

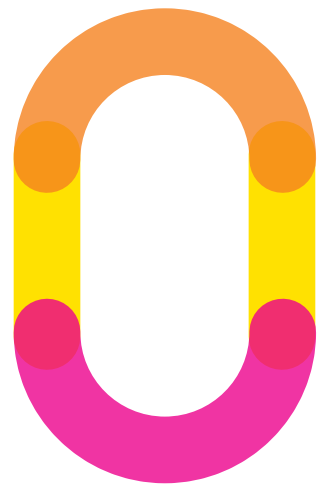
I n t o A F R I C A

Kenya and Tanzania offer travelers magnificent
wildlife, profound beauty, and companies that
will help make the most of the trip

BY SOPHY ROBERTS

"The Cicada sing an endless song
in the long grass, smells run along the
earth and falling stars run over
the sky, like tears over a cheek."
— Karen Blixen, OUT OF AFRICA

It is January 2, 2015, and I am sitting with my family in a safari jeep in Kenya’s Mara North Conservancy, bordering the Masai Mara National Reserve. There is no place more beautiful than this endless shortgrass plain studded with elegant flat-topped acacia; silhouetted against the sky the trees look as delicate as drawings in a fine-tipped pen. A tower of giraffes breaks up the long distance. They walk in a perfect line as if making the most purposeful journey on earth, their horn-like ossicones grazing balls of cloud. In the near distance are two cheetahs; they are so close I can see the tear-shaped lines that frame their eyes. They mark their territory on a trunk, then proceed slowly with their long tails switching at flies. Some zebras are skittish; a group of wildebeests snort nervously to one side.



OUR GUIDE STARTS UP THE LAND CRUISER. We have spent the best part of an hour with the cheetahs, and have lions still to find. Just as we move off, however, everything changes. Twenty feet in front of us, dust is thrown up into the air, the cheetahs peeling away from each other to draw a heart in the plain. Their maneuver, which happens with extraordinary speed, corners a young wildebeest calf. One of the cheetahs holds the quarry’s neck to the ground as the other starts to tear at its hide. A full two minutes later, the wildebeest is suffocated; heat steams out of its torn belly, reminding me how even a fresh death in Africa has its own distinct stench.

What is more peculiar than the smell, however, is the fact that no one else is here. Such sightings are customarily radioed between guides, so by the time there is a kill, a num-



1.



2. The zebra mig ration through the Naboisho Camp in Kenya



The staff prepares a typical bush dinner at the Naboisho Camp

“Without tourists, there’s simply nothing left to contribute to the conservation agenda”



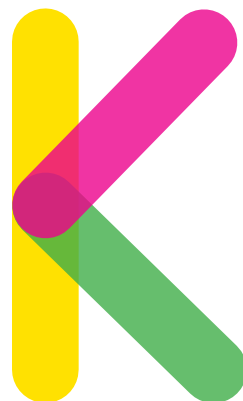
Kenya has seen the most dramatic drop-off of all the popular safari destinations, according to Samuel Tunai, governor of Narok County,

“2014 was the worst year ever. Lodges were full because of locals, but in terms of revenue, it wasn’t good. When Ebola happened in West Africa, I didn’t for a minute think it would affect us.”

ber of vehicles have congregated. On this occasion, however, the Mara is running empty. It is why I have come, traveling opportunistically on a ten-day safari with my husband and two young sons, traveling with a company called Asilia Africa; I book on December 23 and board flights four days later, paying far less than I should for this time of year, which in normal circumstances would be considered high season. We split our time between the Mara in Kenya, and the Serengeti National Park in Tanzania. Between them the two areas make up one contiguous ecosystem that plays host to perhaps the greatest wildlife spectacle on earth: the migration of 1.5 million wildebeests that from July to November cause visitor numbers in the Mara to momentarily swell beyond the traditional New Year peak.

I can take this family vacation last minute because of a new reality threatening the continent: Tourists are scared to come to Africa, or at least anywhere beyond the more obvious locales, like Cape Town and

the Kruger National Park, because of the so-called Ebola effect. As recently as October 2013 when I was last in the Mara to work, there were up to fifteen safari jeeps at a single sighting, and this a month after the terrorist attack in Nairobi's Westgate shopping mall when occupancies were already running low. When news broke of a lethal disease on the other side of the continent, fears escalated—even if, in reality, the Ebola outbreak in West Africa was farther from Nairobi than it was from London. Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda—none of these East African countries have had Ebola, yet visitor numbers are dramatically down.



