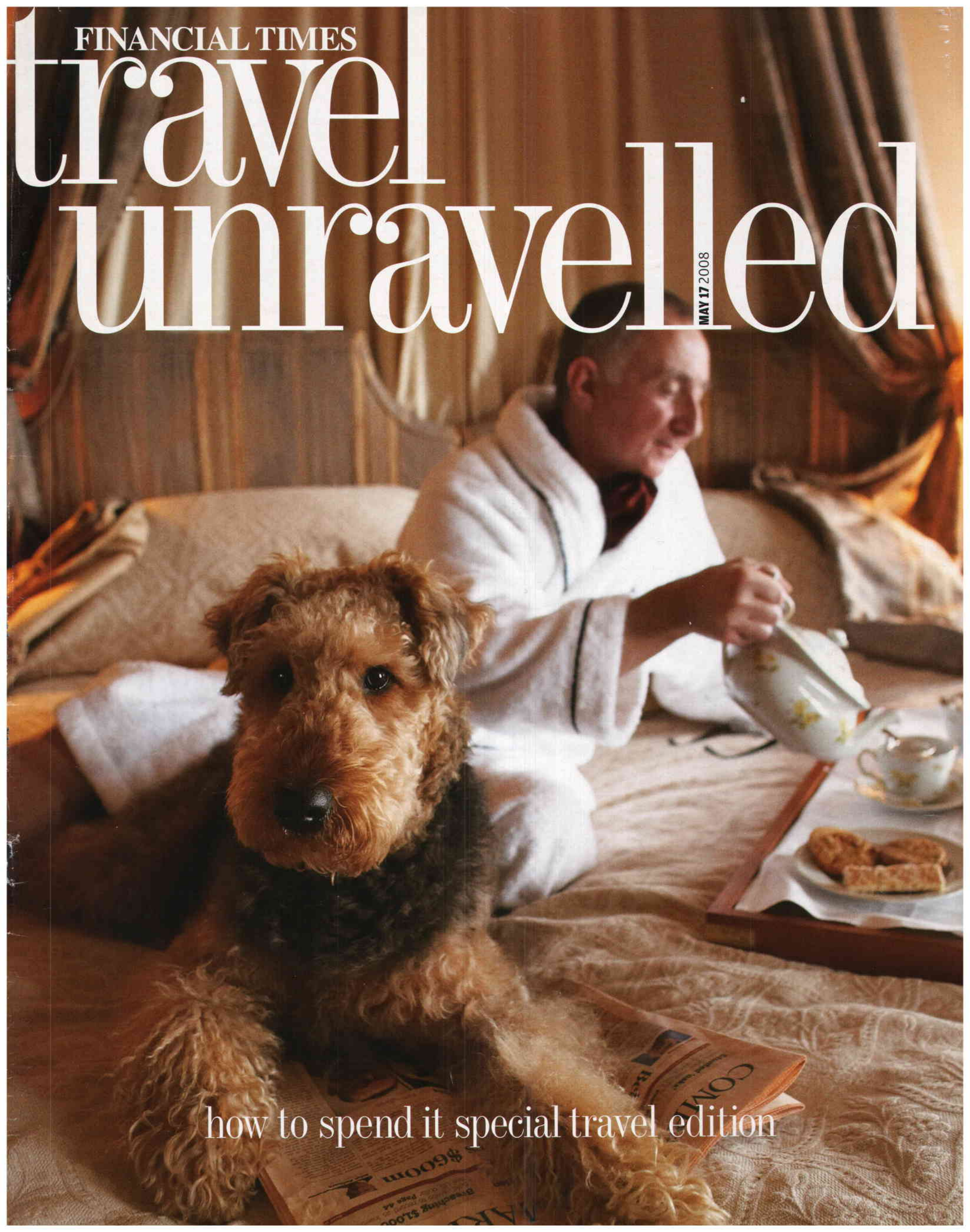


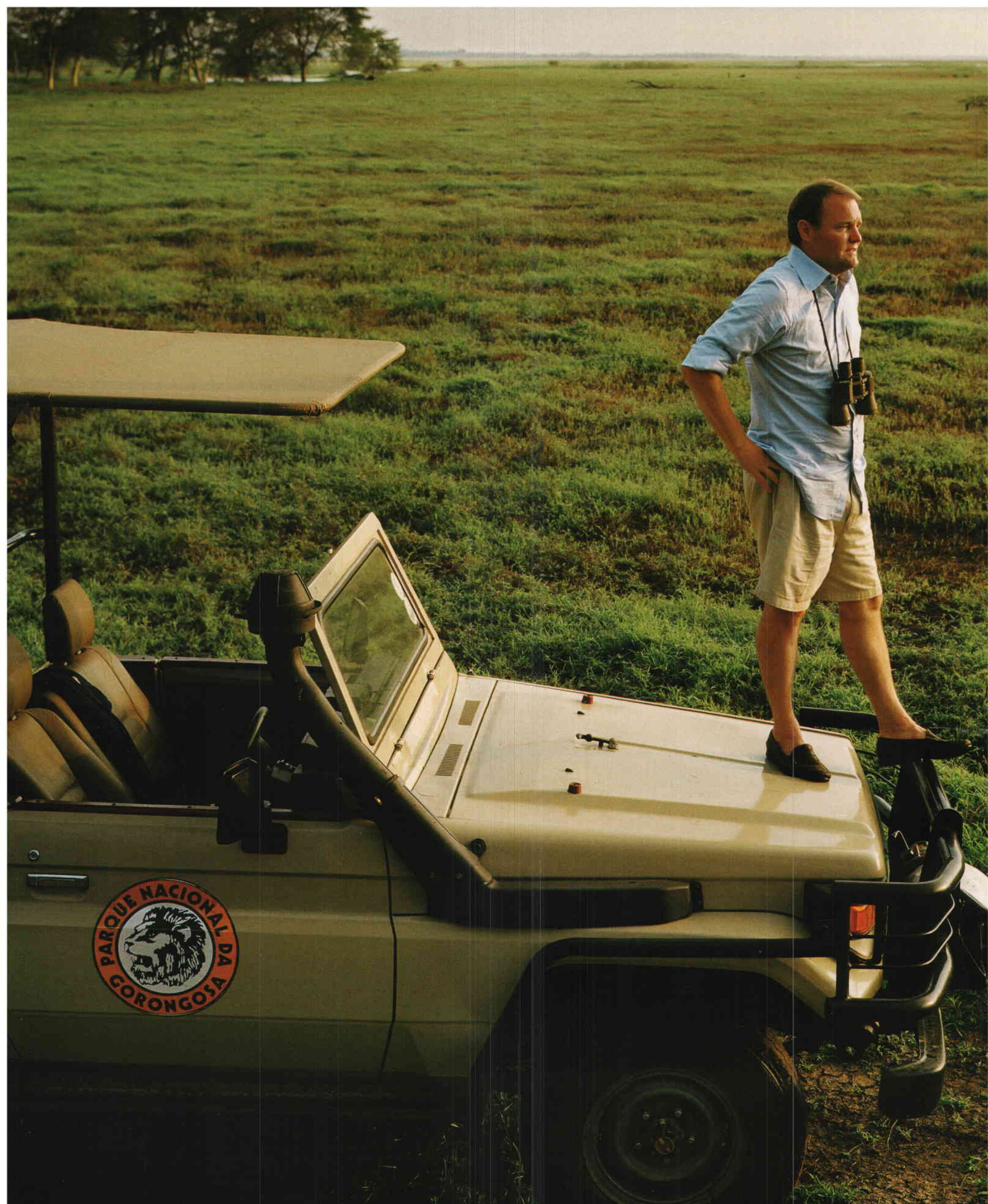
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travel unravelled

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how to spend it special travel edition



Eco philanthropists are now buying up vast tracts of East Africa with little interest in commercial gain. Will this be the generation to rescue Africa's wildlife and offer affluent consumers a true wilderness experience, asks Lucia van der Post. Photographs by Derek Hudson.

