

A QUESTION OF CONSCIENCE

Tourism's importance to Kenya's economy is clear. The absence of visitors due to the political turmoil earlier this year cost the nation millions of pounds in much-needed income. With stability again ruling the day, and visitor numbers on the rise, we thought we'd ask a crucial question: what does the tourist industry contribute to the wellbeing and culture of traditional communities? We sent **Mark Stratton** to find some examples of eco-tourism at its best.

Tourism is undoubtedly important to Kenya's economy. But do local communities benefit whenever we roar across their ancestral lands in search of wildlife? And can tourism really maintain tribal customs without reducing them to a sideshow?

It was the search for answers to these questions that recently took me to Kenya. I wanted to experience the most forward-thinking lodges in East Africa where the benefits from tourism were being equitably shared between lodge owners and locals – not the types of places that consider excursions to local schools for holiday snaps of cute children as eco-tourism.

However this journey wouldn't see me 'going local' – sleeping in mud-walled huts and living on a steady diet of roasted goat's intestines (not a delicacy I can recommend) – as some of Kenya's most ethically-sound lodges are also among its most luxurious. Hence a night into my journey and I was sipping a gin and tonic (going down a treat with roasted cashews) on the verandah at Ol Donyo Wuas. Across the plain, 40km ahead, the sinking sun was flickering like a child's sparkler on Kilimanjaro's ice cap. I couldn't see the mountain's foothills for haze – it was as if the summit was floating on air.

Opened in the late 1980s, Ol Donyo Wuas is one of Kenya's original bush home lodges. Its original rustic cottages, now a modern mix of adobe, thatch and glass, are snugly camouflaged amid the volcanic Chyulu

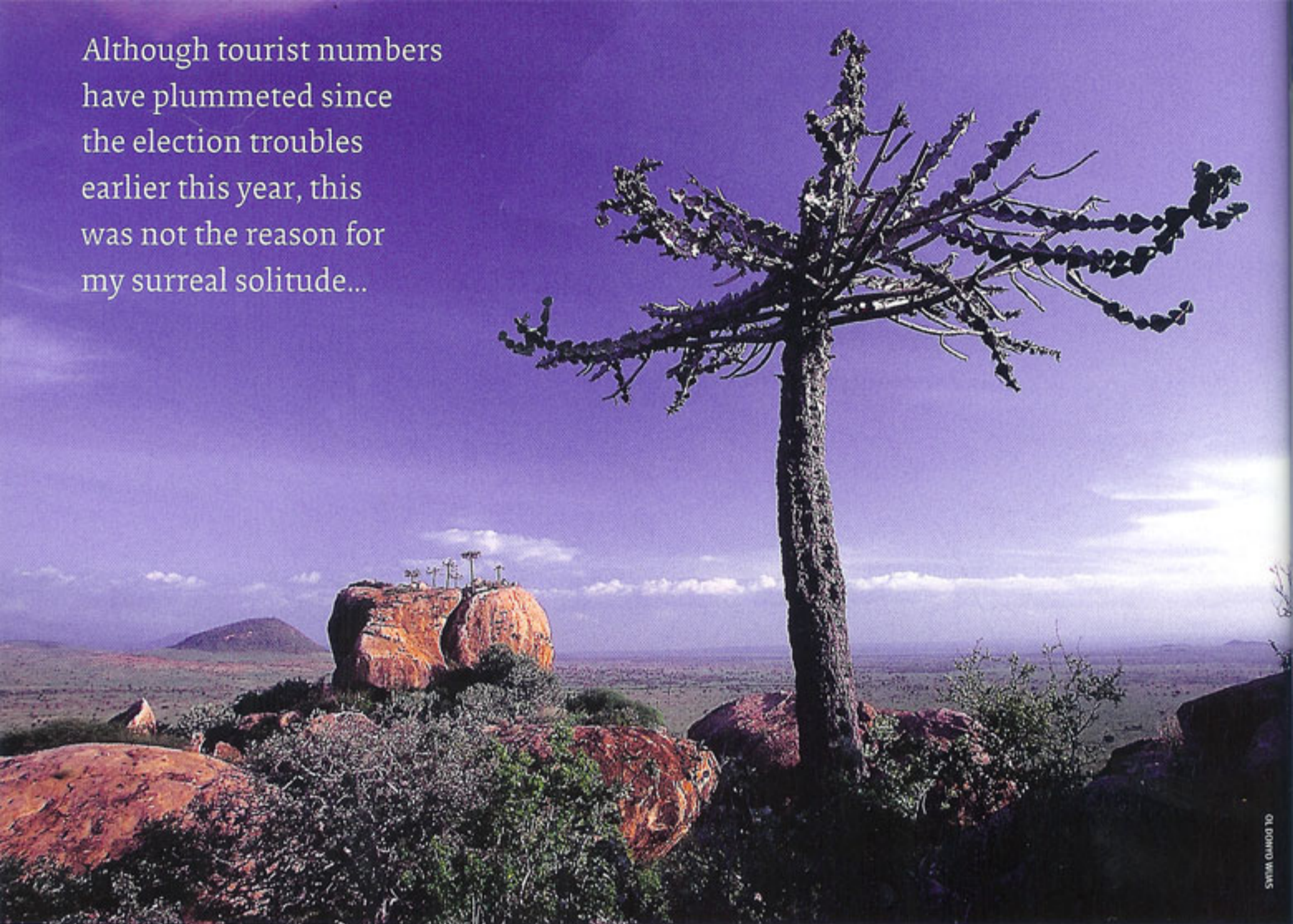
Hills, which form part of the 125,000ha Mbirikani Group Ranch. Collectively owned by the local Maasai, Mbirikani represents an important land corridor between Tsavo East and Amboseli National Parks.

