



N O M A D L A N D  
**KENYA**

ON A VISIT TO IL NGWESI ECO-LODGE TO CATCH UP WITH EAST AFRICA'S NOMAD HERDERS, THE MAASAI, A ONETIME TEXAN SMALL RANCHER EXPANDS A COMMON THREAD CONNECTING HISTORY'S GRAZERS.

*By Rick Bass*

I live in Montana, where, though certainly we have cattle, we have even more land. More grass than cows. Other than our nine months of winter, this is heaven for grazing animals.

Once, and not too long ago, there were buffalo all up and down the Rocky Mountain Front—the sea of grass that blew in waves in the wind coming down that great wall of stone. The buffalo moved like wind, so much so that native cultures spoke of fire and buffalo as similar forces.

As a child growing up in Texas, I lamented often that I was only able to see those herds in my mind. I wondered what it might be like to see Africa, one of the few other places on earth where the perfect combination of vast space, steady sunlight, and the clockwork of the seasons—monsoons breaking open the cracked heart of drought every year, just in time—conspired to yield, produce, such a near-infinity of the living. And back then, even more than today, Texas was cattle culture: Anyone who had any land at all had a few cattle. My best friend Kirby and I even tried our hand at it, simply because it was the fabric of the culture all around us. Kirby's grandfather had a farm near Brenham, in the soft rolling hills northwest of Houston, that had some grass on it, so we bought a few calves, auction rejects, and tried to fatten them up. More on that later.

Main lounge and reception, Il Ngwesi Lodge, Laikipia, Northern Kenya.

In the meantime, for Africa, I waited. Life is long and I thought I would go someday. I went to college in Utah, where dairy cattle stippled the valley bottoms beneath high mountains. I moved to Mississippi, where shiny black Angus stood glinting like coal back in the dappled shade, hiding from the heat. I moved to Montana, where the buffalo were gone but where there were still deer, elk, antelope—everything else but buffalo. Bird hunting with my dogs, I wandered past the stone circles of teepee rings, some so recent—150, 200 years ago—that they had not even been covered by the creep of soil washing down from the mountains just above me. Suddenly, 60 years had gone past in my own life, I had lived long enough to see sufficient changes to the world and the land to qualify as at least a thin kind of history, and I realized if I was going to go see the animals of Africa, it was time.

I wanted to go to Kenya for the diversity as well as numbers, and a friend of a friend recommended a lodge, Il Ngwesi, in the northern half of the East African nation, in the Lewa conservation district. On the phone, it sounded too good to be true (it wasn't), and the website, of course, was vibrant, teeming with images of zebras splashing through rivers, elephants lumbering in long lines through shaded river bottoms, and the dazzling languor of sunstruck cheetahs, regal, watching over endless sere grasslands, their charcoal faces like masks, searching for whatever to run down next. Il Ngwesi works in partnership with a nonprofit, Wild Philanthropy, that seeks to find solutions in Africa to conservation needs and challenges.

The animals were all present in the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy—a region dedicated to preserving their habitat—but what interested me in Il Ngwesi just as much was the way the Indigenous people, the Maasai, were central to the lodge, and in charge of running it. Will Jones, director of Wild Philanthropy,

told me that although there are many tourism/wildlife-viewing/safari lodges in Northern Kenya, all the others are run by non-African managers, and that Il Ngwesi is the only lodge where the Maasai are not only the employees, but the owners.

There are a lot of “eco-friendly” lodges throughout Kenya, but this commitment to local people seems important to me, and I was interested to see the character and quality of the operation, as well as the character and quality of the land. The Maasai, traditionally a hunter-gatherer culture, developed into a nomadic herding society, renowned for their expertise in taking care of meat-on-the-hoof; goats and cattle in the red rock deserts and mountains of their homeland. So wedded have the Maasai become to the culture of cattle that there is a belief among the Maasai that every cow in the world belongs to the Maasai.

