

GLAMOROUSLY GREEN!

AMIDST SOME OF THE MOST EXPLOITED NATURAL REGIONS OF KENYA, FIND OUT HOW EXCEPTIONAL SAFARI PROPERTIES HAVE MADE BEING GREEN VERY GLAMOROUS AND PROFITABLE. **BY DEVANSHI MODY**



COURTESY OF SIRIKOI

Morning at And Beyond Bataleur Camp.
Opposite: Special performances at dusk at Sirikoi.



COURTESY OF AND BEYOND BATALEUR CAMP

Interestingly, Kenya's community-conscious and commercially viable 'conservancy' model has redefined the wilderness experience: Protecting wildlife and wilderness and profiting the tribals co-exists with ethical and elegant tourism.

MASAI MARA
MARA PLAINS (GREAT PLAINS CONSERVATION)

Plastic and cement-free, built entirely from bio degradable local materials and creatively implemented recycled materials

The sophistication of simplicity is the mark of Kenya's classiest camp that boasts the best guides around. They're witty and poetic like my guide Duncan who showed me the cat-trick (lion-leopard-cheetah), including lions that looked like Brad Pitt and Antonio Banderas. Really. Award-winning filmmakers for National Geographic, Derek and Beverly Jubert have their camp floored with colonial railway sleepers; the chandeliers are from colonial dining-carriages. Plush zebra-striped shawls drape dining-chairs and you can take them with you to bed (the shawls, not the chairs, although peculiar preferences are no doubt entertained). Ah, the tents! One hears they cost US\$300,000 per key, are river-wreathed, embellished with hippos who serenade you as you splash in your stand-alone copper tub. Showers have Lamu doors said to cost US\$2,000 per door. No, the doors aren't to the shower, but are the shower, studded with brass taps. Lean, clean cuisine ravishes. I'm told the spanking-new Mara Plains piqued Brangelina's interest. They're sure to come given that they endorse and grace places renowned for conservation and Great Plains Conservation has made of conservation a fine art.

OL DONYO (GREAT PLAINS CONSERVATION)

Pays Masai 70 percent of their cattle's worth if eaten by a lion to prevent them from killing the culprit.

Perched over the Savannah with astounding views of the snow-capped Kilimanjaro that hangs in the sky like crystal. The lodge, rustic by day, turns seductive when dressed for supper in candles, lamps and lavish tableware. Suites come with salons flowing unimpeded into terraces with



Clockwise from top left: The Robinson Crusoe-esque Sabuk Lodge; view from tents at Mahali Mzuri; lemon-laden tree at Sirikoi; Brasserie at Hemingways Nairobi; Breakfast overlooking the Mara at Elawana Sand River; The Cottar's Private House; the Mara Plains Safari Experience. Centre: Cheeky siblings in Lamu.



FROM TOP: COURTESY OF SABUK; COURTESY OF MARA PLAINS SAFARI



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: COURTESY OF MAHALI MZURI; COURTESY OF SIRIKOI; COURTESY OF HEMINGWAYS; COURTESY OF SAND RIVER MASAI MARA; COURTESY OF COTTAR'S PRIVATE HOUSE; COURTESY OF FORDHANI HOUSE



Clockwise from top left: The Sultan's House at Sanctuary at Ol Lentille; early breakfast at Sabuk Lodge; the Ol Donyo safari experience; bright interiors at Forodhani House and a sumptuous spread at Sirikoi.

cliff-edge infinity pools offering those bewitching views over Mt Kili. Sleep under a blanket of stars on terrace-top star-beds whose velvet-armed embrace you leave only for champagne breakfasts in the lodge's fabulous forested treehouse. Or you can breakfast in-camp overlooking a waterhole where animals have mid-morning drinks parties. Elephants pose gracefully-when not throwing their weight around, nudging out giraffe, zebra, gazelle, and warthogs.

