

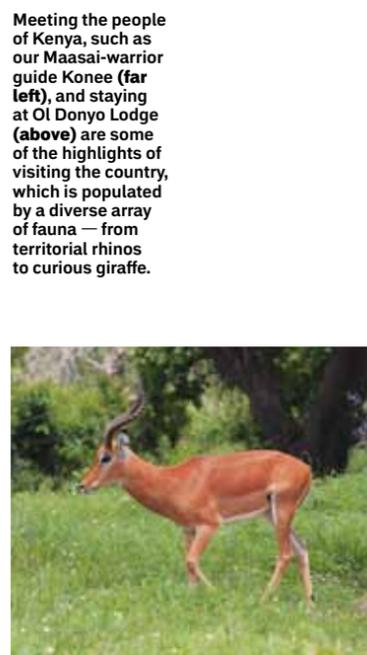


Animal kingdom

As ancient traditions merge with modern sensibilities, Kenya offers vast plains of stunning landscapes and the opportunity to get up close and personal with the world's wildest animals.

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Meeting the people of Kenya, such as our Maasai-warrior guide Konee (far left), and staying at Ol Donyo Lodge (above) are some of the highlights of visiting the country, which is populated by a diverse array of fauna — from territorial rhinos to curious giraffe.

Check into the Solio Lodge (left), located in Solio Game reserve, and you won't even have to leave the comfort of your room to spot a wide array of wildlife. The creatures on show range from Thomson's gazelles and impalas locking horns to bushbabies with beguiling eyes.



This is the most spectacular plane landing I've ever experienced. As we start to descend, I look for a landing strip but see only a lone windsock and gazelle, zebra and giraffe running from the plane's path. On the 'landing strip' I'm surrounded by nothing but vast plains encircled by the Chyulu Hills and the Twin Peaks. A veritable playground that's full of potential for animal spotting, it is also a little frightening. This much empty space can be daunting, and I'm not necessarily the best equipped for spending time in the African bush by myself. However, as the pilot unpacks the bags, a cheerful "Jambo!" is shouted my way in greeting. Jonathan, my tall Maasai-warrior guide, comes bouncing over the hills. Konee, his Maasai name, means future and he lives up to it. Dressed in the traditional toga-like *shuka* and festooned in colourful beads, he asks almost immediately, "Will you use my photo in the magazine?" I reply maybe and he makes me promise to send him a copy. Konee is media savvy yet still lives in a traditional *boma* (village), and his culture and people are just as much a part of the Kenya story as the animals. "I'm looking for my second wife at

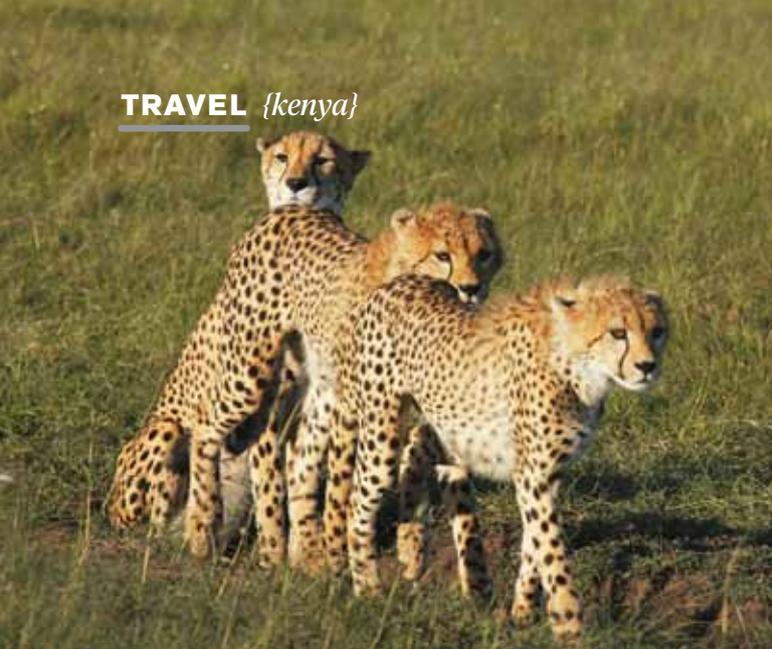
the moment, I'll just Google her," he says with a cheeky grin. While he might be living up to his name, he's still scared of his mother. "I don't tell her that I eat hen and egg when I'm working," he admits. The traditional menu of fresh cow blood and milk is still adhered to in his village. It's this blend of the future and the past that makes Kenya such an intriguing country to visit. Slowly emerging from years of political unrest, the country feels like it's on the brink, and that something big is about to change around here. The future is looking particularly bright for this country. We set off for Ol Donyo Lodge (www.greatplainsconservation.com/odl; book at www.aboveandbeyondholidays.com.au). It's built in sympathy with its surroundings, and it's not until we're upon it that I spot its sloping thatched roof. There's no canvas for this part of the safari. Rather, there are decadently appointed rooms that feature plunge pools and, uniquely, a star-bed. This roof-top bed, safely shrouded in a mosquito net, allows guests to spend a night under the vast African night sky. The lodge is run by the Great Plains Conservation company. Established by concerned conservationists and headed

