



TRAVEL

WHERE TO STAY WHEN YOU VISIT THE BEST PLACES ON EARTH.

THERE'S an old Somali proverb that says a brave man will be scared by a lion three times.

When he sees its tracks. When he hears its roar. And when he comes face to face with the beast. To the Masai people of Kenya, the adage gets it back to front. You are not a man, let alone a brave one, until your first meeting with a lion.

Picture this tense dawn somewhere in the south of Kenya. Warriors in red cotton *shukas*, or blankets, circle the animal, boxing it in. Agitated and growling, it scans the men for the weakest link — invariably an teenager who blinks too much and shuffles his feet. This is the boy's initiation; he must conquer the king of the beasts.

When the lion charges, seeing an escape, the boy must swallow fear and stand his ground, thrusting a blanket-wrapped arm straight into the animal's mouth. As it bites down he'll spear it, wounding it fatally. Bravest of all is to slice off the lion's tail while it's still alive. If he does this, high status is assured. Cattle can be his — the Masai measure of wealth — along with a wife and family of his own. People will say, this is a man. ▶



THE PRIDE OF AFRICA

CAN HUMANS AND LIONS LIVE TOGETHER? A GROUNDBREAKING TOURISM VENTURE WITH THE KENYAN MASAI TRIBE SUGGESTS IT'S POSSIBLE. **LANCE RICHARDSON** WENT ARMED WITH A CAMERA TO FIND OUT MORE.

The deluxe tent accommodation at the Mara Plains camp.

At least, that's how it used to be. There also used to be 200,000 lions roaming freely in Africa, until punitive retaliation for attacks on domestic cattle cut numbers dramatically. Now that modernity has taken its toll, throwing poaching and urbanisation into the mix, there are as few as 23,000 lions left in the world, and only perhaps 2000 in Kenya — almost all of them on game reserves like the famous Masai Mara.

As for the Masai people, the government has long since outlawed many of their traditional practices. Karen Blixen, writing 1937's *Out of Africa*, called them "fighters who had been stopped fighting, a dying lion with his claws clipped, a castrated nation". By the time the 1990s rolled around, this description had become even more depressingly apt.

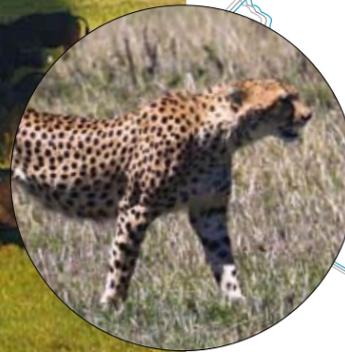
Cut to May 2006, however, and a promise of changing fortunes appeared on the northern border of the Masai Mara. This promise involved close to 9000 hectares of land, making up a new area called the Olare Orok Conservancy — one of several in the area. It involved tourism, with hunting rifles swapped for Nikon and Canon zoom lenses. It involved mass relocation, the natives moving to the periphery and returning cattle pastures to wildlife. And most notably of all, it involved a serious cultural challenge: could 277 Masai landowners, fiercely protective of their cows, be convinced that future prosperity lay in preserving the very animal they'd always called their greatest foe?

Our plane is like a small stone skipping across a wide green sea. It touches an airstrip only briefly before bouncing up again, skirting the jittery figures of gazelles, arcing above

Sunrise hits the deck at the luxurious and eco-friendly Mara Plains camp.



The Mara Plains from a hot-air balloon. The Masai jump-dance; a hammock at the camp and a drop-in visitor; a cheetah.



SUCH MEASURES HAVE HELPED TURN THIS EXPERIMENT INTO AN ECOLOGICAL REVELATION.

a herd of elephants, over hills and rivers, hippos muddying the waters below; then it glides with graceful accuracy down to another stretch of dirt.

Daniel Koya is standing by an open truck, waiting to ferry us to the Olare Orok Conservancy. A paragon of Masai self-composure, both calm and regal, he is also a graduate of the Koiyaki Guiding School, a Mara-based college that turns local residents into keen guides and conservators. As such, he wears the red *shuka* but drives with the dexterity of a city slicker in rush hour, dodging animals and fording tight crossings with ease. "There's a *topi*", he says, pointing out an antelope. There is a giraffe ("so elegant") failing to hide behind an acacia tree. There is a warthog. My camera fires, multiple lenses clinking on the seat beside me.

Our base lies tucked in a bend of the Ntiakatek River. Built without a single scrap of concrete, Mara Plains Camp is owned by Great Plains Conservation, with partners including the National Geographic Society and Dereck and Beverly Joubert, the famed documentary filmmakers and Nat Geo Explorers-in-Residence. There are only three camps like this in the entire Olare Orok Conservancy, averaging just one guest bed per every few hundred hectares. In a curious way, this set-up, aimed at international

visitors, sits at the heart of changes that have been wrought here in little more than five years.

When the 277 Masai landowners pooled their holdings in 2006, moving cattle and families to the periphery, it was an untried experiment. The theory went like this: cede space to regrowth, and wild animals will return. Protect these animals — the lions in particular — and tourists will inevitably follow, attracted by the possibility of doing things prohibited in the state-owned Masai Mara (night drives, for example, and off-road safaris). The few tourism operators allowed to work within the Conservancy, including Great Plains Conservation, then pay the landholders a guaranteed monthly stipend. For the first time in history the Masai have a regular income — and an incentive to leave the land untouched, except for sustainable rotational grazing.

