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Lodges at Il Ngwesi in northern Kenya — Il Ngwesi

Investing in a conservancy is the responsible way to own a piece of Kenyan wilderness – but the biggest returns won't be monetary. By Jane Owen

tanding on the hill at Il Ngwesi in Laikipia, northern Kenya, where uninterrupted baked red dirt and scrub stretches for thousands of acres without any sign of human habitation, it is difficult to appreciate the land use revolution that is taking place as landowners and local communities join forces to create sustainable conservancies.

For those with an interest in such conservation areas but without the greenbacks to buy up global wilderness on the scale of, say, US billionaire Daniel Friedkin's 6.1m acres in Tanzania, Kenya offers interesting alternatives. These range from leases in wildlife conservancies to more complicated investments in northern Kenya where the buyer has to provide "sweat equity" as well as the readies to secure a leasehold in a community-owned tourist lodge.

Stick the money under a mattress and you may end up with a better return and, frankly, an easier life than picking the north Kenyan options, which depend on agreements and understandings between landowners, local pastoralist communities and conservancies.

On the other hand, the rewards include a foothold in one of the world's last wildernesses and the return of wildlife that has been decimated as a result of overgrazing and the illegal wildlife trade.

Il Ngwesi is a pioneering example of the sweat equity option. It is a Maasai-



Maasai elder lames Olekinyaga with an armed guard during a walk near Il Ngwesi

A herd of reticulated giraffe



owned-and-run eco lodge with the now familiar trappings of wealthy people getting away from it all: rustic furniture, mud-wall type construction and an unfussy approach to household management. It lets rooms at \$345 per person per night, all inclusive apart from alcohol. Il Ngwesi represents the kind of community tourism investment model that could be replicated. Investors may see returns in 15 to 30 years dependent on occupancy rates, according to Will Jones, my guide for this trip. He is an east African tourism expert involved in Kenya's conservancy work who is attempting to roll out the model across northern Kenya by creating an impact

investment vehicle, Wild Philanthropy. The origins of this eco lodge in this remote area are outlined to me by Maasai elder James Olekinyaga on an early morning walk from Il Ngwesi, through the parched orange landscape dotted with giraffes, elephant families, exquisite iridescent blue cordon-bleu and yellow-vented bulbul birds, and the sweetly scented Boscia senegalensis shrub, to Tassia eco lodge. An armed guard keeps us company in case the nearby elephants decide to get frisky.

Il Ngwesi's foundation depended on trust and mutual benefit between Olekinyaga's community and neighbouring landowner and conservationist Ian Craig who suggested forming a conservancy and tourist lodge. Michael Dyer, Craig's cousin and a landowner who has

helped set up a number of communityowned conservancies, was also heavily involved and helped bring in the main funding from the Liz Claiborne Art Ortenberg Foundation.

"Ian Craig brought the idea to my dad in '94 to '96," says Olekinyaga. "They were the same age and they had grown up together. The community was suspicious because of the colonial history and

'We used to be 100 per cent pastoralists who could not go to school because we were always moving'

said, 'If you want to build a lodge, go and build it on your land'. But Ian Craig took us round the country to lots of meetings and raised money from the EU, US and the Kenya Wildlife Service to build the lodge. Finally the elders came together for a meeting under the acacia tree. It was a difficult decision but we agreed to go ahead."

In return, the community gained employment and more secure grazing.