by Dereck and Beverly Joubert, the organisation is about conservation first and hospitality second. The land is leased from the Maasai and 85 per cent of the staff are from the local village. They still graze their cattle on the land and there is that inevitable clash between man and wildlife. However, a predator compensation plan put in place by the company and self-policed by the villagers means the locals are less likely to go hunting for revenge. This program has seen the numbers of lions in the ecosystem grow to more than 250. High-end, low-volume tourism is the sustainable path many of Kenya's private conservancies are taking. Instead of park fees based on the numbers of guests, camp owners pay the local people each month regardless of occupancy. In exchange for these guaranteed payments, tribal landowners agree to create and maintain a viable and sustainable ecosystem so the wildlife can prosper. As a result, Great Plains encourages the locals themselves to become custodians of the African wilderness. But a warrior's need to demonstrate his prowess hasn't lessened, and so the Maasai Olympics were created. The inaugural games held last year featured high jump and javelin throwing

(the Maasai didn't want to use their own spears for fear of damaging them). Hundreds came to take part and witness, with the first prize being a breeding bull. For the Maasai, cattle are still their number-one currency. These Olympics allow the *morans* (young warriors) to prove their manhood in ways that are more sustainable than felling a lion. Alyssa and Ray Wyatt are our hosts. When asked what they love about the lodge, they don't hesitate. "Exclusivity." For here, on the conservancy, it's only the guests of the lodge who are on the range. "In the Maasai Mara National Reserve, you have people who are revving up and shouting and jostling for space to spot a pride of lions. But here, there is only us." An exclusive show of the reserve's wildlife is almost guaranteed at the lodge's wooden hide that looks out over a waterhole. "We lose people down there," explains Alyssa. "They say they are just popping down for a quick look and don't return for hours afterwards." I fall prey to its charms, too. Dropping by one afternoon, I spy a large bull elephant chasing away a small warthog family. A few hours easily slip by engrossed in watching the theatre of nature.

Unlike national parks, conservancies allow you to escape the jeep and walk among the wilderness. Getting about on the plains via foot gives a more intimate safari experience. You're accompanied by an armed guide, however. Travelling at a slower speed allows you to take in the surrounding nature. Konee points out trees the Maasai use for toothpaste, and the sausage tree whose seed pods are fermented into a drink. For even more wildlife spotting, Ol Donyo Lodge offers daily safaris to Amboseli National Park. At the foot of Mount Kilimanjaro, Amboseli is famous for its large herds of elephants. The drive to the park usually takes two hours and on the way we pass herds of giraffe and the oddly stretched-out gerenuk (antelope) grazing by the road side. We see only one other car, with the drivers stopping to swap animal-spotting stories. "Where are all the animals? I've never seen it this empty," says Konee. As we're travelling in low season we're avoiding the crowds, but that also means game numbers are down. Disappointment doesn't last for long, though. As we turn a corner we see a large herd of elephants in the near distance, from the giant matriarchs to the gambolling youngsters. During high

season we might have been surrounded by 50 cars, but today this show is just ours. We get to catch similar performances again at our next destination, Laikipia — a region of Kenya renowned for its precious rhinoceros population. Solio Game Reserve, Kenya's first private reserve, is at the forefront of their preservation. It's surrounded by an electric fence and soon it's evident that these extreme safety measures are needed to keep the rhinos safe from poachers. In the 6880 hectares of fenced-off land, some 150 white rhino and 71 black rhino, guarded by private and government security, can live in much-needed safety. Between 1970 and 1990, the black-rhino population declined by more than 98 per cent — their numbers went from 20,000 to 400 — and it's private reserves like this one that are building the numbers back up. There are now thought to be about 5000 throughout Africa. Situated on the reserve, Solio Lodge (www.thesafaricollection.com) is five star all the way. Its thatched roof almost engulfs the building, creating an igloo feel and, inside, floor-to-ceiling glass windows look out over the marsh with Mount Kenya in the distance. Across the marsh, proud waterbuck, twitchy Thomson's gazelles ►



Mara Toto camp (above and right) is in the Maasai Mara National Reserve, home to some of the world's most magnificent big cats — from cheetah mothers and their young cubs to roaring lions.



and elegant impala test their strength by locking horns. Here you can spot game without leaving your bed.

