

REIMAGINING THE MARA

Across the Masai Mara, pioneering private conservancies are turning conventional ideas of sustainable tourism on their head – and in the process debuting some of the best new camps in Africa. Sophy Roberts reports

It's October, and the sun is beating down hard upon the African plains. The air is filled with the smell of warm dust, a scent as indivisible from the savannah as fresh-cut grass from the English summer. The high-season tourist hordes that come to chase the wildebeest migration have now left, with the only creature in my eyeline a giraffe browsing the leafless parasol of an acacia. It stands in the middle of a rutted track through Kenya's Masai Mara National Reserve.

I assume this thoroughfare on the reserve's northern boundary has been created by scores of tourist minibuses cutting up the black cotton soil. Only later, when we're heading back to camp, do I realise my mistake. The track – in places as wide as a four-lane motorway – is the work of cattle. For around 15 minutes we drive on the same stretch of ground, the grass

trammelled by Maasai herds that trespass into the protected reserve (not a national park, but a 1,510sq km area "owned" by the Maasai and administered for the Kenyan government by the local Narok Council, with the Transmara Council controlling the western section, beyond the Mara River, known as the Mara Triangle). I watch the cattle illegally enter the reserve at dusk, where they graze through the night. As to why it's happening, there are those in the Maasai community who say these incursions are due to population growth, that grazing rights have always been a form of political currency between their clans. A handful claim conservation tourism, which helps monetise the Mara ecosystem, hasn't only "fenced" them out, but has also failed to pay enough by way of compensation, while some tourism professionals argue that the perpetrators are a handful of greedy cattle barons who aren't being brought to account.

"We're building up to a huge clash of cultures because cattle are the Maasai's currency," says Jackson Looseyia,

a Maasai and one of Kenya's most high-profile safari guides. Over the next two days, Looseyia (pictured above right) is leading me on his new "mobile safari" into the reserve's lesser-known Mara Triangle, the aforementioned western wilderness area (and one of the Mara's success stories). Indeed, if I were only going to come to the Mara once, then this is the way I'd do it – with Looseyia, who is as adept at explaining the politics of a lion pride as he is at unravelling the history of his people. And that's when you start to understand the complexity of what's at stake. "'Brand Mara' is a powerful economic force," he says, "but I admit that there are times when this place doesn't much look like a millionaire's garden." We discuss the overvisited parts, the bad roads, the build-up of rubbish and how, when a flock of balloons is hovering over the reserve, the Mara can feel more like a zoo than the most spectacular wildlife experience on earth. I ask Looseyia if the Mara is a write-off. "We're close," he says, "but



people making that claim haven't been to where the gold dust is."

Uncovering that booty is exactly why I'm here – and it's a prize that I'm told belongs not only to the Mara Triangle but also the privately managed conservancy areas on the reserve's northern peripheries. The model works thus: in exchange for a guaranteed monthly income, the Maasai landowners lease out their land for conservation purposes, with tourism partners then having the right to use the area. The Maasai can also graze their cattle in some areas, but under strict controls. "Think of it as urban planning for the Mara," says Kasmira Cockerill, a Canadian-born scientist coordinating research projects

in the conservancies, including the three contiguous zones I'm visiting: Mara North, accessible from the new Mara Toto and Richard's River camps; Olare Motorogi, where the two new camps comprise Mahali Mzuri and a completely recast Mara Plains (pictured overleaf); and Mara Naboisho, home to Basecamp's new Eagle View and Dorobo Bush Camp. Along with five other conservancies (some rudimentary, others more advanced), these areas have more or less doubled the protected wildlife-dispersal zones of the Mara Reserve over the past seven years. Rob O'Meara, who manages the Olare Motorogi Conservancy, calls the concept "a game changer for east Africa". Svein Wilhelmsen, a Norwegian who was part of the Basecamp team that helped establish Naboisho conservancy in 2010, calls it "the future – this balanced system between the numerous conflicts of interest".