My first night in the open-fronted cottages, which overlook the lodge's waterhole, was one of the noisiest and most enjoyable that I've ever spent in Africa. Genets scabbled around my verandah seeking tasty morsels, and long before the cacophonous bird chorus at dawn I'd been woken by howling hyenas and elephants – sounding like they were extracting the last dregges of a milkshake through a straw – slurping at the waterhole. The latter's massive silhouettes resembled kopjes in the darkness. Although I watched for several hours, I failed to spot the cheetahs that are known to frequent the waterhole.

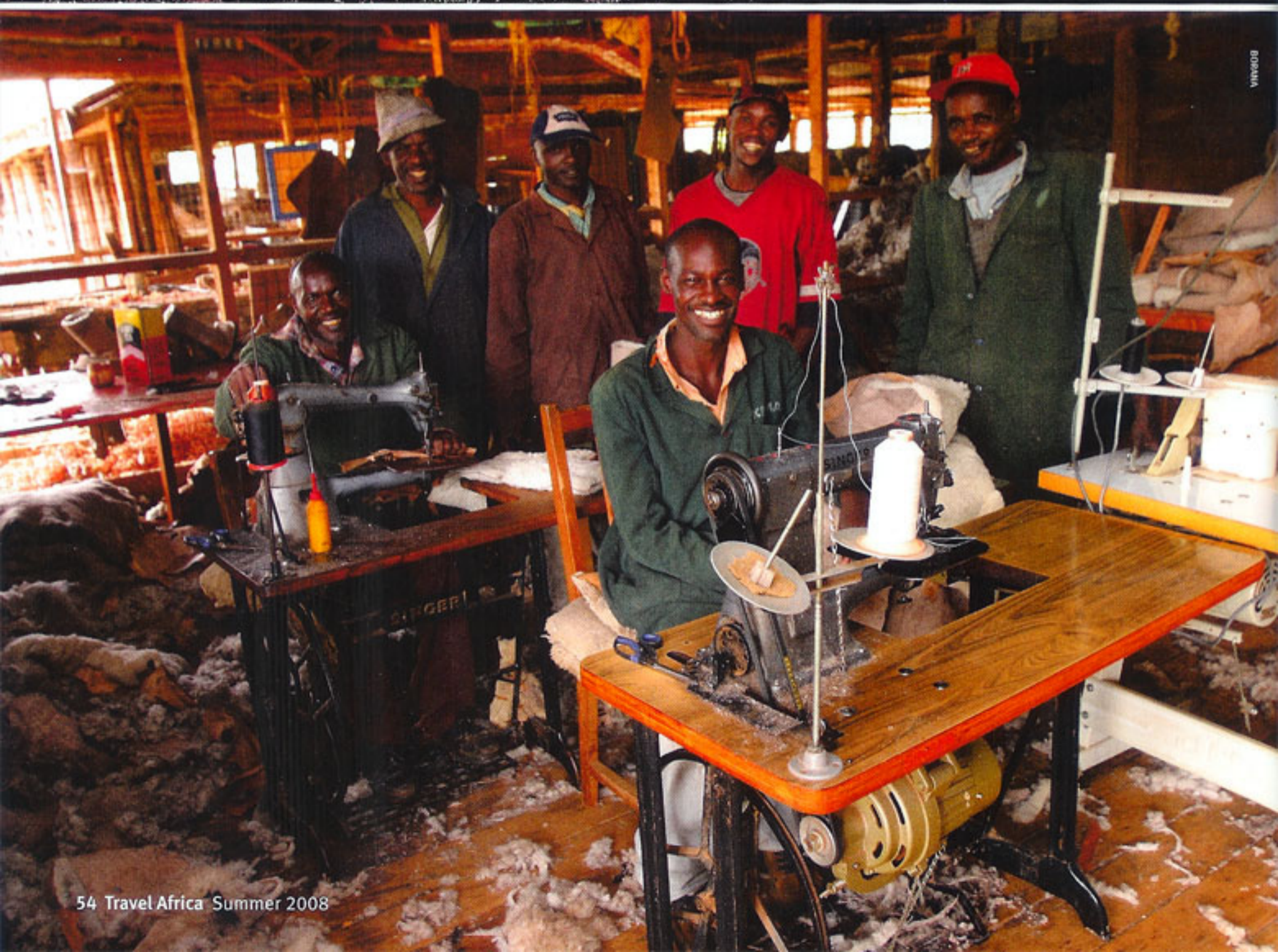
After the gentle wake-up call (the arrival of tea and home-baked biscuits) I, like other guests, had the choice of enjoying several options: a morning game drive, a romp through the bush on horseback or a trip to search for Mbirikani's native population of black rhinos that live in forests growing on top of dramatic lava flows. One thing was for certain – whatever option was chosen, the exclusivity was guaranteed. You simply don't see any other tourists on this private ranch.

While this might sound a bit like other exclusive safari lodge experiences, if you dig a little deeper you'll realise that Ol Donyo Wuas is indeed >>

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OL DOWHO WILMS



BORAMA

different. The owners, Richard Bonham and his sister Trish, were among the first to negotiate an agreement with the local Maasai for use of their tribal land. Most importantly, the deal involved sharing the lodge's spoils with the community.