And this is where the small-rancher past of my Texas childhood—in the lush, forgiving, productive landscape of East Texas, and the Gulf Coast—felt, in Kenya, so far away. I recognized a little of it—the way a single cattle herder, walking along behind five or six lean cows, tapping them with a stick to keep them directed and moving—reminded me of small farms and ranches of my youth where folks had half a dozen cattle, or even a dozen, on 40 acres. But here, the Maasai had all the land to the horizon. It was just damned hard land. Mythically hard. How can a cow put on a pound of flesh amid such stone? By walking, working, trying to find a spot of grass here, a spot there—some shade here, some water there—while beyond, up on the ridges, in the protected area, the real wildlife—what was here before cattle—is protected, and waits for tourists to come see it, with those revenues feeding the Maasai, and allowing them a bit of cushion, enabling them to keep driving their cattle here and there, tapping them forward into each next day.

The barbed wire fences that had helped enforce the current U.S. cattle culture were not present at Il Ngwesi. There is one big fence, which the Maasai use to keep cattle out of the central core of their wildlife

conservancy. They need the wildlife, and they need the cattle. It's a simple and elegant solution. They protect the best grass for the wildlife—the real cash cows of their hardscrabble economy—while keeping the past alive, the nomadic cattle herds. Keeping the cattle moving helps the land recover. A foot in the past, a foot in the future. It is this way everywhere, is it not? Texas, Kenya; Timbuktu, Peoria?

There are of course pressures on the system. A rhino—or rather, the horn of an individual rhino—is, by the curious and mad reckoning of our own peculiar, troubled species, worth, say, ten thousand cattle. Ten thousand cattle, or one rhino horn—are you kidding me? So the Maasai employ game guards to help protect the community investment, young men who walk all day at some quiet and often undetected distance behind the rhinos and elephants and giraffes, not with the atlatl or spear of but two and three generations ago, but with machine guns—Kalashnikovs and Chinese-made Kalashnikov knockoffs, sun-varnished from whatever last war they had been used in, sometimes manufactured in the very same countries that seek simultaneously to devour the horn of the rhino that the guns would protect or, conversely, kill.

History. We are living on its edge in every step. Perhaps there are moments when its movement is a slow or even merry rippling current, and we ride it like upturned leaves, barely noticing all that is going past. But perhaps too there are times when it is titanic, when waves tower, when ice shelves fall from the edges of the continents; times when the continents themselves get up and begin walking.

It can take a long time to go back into the past. The gravel airstrip in Lewa in Northern Kenya's Laikipia is a start, as is the two-hour cobblestone Land Cruiser ride to the lodge. David Jeeps, the Maasai guide who picks us up, tells us about two white rhinos they guard at the lodge for tourists to see, in an enclosure of about 15 acres: keeping them forever safe, yet no longer



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Top: Viewpoint in between rooms; Middle: View of Mount Kenya; Bottom: An example of the “open to the bush” rooms at Il Ngwesi.

able to roam the world free. These two rhinos, gifts from South Africa, are new, he says, brother and sister (they won't mate), getting used to their new country.

Jeeps says the community is still grieving the loss of the previous rhino. It too was a gift. One of the Maasai's young men went to Lewa to pick it up when it was just a baby, blind and orphaned, and walked it 40 miles home to the village like a dog, sleeping with it for warmth in the cold desert nights. The stars above delineated its new home, no matter that they were unseen by the little rhino. The baby imprinted on people. They were able to keep it safe for only a couple of years before poachers got it. “He was such a sweet rhino,” Jeeps says.

How improbable is this world, to dream, to attempt, to guard a \$50,000 horn out in the middle of what feels like one of the remotest places on earth, with but a gun or two and a single ranger?

Everywhere around us, stone and scrub, no water. Dazzling blue sky. The blackest night pierced by what seem like millions of diamonds. It looks like my beloved Texas Hill Country. Fredericksburg, Austin, Johnson City, Llano, without the people.