"To be honest, it took a while to sell conservancies over the Mara Reserve," concedes Will Bolsover, founder of specialist tour operator Natural World



Main picture: the dining tent at Richard's River Camp. Left: Maasai safari guide Jackson Looseyia

Safaris. "You're dealing with a heritage brand, and for a while, conservancies looked like little upstarts. But over the past couple of years, I could see the trend was changing. In 2013, roughly 60 per cent of our safaris in Kenya focused on the conservancies, and 40 per cent on the Mara Reserve. In 2014 and beyond, I expect that ratio to keep shifting, especially now the conservancies can claim some of the best camps in Africa."

Dawn is breaking over a dried-up stream on the boundary between Olare Motorogi Conservancy and the National Reserve. We're looking for Mystery, a leopard with a 10-week-old cub. Within a quarter of an hour, there are 15 vehicles approaching – eight of them coming in from the reserve side, seven from the conservancy.

As the vehicles jostle to get ahead of one another to give their passengers a clear shot, the leopard moves more quickly through the scrub. My guide is Richard Pye, warden for the Olare Motorogi Conservancy, who until recently also managed the stunningly beautiful Mara Plains – a proper luxury camp with claw-footed baths

and pewter platters – that was completely rebuilt in July 2013 and is set in a wooded copse looking out towards the short-grass plains. "Watch carefully," says Pye, starting to pull back. "Right now she's in the reserve, but the moment she crosses the river, she enters the conservancy. The rules change – and you'll see her calm down."

The leopard dips from view before re-emerging on our side of the lugga. The reserve vehicles stop; if they don't, they'll trespass on conservancy land. The conservancy vehicles, however, continue to move freely – or at least those, like us, who've also paid for a day's permit into the reserve. ("The conservancies give you the best of both worlds," says Bolsover. "The reserve can't.") But Pye doesn't try to move in tighter. In the conservancy, there's another code of conduct, which restricts vehicle numbers to four per sighting. "In the reserve, I once got locked in by 25 safari vehicles around a leopard. To me, one vehicle more than mine is one too many."

If the encounter with Mystery shows me the benefits of a highly controlled model, then the next two hours are a more complete revelation. Deeper into the conservancy – from its riverine valleys to rocky escarpments crested with whistling thorn – it feels like I have Africa all to myself. We have private sightings of bat-eared foxes, three cheetahs and another leopard. We're free to drive off-road to get closer to the animals and to do a walking safari, both of which the reserve forbids. Admittedly, Olare Motorogi doesn't have the big-river crossings that distinguish the reserve, when the crocs bring down migrating wildebeest, but otherwise this conservancy experience feels as exclusive as the facts suggest: 341 acres per guest when all 94 beds in its 32,100 acres are booked. As for the cattle-grazing issue, here it appears to work with positive economics. In May 2010, the original five-year lease was renewed for another 15 years, with some 284 Maasai landowners currently signed up. Says



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Clockwise from top:
a bedroom at Mara
Plains Camp. Lions near
Mahali Mzuri. A suite at
Basecamp's Eagle View

left), with mine overlooking a salt lick where at night lions gather within 50 yards of my bed. It's not the most gilded camp in Africa, but it is utterly genuine in its approach, with 100 per cent Kenyan staff – almost all of them Maasai. The bulbs are underpowered (eco) and the solar showers take a few minutes to warm up (again, eco), but I like its sense of understatement. ("I find the really smart camps overstaffed and overstuffed," says Wilhelmsen, in a telling description of his own aesthetic.) The food is wholesome; the campfire, which burns long into the night, is surrounded by informed and sophisticated guests; the bed is warmed with a hot-water bottle between the sheets. Then, from Eagle View we walk two hours to the firm's seasonal Dorobo Bush Camp, where flushing toilets are being added to each tent's en-suite bathroom for 2014. Otherwise, there's nothing over the top – no mahogany safari trunks, cut glass, silver or expensive wines. To me it is the Zen of safari, stripped back to what a modern eco camp can be: comfortable, elegant, lit by lanterns. And the wildlife is good – not as strong as Olare Motorogi, but present enough.