Up in the northwest corner of the Serengeti, Tanzania's most famous wildlife haven, there is an African miracle taking place. Just six years ago this vital Western Corridor of the reserve was a dismal hunting block where badly controlled hunting and poaching, for the pot and for the bush-meat trade, by the desperately poor populations on its borders had hammered the wildlife. Today, all 346,000 acres are flourishing again under the beneficent eye of Wall Street fund manager Paul Tudor Jones. Together with South African Luke Bailes (whose five Singita lodges in and around the Kruger National Park redefined what luxury in the bush is all about), he's turned it into Singita Grumeti Reserves and made it one of the most sensation-ally luxurious safari destinations in Africa. And, better still, in the process they're not just providing a new playground for the rich and privileged – they've created jobs for some 600 people, educational scholarships for eager students, and are helping to start small businesses and generally bring, to this once neglected corner of Tanzania, something of the prosperity that ecotourism has brought other places. It's a double whammy. The well-heeled tourist gets to have a safari experience almost like no other, and, in parting with his cash, he has the satisfaction of knowing he's doing his bit to conserve this part of paradise and improve the lives of local communities on its borders.

All over Africa, ecotourism usually provides some benefit to the local communities – the difference, though, with Grumeti is this: nobody has any illusions that it can ever be made to pay its way. Nobody is even trying: keeping costs



a rich man's game

down is the most that they're aiming for. Tudor Jones knows that his African dream is going to cost him plenty. Exact sums are hard to come by, but he is rumoured to have poured some \$90m (about £45.5m) into Singita Grumeti Reserves. If and when Grumeti Reserves (the commercial arm) begins to make a profit, then the promise is that the profit would be directed immediately to its charitable arm, the Grumeti Fund. It's the Grumeti Fund that has helped villagers on the edge of the reserve to start up chicken, pig and honey-keeping businesses, that is guiding them to make (and cook with) sunflower oil instead of cotton oil, that is funding the educational scholarships, the 125 anti-poaching scouts (recruited from among the former poachers), the wildlife monitoring, the research, the translocation of animal species (two rhino have just arrived): the whole shebang that lies behind a 21st century luxury safari experience.

But Grumeti Reserves isn't his only African venture. Down in Zimbabwe is another, earlier, philanthropic project, Pamushana Lodge. Somehow Tudor Jones and his managers on the ground have managed to negotiate their way round Mugabe's mad ways and create an exclusive wildlife destination where there are just six villas in which those with the wherewithal can stay. Because of Zimbabwe's problems, it is little known or visited. It's 130,000 acres of wild country which has been restored and, again with Singita as its managing partner, Pamushana has saved this corner of Zimbabwe for wildlife and has given hope and life (the Malilangwe Trust feeds some 25,000 Zimbabweans a day) to some of the poorest people on earth.

Here we see the new-style philanthropy at work. The old theory was that ecotourism had to pay its way: if you restored the land, built up the animal herds and built the lodges then tourists would come to fund it all, so ran conventional thinking. The problem with that, according to Dave Varty, the visionary behind the founding of CC Africa, who is currently redeveloping Londolozi, the family lodge in South Africa's Sabi Sands, is that it's been

almost too successful. "We're in the sunset phase of this philosophy," says Varty. "The 'if it pays, it stays,' way of doing things has worked too well. We're busy filling up the last vestiges of wilderness with man-made artefacts such as camps and lodges and roads." What we need now, he thinks, is philanthropists who are prepared to preserve these vast tracts of Africa without expecting them to pay their way. For that you need serious money of the sort that the new breed of hedge-fund kings and internet tycoons can provide. Commercial success, it seems, has often come at too high a price. What we need now is very low-impact tourism of the sort that Singita Grumeti can offer – tourism that doesn't destroy the very thing most of us long to see.

Take the Masai Mara, Kenya's most famous wildlife destination, which is roughly the same size as Singita Grumeti. It has some 3,000 beds, compared to 54 at Singita Grumeti. With the 3,000 beds comes the vast infrastructure needed to feed, water and transport lodgers. In good times there are literally hundreds of minivans roaming the area, there are road systems that crisscross and sometimes damage the fragile ecosystem, cheetah whose hunting habits are being disturbed by prying tourists (unlike the lion and leopard, they often hunt by day), animals that are tired of looking at mankind and its wretched vehicles. (Though following in the wake of the recent disturbances, Kenya has few tourists and the Mara is almost empty, so now is the time to go).

