed compartment, more or less insulated from any real contact with the people whose land it was. The local population were simply the labourers – they carried luggage, cooked food and washed clothes. Today the new-style traveller still wants adventure – and he can get that – but he also longs for some sort of cultural experience, for insights and human exchanges that the old-style hunters were never interested in. So all over Africa new-style safaris, to meet these new needs, are being evolved.

Eco-tourism has long been the buzz-word in all travel. Ever since we began to realise that the rush to the world’s most desirable spots looked as if it could end up destroying the very things we all wanted to see, those involved in tourism have been trying to work out ways of keeping the destinations as pristine as possible. In safari-life the generally agreed consensus is that this translates into low-volume, high-cost tourism which means small, intimate lodges (in Botswana, for instance, there are very few lodges that take more than 16 people) sitting in vast acreages of declared national parks. These safaris do deliver a very fine wildlife experience but, once again, offer very little in the way of an insight into the people and their culture. Again the local people are mostly bit-part players; as time has gone by, some have been recruited as trackers and guides but mostly they are the labourers, cooks and waiters.

The strategy behind the national parks in almost all the great African wildlife countries has been to move all the indigenous people out of their ancestral lands, put up a lot of fences and then bring in white-owned safari outfits to attract high-paying tourists with most of the revenue going to said white-owned safari outfits. There

is now a growing realisation that this isn’t only morally wrong – it’s actually unsustainable. Increasing and justifiable resentment from the local peoples has led to friction and is often behind the poaching problems – it’s obvious to even the most obtuse that if local communities see no benefit coming to them from the wildlife they will have no incentive to look after it and may indeed have to poach just to survive.

Many of the more forward-thinking safari outfits have tried to grapple with these problems by involving local people in more interesting roles – helping them to develop farms to supply the lodges with food, to build factories to provide the building materials – to ensure that some of the revenues are returned to the local communities. But this still leaves out the fact that many safari-goers not only feel guilty swanning through a country, totally insulated from its indigenous people, behaving as if they were of no conceivable interest, but they also feel they’re missing out. They want to talk to them, see how they live, hear their stories, add a cultural



Left: the days of the hunting safari encapsulated in this 1895 photograph are long since gone. Above: Laikipiak Masaai guide clients on a camel safari.

dimension to the whole wildlife experience. It’s this kind of thinking that is behind a whole new set of enterprising community-owned tourist initiatives that are starting up all over Africa. Often

funded by EU money or charitable trusts, sometimes kick-started with European expertise, these are lodges built, owned and run by indigenous peoples. Their great advantage, particularly in Kenya, is that they are smaller, more remote and often surprisingly luxurious.

Up on the Laikipia plateau in central Kenya are some two million acres of wild savannah and here some of the most interesting experiments are shaping up. Almost all this land is privately owned – that is, it is not officially designated national park territory – which allows the owners much greater flexibility in how they use it. This land was traditionally arid and used mostly for cattle ranching. Now many of the ranchers have found that not only is the income from cattle-ranching declining and the land becoming degraded, but by adding in the wildlife and a chance to interact with the local people they can bring in tourists (who without the wildlife had no incentive to come) and greatly increase the income.

