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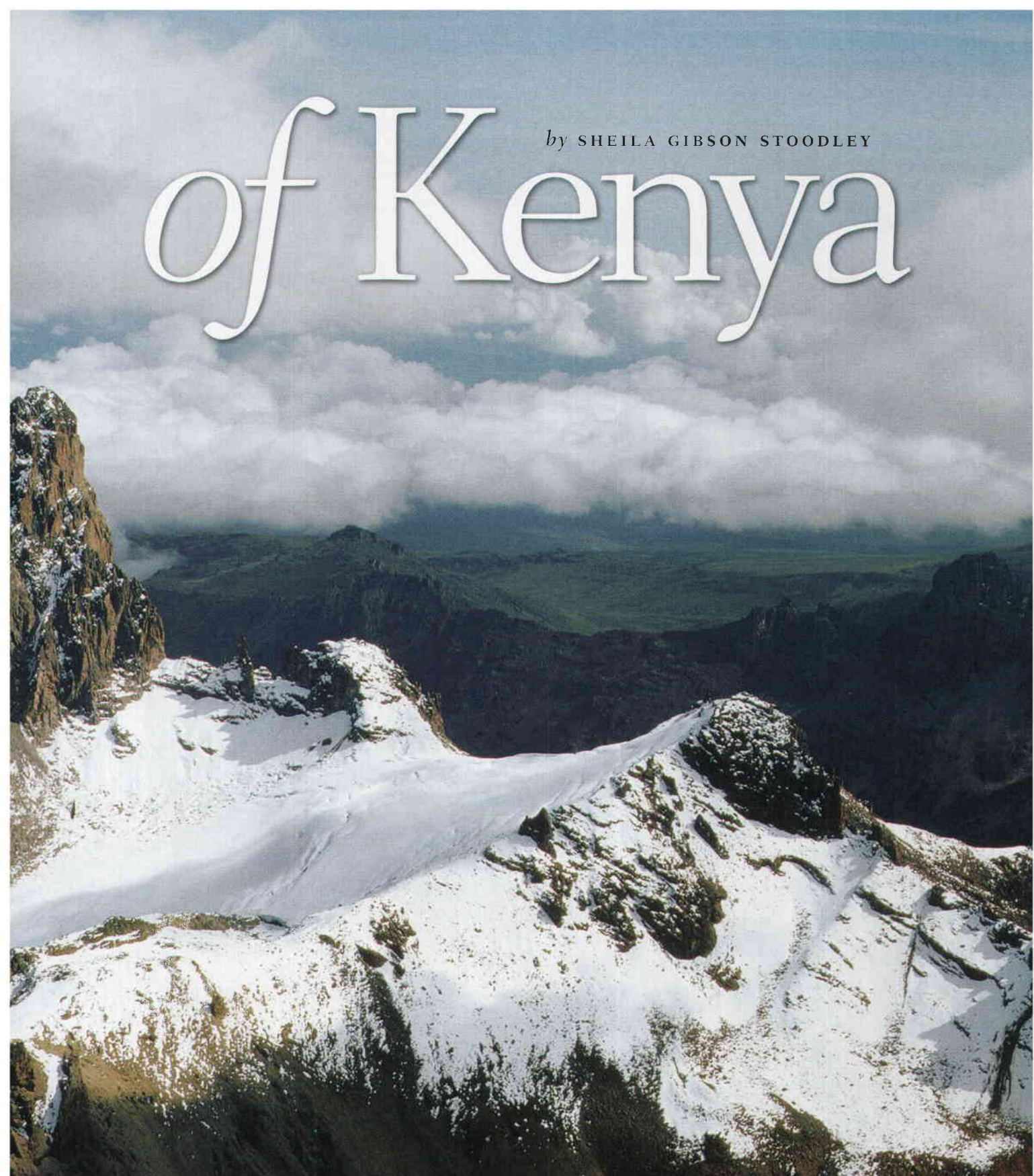
The Pride