Staying at Singita Grumeti isn't cheap – bed nights work out at roughly \$1,000-\$1,500 (about £506-£759) per person per night – but for that you get to share a vast area of wild Africa with just 52 other privileged guests, deployed in three widely separated and different lodges. You mostly get a guide and vehicle to yourselves (if all the lodges are full you might share with one other couple to reduce traffic) and you choose your own schedule. Of the three lodges, Sasakwa, poised on the edge of a cliff looking out over a savannah so vast it seems to curve past the edge of the horizon, is the most exuberantly luxurious – all Edwardian

Left: Greg Carr at the 1,455sq mile Gorongosa Park in Mozambique, to which he has pledged \$40m in the next 30 years. Above right: villagers from Chitengo pause en route to the Gorongosa waterfall.



splendour with plush four-posters, African artefacts, Murano glass chandeliers and private swimming pools. From its lush green lawn you can look down through the telescopes and check whether the lion is stalking its prey or just panting from its vast dinner the night before. Over to the north is Sabora Plains tented camp, but these are not tents that Baden-Powell would recognise – if I didn't know that they were done by South Africa's maestro of the safari aesthetic, Boyd Ferguson, I'd have sworn that the other master of safari style, Ralph Lauren, had had a hand in them. You get libraries and great showers and four-poster beds but, best of all, you eat breakfast under a tree on the plains with the wildebeest and zebra doing their teeming before your eyes. Over in another area is yet another camp, Faru Faru – all glass, creamy leather and chrome modernity, with views over a water hole where the animals come down to drink. Old-fashioned safari-goers who are accustomed to thinking that staying in a tent with a bucket-shower is the real thing might find it all a little shocking. There are thoroughbred horses waiting to be ridden, a tennis court to be played on and a spa on a cliff edge with masseuses at the ready for hot-stone therapy should the muscles feel weary.

And as for the wildlife, you need to know that, by securing this corner of Serengeti, Tudor Jones has saved a vital piece of a precious ecosystem, for Singita Grumeti is part of the annual wildebeest migration route. When it was still a hunting block the game would come up from the protected areas into this unprotected buffer zone and find they were being hunted both by licensed hunters and local poachers. With the new security in place numbers are already rising. Buffalo, for instance, have risen from 605 in 2003 to 2,248 in 2006, giraffe from 333 to 1,005, elephant from 355 to 892, and so the story goes on. This is really the nearest the 21st century gets to offering the illusion of being in real wilderness. You may wonder why Tudor Jones bothers to share it with anybody else, since the money it brings in must make an infinitesimal dent in the vast running costs. The answer, it seems, lies in another of this new breed of philanthropists' core beliefs. Keeping it all for oneself alone, particularly if that boils down to a two-week visit once a year, isn't morally justifiable. Sharing it, even if it's just with those who are wealthy enough to pay the sums they ask, defrays the guilt, along with some of the expense.

Up in Kenya, the Bonde Nielsen family feels much the same way. It has some 65,000 acres of extraordinarily

“Not only will it save the biodiversity, create jobs and reduce poverty, it can change the life of the ecotourist. It reconnects him with the natural world.”



Top: the Chitengo village chief marks the opening of a new park season with Greg Carr. Above: nesting cormorants in a yellow fever tree at Gorongosa.

beautiful and varied land perched on the edge of the Rift Valley and, though they couldn't begin to defray more than a small proportion of the costs of conserving this land, they also welcome tourists in a limited, highly exclusive way. “We never expect it to make a profit,” says Jan Bonde Nielsen, who developed one of the world's largest flower-growing operations in Kenya (now one of its most successful exports) and bought the land some 20 years ago, “but it can make a contribution and we think we ought to share it with people who can appreciate it.” So five or six times a year it will allow a family, or a group of up to 16, to rent the entire estate. For the \$250,000 (about £126,568) a week it costs, you get all of Oldonyo Laro to yourself and your friends and family – that includes a helicopter,

a Cessna plane, pilots, chefs, guides, Land Rovers, gorgeous rooms, views and animals. There is no brochure; word is passed around the international, well-connected set who is its target customer. It appeals to those for whom privacy and discretion is essential – rock stars, royalty, hedge-fund managers, internet tycoons.