The lodge: a masterwork of elegance and simplicity. Small world: There's a sign thanking the late fashion designer Liz Claiborne and her husband Art Ortenberg for their conservation efforts in the region. Claiborne and Ortenberg helped conservation in the little valley in northwestern Montana, the Yaak Valley, where I live, too. Small world. Their eye was drawn to beauty and to wildness. They're both gone now. They worked hard at this kind of

thing all their lives.

I get out of the jeep. Thatched roofs, tile floors, and a ten-million- or hundred-million-dollar view—the curve of the earth on one side, a canyon with a river—a river—on the other side.

The animals are at the river. No number, no valuation can be put on a river in the desert. Such is the character of miracles. Such too is the character of the most basic and mundane things, things we take for granted. An elephant, a glass of water, one more moment of life.

At Il Ngwesi, our lodging is a thatched-roof treehouse.

One walks down through a cool garden to a swinging rope bridge and into the adobe open-walled quarters—an immense mosquito-netted bed looks out over the river below.

In the morning, we walk into the desert with Jeeps, weaving our way through brush and sand and stone. Giraffes, warthogs, elephants, and zebras flow before us in waves. Was Texas ever like this, and if so, what happened?

We know what happened. It is up to the Maasai, really—not Western conservationists—to hold on to what they still have. And with the rules of



Top: The Il Ngwesi team; Bottom: Maasai Manyatta, a cultural homestead; Opposite page: A herd of reticulated giraffe.



the world changing so fast now.

That night, we drive down to the Maasai village to visit and take a meal; the village has slaughtered a goat and offered to make it available to us. The children and young people are dancing the way they do every evening—the curious and mesmerizing chant-and-hop, each trying to leap higher than all the others. Red robes, red as the desert. Red from the goat's blood, red meat cooking over the red coals as red dusk settles over us, then night.

The Maasai continue to drive and herd their cattle and goats to places where they can find thin grass and, increasingly rare, water.

Giant acacia trees, with their rich bounty of shade, ring their village. The entire perimeter is protected by a fence woven of thorn bushes, impenetrable to lion and leopard—protecting the Maasai as well as their stock, which, at this time of year, consists of baby goats, cute as the dickens, galloping around in little corrals of woven branches, buzz-tails spinning. Meat everywhere.

About those cattle that Kirby and I tried to raise, in the soft green rolling hills outside of Brenham: We bought the calves cheap at auctions, defective animals that no one else wanted, \$35 per calf, and turned them loose on Kirby's grandfather's farm. The barbed wire fence was sagging and rotting, and the little calves slipped through it at will, escaped into the ether—into what back then was the future, but is now the past. No matter how hard we tried to patch the old fence, we never could hold them for more than a few days. We were not any kind of cowboys, nor, certainly, were we any kind of Indians (or any other Indigenous people). We were just kind of in the middle, and I marvel at the tight latticework of wreathing of the thorned fences of the Maasai in Kenya, where people's lives and livelihoods depend upon the quality of their work.

The culture of meat is the same. We sit around the campfire with our plates of goat. We look up at the stars. We hope for rain. We know we look up at the stars

and know that we do not know, can never know, what will be coming the next day, but that we are here in the moment, each doing our work, our best, and that in the mornings we will get up and go out into the world and seek to keep doing our best, and that we might be called upon to adapt. Some things—Maasai and cattle—change slowly, even as all the rest of the world, and its changes, rotates around a pivot we sometimes cannot see, but keep following, leaning forward.

Rick Bass was a guest of African adventure and exploration specialist Journeys by Design ([journeysbydesign.com](http://journeysbydesign.com)) and its nonprofit, Wild Philanthropy ([wildphilanthropy.com](http://wildphilanthropy.com)). For a two-week private safari to Kenya, to include three nights at Il Ngwesi and two nights walking with camels, costs start at \$ 19,500 per person, including ground arrangement service and all full-board accommodations, with an additional \$5,000 contribution per group to Wild Philanthropy to fund conservation and community projects.