Besides the lodge's hefty annual rent being paid directly to Mbirikani's local community, the Maasai also profit from Ol Donyo Wuas' success, receiving a substantial sum for each night a guest resides. Richard Bonham's Maasailand Preservation Trust also actively supports myriad conservation and community projects. These include building classrooms, providing 'wildlife scholarships' to put needy children through school, initiating a mobile health clinic, creating and maintaining a tree nursery, and providing round-the-clock security for black rhinos. Richard was also instrumental in developing a game scout patrol that now includes 90 wardens across six group-ranches covering 500,000ha between Tsavo East and Amboseli.

The lodge also welcomes guests' donations to community projects - one former visitor donated a staggering £500,000 to build a new girl's secondary school.

"After primary school Maasai girls are often married off at the age of 14 or 15," says Jonathon, the school's accountant. "The nearest secondary school used to be 80km away, but the close proximity of this new facility means that many parents are now

programme. He praised the scheme for changing local attitudes. "Now if a wild animal takes one of my sheep or cattle I have no problem with it," he says. Still, isn't he scared of lions when herding I ask? "Yes" he says, "but if they're hungry they will eat my livestock first."

I carry this sobering thought with me on a final horse ride into the bush. We get marvellously close to giraffe and those sleep-depriving, slurping elephants - just a few of the 68 mammals recorded in Richard's little slice of paradise. We did not see any lions. But that did not stop me from wondering whether those lurking would prefer some tasty equine rump or my own derriere.