Like Tudor Jones, the Bonde Nielsen family is conserving some precious acres, acres that without them would be left to decline. They stretch from the desert-like floor of the Rift Valley up through deep gorges and montane vegetation to virgin rainforest in the Nguruman escarpment. The rainforest alone is crucial to the ecosystem – it's a key catchment area for the rain and if it were lost the climatic effect would be disastrous. When Bonde Nielsen and his long-time friend Hermann Steyn bought the land it was largely degraded – the usual African story of wildlife being poached and cattle overgrazing the land. If the two families hadn't bought it, and in particular if Steyn hadn't implemented a strict access policy, it's a fair guess that by now much of the rainforest would have been chopped down, the wildlife further depleted and the whole ecosystem even more degraded, says Bonde Nielsen's son Peter, the general manager of Oldonyo Laro.

The Bonde Nielsen family's vision is big and the money they've poured in almost unimaginable. “We'd like,” says Mark Jenkins, Oldonyo Laro's new manager in charge of conservation, “to look at creating a conservation-based economy from Amboseli to the Masai Mara,” a distance of some 120km. This would create a meaningful, cohesive ecosystem allowing game to pick up on ancient migration routes; it would benefit all the land and wildlife which is currently broken up into much smaller parcels. The Bonde Niensens know that the wellbeing of their own 65,000 acres is intimately connected to the prosperity of the land and the people that surround it. Their motives are partly philanthropic and partly pragmatic. Their running costs, like Tudor Jones's, are vast. They employ some 600 people (anti-poaching, road-building, research, guiding, bush clearance) and in Africa that means somewhere between 3,000 and 5,000 people are benefiting. They, too, believe that enabling local people to become self-sufficient has to be key. Simply giving them charitable funds isn't the answer. They're looking to offer management and business



advice to the many different landholders who surround Oldonyo Laro. They are helping them to devise business plans in which tourism will play a part – but merely a part. Too much tourism, as we’ve seen, can easily be the enemy. “Livestock, bee-keeping, small enterprises, can all help bring financial independence.” By giving them an interest in preserving the land the area itself will benefit, and by giving them a source of income the need to poach wildlife or chop down trees is removed. A financial stake in the conservation of the area is key.

Down in Mozambique another American called Greg Carr, who is still only in his early 40s, has decided that he wants to devote his foreseeable future to restoring a devastated, forlorn and forgotten game reserve, Gorongosa. Gorongosa was once one of the great glories of Africa: 1,455sq miles of vast savannas and green wetlands. Its wildlife was decimated during the civil war (of a buffalo herd that once numbered 14,000, just 50 were left), when both the political parties of FRELIMO and RENAMO made their headquarters in the park and combatants and refugees alike plundered it to survive. Carr’s foundation has a 20-year agreement with Mozambique’s government to co-manage the park and he’s promised that he will spend as much as \$40m (about £20.3m) in the next 30 years. It’s clearly money he never expects to be returned. As long ago as 1998, he tells me, “I decided to turn away from commerce and into philanthropy. I’d always been interested in biodiversity and Gorongosa seemed a wonderful project.”

Land-carrying capacities have been assessed, reforestation is under way (Gorongosa has Mozambique’s only rainforest) and the panoply of animals that once strode across its plains and rivers is being reintroduced. The park’s infrastructure is being rebuilt, anti-poaching teams are being trained and a biological research centre set up. Revenue, it is hoped, will come from tourist ventures – for the moment it is for those of an adventurous cast of mind. The nearest airport is Beira which is some three hours from the park. The facilities boil down to nine cabins which are clean and serviceable, with proper guiding at hand and simple, fresh, inexpensive food. A plush, tented camp, into which the well-heeled can fly in their Cessnas, is planned for the near future.

Like most of the new breed of philanthropists, Carr understands that key to the future of wildlife is the co-operation and welfare of the people who live there. They’ve already created 500 new jobs. “I’d also always been concerned about poverty – eco-tourism brings together those two interests. And,” he points out, “there’s yet a third benefit – if we can save Gorongosa, not only do we save all the biodiversity and not only will

Top: impala at Gorongosa, site of Mozambique’s only rainforest. Above: Jan Bonde Nielsen at Oldonyo Laro in Kenya, where his family employs 600 people.

Many of this wealthy generation see a kind of psychological salvation in trying to redress the problems of a world that’s being spoiled on a daily basis.



it create jobs and so reduce poverty, but it can change the life of the ecotourist. It reconnects him with the natural world and reminds him of what could be lost.”

