



H O M E O F T H E P L A I N S

WATCHING NATURE UNFOLD ACROSS THE WILD SAVANNAH IN KENYA AMOUNTS TO THE GREATEST SHOW ON EARTH – ESPECIALLY WHEN THE ‘BIG FIVE’ MAKE UP THE HEADLINE ACT.

Words and photography LYNN GAIL



CLOCKWISE TOP LEFT: *A lion on the prowl; The Maasai Mara have survived for centuries in harsh lands; Floating above the grassy plains; Maasai warrior-style high jump; A dazzle of zebras.*
OPPOSITE (clockwise from main): *A herd of elephants in Samburu County; Elephants feature on the ‘big five’ checklist on safari; A tower of giraffes are the only form of high-rise.*



An eye the size of a passionfruit, edged by thick, dark eyelashes and dry, parched skin, is staring directly at me. Our guide, Milton, has cut the engine on our open-sided 4WD and the only audible sound is a long drawn-out swish as elephant trunks sway, effortlessly, through red oat grass. The herd is so close I can almost touch the crevices of their deeply wrinkled skin.

An hour ago our faces were glued to windows in a 12-seater light plane as we descended over zebras and wildebeest, to land at Mara Keekorok Airstrip in the far-reaching plains of the Maasai Mara. Covering over 1510 square kilometres, the Maasai Mara is Kenya’s premier game reserve and home to the ‘Big Five’ – elephant, lion, leopard, buffalo, rhinoceros – and other smaller creatures.

It’s day one of a three-day safari and there’s already a sense of animal checklist gratification in our group of five as we head deeper into the riverine forest. Milton halts, every few hundred metres, to scan the plains. Where we see only tall, dry grass backlit by fading sun, he sees signs of unscripted drama about to unfold. The shade beside our vehicle rustles; two metres away, a fully grown male lion rises, yawning, baring every razor-sharp tooth before striding across our path to flop back down. Male lions are notorious for enjoying their catnaps and often sleep up to 20 hours a day, longer after gorging on a meal. Females sleep slightly less when hunting for their cubs. “They have little to fear,” Milton tells us as we watch, hoping to witness the hunt. “Sadly, humans are their main predators.”

His keen eyes turn to a flattened area of grass. On cue, the show begins from our ringside seats. A pride of lions gather, alert, noses twitching to the scent of dinner. Rarely do they charge unless the kill is close; with small lungs they are not fast runners, relying more on their stalking abilities. As nature unfolds, the pride seems oblivious to our presence. There is no gory attack, no symphony of lions’ roar, but watching them pursue distant prey at dusk, as they have for hundreds of years, still warrants a final curtain call before we head off towards our safari camp – Mara Ngenche.

The campsite has prime position where the Talek and Mara Rivers merge. Ten luxurious tents are nestled in their own private garden complete with secluded plunge pool overlooking the river – glamping at its finest. Its warmly infused decor begs a much longer stay. >>





FROM ABOVE: Mara Ngenche Safari Camp; Gazelles live in herds on the Maasai Mara National Reserve to better protect themselves from predators. **OPPOSITE** (clockwise from top right): Lions like to laze in the long grasses on the plains; Guide Milton surveys the landscape; Lions are inherently lazy, often snoozing for up to 20 hours a day; A makeshift bar near to the Mara Ngenche Safari Camp.



Conscious Traveller

Mara Ngenche Safari Camp comes under the umbrella of Atua Enkop Africa Luxury Camps, which has adopted several strategies to promote positive change through conservation and sustainable practices in Kenya. The camp's long-term commitments include undertaking projects that benefit surrounding communities while ensuring much of their staff are employed from local villages. One of the main projects works closely with Kenyan-based conservation company, Wildlifer Works (wildliferworks.com) to ensure all safari vehicles are carbon offset through forest

protection; another initiative supplies surrounding areas with tree water from local bore holes, which has resulted in the near eradication of typhoid in the Tipilikwani area in the Maasai Mara. The camp also supports local villages by displaying and marketing artwork and fashion accessories, including bracelets, necklaces, beadwork, in the camp's shops. With a strong, ongoing commitment to protecting Africa's wildlife, the camp's trained safari guides work closely with The Satao Elerai Community & Wildlife Trust (sataoelerai.com) to provide elephant protection and monitoring services across Kenya.

That night, snorting hippos serenade sleep until a soft voice announces morning: "Jambo, jambo." Marco, my personal guard, who has been outside my tent all night, greets me surprisingly fresh-faced with a beaming smile, and a tray of hot tea and pre-game drive cookies. The camp is unfenced and wildlife can wander freely. While the odd hippo climbs up from the river, disorientated at night, sightings are rare due to human activity; if any assistance is required during the night, a few flashes on the torch alert the guards.

Milton is waiting for us with thick red-checked blankets; being autumn, the predawn air comes with a chill. Cocooned in warmth, we head to a clearing for our first safari sighting: a journey of giraffes. They're so elegant against the scraggly acacia trees they don't seem to belong, as if they've been randomly dropped into the wrong set. Their calm, graceful movements mirror a carefully choreographed stage production.