When I reached my next stop, Borana Lodge, I was met with another bedroom view to die for. From my two-storey stone cottage, which was topped by an exquisitely woven thatched roof (and incidentally, a group of black-faced monkeys who were mischievously unpicking it), was a vista of Mount Kenya's multiple jagged peaks and the stony Samangua Valley. Besides the show outside, each of Borana's six tasteful and spacious cottages have open hearths that are lit nightly to warm the cool air.

Borana's forte is riding and guests can partake in horseback safaris lasting up to several days. However, every night out on the trot is one away from the cosy cottages and the lodge's immense dining area, where you enjoy silver service meals around the large rosewood table. The eco-warrior in me decided to

Opposite top: The volcanic Chyulu Hills - home of Ol Donyo Wuas

Opposite bottom: Proud of their work, Borana's workshop and tannery staff. The lodge uses the operation to provide working opportunities for disabled people in nearby villages

"I think 'eco-tourism' and 'responsible tourism' are words becoming too widely used simply for marketing purposes. For many, it's easier to write about a project on their website than actually make the project a success"

willing to send their girls for further education."

"The Maasai love their cattle even more than their women," says Richard. He concedes it has been a long haul to get the Maasai to limit their grazing to produce better habitat for wildlife. But now he believes they understand the financial benefits tourism can bring and tells me they're in favour of livestock-free zones. His philosophy is clear. "You've got to prove that wildlife generated tourism will generate more income per acre than cattle," he says.

I'm particularly impressed by his radical scheme developed with Tom Hill, an American philanthropist and former guest, called the Predator Compensation Fund (PCF). He tells me the Maasai had made a conscious decision by early 2000 to wipe out lions in Mbirikani. "Between 2001 and 2003, 22 lions had been killed and we scarcely saw one during those three years," he says. "The Maasai didn't hate lions," adds Tom, "they just hated the economics of them." It's estimated that predators cost the Maasai £25,000 in lost livestock on the ranch each year. So in 2003 Richard and Tom initiated the PCF to remunerate Maasai at an above market rate of KSh13,500 (£100) for livestock lost to verifiable kills (including through hyena and cheetah). In the five years since, only three lions have been killed and sightings of the big cats by guests have increased substantially.

I wondered what the locals' thought about this? During a visit to a Maasai *boma* the next day I asked David, a local herder, what he thought of the

