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Kenya: a return to the age of innocence

To woo back visitors, Kenya must learn from a new private wildlife sanctuary, says Brian Jackman.

Brian Jackman

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In January, at the height of Kenya's post-election turmoil, I flew to the Maasai Mara game reserve. The Foreign Office advice was to stay away, but I called friends in Nairobi and their message was unequivocal. "Get on the plane," they said. "You'll be fine in the Mara."

And so I was. With tourism reduced to a trickle, there never was a better time to visit East Africa's most popular wildlife stronghold. This was how the Mara used to be in its age of innocence three decades ago. Cruising the savannah from dawn to dusk, I hardly saw another vehicle. On the other hand, the plains were thick with game.

In the wake of December rains, thousands of zebras and wildebeest had moved in from the Loita Hills and the big cats were out in force. In two days at Little Governors' Camp I saw 30 lions, seven cheetahs and three leopards - and no one else was around.

No wonder the BBC chose the Mara when filming its long-running Big at Diary series. But being the predator capital of the planet comes at a price: the reserve has become too popular for its own good and, in normal times when the camps are full, there would have been vehicles all over the place, converging like vultures whenever a cat was located.

A freeze on new lodges inside the reserve has brought some respite; but on the private land outside the reserve, it is a different story. There, on the rangelands of the Greater Mara, a government decision to give away common grazing land has triggered a property free-for-all, with unscrupulous investors buying up 150-acre plots in the hope of making a quick killing from tourism.

The most outrageous example was an attempt to build a lodge on the rim of Leopard Gorge, an area frequented by generations of Mara leopards including Half-tail and her cubs, seen by millions of viewers on Big Cat Diary. Fortunately, the plan was quashed, but the abandoned buildings are a hideous eyesore in a hitherto pristine wilderness.

Elsewhere, development has continued unchecked. In the past year alone, at least a score of camps has sprung up within easy reach of the reserve's main gateways, and the effect has been disastrous. At peak times, especially in July and August when the Serengeti wildebeest arrive, more than 8,000 visitors pour into the reserve, all wanting to see what has been called the greatest wildlife show on earth.

Last year, in an attempt to reduce the pressure, the Kenya Tourist Board doubled the park entry fees to discourage the

minibus fleets favoured by budget travellers. For Aris Grammaticas, who owns three luxury camps on the Mara River, the move could not come soon enough.

Governors' Camp, which he set up in 1972, is the oldest luxury camp in Africa and enjoys an unrivalled location in the midst of five resident lion pride territories, including the Marsh Lions of Big Cat Diary fame. "The result has been great for us," he says. "Since the park fees were raised, we've noticed a big drop in the number of vehicles entering our area."

Even so, in other parts of the reserve the congestion continues and the Kenya Wildlife Service admits it has no clear guidelines on how to control it.

Amid all the gloom, one initiative stands out like a beacon of hope, not just for the Mara but also for wildlife all over Africa. Three years ago, at the request of a local Maasai chief, 23,000 acres of pristine savannah on the reserve's northern border were set aside as a private wildlife sanctuary.

The Olare Orok Conservancy consists of 184 plots of freehold land whose owners have agreed to remove their cattle in return for a more generous income generated by high-end eco-tourism.

There are no fences and the savannah inside the conservancy is indistinguishable from the adjoining reserve, with giraffes, elephants and zebras moving freely among scattered flat-topped acacias - only the minibuses are absent.

The deal was brokered by Ron Beaton, a game warden's son who has spent most of his life in the Mara, and Jake Grieves-Cook, spokesman for the Kenya Tourism Federation and owner of Porini Lion Camp, one of the four low-impact bush camps allowed on the conservancy.

"These private wildlife conservancies are the way forward," says Grieves-Cook. "They give the Maasai a better income than they could ever earn from cultivation and we are very strict about visitor numbers, with no more than one tourist bed for every 700 acres of conservancy land."

Wildlife inside the conservancy has also benefited. "We now have two resident lion prides, five leopards and regular cheetah sightings," says Beaton, "and this all goes down well with our visitors. They enjoy watching lions without jostling minibuses disturbing the peace they have come to enjoy."

During the dry season, these last unfenced rangelands of the Greater Mara become a vital dispersal area for wildebeest. They form an area bigger than the reserve itself and, without schemes such as the Olare Orok Conservancy, Grieves-Cook believes that the Mara ecosystem cannot survive.

Already, the amount of land available for wildebeest migration has been seriously reduced. The tragedy is that the Mara, which generates more revenue from tourism than anywhere else in East Africa, should have suffered the highest rate of wildlife decline. In the 1980s, 800,000 of the Serengeti's 1.3 million wildebeest poured into the Mara each year. Nowadays, fewer than 300,000 make the journey.

Ironically, the trauma of Kenya's descent into anarchy has given the Mara a breathing space. The collapse of the country's tourist industry will drive many of the cowboy operators out of business and shut down their camps.

When tourism resumes, as it undoubtedly will, perhaps the government will see that privatising wild land, as the Olare Orok Conservancy has done, holds out the best hope for saving its wildlife.

Why should I care what happens? Because this was where my love affair with Africa was born. This was where I saw my first lion. Even now, in spite of everything, if I could make only one last safari I would head for the Mara.

There, from the riverine forests of the Mara River, I would drive across the wind-blown grasslands of Paradise Plain to the stony heights of Rhino Ridge. From there you can see it all: a cheetah's-eye view of grazing herds and solemn giraffes, of sunlight and cloud shadow, elephants slow-marching along immense skylines, lion kills wrapped in shrouds of vultures and the faraway slopes of the Oloololo escarpment.

This is how to make the best of it. First, spend a few days at Little Governors' Camp to get the cats out of your system. You want to find lion, leopard and cheetah? No problem. Yes, you will see other vehicles, but the camp itself enjoys an unrivalled location. Access is by ferry across the Mara River and its 17 tents are spaced around a sleepy

lagoon, a natural theatre-in-the-round where elephants, waterbucks and gorgeous crowned cranes all have regular walk-on parts.

Move on to Kicheche Bush Camp in the Olare Orok Conservancy. "The smartest address in the Mara," Paul Goldstein, its British-based owner, boasts, and who could disagree? It caters for no more than 12 guests at a time and vehicles from the reserve are not allowed in, although there is nothing to stop you entering the reserve provided you pay your park fees.

What you get here is an authentic taste of exclusive Africa. Hidden among acacia glades, this is a purists' camp and its luxuries - spacious tents with en suite bathrooms and bags of space for clothes - in no way detract from the essential wilderness experience. When I was there we had elephants and buffaloes wandering past every day and lions roaring every night.

The song of the lion is not only the most thrilling sound to be heard in Africa; it is also a sign that the savannah is in good shape. If Kenya is to woo back its visitors, it should look hard at what has been achieved at Olare Orok.

ESSENTIALS

Brian Jackman travelled with the **Ultimate Travel Company** (020 7386 4646, www.ultimatetravelcompany.co.uk (<http://www.ultimatetravelcompany.co.uk>)). A fully inclusive safari with three nights at Little Governors' Camp and three nights at Kicheche Bush Camp, including all meals, game drives and park fees, return flight from London with Kenya Airways, private transfers and bush flights with Safarilink, costs from £2,150 per person.

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