East Africa just became a bit less rugged, thanks to **OLDONYO LARO**. The private Kenyan estate offers custom-blended mixes of adventure and leisure that might range from a helicopter ride to the top of Mount Kenya to a poolside pedicure.

of Kenya

by SHEILA GIBSON STOODLEY



HELL'S GATE NATIONAL PARK, despite its name, is one of Kenya's more welcoming destinations. Indeed, you can roam areas of the wildlife reserve's 26 square miles with little fear of being eaten; few of the big cats—lions and leopards—tend to cross the borders into the park. No animal poses any threat to my fellow passengers and me as we view the park from aloft, noting how the green and tree-studded terrain contrasts with the tawny-colored savanna surrounding Oldonyo Laro. The 65,000-acre estate, which lies 120 miles southwest of Nairobi, was the starting point for this helicopter ride and is serving as home base during this trip to Kenya.

"Where we'll land, unless you want to walk enormous hours, you can't get there," says Peter Silvester, the guide who coordinated this morning's flight and every other significant excursion during my visit to Oldonyo Laro. Just outside of Hell's Gate, we touch down on a patch of grass that is framed by cliffs whose rock faces emit puffs of steam. Silvester explains that, because of these steam

Silvester descends a nearby riverbank and touches the mouth of a vent, covering his fingers with a rust-colored goo. The steam brings minerals to the surface, and one of those minerals, iron, turns red when it is exposed to air. The red ochre is part of the Maasai's tribal identity, Silvester explains. They wear it as war paint and also for ceremonial purposes.

Silvester, a 43-year-old second-generation Kenyan (his grandparents were British), has a mop of black hair, a boyish face, and a preference for the beige clothes that have become the uniform of travelers who explore rugged realms. A professional guide for three decades, he has been serving the guests of Oldonyo Laro (which means "old buffalo hills" in Maa, the language of the Maasai) since July 2006. When working for the estate (which the locals call just Laro), Silvester has use of the helicopter, a seven-passenger EC130 Eurocopter that allows him to showcase regions of East Africa that would otherwise be difficult to reach. The helicopter also enables him to fill an itinerary with a wide range of activities. "During the last trip I did, which was 12 days long, we spent 60 hours in the chopper," Silvester says, noting that it costs \$1,600 an hour to operate the aircraft, but that flight time does not affect the price of a guest's stay, which is all-inclusive. "We don't want to say to you that you've run out of chopper time," he says. (The helicopter is not the only flight choice available to Laro guests; you also can tour the countryside in fixed-wing aircraft.)

Pilot Ian Mimano refers to the EC130 as "the Bentley" because of its smooth handling and relatively stylish design. Silvester deploys the helicopter to collect Laro guests from Jomo Kenyatta International Airport. Then during your stay, he might use it to take you to lunch in the Laro property's highlands—at a cabin that affords a view of elephants gathering at a strategically placed salt lick. Or you might



vents, this area is considered sacred by the Maasai, nomadic, cattle-herding tribespeople who have lived in Kenya and Tanzania since the 17th century. In battle, the Maasai have demonstrated their ferocity, as indicated by the name of the national park. A 19th-century explorer dubbed the area "Hell's Gate" after tribe members ambushed him there and killed his partner.

The Maasai record their history in songs and dances. Some of the tribes living near Oldonyo Laro are willing to perform for guests.

The Pride of Kenya

ascend Mount Kenya the easy way, pausing along the way to hover over the flocks of flamingos that congregate on Tanzania's Lake Natron or to touch down and fish for trout. Golfers can land on the driving range at the Windsor Golf and Country Club near Nairobi for a round of 18 holes.

SILVESTER CLAIMS THAT Oldonyo Laro is a greater asset than the helicopter. The house itself sits 4,500 feet above sea level, on the edge of the rift that gives Africa's Great Rift Valley its name. The building's large dining room and an adjoining lounge both feature thick eucalyptus-wood pillars, roofs thatched with native red oat grass, and no fourth walls. A patio overlooks the valley, and the pool area has a tented lounge and a separate tented space where Naomi, a beautician from Nairobi, administers manicures, pedicures, and massages.

