



Luxury travel

Big cats and G&Ts: see the best of the Masai Mara on foot

An exclusive trek through Kenya's top conservation areas is like walking in a wildlife documentary, says **Graeme Green**

There's a disturbance up on the ridge. Herds of wildebeest that had been quietly grazing moments before scatter chaotically. Topi stare anxiously in the direction of the threat: a pack of spotted hyenas on the hunt. The predators run amok, watching for signs of weakness: a slow animal that they can pick off.

It would be an enthralling enough scene — dawn on the Masai Mara with wildlife in every direction — if we were watching from the back of a safari van, but it's all the more exciting because we're on foot, just a few extra creatures among thousands on the Mara grasslands. "Observ-



ing wildlife from the animals' level is completely different from a game drive," our South African guide, Roelof Schutte, whispers as we look on. "There's no engine noise. You're much more connected to what's happening around you. It's like walking in a wildlife documentary."

Walking safaris are nothing new, but our Kenyan adventure takes it to the next level: a four-day, 85km hiking trip across five of the wildlife-rich conservancies surrounding the Masai Mara game reserve. If, as the saying goes, "a game drive is like watching the film, but a walking safari is like reading the book", our trip is like reading the complete works. After a short flight from Nairobi, we

start our exploration from the Ol Seki airstrip, within the Naboisho conservancy. What could have been a 45-minute direct drive to our lodge becomes a five-hour game walk, with much wildlife for us to watch and photograph, from roving elephant families to lumbering giraffes. We spend an hour with a pair of cheetahs in hunting mode, stalking kudus and impalas without success.

Later we find a pride of lionesses and yawning cubs resting on a mound. As darkness falls, we come across two adult males with thick manes. They unleash a series of mighty, unsettling roars that ripple out into the night, a warning to “outsiders” with designs on their territory. It’s like nothing I’ve ever heard. Adding to the drama, lightning crackles over the surrounding hills.

We see plenty more the next day: a pair of dik-diks, Africa’s smallest antelope, scampering through bushes; a caracal on the prowl; lappet-faced vultures circling on the morning thermals. We photograph four regal-looking lions and, later, a female cheetah and three cubs with an impala kill. Towards the end of the day a female leopard moves up a rocky hillside.

The next morning, at dawn, we set out on foot from the Naboisho camp with Schutte, who’s carrying a rifle for protection, and Rakita Ole Shololo, a Masai from the Ndorobo clan who is about 70 (he doesn’t know his exact age), putting 40 years of hunting experience to use as a keen-eyed spotter and guide. “The eyes are everything for the Dorobo,” he tells us.

As the morning warms, we climb up on to a hillside that’s busy with elands, hartebeests, zebras, impalas and warthogs. The amount of wildlife here is a sign of how healthy the ecosystems are in the Mara’s conservancies. “Before Naboisho conservancy was established, everything was soil, no grass,” Schutte explains. “The Masai lived here with a lot of livestock and it was heavily overgrazed.”

The conservancies are Masai-owned, but privately managed, with massive areas

of land under conservation protection. There are fewer lodges and crowds than in the overrun main reserve, with regulations on the number of vehicles allowed around animal sightings. “The goal is to let the Masai stay and rear their cattle, and at the same time to protect land and wildlife. It’s win-win,” Schutte continues. “Cats — lions, cheetahs — are doing great. The conservancies are going from strength to strength.”

We walk across open grasslands. Thomson’s gazelles bound along the horizon. Behind them, Schutte points out, the bluish mountains that we can see are inside the Serengeti, across the border in Tanzania.

On foot we experience details that would go unnoticed in a van, such as the wind shrieking through acacia thorn trees and the “guardian” ants that protect them. Sitting, looking out over a valley, we are visited by a curious giraffe that checks us out before rendezvousing with his posse of females.

In the afternoon we reach Olare Orok, the neighbouring conservancy, and the Kicheche bush camp, a welcoming, tented site with a wild, remote feel. After a day walking in the heat, pint glasses of ice-filled G&Ts are a genius idea.

We set out the next morning in darkness, Rakita setting a brisk pace as we march through areas that vehicles cannot access, from dry riverbeds to thick woodland and granite outcrops. Along the way we communicate with finger clicks and whistles to avoid disturbing the wildlife. “Nature’s art is incredible,” Schutte says, admiring the feathers of a passing kori bustard, the world’s heaviest flying bird.

We pass through herds of the Masai’s cattle drinking at the Olare Orok River. Near by, among the trees, a small team has set up our fly camp for the night. A cooler of cold drinks is very welcome after 23km on foot, as is a chickpea curry by the campfire and a tent with a proper double bed.

Night stars give way to pink skies. A hippo lumbers across our path in the peaceful early morning, a situation we take very seriously. Right of way is undisputed

against such a heavyweight. “The hippo is the most dangerous animal in Africa by far,” Schutte says as we silently let the two-tonne bull pass. “They’re very unpredictable. When they charge they won’t stop.”

There’s a morning mist across the Masai Mara, sunlight catching dew in long grass and spiderwebs. A lone elephant wanders the hillside. It’s a sight for us to behold, but Rakita is less impressed. “Cows are more interesting than elephants,” he says, laughing. “They give us milk and meat that we can sell.”