"A drought cannot kill this lodge," says Olekinyaga. "It will be here for ages. We used to be 100 per cent pastoralists who could not go to school because we were always moving. Now

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Borana in the Kenyan highlands, where 30,000 acres has been turned into a conservancy — borana.co.ke

A wild-card purchase

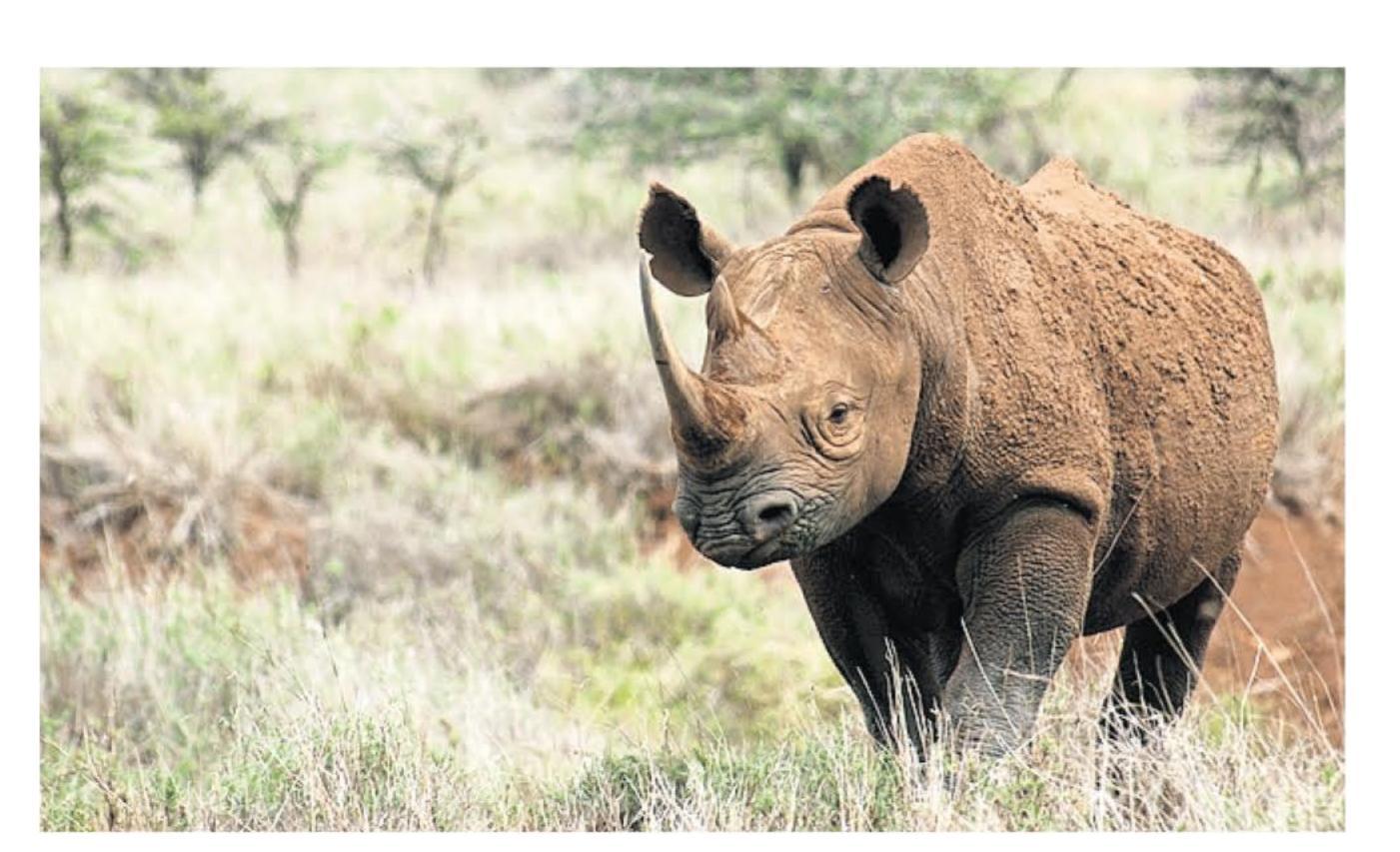
Continued from page 1

we have been able to buy more land, and support education and health and security and employment."

Their trust has paid off and, incidentally, created a place where the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge have stayed a couple of times.