The main 'mess' hall in the lodge has a soaring six-metre-high ceiling and a distinct African feel through its artwork, leather trims and cane chairs. This is a room that fits every colonial safari fantasy.

Our host here is Ava Paton, an elegant South African with a flair for cooking and who takes great pride in her herb garden and her menus. "Cooking without herbs is like painting without colour," she declares as I join her for dinner. When quizzed on what she loves most about this lodge, she recites the website: access from Nairobi (only three hours by road), density of game and the pleasant climate. "But," she pauses, "my truly favourite thing is Murray."

Murray, I soon learn, is the lodge's resident bushbaby. It's smaller than a possum with kangaroo-like legs, large beguiling eyes and a long glider-like tail, and it's easy to see why she holds top spot over the many wildlife in the reserve. At night, she may decide to join you for pre-dinner drinks, jumping on your shoulder to hitch a ride or bouncing between the chairs. If getting close to the native animals is what you're after, enjoying a drink with a body-heat-seeking bushbaby down your shirt is a pretty unique experience.

The reserve that Solio lodge sits in is a lush, forested expanse with swampy waterholes surrounded by majestic yellow fever trees and waterbuck. We enjoy sundowners while watching white rhinos balance their bravery with their curiosity, daring to come only just so close. Not all the animals are so timid though. During the next morning's game drive, we park 100 metres from a tree line where a herd of

giraffe are grazing. They turn their attention to us, moving with that slow gait that animals of such size have. They gather around the car chewing cud; their large brown eyes staring with curiosity.

The diversity of Kenya's landscapes is highlighted the next day when I arrive at the Maasai Mara National Reserve. The protected park is located in the Great Rift Valley and is famous for its annual migrations of millions of wildebeest and zebras. Here the walls of the valley — travelling more than 5000 kilometres from the Red Sea to Mozambique — rise either side of the vast plains of grass that is whipped into waves by the wind. The park

water after a night feasting on the grass. Hyenas are in abundance; these unsightly animals are the most successful hunters on the plains. Warthogs trot by with their tails held high. Dainty Thomson's gazelles skip away and the nodding topi, with their long brown socks and blue flanks, bob their heads in agreement.

But we're after big cats and the Maasai Mara answers. Two males, magnificent in their disregard for the car, stretch and sleep in the morning sun. However, it's the playful cheetah family that enthalls me. Narashua (Maasai for spot) proudly shows off her two cubs. We have a private audience with these shy cats of Africa. And as the full

Two males, magnificent in their disregard for the car, stretch and sleep in the morning sun.

spills into Tanzania and stretches 1510 square kilometres. It's home to about 95 species of mammals and 570 recorded species of birds. The more traditional safari experience begins here. Mara Toto camp (www.greatplainsconservation.com/mara_totocamp) is just outside the park but there are no fences. After dark you must not leave your tent without a security guard. However, for all the camp's wildness, it's not without creature comforts. There are only five tents, each a two-roomed affair with king-sized beds, hot bucket showers and plumbing. The canvas walls allow the sounds of the bush to lull you to sleep with softly chirruping crickets, or wake you abruptly as a hippo and a monkey seem to have a loud showdown.

Out on the plains we spy hippos racing alongside the jeep, late to return to the

moon rises over the hills, the family of cheetahs close their eyes as their heads nod off to sleep among the white tissue flowers that dot the plains like confetti.

We linger even though the cats are now asleep. It's impossible to get tired of these animals; even Kevin, my guide, who has been doing this every day for five years, still delights in the animals. Perhaps, it's the fascination of the power of nature. Perhaps, it's a kickback to our evolutionary selves when we depended on our livestock. Or, perhaps, as Karen Blixen says in *Out of Africa*, "You know you are truly alive when you're living among lions." 🐾

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