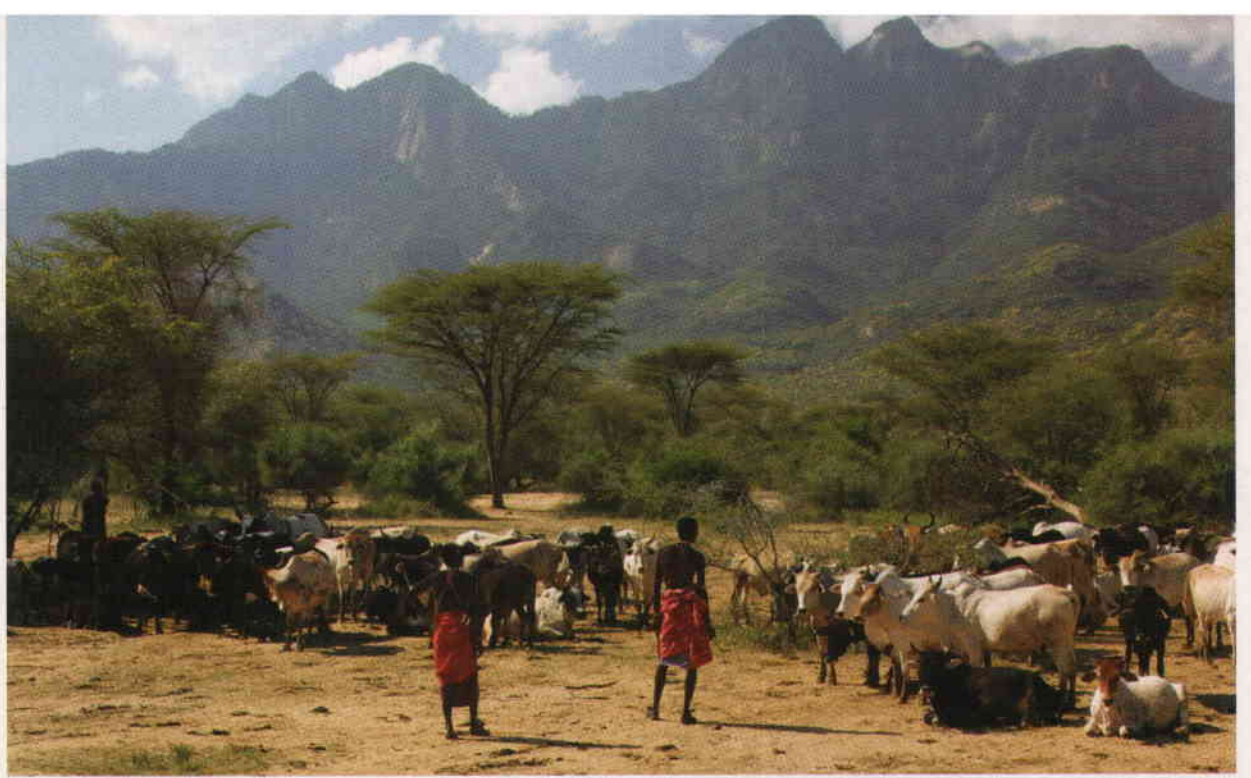
Conventional wildlife management, of the sort that goes on in national parks, has always rigorously separated domestic cattle and people from the wildlife; these new attempts to combine all three is revolutionary and only possible because the land is privately owned. Serious environmentalists, of course, point out that domestic animals, wildlife and man all inhabiting the same space only seems revolutionary because we were so daft as to separate them in the first place. Until the white man came along and fenced off great areas which

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they declared national parks they all had, somehow down the millennia, found a way of surviving together. So in some way these new steps are also very old steps.

Anybody interested in these experiments could perhaps start at Borana, a vast 35,000-acre ranch where the old-established cattle-ranching goes on, wildlife has been allowed to come back (the predators, the endangered Grevy's zebra, herds of antelope) and there are local community tourist enterprises. For the safari-goer this is a new and exciting combination. How it works is that the cattle-ranching still goes on and all around wildlife is encouraged and is fast coming back. The Dyers, a very old Kenya family who run Borana Lodge, accept that they will lose some of their cattle to predators but hope that the higher return from tourism will off-set those losses. Lion or leopard that develop too great a taste for domestic stock are tracked, sedated and then relocated to areas of the ranch where the cattle are less obvious.

Tourists can stay first at Borana Lodge, more in the mould of a traditional white-run highly sophisticated



Visitors can help give the local people an incentive to keep their own traditions alive, eat the spit-roasted goat and gain some genuine insight into the culture.

lodge, see the working of the ranch, get all the local chat and gossip from the Dyers themselves and then perhaps move onto one of the two completely locally-owned and run community lodges. Il' Ngwesi was the first of its kind. Built by the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy, helped by Borana and members of the Maasai community, it is now wholly owned by the Maasai who man it entirely, being the greeter, the guides, the managers. It is in a stunningly beautiful position and consists of just six cottages scattered along the hillside. Built from local materials (with a little help from Prince William in his gap year), it is in the vanguard of this new form of eco-tourism. So far it has been a huge success – from everybody's point of view. The community loves it: it provides work for more than 40 local people and the income trickles all through the community. Tourists love it. The intimacy of the lodge, its remoteness, the intensity of the experience, are completely different from anything that the hugely popular, increasingly

the sort of safari that will interest those who have already been to somewhere more conventional like Serengeti or the Maasai Mara," says Will Jones, whose company Journeys by Design is making something of a speciality of this new form of tourism. "They are now looking for something wilder, more adventurous."

So successful is Il' Ngwesi that a similar lodge, Tassia, has opened not too far away. Set into a spur in the Mokogodo Hills overlooking a vast valley, it was built on a Maasai ranch with funding from overseas and it too is entirely owned the local community. Its six cottages are built of mud, stone and wattle (Il' Ngwesi's are made of wood and thatch) and its position is breathtaking – built into rocks and mountains, it even has four-poster beds and showers in the natural contours of the rock, as well as a rock pool for swimming. It would be a fantastic place to book in its entirety for a family celebration or a private African house party. To arrive, as I did, on a glowing sun-lit evening, to step down from your small plane and find there, etched against the sunlight, a row of Maasai in their scarlet *shukas*, is a sight and experience never to be missed. Those who would like to walk in that wonderful country might think of doing a camel-trek between Il' Ngwesi and Tassia.