SIRIKOI

Unbelievably lush organic farm

Enchanting hand-built stone-and-thatch structures. They have a jet-setting pet giraffe (yes, Nditu whizzed in from the giraffe orphanage) who gallops about the lushest lawns when not shooing away suitors. Embowered under trees where monkeys swing and birds court and sing, relish a cornucopia including fruit and veggies from their gardens, veritably the Garden of Eden, where tropical mangoes and papaya flirt with multifarious berries. The ever-green Willie Roberts recounts, over balmy suppers, how he ran away from home, stayed in forests, caught and sold exotic birds to earn money and didn't go to school - all this to ensure the family tree wasn't transplanted to England when his father died prematurely.

ELEWANA SAND RIVER

Supports NGOs involved in environment protection, their vision being commitment to East Africa.

Superbly stationed on the Sand River with the best seats in the wilderness theatre to watch the Great Migration. Colonial-chic tents all leather and wood aswirl in signature almond fragrances and sumptuously draped, have crystal decanters and the crumbliest cookies stored in cut-glass bottles. There are in-door baths and outdoor showers. Breakfast on private terraces delights, unless monkeys whisk off your wholegrain toast. Sup al fresco on Little Sand River's soon-to-be-jacuzzied pavilion. Chef customises wheat cigars enclosing gloriously green sautéed spinach as general manager Tim tells me the glowing full moon and brilliantly starred sky were ordered specially for me.

BATALEUR

Amongst the first to integrate existing trees into the camp to prevent tree-cutting, so don't be surprised to see a tree trunk shooting out from within a tent.

With its artfully created vintage look, the camp feels like it's been around a century. So too the impressively loyal staff. Managers aren't "imported" expats or "mzungus" (white

Kenyan). This exclusive retreat masquerades as rustic colonial casualness. If you spot a guest lazing around in tattered shorts, don't attempt rescue. He's probably one of Bataleur's typical unpretentious billionaire-millionaire guests. Sultry dark-wood tents have wispy four-posters and sheets you wish you had back home. Chef Meshak unfurls epicurean 4-courses, sprucing up Masai specialities too, including spinach or bean stew usually served with goat, the Masai staple (Chef can also prepare a vegetarian version). After Esther does the best massage in the Mara (in-tent amidst roses and candles) emerge onto your terrace ablaze with lamps and candles. Butler John asks Manager Stanley if he could add more, to which the latter responds, "150 lamps are quite enough, John!"

GOTTAR'S 1920S

Resists corruptors of the wilderness.

Calvin Cottar's family set up camp in 1920 and Calvin conserves a genteel way of life-- he's gallant and charming, unless combating encroachers (including an A-list resort) who desecrate the wilderness with illegal and ill-considered constructions. Letura, a guide there finds Calvin's crusade to protect wildlife more admirable than ironic since hunting was a well-known Cottar family tradition. Tradition perpetuates though with colonial canvas baths offered in the tent. If you find your honeymoon tent shambolic, don't call the butlers lax, it's a baboon battalion that's accessed your bags and the tent's mélange of quaint collectibles- an old typewriter broods here, a gramophone flares up there, and time has stalled everywhere.

RICHARD'S CAMP

Composts discarded food from guests' plates and wet kitchen waste to create manure for the gardens.

Tents with the prettiest painted roof linings and quirky artefacts (like the canoe that's turned into a bathroom shelf) lace a stream where hyenas have a den. At sunset, you can walk past this den to reach a pop-up bush dinner

set captivatingly on a waterbody and aglitter with myriad lamps. Breakfast was dangerous as I effected diplomatic disaster when I almost abandoned a neighbouring camp to return for Richard's marvellous mango-passion-cardamom-turmeric smoothie.

SANCTUARY AT OL LENTILLE

Increased conserved area from 5000 to 25,000 acres in five years

John & Jill went up the hill and built a lodge with a view to a kill. Then they gifted it to the local community whose conserved land they manage and expand, using all profits and guest donations to provide them education, healthcare and more often worth more than US\$400,000 a year. My alluring Sultan's Room's balcony, from which tree trunks fountain out, hangs over a valley suddenly assailed by 100 elephants trumpeting at dawn. Never had a better wake-up call!