The family who built Laro placed the bedrooms nearby, in seven freestanding canvas-sided structures that are more like cottages than tents. Each is perched on 8-foot-tall stilts and has a deck and a shower. The high altitude ensures that the dwellings remain cool and attract few mosquitoes (though they are zippered shut at night, just in case). A call button on the headboard of the king-size bed summons room service.

Laro has its quirks. The beds have solar-powered reading lights, but the rooms do not have outlets for hair dryers or laptops. (The principal owner is fond of candlelight



If you want to stroll the grounds after nightfall, you will need a staff escort because of the wild animals that like to visit the estate.

and has vetoed requests from family and friends to install electricity.) If you want to stroll the grounds after nightfall, you will need a staff escort because of the wild animals that like to visit the estate. (A late-afternoon journey to the on-site airstrip was temporarily halted by an ostrich sitting in the middle of the road.)

Nevertheless, Laro is comfortable, secluded, and tranquil, and, Silvester says, the promise of returning to the estate at the end of the day encourages guests to try excursions that they might not otherwise attempt. "Coming back to Laro is like coming back home," he says, explaining that, for example, people with no interest in camping have been willing to spend a night on the savanna knowing that the comforts of the house awaited them. "It allows you

to push the adventure side more. People will do a little more immersive experience because they have Laro in the back of their minds."

Although Silvester is Laro's head guide, he continues to operate his own company, Royal African Safaris (RAS), which specializes in trips that employ mobile camping facilities. Silvester could fill his calendar with RAS clients, but he works with Laro, he says, because he likes what the Bonde Nielsens, the Danish family who built the home, are doing with it. "They want to go for something not done before in safaris—a unique, all-inclusive approach," he says. "Laro will open the door to new people. It will introduce the market to people who have not come to Kenya on safari for various reasons."



A vacation at Laro affords ample opportunity for safaris in nearby game parks, although ostrich and other wild animals also roam the grounds of the estate, where each freestanding bedroom tent (opposite) feels more like a canvas-sided cottage.

PETER BONDE NIELSEN is the family member most involved with opening Laro to outsiders. His father, Jan, purchased Laro with a friend in 1985. Jan had fallen in love with Kenya in the 1970s, when he moved his flower-growing business to the country from Sardinia. He has since sold his greenhouses (he now operates an oil terminal in the country of Georgia), but he kept Laro, which became his family's holiday home.

Peter, the eldest of Jan's five children, has managed Laro since 2003, and he knows it well because he helped construct sections of it. In the early 1980s, he finished his schooling in England by flunking his A levels, exams that help determine whether a student would gain admittance to a university. His father, not amused by Peter's academic failings, eventually sent him to the Kenya property, where he stayed for almost three years.

"I was part of the team that put in the roads," Peter says. "It was a punishment, so I wasn't in charge. I cut down trees and removed roots, bushes, and rocks. I put in a few airstrips, too, but the one I built nearest to the house no longer exists. It was turned around [later] because we thought it was best not to have an airstrip facing a mountain."

Peter spent more than a decade working in Russia in different fields (importing food and alcohol, producing carpets, and selling real estate) before revisiting the home in 1999. He moved to Kenya permanently four years later because, he says, "I realized Laro wasn't going to work the way I wanted it to work unless I was here."

The way Laro works is that each year the family rents the property to five or six groups of guests for the all-inclusive rate of \$250,000 per week. This modus operandi grew from the family's need to maintain Laro when they were away. "It's still a private home. We don't want it to get commercial at all," Peter says. "But Laro is probably used by the family two times a year, and then it sits. We thought we could use it to raise money for something sensible, for community work in the area."