KENYA HAS SEEN THE MOST DRAMATIC DROP-OFF OF all the popular safari destinations, with occupancy levels the worst the industry has seen since the country's troubled election year of 2007, according to Samuel Tunai, governor of Narok County, which administers the funds for the Masai Mara National Reserve: "2014 was the worst year ever. Lodges were full because of locals, but in terms of revenue, it wasn't good." He adds: "When [Ebola] happened in West Africa, I didn't for a minute think it would affect us." Across the entire tourism sector in the Mara, there have been heavy redundancies, the furloughing of staff and mothballing of camps.

"Without tourists, there's simply nothing left to contribute to the conservation agenda," says Bas Hochstenbach, cofounder of Asilia Africa, which owns Rekero, where I stay, as well as nine other luxury camps in the Mara-Serengeti ecosystem.

"Even the mountain gorillas in Rwanda have felt the effects of this crazy paranoia," says Praveen Moman, founder of Volcanoes Safaris, which operates the leading gorilla-tracking camps in Uganda and Rwanda. "There's no question the safari industry's business models are starting to creak," says Will Jones, founder of Journeys by Design, an African travel company that looks after the likes of Ralph Lauren on safari: "In times like this we also all start to



The great Wildebeest migration arrives on the pastures of the Masai Mara National Reserve in Kenya



Cheetah cubs lounge on a vehicle at the Naboisho Camp in Kenya



In the Naboisho Conservancy an elephant makes a bold challenge to a pair of lions



Zebra grazing in the Mara Naboisho Conservancy, a 50,000 acre conservation area located in the Great Rift Valley, Kenya. The Mara Naboisho Conservancy provides a significant wildlife migratory corridor for the Mara-Serengeti ecosystem, supporting both the north and south wildebeest migrations.

Giraffes on the run at the Naboisho Camp in Kenya
→



see how the dependence on tourism is a major handicap in the conservation mosaic.”

Hence the importance of a parallel drive to try to plug the gaps via wealthy philanthropic individuals. “I’m talking about adventurers who have already fallen for Africa, who are willing to make strategic philanthropic investments to help protect critical ecosystems for the long term,” Jones says. “I am a hundred percent confident these people are there; we are already talking to them, because they are the same people who have been booking our safaris.”

While niche, this emerging market is also tangible, and accounts for the development of Jones’s second business, Wild Philanthropy, which matches private donor-investors with carefully identified conservation areas to help channel funds to where they might make a difference (and possibly, given the right climate, the donors might even break even on their investment in the process). That won’t be in the Mara—the Reserve’s governance relies on national funds derived from park fees—but it will potentially include the private conservancies on its boundaries (which provide dispersal zones for the wildlife equal to the

National Reserve’s size), as well as farther afield, from Tanzania to the Central African Republic to the Sera-Melako wilderness area in northern Kenya close to the border with Somalia.

“The time has come to provide a clear and formal channel for funneling interest and funds into the right places in Africa, because all that’s lacking right now is ease and structure,” Jones says.

Jane Edge, a former environmental journalist, agrees. She recently set up a new consultancy, Afro-Thropic, which functions as a match-making service between NGOs and the donor community with the ultimate aim of supporting large-scale conservation projects with NGO status: “Historically, private donors have tended to focus on protecting megafauna, such as elephants and rhinos, but there are a few very powerful individuals as well as a number of multilateral donors such as USAID, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, and the EU, and major NGOs, such as WWF and WCS, who are more broadly focused on landscape protection.”

Edge says the trend is already moving ahead confidently, which is good, because the need is criti-

cal. “The reality is there may be no more than sixty well-managed protected areas greater than a hundred thousand hectares extent in twenty years’ time, which is why another essential focus is on community conservation areas, which have the potential to expand the areas under conservation in Africa by millions of hectares,” says Edge: “Models such as the Northern Rangelands Trust in Kenya, which covers two million hectares, and Namibia’s sixty-four communal conservancies, which now cover over seventeen percent of the country, are integral to this success, attracting major funding from government development arms, such as the French, Danish, U.K., Dutch, and U.S.”



IN ORDER TO GET A SENSE OF A SINGLE PROJECT WILD

Philanthropy is championing, I travel to the Sera-Melako Conservancy in Kenya, which is a member of the Northern Rangelands Trust, or NRT. It is March, and the ground is bone-dry, with daytime temperatures in the shade exceeding 30 degrees Celsius. The riverbed is without water, which is why we can camp on it, using “cot-beds” hooped with mosquito nets. The fly camp—elegant in its simplicity, with the beds adjacent to a big campfire—has been set up in advance of our arrival by Willie Roberts, a well-known third-generation Kenyan who helped establish the country’s very first conservancy models in the 1980s, in the Masai-controlled areas bordering the Mara National Reserve.