SABUK

Uses and conserves solar power.

Robin Crusoe-esque, where barks fashioned into fantastic sofas, tables and what not lounge on rock floors under timbered ceilings. It's said there are no walls between Sabuk and Sudan. Certainly, no walls come between you and the river below this raised wind-whipped abode. I share my unwallled room with hyraxes, amongst other creatures. Labyrinthine bathrooms with cliff-edge outdoor baths strike. Camels bring you breakfast in the bush! Certain camps I stayed at that declared themselves vociferously "green" nevertheless kept lights on needlessly throughout the day. When questioned about wasting energy they respond, "But it's solar energy." Contrastingly, Sabuk's owner Verity Williams appreciates solar energy too requires conservation. Her minimal use of lights is also aesthetically appealing and makes for softly-lit suppers, less delicious only than Verity's inimitable hospitality.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: COURTESY OF THE SULTANS HOUSE; STEVIE MANN; COURTESY OF FORODHANI HOUSE; COURTESY OF SIRIKOI

COURTESY OF OL DONYO

Living area of the tent suite at Richard's Camp. Opposite from top: Royal suite at Majlis on Lamu; Breakfast in the Bush by Richard's Camp.



DID YOU KNOW

The Masai are Kenya's mascot, but were exploited in all tourism marketing initiatives from which they often didn't directly gain. But now, the conservancy model profits tribals by:

- 1 Enabling tribals to individually-own land. Tribal land is no longer a community-shared amorphous expanse.
- 2 Instilling awareness that conservation is not just good but lucrative, which incentivises the tribals to lease out their land to tourist partners who manage it.
- 3 Permitting tribals controlled grazing.
- 4 Employing, educating, empowering tribals, providing water and healthcare among other benefits.
- 5 Utilising conservancy fees tourists pay to sustain conserved areas and support its communities.

Financially supporting the conservancy pre-opening is hailed as the right way to develop as it establishes an understanding between local communities and tourism partners



Open quarters at Ol Donyo



Clockwise from top left: Eagle Cottage at Sabuk Lodge; Eagle view and Dorobo; the Mahali Mizuri game drive; family tent at Elawana Sand River.



MAHALI MZURI

Financially supporting the conservancy pre-opening is hailed as the right way to develop conserved land as it establishes an understanding between local communities and tourism partners well before operations begin.

Before I reached, vivid tales reached me of Sir Richard Branson's new space-ship-like camp said to befit Mars and not the Mara. It's "ground-breaking" literally because the hillside was dynamited and shaped. Naturally, purveyors (read competitors) of these intriguing descriptions hadn't entered Mahali Mzuri because non-resident guests aren't allowed in! Branson invested US\$1 million in pre-opening conservation, revolutionised eco tents, teetered his camp high, offering sensational views from terraces from where Masai staff can spot a hilled lion 5000 light-years away! On-arrival, you are greeted with champagne from a champagne-stocked open bar, which guests adore. They also have cereals at breakfast from a box, which I spurn. However, the obliging Aussi chef rose early to home-roast granola exclusively for me.

EAGLE VIEW

Initiated long leases (15 years) enabling investment with a long-term perspective.

Remote on an escarpment. Norwegian founder Svein tells me about his audacious conservation philosophy of "co-existence": symbiosis between Masai land-owners and tourist partners who benefit the Masai thereby incentivising wildlife preservation (the Masai being

notorious lion-hunters.) Svein's camp, extraordinarily, efficiently and entirely Masai-staffed, demonstrates how a minimally-intrusive camp can romantically transform into a seductively-lit resort, come evening. Tents have slick wooden bathrooms, the European suaveness no misfit. If an elephant is feeding outside your tent, call Lars, Svein's partner, who heroically rescues damsels-in-distress, earning him the epithet Sir Lars-a-lot!