As Milton explains, giraffes rarely sleep for more than five minutes at a time. With lions as their main predators, they often keep one eye open, always alert to approaching felines. We carry on and pass the lovable warthog, a safari misfit with its pig-like torso and wart-covered face. We stop and watch zebras, learning each one is born with a unique pattern, and spot graceful gazelles who unknowingly take centre stage. Watching nature unfold across the wild savannah is the greatest show on Earth.

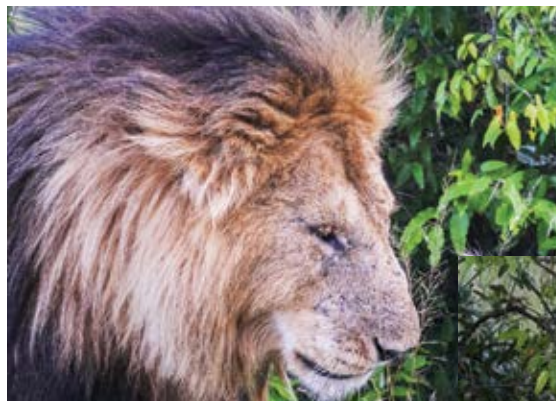
In this far-reaching landscape, the only visible fencing is around the Maasai village we visit. It's the reverse of the concrete jungle; in the great Maasai Mara, the animals roam free and the people are caged. We're treated to a traditional Maasai welcome as tall men and women, attired in myriad vibrant cloth and headdresses, stomp towards us. United by a humming rhythmic motion, their deep guttural sounds stir my emotions: the men begin jumping skywards to outspring one another as the women gather in anticipation to watch the victor, and possibly a suitor. In his thick Kenyan accent, the young people's chief, John Seki, tells us there is a reward for you

to become a winner if you are not already married. With a dimpled smile he explains: "If you are not married, the elders reward you a lady; if already married they reward you 10 cows!"

Jumping high brings respect and status; but if the springs are somewhat sprung and a wife has not been 'won' before the age of 30, tribal members gather to choose a wife as it is unbidden to stay single. John, who is a foot shorter and much slighter than most of his tribe, married in his early 20s; height does not necessarily guarantee success in the tribal dating game.

At 3.30 the next morning, I hear Marco's singsong, "Jambooo, jambooo," coming through the canvas. It definitely beats the insistent buzz of an alarm clock, especially at dark o'clock when you're heading off on a hot-air balloon ride. As we hurtle along the inky savannah watching for daylight's first rim of light, we listen to nature's early morning concerto as the Maasai Mara comes to life.

In Kenya a hot-air balloon take-off is different from elsewhere in the world. We are instructed to lie horizontally, grip onto the basket's woven handles, and keep everything secure as the balloon drags along the ground filling with air. The baskets are so deep it's difficult to see before we're airborne. Then we're up, floating effortlessly like clouds across the extensive plains, as sunrise filters through pastel layers of morning mist. It's completely silent, apart from the occasional deafening 'whoosh' as flames surge into the balloon, keeping us afloat. As we glide gently up and down, we



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A Traveller's Checklist

GETTING THERE
South African Airways (SAA) has daily flights to Johannesburg from most Australian capital cities (with codeshare partner Virgin Australia) via Perth. SAA flies daily from Johannesburg to Nairobi, Kenya. flysaa.com

STAYING THERE
Bench Africa has a range of Kenyan safari options that include a stay at Mara Ngenche. benchafrika.com.au

TALKING THERE
The official languages of Kenya are Swahili and English. Try these words and phrases out while you're there:
Habari – Hello
Habariyaasububi – Good morning
Usikumwema – Goodnight
Samahani – Excuse me
Tadadhabali – Please
Asante sana – Thank you very much
Ndiyo – Yes
Hapana – No
Jinalakoninani? – What is your name?
Tembo – Elephant
Samba – Lion
Kiboko – Hippopotamus

SPENDING THERE
The currency of Kenya is the Kenyan Shilling; \$1 converts to roughly Ksh67.

→ *Flights offset through Greenfleet*

spot herds of elephants, zebra and wildebeest roaming below. Other balloons dot the backdrop, and I realise how miniscule our massive balloon is in the endless landscape.

After our early morning start we head back and enjoy an early lunch sitting by the Talek River watching hippos slide in and out of the muddy water before taking a pre-safari siesta.

Later, Milton picks us up for our final game drive. In just two days we've become a unit, following a routine of immersive safari drives, lazy lunches and long talks about life in Kenya. An approaching storm looms as we search for wildlife against its blanket of steel-grey clouds. A hungry hyena paces through the grass on the lookout for an easy kill as two ostriches take off like road runners. A secretary bird, so named because their feathers resemble the quill pens secretaries used to tuck behind their ears, takes flight as the sky rumbles.

We find the smiling staff from Mara Ngenche standing in a clearing behind a buffet of hot food and a makeshift bar. It's a dramatic ending; lightning illuminates nightfall before the first drop of rain sizzles on the flames. **IT**