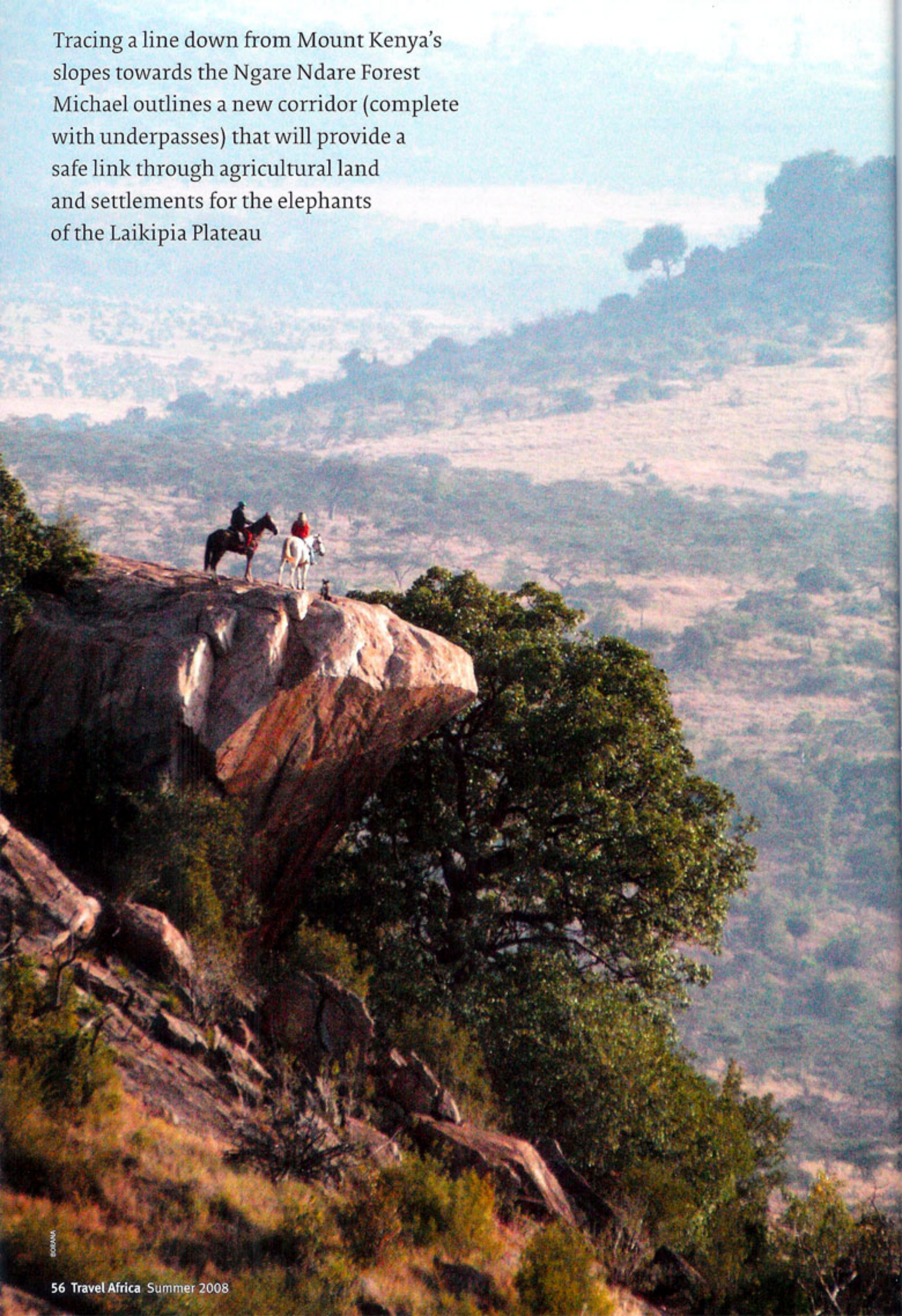
stay put - tough work, but somebody has to do it.

A full stomach made keeping up with Michael Dyer, the energetic owner of this family-run ranch on the Laikipia Plateau, a task in itself. "I can't slow down," he tells me during our whistle-stop tour of Borana by Land Rover, "there's 14,000ha of wildlife habitat out there to maintain."

Some 15 years ago Michael's land underwent a Damascene conversion: reverting from a cattle-ranch to a wildlife conservation and tourism stronghold. "When I took over there were 15,000 cattle, sheep, and goats," he says. "The land was hammered." Now just a few thousand Boran cattle remain and Michael is proud of how the reduction of grazing has created a bushy green layer of forest and scrub across the 2000m-high plateau. With many rare species of wildlife there's a Jules Vernean quality to the ranch. Over two-days I'm treated to sightings of Grevy's zebra and Somali ostrich. Of the largest herds of reticulated giraffe I'd ever seen, Michael comments: "We've got far too many of them."

While wildlife conservation is a major part of Borana's long-term goal, they also focus on the wellbeing of locals, investing a considerable amount of time and resources into impressive community development projects. "From the start I knew if we were going to make a go of tourism we had to benefit our pastoralist neighbours," says Michael. The success of their programmes lead to them being awarded the Virgin Holidays Responsible Tourism Award for poverty reduction in 2007. >>

Tracing a line down from Mount Kenya's slopes towards the Ngare Ndare Forest Michael outlines a new corridor (complete with underpasses) that will provide a safe link through agricultural land and settlements for the elephants of the Laikipia Plateau



Michael's keenness to promote self-sufficiency is reflected in Borana's support for several micro-businesses. A long established workshop and tannery (managed by Michael's wife Nicky) cures ranch leather and employs disabled workers from the local villages. Martin, completely blind, gives me a tour of the tannery before Michael takes me to see his newest venture: a brick-making kiln. As we watch a local man stacking clay moulds into a wood-fired kiln, Michael explains that it has been hard to find anybody making bricks in the area. "Its old-fashioned technology," says Michael, "but once we've set up the guys with these skills we will hand over the business to them and buy bricks back."