NAIROBI & LLAMA

Besides the fabled Masai Mara and central Kenya's ranches-turned-conservancies, new hotels in Nairobi's leafy suburbs and villas in car-free Lamu (where "transportation" is still a donkey) have gone green as well.

HEMINGWAYS NAIROBI

An all natural and organic Spa

Intriguingly inspiring, this is colonial-style grand hotel on Karen Bixen's farm is evocative of Ernest Hemingway's time and is very near where Lord Errol was murdered. With views over the fabled Ngong Hills where Finch Hatton was buried, the location is dramatic. Just off the plane, I'm offered fuchsia roses as I'm shown around the 48-suite hotel. Set amidst a 10 acre piece of land, of which only 22 percent is developed, Hemingways enjoys an abundance of pristine greenness. At the all-natural spa, manager Katy does facials with glamorously organic Parisian Anne Sémonin products (that also feature in the marbled in-suite bathrooms) whilst

FORODHANI HOUSE

Swahili architecture with clever spatial use for natural cooling sans airconditioning. Works even in sweltering summers!

Best-positioned villa on Shella island, playground of the rich and famous, where the Peugeot villa neighbours a villa the Princes of Monaco and Hanover frequent. Forodhani's immaculate white, three-tiered structure seems like a vestal kneeling in prayer at the water's edge. Its breezy open spaces are thrillingly Swahili. French owner Isabelle infuses finesse: manicured minimalism and gorgeous gardens with sunken seats. The Forodhani experience includes savvy Swahili manager "Babu British," (with a colourful personality), Chef Amos's fresh food, whilst Isabelle's brother-in-law manoeuvres a dhow through mangroves. Romantic. Isabelle certainly embarked with a Swahili dhowman and enfin said, "I do," or "I dhow"...

MAJLIS

Windmill Power

The private-villa-turned-Lamu's-only-deluxe-hotel is acclaimed for Italian owner Federico Moccia's concerted green initiatives, including windmills flapping away. UNESCO heritage site Lamu's history is colourful, but there's more culture in the Majlis's artwork and architecture (magnificent waterfront bar with Arabian facade) than in far-out historical sites of questionable attraction. Forget excursions, unless on Bond-style speedboats to Manda ruins. Much better to loll at the Majlis over Chef Kenneth's

spectacularly good Swahili cuisine, coastal and influenced by Arabs and Indians. So, you'll find Swahili chapattis akin to Indian parathas, lentils and "curry" remarkably like a korma. Taste the local culture. If culture does fill you, then there's great biscotti and pasta too! +

T+L Spotlights

Tours and Resorts

Cheli & Peacock (www.thecpportfolio.com)

For over 27 years, C&P has created authentic safari experiences. They manage some of Kenya's most elegant and renowned camps and lodges.

LAMU SHOP

Atilamu (www.alilamu.com)
Attractive collection of modern African folk art

Aman (*Shela Village*,
Contact +254733455821 or
sandybornman@gmail.com)
Best Shop on the island for stylish clothing, Kenyan-made leather bags and belts; beaded leather sandals and soft linen slacks.

Anna Trzebinski (www.annatrzebinski.biz)
Furniture, kikoi robes, housewares from the Nairobi designer.

SEE

Lamu Museum (www.museums.or.ke)
Originally a 19th century Swahili home, this tidy museum contains rare ceremonial horns, furniture, jewellery and other artifacts.

NAIROBI SHOP

Noorjehan Collections
Jeweller Gemini Desai designs necklaces and other treasures with ancient rade beads, both precious and fun, from around the world. Contact jdesai@wanachi.com

SEE

Loft, One Off Gallery (16 Rosslyn Lone Tree;)
Set on the grounds of curator Carol Lee's own residence, this lovely gallery showcases a variety of works from Peterson Kamwathi's politically charged prints to mobiles made of recycled bottles by James Mbuthia.

Banana Hill Art Studio Gallery (Limuru Road, Gigiri) represents more than 50 up and coming African painters and sculptors.