At Loisaba, a vast wilderness area of some 150sq km (the same size as the Ngorongoro Crater and larger than many of Kenya's national parks), they, too, are beginning to think along the same lines. Wildlife co-exists along with some ranching and besides the sophisticated conventional lodge at Loisaba many of the guests now choose to spend a few nights at one of two new small ventures run in partnership with the

Laikipiak Maasai people from the neighbouring Koiya tribal lands. Known as the Star Beds, these are two sets of beds in two different areas (it's a great idea to walk one day from one set to the other) which are built on wooden platforms only half-covered by thatching – the idea being to lie out under the African stars but in conditions of total comfort. Being on wheels, they are pulled out from under the thatch in fine weather but at the first sign of rain they can be wheeled back – fast. Before tucking up in the Star Beds the guests are fed and hosted by the local people, traditional camp-fire style. Loisaba, too, is privately-owned and so offers great flexibility with all sorts of activities, from picnics, walking and river-rafting to overnight fly-camps and camel treks, on offer.

The really well-heeled (and I'm afraid this doesn't come cheap) should not miss the chance of a trip in the helicopter of Humphrey "the pampered pilot". Humphrey honed his skills in some pretty tough encounters in Northern Ireland and is about the only pilot with whom I'd be prepared to set off into the wildest bits of northern

Kenya. To do as we did and fly over the tops of hills and sand dunes that few men have ever seen, to land on some dunes right up against Lake Turkana, run up and down the dunes and down a bottle of champagne before heading off to spend the night at Desert Rose, a small eco-lodge (though not community-owned) at the top of Mount Nyiru, and then to walk in the hills with the local Samburu, is worth a dozen pride of lions in the Mara.

The really intrepid could camel trek from Desert Rose across the Chalbi desert to Kalatcha, a small camp run by the women of the local Gabbra community. A mere 14 miles from the Ethiopian border, this has to be one of the most remote camps in all Kenya – this is primarily a desert experience. Magically beautiful, built round a desert palm oasis it is rustic, simple and charming, with a beautiful kidney-shaped swimming pool and exceptional sand grouse shooting.

Down in the Rift Valley is Shompole, which is trying out a different economic model, a partnership between the local community of some 4,000 people and a traditional Kenyan tour operator. What this offers the local community is work and income. For the tourist it means they are looked after and guided by local Tanzanian Maasai (even though this is southern Kenya the Maasai are as peripatetic as the wildlife) and have a chance to see a rather different way of life. This is probably the most sophisticated of the new community-run projects with stunningly beautiful cottages, each with plunge pools and plenty of flowing water. Overlooking Lake Natron, is a nesting site for thousands of flamingos but also in the area are plains game, nocturnal animals (aardwolf, civet, serval, leopard, hyena) as well as elephant, lion and cheetah.

These lodges are all busy experimenting with new ways of ensuring the future of the safari and serious environmentalists all over the world are following the experiments with great interest because if the blueprints can be made to work, it may show how the apparently conflicting interests of all three groups – people, wildlife and domestic animals – can be resolved. This isn't to say that there are no teething problems – of course there are. Getting what are essentially very traditional societies to understand what the international customer expects isn't always easy. But they do offer exciting glimpses of a new way of engaging with the countries in which wildlife is to be found and, for the moment, the evidence is that tourists love it and that it offers a richer, more complex, more interesting experience. If you're up for something new, different and infinitely more adventurous, the new-style eco-lodges are the way to go. ♦

A ten-day all-inclusive private safari with Journeys By Design (01273-623 790, www.journeysbydesign.co.uk) taking in Tassia, Il' Ngwesi and Shompole, costs from £3,750 per person. A seven-day Wild Week safari by helicopter taking in the Great Rift Valley, the northern Suguta Valley and sand dunes and the mountain retreat of Desert Rose costs from £5,500 per person. Prices are based on four sharing. Owner Will Jones will happily visit the home of a potential client to devise a special safari.

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over-crowded Maasai Mara has to offer. Because it is community owned, walking, biking, overland camel treks, overnight fly-camps, night-drives – all banned in the national parks such as the Mara – are possible. The reaction of tourists has been stunning. As Michael Dyer puts it, "These days tourists are looking for much, much more than a passive experience – it's easier to sell walking safaris than air-conditioned Land-Rovers." There's a real working *manyatta* (collection of local Kenyan rural huts) nearby which has none of the phoneyess of the show ones to which tourists are regularly wheeled. Visitors can help give the local people an incentive to keep their own traditions alive, eat the spit-roasted goat and gain some genuine insight into a spectacularly interesting culture – it's two-way traffic that really seems to work.

Is there a downside? Well, yes of course. Wildlife is at least as varied as in the national parks but it isn't found in the same density. Those looking for the certainties of prides of lion, leopard and all the other species that the Mara has to offer will not find it. The food, whilst excellent, will not be for those who are used to the haute cuisine of the star-spangled South African lodges. But prices are also correspondingly lower. "It is probably

Clockwise from top: herdsman at the foot of the Sarara mountains; en suite tented accommodation in Lewa; the dining room at Il' Ngwesi.