Not that "untouched" means any deprivation for visitors. As we stumble across a rickety suspension bridge, Mara Plains reveals itself to be an oasis of supreme luxury. Living spaces open to the elements are filled with books on anthropology and the Great Migration. The clink of ice cubes in gin and tonics

overlays the animal din. Wake-up calls in private tents by Masai warriors ("Hodi!"), and Canon EOS 50D cameras, available for hire, round out a base that could, if required, be erased in a matter of days. An environmental watchdog measured the camp's footprint and was confounded by its efficiency. That conservation tourism can reach such delirious heights of comfort while remaining faithful to its original vision is truly astonishing.

Unsurprisingly, such an environment inspires a sense of wide-eyed creativity. My camera accompanies me everywhere. A solitary acacia on the plains becomes an abstract statement about Africa; a pair of giraffes, necks entwined, offers a postcard image of domestic harmony. Lorna Buchanan-Jardine, the camp manager with her partner Richard Pye, is a trained photographer, and offers guests ready tuition and assistance.

In the afternoon, Pye bends over a map secured beneath a piece of glass. Here is where a lioness was seen lunging on to the back of a hippo, he says, making a mark. And here is the last sighting of the Moniko Pride, which we'll visit tomorrow. Animals are the key priority in the Olare Orok, and he makes it clear that the financial security of the many Masai families is only half the conservancy's remit.

GOINFO

GETTING THERE
Air Mauritius (airmauritius.com) flies to Nairobi from Melbourne and Perth. From Nairobi, several small domestic carriers fly into the Masai Mara.

STAY
The low-impact **Mara Plains Camp**, just 20 metres from the Masai Mara, offers seven raised tents (maximum 14 people), with an on-site chef and private vehicles, from \$400 per person per night. greatplainsconservation.com

HIGHLIGHTS
Guests can visit a traditional Masai Engkang village, buying craft, taking photos, and asking questions about lifestyle, history and beliefs. Photographers can participate in the Mara Predator Project, helping to track and monitor individual lions.

DON'T FORGET
A yellow-fever vaccination.

"If we find a cheetah with mange, we'll treat it," he tells us. "A lot of people might disagree with that, but we're looking out for them."

Such interventionist measures, though controversial, have helped turn this experiment into something of an ecological revelation; the area now boasts one of the highest densities of lions anywhere. This means that when visitors exercise by running to the closest acacia tree and back, Masai guards are never far behind. Indeed, leopards have been known to wander through the camp (and monkeys, for that matter, which have taken a particular liking to BlackBerrys).

The sky is pregnant with a heavy storm — the only one during my stay here, the weather's mostly clear and mild — sending wildebeest fleeing over the horizon into early evening. When night falls, a scream rings out. We retire to our tents as the lions make a kill in darkness, the maniacal laughter of hyenas echoing across the savannah. It's strange to think that everything here gets eaten in the end. The plains are cluttered with bones and thrum with the high tension of animals on borrowed time.

Sometimes different cultures collide, and the space created in the smash takes on a haze of incidental surrealism. A Masai man wanders into his village dressed in authentic Hugo Boss, clueless as to how much the suit he found in a Nairobi market is actually worth. A woman teaching beadwork poses for photographs at Mara Plains, introducing herself as "the queen of Sweden". A young warrior stalks along the side of the road, brandishing a ski pole at the unyielding African sun. A journalist joins a Masai jumping ritual and proves, once and for all, that white men can't jump and probably shouldn't try.

We visit the Loigero Primary School to see some of the benefits of the Olare Orok Conservation Trust. Many take the form of education, whether the Koiyaki Guiding School or Masai women being sent to India to train as solar engineers (eight since 2009). Loigero Primary started as about 15 kids beneath an acacia tree. Now the headmaster, ruler in hand, points out the school's achievements and goals on his office wall while a group of boys and girls — there are 458 enrolled in all — showcase dance moves in the playground that would put Beyoncé to shame. The school motto, "Education is Power," hangs prominently above the headmaster's desk.

Our final game drive, in search of the Moniko Pride, even further touches on the ripple effects of education. Daniel collects us at Mara Plains and we go tumbling across the savannah. Dik-diks — dwarf antelopes — race past; a buffalo snorts in derision as I crane out of the truck with my camera, trying to frame it against a dazzle of zebras. The lions turn up, finally, on a quiet hillside, with half a dozen cubs playing on a fallen tree. They bite each other on the scruffs and stare at our truck with undisguised curiosity. Eventually one walks over. It looks directly down the barrel of my camera lens — then, like a hyperactive child, it catches sight of a bird and races off.

A short while ago, a Masai landowner discovered his cattle herd had been hit by sustained lion attacks. Furious, he set off to hunt the big cats. Word quickly spread, however, and other Masai rushed to intervene. They talked him down. Kill the lions, they'd realised, and we kill the Olare Orok and everything it offers.

Koya sometimes returns to his village, holding seminars with other guides for the older generation. The elders never used to understand conservation, he says, but things are changing. "Now they say, 'Look what people are bringing. This is good. We better keep these animals around.'"

Accordingly, the Olare Orok Conservancy, originally an 18-month trial, was extended to five years, and is now a 15-year lease with the Masai people. We watch the animals lazing in the setting sun, oblivious to the machinations of politics and history. Only metres away, a maned male lion stalks over to a lioness, feigns disinterest, then mounts her from behind. For the first time in days I lower my camera, the bashful voyeur.

"Ha," says Koya, swigging a Coca-Cola. "A lion wedding." ☑

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PHOTOGRAPHY LORNA BUCHANAN-JARDINE.