Peter says that 65 percent to 90 percent of the weekly rental fee is split between two organizations: Oldonyo Laro Wildlife Security, a 90-man force that patrols the Laro property, dissuading poachers and monitoring the wildlife; and the Lorika Foundation, an organization that provides scholarships, business education, and small loans to residents who live near Laro (See "Fixing the Future," page 196). The percentages that the organizations receive depend on the renters; if they spend their days at Laro's pool, the sum donated will be greater, and if they fly the helicopter constantly, the sum will be smaller. The Enterprise and Conservation

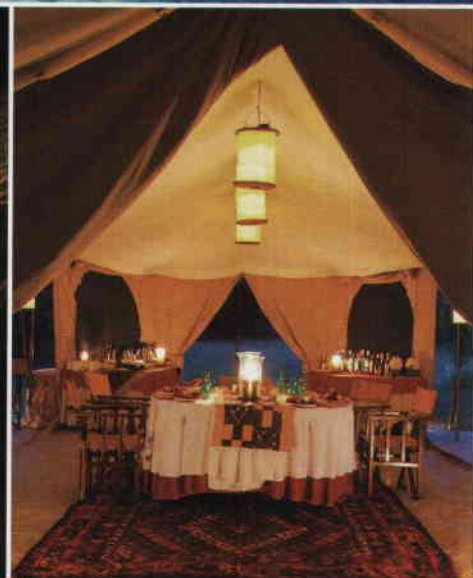
Society, a U.K.-based charity, handles the bookings and donates the proceeds to the organizations.

When the Bonde Nielsens were looking for someone who could serve the guests and also nurture the philanthropic aspects of Laro, family friends recommended Silvester. The family hired Silvester as head guide and his wife, Julianna, another second-generation Kenyan of British descent, as the director of hospitality.

"[Silvester], Jules, and I talked more and more about the problems here, and what we could do to change things and also conserve the area," Peter says, referring to the challenges arising from the poverty that prevails in the neighboring communities. "We talked about how the effort must be self-sustaining, and it must not rely on the family to be here and be alive. Peter Silvester said this a long time ago, and I've noticed it ever since, but conservation is not about animals, it's about people. Without people, there's no need for conservation."



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FROM HELL'S GATE, Mimano flies us to our next stop, the Solio Game Reserve, where Silvester has obtained permission to set up camp for the night. This is a privilege that the property, which devotes 17,000 of its 60,000 acres to wildlife, began granting only last year and only to a handful of camping companies. On this night, we will be the only human sleepover guests. Silvester says that because Solio is privately owned, the animals here are truly wild, compared to the creatures in, say, Tanzania's Ngorongoro Crater, who encounter many safari vans and are accustomed to the presence of people.

Silvester included the side trip as an example of the "more immersive experience" available to Laro guests. His camps feature amenities that might have embarrassed Boy Scout founder Sir Robert Baden-Powell (who is buried about 30 miles from Solio). Each tent contains a king-size

bed, a wardrobe, a flushable porcelain toilet, and a genuine shower (and complimentary toiletries). Silvester achieves water pressure by hoisting a large canvas bag, which can hold almost 19 gallons of hot water, 30 feet off the ground in a tree that is close to the tents.

Since Solio's founding in 1970, the reserve has protected and nurtured hundreds of white and black rhinos, which have been hunted nearly to extinction for their horns. Doug Owino, a bespectacled 42-year-old Kenyan who has worked for RAS for 10 years and who Silvester deems "one of the better guides in the country, very knowledgeable," leads the afternoon safari through Solio. Soon after we depart the campsite, Owino spies two white rhinos, a mother with her 3-year-old calf. When he inches the car within 20 feet of them, the mother looks at our vehicle, but she cannot discern its occupants. "Bad eyesight has let them

Knowing they can return to Laro and relax by the pool (top), guests are more willing to camp overnight in the wild (above, left and right).