The ranch has also been extremely active working with local schools. Besides providing annual bursaries to the brightest children Borana has also funded infrastructural improvements such as remarkably fuel-efficient cookers at Ngare Ndare School, which require tiny amounts of wood to cook the children's meals. "You've got to give these children a chance," says Michael. "It's shocking how far education is behind in Kenya." Near the same school is a new forestry project aimed at repairing eroded land and providing sustainable firewood and forage.

Later that day, from a jagged saddleback ridge, we gaze across Borana's magnificent expanse. Michael is still buzzing with ideas. Tracing a line down from Mount Kenya's slopes towards the Ngare Ndare Forest he outlines a new corridor that will provide a safe link through agricultural land and settlements for the elephants of the Laikipia Plateau and Mount Kenya. It's being partly funded by Sir Richard Branson – a former Borana guest. The corridor includes novel elephant underpasses. "That's what I love about Kenya," says Michael, "there's so much freedom to try out innovative management."

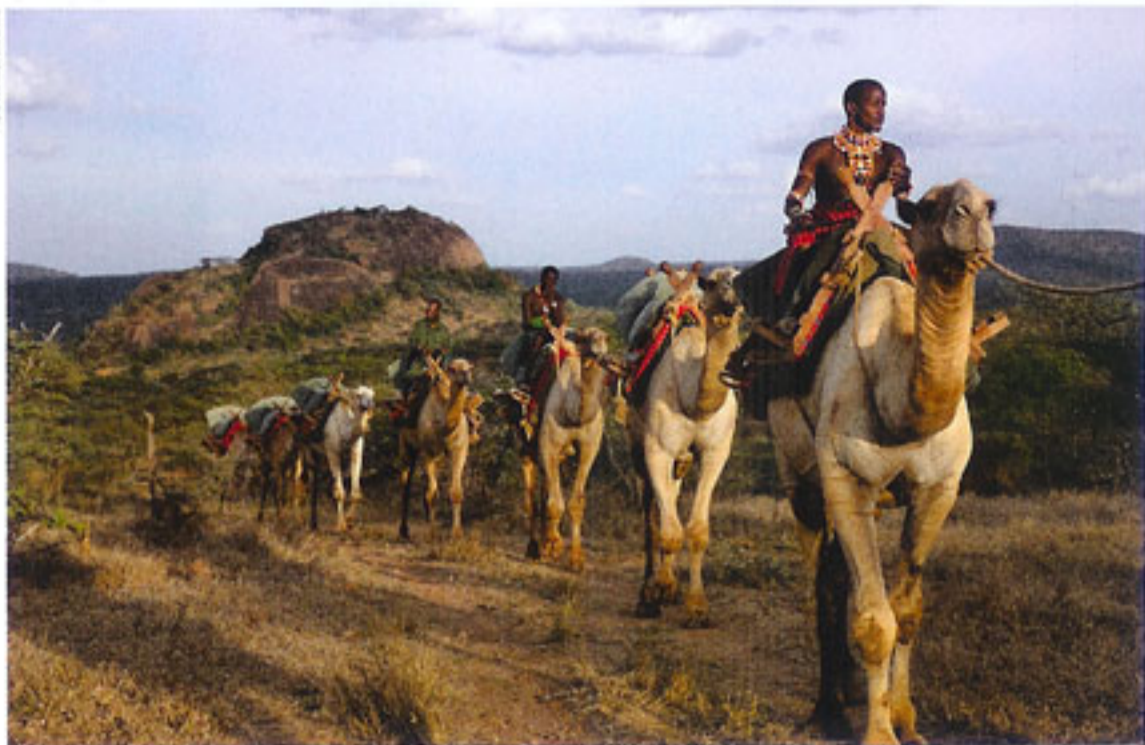
The following morning he's piloting me in his vintage (sounds more reassuring than 'old') aircraft northwards across the Laikipia Plateau. A trundling herd of elephants appear below as leathery smudges against the calamine-coloured hills.

I'm deposited next at Ol Malo, another award-winning eco-lodge. Working closely with its local Samburu population, Ol Malo was the overall winner of the Responsible Tourism Awards in 2006. It also received the top honour in the poverty reduction category.