For those interested in this model, the remaining 17-year tourism lease on Lekurruki Maasai conservancy is on sale for \$900,000. It includes the community-owned lodge of Tassia, which is as remote as it is beautiful.

Balancing the needs of wildlife, landowners and local communities like the



A black rhino

spotted at

Borana

borana.co.ke

Maasai — whose wealth is traditionally measured in numbers of cattle, goat and sheep — is uneasy. Land use and ownership in Kenya is also historically controversial because of the colonial land grab by Europeans in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Recently, "walk-ons" — by pastoralists who want to graze their livestock on



Sarara, a lodge in north Kenya built on land owned by the Samburu community — Sarara

private land where good management has avoided the worst problems brought about by the current drought — have been reported in western Laikipia, some of them escalating into violence.

Some landowners, such as Dyer, run a "livestock-to-market" programme, which helps local people by fattening community-owned livestock. When I visited Borana, Dyer's estate in the Kenyan highlands, some of Olekin-yaga's community livestock were grazing there as part of the programme.

Dyer is a trailblazer and passionate conservationist who started one of the country's first community partnerships. In 1990 he and the neighbouring Laikipiak Maasai were wrestling with the problems emerging around climate change, particularly drought. Dyer decided to turn 30,000 acres of Borana into a conservancy.

It was funded in part by four conservation partners who have built homes



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Above: Il Ngwesi's board of directors — Il Ngwesi

Below: Michael Dyer with Kody, an orphaned lesser kudu





on the ranch. They contribute \$400,000 to cover core conservation costs out of a total annual budget of \$900,000, the balance of which is underwritten by the Dyer family's commercial enterprises.

Arijiju is an upmarket house that has been built on one of Borana's concessions. The publicity-shy conservationist developed the plot and surrounded the house with thatched yoga rooms, spas, a gym, steam room and all the other bare necessities of life.

Dyer and his family built a tourist lodge at Borana in the early 1990s, staffed mostly by local people, in order to generate income for the local community and the conservancy. The thatched cottages, made from local materials, overlook a dam where elephants, Cape buffaloes, warthogs and

the occasional black rhino gather. Three years ago Dyer took down the boundary between his land and neighbouring Lewa Wildlife Conservancy, now a Unesco world heritage site, to create 93,000 acres for endangered black rhinos and Grévy's zebras. Today there are 83 black rhinos from an original population of 12, and 11 per cent of the world's total Grévy's zebra population is

now based at Lewa. No more concessions are being offered by Borana but the model has been followed by various conservancies. These include the 1,000-acre Naretoi estate, in partnership with the neighbouring Maasai on the northern borders of the Maasai Mara, which abuts the 6,000-acre Enonkishu Conservancy. Naretoi is offering 12 (out of an original 34) five-acre house sites, with 99-year leases at \$250,000 to \$400,000 each,

available through Knight Frank. Sarara in northern Kenya started life at about the same time as the Borana Conservancy. Today it includes an elephant sanctuary founded two years ago by Katie Rowe, who runs Sarara with her husband Jeremy Bastard. The land belongs to the local Samburu community which created the lodge with the help of Ian Craig and Jeremy's father, Piers. The community gets a 60 per cent share of profits from the lodge, with 40 per cent going to the conservancy.

Wildlife, including leopard, is returning and, in turn, attracting tourists. The success has been such that the community now wants to extend the lodge and may eventually look for investors.

However, Dyer, who is involved with a number of conservancies, has a

warning. "Investment in community land is not for those wanting something secure, safe and predictable. It is leasing a footprint," he says. "Investors have to be prepared to invest further funds plus skill and focus to make it work. People have to understand what they are getting into. This is not simply a third, fourth or 10th holiday home. Investors need to be people who want to come and engage, and they need to believe in sustainable land management."

It is a message backed by Tarn Breedveld, tourism development director at Northern Rangelands Trust, which supports community conservancies. "You can have a pile of contracts this high but, in the end, it comes down to the relationship between the investor and the local community. Managers are critical and the wrong kind of contract can lead to managers treating the community like the taxman," she says.