We come in by helicopter, flying over giraffes and elephants, which thread through the acacia. We see tribal “bomas,” which are the nomadic pastoralist settlements belonging to the local Borana, Rendille, and Samburu tribes. Circles of thorn enclose their cattle at night; during the day, the herds graze, overseen by young boys watching out for lions and other predators. The ground is like a desert; there is very little sign of water, or grass. We don’t find large buffalo herds here on the flat expanse, except in the Matthews Range, which is heavily forested. From

A giraffe sited on a walking safari for families at the Mara Bush House
→



We come in by helicopter, flying over giraffes and elephants, which thread through the acacia.

We see tribal “bomas,” which are the nomadic pastoralist settlements belonging to the local Borana, Rendille, and Samburu tribes.

→ The Northern Rangelands Trust (NRT) is working with native communities on sustainable development projects



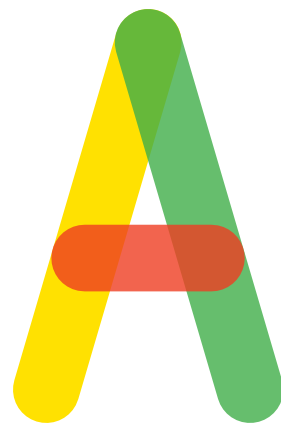
Dinner is served on the deck above the Talek River at the Rekero Camp
→



steep slopes doum palms burst up like giant shuttlecocks into the sky.

The longer we fly, the wilder it becomes, until we have entered the heart of the Sera-Melako conservancy area—a vast expanse of arid bushland that stretches toward the Ethiopian and Somali borders, and hosts an estimated population of two hundred rare Grevy’s zebras, representing approximately 9 percent of the global population. The area comprises 732,000 hectares of African bush owned by the Rendille and Samburu. Under the conservancy agreements, the NRT helps with the introduction of more sustainable grazing systems; it also provides security with a powerful anti-poaching unit.

The money required for all of this is generated through a mixed model: straightforward donor money (which Edge is trying to support with funds from national institutions and NGOs) is one route; now the NRT is also looking at tourism development. That is why Jones is here, scouting Sera-Melako’s potential for philanthropically minded private investors. Build a camp, says Jones, and there will be income for the conservancy and the communities associated with it, which increases everyone’s vested interests in protecting the wilderness while also giving confidence to the pastoralists that the NRT is in it for the long term. “We know tourism alone can’t prop up this place. The Ebola crisis has proved that,” Jones says, “but we have got to keep on trying, by improving the balance of factors that can keep wild places wild.”



AS FOR HOW MUCH MONEY IT WOULD TAKE TO GET Melako moving, Jones estimates \$400,000 to build a camp, which doesn’t include building a private home for the donor to use with his or her family. In addition, the investor would be obligated to cover \$120,000 of the conservancy’s operational fees each year (as Jones points out, these figures are equal in value to some of the single safaris he has organized for private clients over the years). The risks for that

“We know tourism alone can’t prop up this place. The Ebola crisis has proved that,” Jones says, “but we have got to keep on trying, by improving the balance of factors that can keep wild places wild.”

donor-investor are significant, especially in the current climate: It is unclear if and when Kenya will recover from the latest crisis, with not just misplaced fears about Ebola, but very real risks from terrorism, which continue to undermine the region. To conservationists like Jones, Edge, and the NRT, however, the greater risk is that without engagement, Africa loses some of its most important ecosystems, as well as the critically endangered species they sustain.

The black rhino is endemic to Kenya; it is where the only significant population of this species remains. In 1970, numbers sat at around 20,000. By 1990, this had dropped to fewer than 400 individuals—a staggering 98 percent decline in twenty years. The NRT already protects 75 members of this species in another part of Kenya, in Lewa Downs, with high-profile support from Prince William, who generates a huge amount of funding and profile for the NRT’s endeavors. The Sera community intends to reintroduce the same species this year—21 black rhinos in 2015 into a newly fenced sanctuary of 25,000 acres.

“This is a pioneering peg in the ground that will see the reintroduction of black rhinos into a pristine habitat cared for by local communities,” says Ian Craig, CEO of the NRT. “It will also help ensure the ongoing protection of Kenya’s second largest elephant population of sixty-eight hundred animals where communities in partnership with government and the private sector have reduced elephant poaching by forty-seven percent over the past three years.”

The reality is such projects need money to keep on going. They need people who can think bigger than the family safari holiday. Thus I am reminded of the single encounter my children have with rhinos on our Mara vacation. It is driving back from the cheetah kill. We have radioed ahead to visit two black rhinos that have three armed guards nannying them in the bush twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. The children are entranced. I have to conceal from them my despair—that in this iconic swath of Africa, the wild rhinos that once roamed a farm in Kenya have already all but disappeared. **i**



Entrance to a guest tent at the Rekero Camp in Masai Mara