That's what I like about these conservancies – the fact that you can see Maasai herds grazing and then, in the next half hour, a pride of lions. The mix is not necessarily to the liking of hardcore conservationists, but it feels realistic, as if it's a potentially balanced solution for east Africa. For animals, the conservancies don't by any means represent a complete throwback to Eden, but there are certainly signs of improvement. "It doesn't take long for wildlife to return," says Isaac Rotich, Basecamp's safari manager. "Already this place has the feeling of a sanctuary." He describes how Ol Mundi, an elephant speared in the shoulder outside the conservancy, came into Naboisho to die – we pick over his skull on a game walk – and how, three years ago, a rhino wandered

O'Meara: "We're trying to build communities that have strength within themselves."

The concept of conservancies isn't entirely new to Kenya; what is new is the process behind their creation, and the growing pace of their success. In simple terms, early conservancies meant negotiating leaseholds with three or four Maasai elders who spoke for large communities holding the deeds to a "group ranch". With an exploding population increasing pressure on limited resources, land ownership in east Africa was forced to evolve, which meant that in the 1990s and early 2000s, many of the group ranches were carved up between Maasai families. Thus, the next run of conservancies needed to convince scores of stakeholders to sign up, patchworking together hundreds of plots. It was the situation that Basecamp's Wilhelmsen found at Naboisho, formed in 2010 just after a group ranch was dispersed.

Wilhelmsen was a co-founder and senior partner at Norway's biggest privately owned fund-management company. Now he spends all his time on his eco-tourism business and associated foundation. In 1998, he opened his first project in Kenya: a small Maasai-staffed camp, Basecamp Masai Mara, on the Talek River fringing the National Reserve. (Testimony to his success is the fact that the then-senator Barack Obama and his family

made Basecamp Masai Mara the location for their high-profile camp visit on an official trip to Kenya in 2006.) So when Naboisho, the group ranch neighbouring this camp was being subdivided, Basecamp – and five other tourism partners, all of whom operate camps in the same area – entered into negotiations with the Maasai to pull together a new conservancy. Today, 55,000 acres are under this new management, with about 98 per cent of Naboisho's 530 Maasai families involved. "It took a lot of meetings," says Wilhelmsen, "and a lot of sitting around to agree with the Maasai. This is all about trust, and you have to be around to gain that."

I went to see the results in October. Yes, the conservancy is peppered with the odd Maasai boma, but there's also evidence of some control over the grazing (fines are imposed if rules are broken). As for the tourist experience, it's good – especially if one's rating system prioritises community and conservation over luxuries such as air-conditioning and full-service spas. Eagle View is a flagship example. This is Basecamp's newest lodge, which sits on an 1,800m-high escarpment in the middle of the conservancy. The architecture, embedded into the landscape, comprises nine outsized canvas tents and three smaller annexes on wooden platforms built to maximise views but hide other guests (example pictured



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Clockwise from top: a tent at Richard's River Camp. Lion taking down wildebeest near Mara Plains Camp. A tent at Mahali Mzuri

through. "In the 1970s, I remember big numbers of rhino moving around here," says local Maasai chief Ole Soit. "And lions, giant prides of lions. These big-cat populations are not as large as when I was younger, but they're coming up again." "In Naboisho, we've now got around 25 lions per 100sq km, or six prides, including one pride of 32," says Wilhelmsen. "I challenge anyone to give me a place this private with that kind of density."