His personal commitment in terms of time and effort is big, too. “I don’t want to sit in an armchair writing cheques,” he says. “Where’s the fun in that? After all, the reason I made money in the first place is because I loved putting together a great team and getting it to work on a fantastic project. That’s just what I’m doing again in Gorongosa – I’ve got another great team, another amazing project.” When one learns that he spends every other month in Gorongosa, living in a tent, one senses a yearning for a way of life and a value system that is about more than making money and consuming.

It’s young men like this that Varty believes may be the future of philanthropy in Africa. We now have a generation of extraordinarily wealthy people who made their money while they were young enough to have life left over to live, and to which they

are searching to give meaning. Many of them see a kind of psychological salvation in trying to redress the problems of a world that is being spoiled on a daily basis. As Varty puts it, “The next frontier probably lies with the young and the whimsical, the poets and the philosophers, who seek from life something beyond consumerism. Perhaps it is the coming generation of the extremely wealthy who may provide the impetus to shift the direction of humanity’s civilisation and the lunacy of business, corporations, growth, share prices, extraction, armaments, war, oil and greed.”

Well-run, highly successful commercial lodges have their place – they’ve introduced countless thousands to the wonders that Africa holds – but, as Varty points out, if there are too many of them you end up with a despoiled land and, already, many deliver too tame a wildlife experience. The Serengeti, once the wildest place I’d ever been, now has lodges and camps dotted throughout its lands and there are plans for a 200-person lodge near Seronera, in the heart of the reserve. Unpolluted land, real wilderness, is becoming ever harder to find. Since it is commercially unsustainable, it’s hard for the governments of countries with more urgent human needs to press their case. Only the truly rich can afford it. It’s no secret that Bill Gates has bought thousands of acres of wild country down in Zambia, that Paul Allen (of Microsoft fame) and Richard Branson are both scouting

round in Kenya, that Ted Turner (who made his fortune with CNN) is buying up vast tracts of wilderness in America as well as New Zealand. Some of it may well be for their private delectation, some may decide to share it with a chosen, well-heeled few, but they seem to be our last hope for preserving these priceless tracts of land. The interesting thing is that they’ve recognised the value. They’ve seen beyond commercial return. They know it’s what humankind is missing and is going to need more and more as “progress” and “development” marches on, destroying what once was every man’s birthright.

Will Jones, whose company Journeys By Design creates tailor-made journeys for well-heeled customers in Africa, has also seen the need and started a new company, Nomadic Professionals, which has the sole purpose of helping those with (ample) funds invest them in ways that “will bring significant mutual benefit to the lives and environment of both the givers and the receivers.” The idea behind it is to “help conserve large, viable tracts of African wilderness and its wildlife,” while at the same time offering what he calls an “uber-exclusive” lifestyle to the donor. He points out that these days 75 per cent of modern wealth is self-made (25 years ago it was mostly inherited) and he believes that a new age of philanthropy is upon us. Nomadic Professionals aims to tap into these news funds, using them as a “force for good in Africa”. Like many he is fairly gloomy about the future of wildlife, given the pressing human concerns that face most African countries, and it’s conceivable that wildlife may in the future only survive on private land where it’s protected by enlightened philanthropists who have the will and the means. Whoever would have guessed, way back then, that it might be internet and telecommunications tycoons who might come riding to the rescue of some of Africa’s most beautiful lands? ♦

IT’S BUSHCRAFT

Lucia van der Post travelled as a guest of **Kenya Airways** (01784-888 222; www.kenya-airways.com), which offers flat beds in business class and flies daily from London to Nairobi for £1,798 (Business Premier World, fully flexible) and £468 (economy, fully flexible). All internal flights were provided by **Precision Air**, 00255-787 888408; www.precisionairtz.com. **Gorongosa** (www.gorongosa.net) offers trips for the more adventurous, but luxury accommodation is planned for the near future. **Journeys By Design**, 01273-623 790; www.journeysbydesign.com. **Nomadic Professionals**, 020-7096 0628. **Oldonyo Laro**, see Journeys By Design. **Singita**, for Grumeti Reserves and Pamushana Lodge, 0131-476 6822; www.singita.com.