For those with neither the stomach nor passion for this intriguing complexity, Will Jones is in the process of founding Wild Philanthropy, which will aim to find and manage tourist lodges for donors. Its commercial arm, Journeys by Design, will take prospective buyers on whistle-stop tours of the offerings.



A bed open to the stars at Il Ngwesi

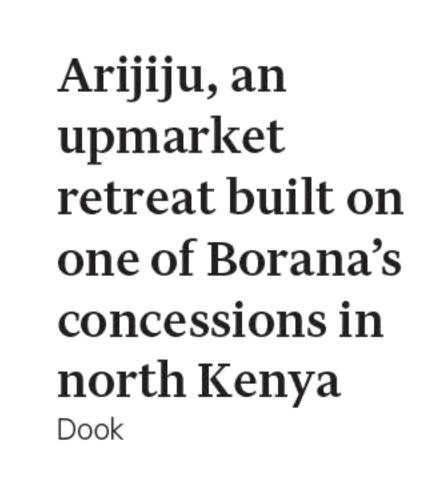
At the beginning of our own whistlestop tour Jones talks me through the endangered species, once so common here, from elephants to Grévy's zebras. But it is difficult to focus on his diatribe because a large herd of elephants is wandering along 100 metres behind him. Shortly afterwards, a herd of Grévy's

zebras thunder past. Jones, who grew up in Kenya but now lives on the south coast of England, soldiers on with his monologue as we head north to Borana, passing rare three black rhinos close to the road. Every other tree seems to be topped out by the head of a rare reticulated giraffe nibbling delicately at the foliage. Wildlife problem? What wildlife problem?

"Ah, but that is because Borana is a rare success story," says Jones.

Jane Owen is editor of House & Home and deputy editor of FT Weekend

She was a guest of Journeys By Design, journeysbydesign.com wildphilanthropy.com

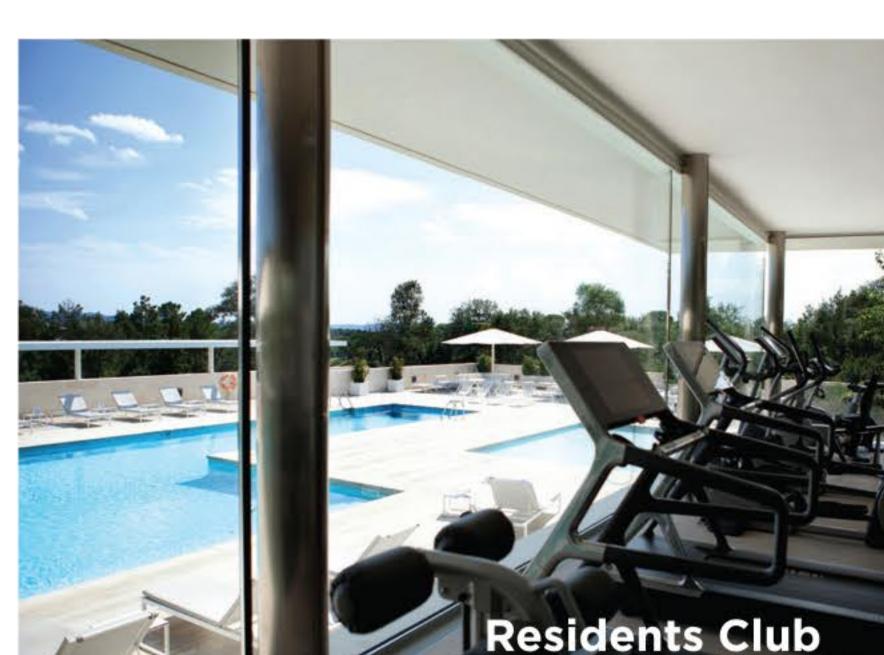




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