While these conservancies are rising stars in Africa, no one is trying to say the model is flawless, with some critics claiming the right balance between wildlife and people still hasn't been achieved. Colin Bell, a leading South African-born conservationist who cut his teeth in Botswana, argues sectors of the Mara's tourism chain have been paying way too little on just about every front for the privilege of experiencing what should be Africa's finest wilderness. According to Bell, permit fees in the National Reserve are too low to cover the management costs and compensate the Maasai for use of their land, while some lodge developers have not invested enough to ensure their environmental impact is limited, which means stakeholders are compromising the long term. If this is not rectified – specifically by improving the management situation in the reserve proper – then the whole Mara ecosystem could be brought down, he says.

Investment in community is certainly where Richard Branson has proved invaluable – by supporting Olare Motorogi Conservancy in a way that has effectively

functioned as philanthropy. Branson has paid almost \$1m in conservancy fees since 2007, even though he didn't have a single operational bed there until summer 2013. As to the Virgin Limited Edition lodge – Mahali Mzuri (pictured above) – it has the most beautiful location of any of the new camps, on one side of an animal-filled gorge. Service is impressive, and the food some of the most sophisticated I've eaten in Kenya, with productions such as soy-glazed ostrich breast with coconut polenta chips and courgette pickle typical of the menus. Personally, I don't care for the space-age aesthetic of the terracotta-coloured tents; their construction, employing steel frames mounted on concrete blocks, seems more "look at me" than less is more, especially with the concrete-constructed pool in a natural alcove on the side of the escarpment. Virgin says it has followed all the conservancy's eco directives on mobile camps with no foundations, and that "the pool can be completely lifted out from the ground while leaving no trace". While I understand that Virgin's guests aren't ones to compromise on luxury, I'd have thought a lighter touch would have been more in keeping, and I end up wanting to recommend other, less conspicuous contenders, such as Jackson Looseyia's mobile in the reserve proper, and a small, under-the-radar camp on the other side of the hill.

The latter – Richard's River Camp (pictured top and on opening pages), located on the border between the Mara North and Olare Motorogi Conservancies –

has traversing rights to Mara North and used to be available only to exclusive-group bookings. Now, this seven-tent camp is open to individuals as well. It has been completely redesigned, with block-print interior swags, Moroccan silver-fringed throws and wrought-iron hanging baskets in the sausage trees. The only manicuring of the scene is the close-cut "lawns" leading down to river pools with basking hippo. Some cement, concedes co-owner Richard Roberts, has been used in the construction, but when you come to the Mara, it's to that hippo pool you must go. +

CONSERVING THEIR STRENGTH

Sophy Roberts travelled to Kenya as a guest of **Natural World Safaris** (01273-691 642; www.naturalworldsafaris.com), which offers a conservancy-focused safari in the Greater Mara with three nights at Richard's River Camp and five nights mobile with Jackson Looseyia from £5,250 per person based on four sharing, including all meals, house drinks, permits, conservancy fees, guiding, private vehicles and scheduled internal flights. Natural World Safaris can create bespoke safaris for any combination of the below. She also travelled as a guest of **Kenya Airways** (020-8283 1818; www.kenya-airways.com), which flies from London Heathrow to Nairobi daily from £1,043. **Basecamp Masai Mara**, +254-733 333 909; www.basecampkenya.com, \$360 full board, including transfers and activities. **Dorobo Bush Camp**, +254-733 333 909; www.basecampkenya.com, \$360 full board, including transfers and activities. **Eagle View**, +254-733 333 909; www.basecampkenya.com, \$490 full board, including transfers and activities. **Jackson Looseyia mobile safari**, see Natural World Safaris, £610 full board, including fees and activities. **Mahali Mzuri**, 020-8600 0430; www.mahalizuri.virgin.com, \$1,045 full board, including transfers and activities. **Mara Plains Camp**, www.greatplainsconservation.com, \$1,365, including meals, park fees and activities. **Mara Toto**, www.greatplainsconservation.com, \$856, including meals and activities (plus \$100 park fees). **Richard's River Camp**, +254-712 362 941; www.richardscamp.com, from \$815 full board, including activities (plus \$116 per night conservation fee).