Its six-bedroom homestead and four cottages tiptoe along an escarpment in northern Laikipia and border 21,000 square kilometres of Samburuland. The name Ol Malo, 'place of greater kudu,' is entirely apt. A doe-eyed kudu known as Tandala hangs around the attractive grounds of aloe and sisal. Although looking rather soppy, she obviously has her survival instincts intact. Otherwise she would have already been an easy picking for the leopard I spotted lazing in a tree on the plain below.

Before my first breakfast is served in the wilds (under a spreading acacia tree), I'm taken down the escarpment with two American guests for a bushwalk. We examine tracks of African hunting dogs and spot a painfully shy gerenuk. That night we ate al fresco. The barbecue is held under a sky so densely packed with stars that I struggle to pick out the velvety darkness of deep space. >>

OL MALO LODGE



JULIA FRANCOMBE / OL MALO TRUST



JULIA FRANCOMBE / OL MALO TRUST



Opposite: With terrain such as this, it's little wonder that horseback safaris are Borana's forte. However, behind the scenes they work hard on wildlife conservation and community development projects

Top: Choose horse or camel to explore the Laikipia Plateau around Ol Malo

Middle: The Ol Malo Trust helps skilled Samburu artisans sell and market their beadwork designs in Kenya and abroad

Bottom: Conceived and run by Julia Francombe (pictured), the Ol Malo Trust has also saved 300 locals from blindness thanks to its mobile trachoma clinic

While your trip to Ol Malo benefits local communities, it also provides you with some enchanting and unforgettable African experiences



OL MALO LODGE

Owners Colin and Rocky Francombe built Ol Malo in 1992 after purchasing 1200ha of degraded cattle-range. "When I arrived," explains Colin, "the land was severely overgrazed, and to attract wildlife back I had to ask the Samburu to remove their cattle." The semi-nomadic tribes now herd their cattle across the arid lands to the north of Ol Malo. They speak a dialect of Maa, not too dissimilar to Maasai, and build brushwood stockades called *manyatta*. "There's no way we could exist here on the border of Samburuland without their cooperation," says Colin.

Guests can visit a local *manyatta* with a Samburu guide. It felt a very natural, unrehearsed experience to watch the gangling young warriors dance. "It's normal for them to dance and to wear the traditional costume and jewellery because it makes them look beautiful and suitable for marriage," says my guide, Laban. But the lodge's greatest selling point (along with the wild surroundings and oodles of luxurious comforts) is its support of the Samburu lifestyle through its Ol Malo Trust. Each guest's nightly fee to Ol Malo includes a £30 contribution to the trust.

Driving this trust forward on a full-time basis is the Francombes' tireless daughter Julia. She is refreshingly candid about the impact eco-lodges need to make. "I think 'eco-tourism' and 'responsible tourism' are words becoming too widely used simply for marketing purposes. For many, it's easier to write about a project on their website than actually make the project a success," she tells me. "Ol Malo is different. My family and I care what kind of education local children are getting, unlike some other lodges with full-time managers who simply want a school they can show guests."

In recent years the Ol Malo Trust has trained over 400 women through its Sampiripiri arts workshop project, helping the skilled Samburu artisans sell and market their beadwork designs in Kenya and abroad. They've initiated a mobile trachoma clinic (a debilitating disease among many Samburu), saving 300 locals from blindness. They also support 10 nomadic schools (even providing camels with equipment boxes that can be packed up

when the Samburu move on), and have built three open-water reservoirs to help alleviate the chronic drought conditions that afflict Samburuland.

I ask her whether her motivation is poverty alleviation or preserving the Samburu's way of life? "Both," she responds "but this depends how you define poverty. If a Samburu elder owns 400 head of cattle but lives in a *manyatta* with no electricity and mud walls, is he poor? As far as I am concerned, he's not. What most people don't understand is the Samburu have incredibly rich lives, where the most important thing is not what car you drive, rather it's your family, your health and how many cattle you have."