POOL: SHEILA GIBSON STOODLEY; TENTS: STEVE MANN

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down through the years,” Owino says, referring to both species of rhino. “Poachers are able to close in on them without them knowing they’re there.”

We admire the rhinos for several minutes before they resume their stroll. “If they had been black rhinos, we’d have been out of there in a hurry,” Owino says as we trundle along one of Solio’s dirt roads. “Sometimes they charge you before you react to them. They can take out anything from ground level to 7 feet high. They can slice open the side of a car. As a rule, [guides] avoid exposing the sides of a car. The front and back are OK, but the sides are vulnerable. You end up injured that way.”

Not long after learning more than I wanted to know about the dangers of black rhinos, we are traveling on a long, straight stretch that is more of a path than a road. We move fairly fast because no interesting animals reside here, and we want to reach another, more promising place before the sun sets and ends our ride. Owino looks behind the car and spots something troubling. Without saying why, he calmly and deftly seizes the stick shift and urges the car forward at twice our previous speed.

In the instant before we rocket ahead, I notice his grave expression, turn, and see the cause of his concern: an enormous gray shape shambling off into the tall yellow grass. It looks like an animate section of a stone wall, but Owino’s reaction confirms its identity as a black rhino. I

scoot away from the left side of the car to the center of the backseat.

Describing the encounter over dinner in the mess tent at the Sólío campsite, Owino does not boast about having saved our lives; instead he jokes about the incident. “It was pissing,” he says, laughing, “and it had its rear to us and trotted away.”

Still, the rhino must have been frighteningly close; when I saw it departing, the animal was nearer to us than the two white rhinos had been. If the beast had chosen to relieve itself while facing the path instead of the grass, we might not be here to chortle about the encounter over an appetizer of celery soup.

As Silvester, Mimano, Owino, and the other members of the support team continue talking about their experiences with wild animals, I grin and laugh and chat and eat, all the while thinking about the rhino and how narrowly we escaped harm. I have sampled the “more immersive experience” that Silvester promises Laro guests, and I am glad I did. However, tomorrow afternoon, when we return to Laro, I will immerse myself in a copy of *Out of Africa* borrowed from the house library, and I will do nothing more perilous than receive a pedicure. It may not be fodder for riveting dinner conversation, but it still will make for an enjoyable day in Kenya. ☐

Enterprise & Conservation Society, 203.542.0567

FIXING THE FUTURE

A STUDENT IS NODDING off in his morning math class, a common occurrence among the 266 day students who attend Olkiramatian Arid Zone School, a public elementary school in Kenya. The boy cannot be older than 6, and he rose early to walk several miles to school. Odds are he left home without eating breakfast and did not bring lunch; his parents probably cannot afford to feed him three times a day, and Olkiramatian’s meal budget covers its boarding students only.

Nike Kondakis, the Lorika Foundation’s head of projects, says that the sleepy student illustrates the many needs of the 52,000 people who live in the areas bordering Oldonyo Laro. Lorika is trying to address some of those needs by sponsoring 26 Olkiramatian boarders, and, if feasible, it will begin offering



a bus program and a lunch program to the commuter students. “We want to attract students,” says Kondakis, “but we also want to improve their ability to learn.”

Lorika is most active with schools, but it began offering instructional classes for aspiring business owners in April, and soon it will launch a microlending program. Locals

seeking to establish or expand a business need tiny amounts of capital to meet their goals, but no banks are equipped to lend to them. The Lorika program will loan sums ranging from \$15 to \$300, and the borrower’s creditworthiness will be entwined with that of a group of six or seven of his peers; if one member defaults, the whole group will forfeit the ability to apply for future loans.

The foundation’s ultimate goal is to help these communities mature and cease to need Lorika’s assistance. “We need to build capacity, not structures,” Kondakis says. “We’ll teach them to own a business so that in five or 10 years’ time, they can build their own health clinics.” —S.G.S.

Lorika Foundation, www.wildlifedirect.org/blogAdmin/lorika/