My last stop on this Kenyan odyssey of eco-tourism would take me into the Masai Mara. Shortly after landing I'm quickly entranced by the sight of gazillions of gazelle, topi, and zebra. Moments later, from my seat in an open-sided Land Rover, I watch

"The camp has brought us work, we can feed our families and afford to send our children to school," he replies. The people do not want to harm the animals because they bring us so many benefits"

three lionesses yawning and slumbering in verdant grass recently freshened by the rains. Remarkably, for those familiar with the 'guaranteed window seat' safaris of the Masai Mara, this experience was not shared with crowds of onlookers in rumbling minibuses – I viewed the lions in perfect peace.

Although tourist numbers have plummeted in the more famous national reserve since the election troubles earlier this year, making safaris here the most personal and rewarding in recent history, this was not the reason for my surreal solitude. I wasn't even in the reserve itself. I was exploring the 8000ha Olare-Orok Conservancy, which was recently created next to the national reserve. Considering 60 to 70 per cent of Kenyan wildlife dwells outside formal designations, the future of Kenya's wildlife management depends heavily on such endeavours. >>

Porini's founder believes that the Maasai should no longer be simply bystanders to tourism within the Mara, their ancestral grounds



In a groundbreaking agreement tour-operator Jake Grieves-Cook negotiated with the local Maasai to create this exclusive nature conservancy, as well as the eco-friendly Porini Lion Camp, on their land. With a 15-year lease secured, the Maasai agreed to move livestock and some twelve villages just outside the borders of the new conservancy. In return, each of the 150 Maasai landowners is guaranteed a monthly land rental. On top, they receive a dividend dependent on how many tourists stay.

Jake Grieves-Cook talks about addressing an increasing Kenyan problem of community land becoming endlessly subdivided and turned into agricultural smallholdings due to population growth. This situation has led to wildlife being driven off these lands. "In the past the Maasai have been bystanders while tourism overtook their ancestral lands," he explains. He tells me the camp raised £150,000 last year for the local community, including staff-jobs for the 100 Maasai. "This sort of money is higher per acre than what the Maasai would earn from cattle-rearing," he says. He also sees the conservancy as a protective buffer zone to the surrounding national reserve.

The camp is delightful. Ten plush tents, each with verandahs, are discretely located in bush beside the Niakatiak River. The camp is unfenced, though with hippos belching and barking their days away in the river's pools, guards are on hand. It's also profoundly eco-friendly, using its own borehole for water and solar-generated electricity. Grey water is recaptured and latrine pits are regularly emptied of waste. "If we dismantled the camp," explains camp manager Alphonse, "you would never know it had been here."

Alphonse remembers the landscape when they first opened in 2006. "It was barren and overgrazed so when you drove a vehicle across it dust clouds would erupt," he says. "Now the grass has grown back and I cannot believe it is the same place."

As always, being in the Maasai Mara is like to being a kid in a candy store. And in this case (with

national reserve safaris prohibited from entering the private Olare-Orok Conservancy) that candy store is supermarket-sized with shopper-free aisles. The wildlife is incredibly abundant and I spend every available opportunity on wildlife drives. I especially love the mix of minor and mega fauna: a family of spotted hyena and their playful cubs, gangs of scampering mongoose, bat-eared foxes and secretive cervals.

During one walking safari towards an eventual sundowner I ask my Maasai guide Stephen Kabaala what the camp means to him? "It has brought us work, we can feed our families and afford to send our children to school," he replies. "The people do not want to harm the animals because they bring us so many benefits," says Stephen. I later learn

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that when the camp temporarily closed earlier this year because of lack of tourists caused by the post-election problems, Porini's staff all volunteered to stay on and look after the place... for free.

So, just as I began back in Ol Donyo Wuas, I am left sipping a gin and tonic. This time I'm under a large mango tree watching a herd of giraffes silhouetted against a sublime Masai Mara sunset. I reflect just how easy and comfortable it can be to make a real difference with your choice of Kenyan safari. 🌿

Mark Stratton's trip was organised with the help of Chris Flat of Bush and Beyond (www.bush-and-beyond.com). Internal flights were provided by Safarilink (www.safarilink-kenya.com) and Tropic Air (www.tropicairkenya.com). With thanks to Kenya Airways (www.kenya-airways.com) for providing flights between Nairobi and London Heathrow.