Walking across the Masai Mara brings many unforgettable moments, whether it’s a herd of wildebeest running alongside us or a martial eagle taking flight. At about midday we see a pair of lionesses in bushes, an ambush spot for unsuspecting animals passing by. Later, Schutte instructs us abruptly to crouch down. “Cheetah,” he tells us, and we watch three of them gather under a tree.

Being so close to big cats outside the safety of a safari van might sound terrifying, but maybe I’m missing the fear gene (animals rarely attack people unless cornered or provoked anyway), because there is a kind of calm that takes over to be part of these great nature scenes. At ground level, from a few hundred metres away, we’re getting to watch animals that you would usually only see in documentaries, from the safety of a sofa. As is the case throughout our walk across the Mara, there’s no one else here to spoil the tranquility. With each encounter we hold our breath and observe, eager not to make a sound to give ourselves away. There’s “close”, and then there’s “too close”...

We reach the Mara River, where a table has been set up for lunch. Before we can eat, though, a helicopter comes in to land. Marc Goss, pilot and chief executive of Mara Elephant Project (MEP), invites us onboard for a flight with a mission. Alongside elephant poaching, one of the biggest threats to elephants in Africa is conflict with humans because they cause havoc in villages and farms. “They can destroy

everything,” Goss explains. “They can take an entire crop in one night.” Local people sometimes respond with arrows and spears, injuring or killing the elephants.

“The telltale sign is the moving trees,” Goss says as we fly over an escarpment, scanning Nyakweri forest below for elephants moving towards Kirindon village. Finding two groups he gives us firecrackers to shoot in their direction, the sound driving the elephants out of the forest into the Olosukut conservancy, where they can do less damage and will be safe. “This kind of thing happens a lot,” Goss tells us on the flight back to our lunch spot. “The elephant population is increasing. Without MEP there’d be more poaching and more human-elephant conflict. There’d be less elephants.”

After a night in a fly camp within the Lemek conservancy we cross grassy plains, heading towards Kileleoni Hill, the highest point in the Masai Mara. We climb to a sanctuary within the Ol Choro conservancy, where two southern white rhinos live under the constant protection of rangers with automatic rifles. “This is Queen Elizabeth and Kofi Annan,” says Brian Ondialla Ole Naingisa, a community ranger who introduces us to the horned duo, munching their way up the hillside. “They’re very valuable. We only have two white rhino in the Masai Mara. We keep a 24-hour surveillance.”

The hills provide some of the toughest, hottest climbs of the trip as we head towards Mara Bush Houses in the Mara North conservancy. Rakita takes the climb in his stride, as he has for much of the previous four days. But the distances we have covered (upwards of 85km) and the heat (up to the mid-30s) mean that this is not an adventure for everyone. “It’s a chance to walk in an iconic place,” Schutte says as we make our final descent towards celebratory G&Ts. “But it’s also about pushing people out of their comfort zone. Walking across the Masai Mara is something very few people get to experience, but you’ll remember it for the rest of your lives.”



Above left: the Naboisho camp. Top: the camp's infinity pool. Above: an elephant herd in the Masai Mara

Need to know

Graeme Green was a guest of Asilia Adventures (asiliaadventures.com), whose Traverse the Mara Conservancies on Foot trips start at £3,965pp for five nights, based on a group of four, including accommodation, meals, house drinks, safari activities and return flights from Nairobi to the Naboisho conservancy, but excluding international flights. Experiences with Mara Elephant Project (maraelephantproject.org) can be arranged by Asilia. Kenya Airways has return flights from London to Nairobi from £585 (www.kenya-airways.com)

Safari chic: Kenya's best lodges and camps

Elewana Lodo Springs, Loisaba

Northern Kenya's precious Loisaba Conservancy acts as a critical corridor for elephants to pass through to or from the Laikipia Plateau, as well as hosting one of Kenya's steadiest lion populations, the rare Grevy's zebra and good numbers of wild dogs, leopards and cheetahs. In June two existing camps – including elevated, sleep-out-style "Star Beds" – were joined by the much higher-end Elewana Lodo Springs, which has eight spacious, tented rooms looking out to Mount Kenya. Each one is also assigned a butler-like "Guest Ambassador", a dedicated safari vehicle, driver and guide.

Details A night's full board costs from \$2,000 (£1,660), including transfers and safari activities (elewanacollection.com)

Giraffe Manor, Nairobi

Photo opportunities abound at this stately, ivy-snagged hotel, *above*, set in forest amid the Lang'ata suburb of the capital, Nairobi. Its 12-acre estate is home to a herd of Rothschild's giraffe, who are liable to poke their heads and long necks into windows during mornings and evenings in the hope of scoring a treat – with pellets provided in each room. Elsewhere there are bright green gardens and quiet courtyards where afternoon tea is served. Guests can undertake guided walks across the estate or meet baby elephants and rhinos at the nearby David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust.

Details A night's full board costs from \$620, including airport transfers (thesafaricollection.com)



Mara Plains, Masai Mara

When asked to nominate a Masai Mara camp that combines luxury with great guiding and an excellent location, Expert Africa picked the seven-tent Mara Plains. It is found in trees amid the private Olare-Motorogi conservancy, beside the main reserve, so you have 2,000 sq km to explore and a

high chance of having the big five to yourself. Night drives are offered, and hot-air balloon rides possible. New honeymoon tents combine the decks of old railway sleepers with dining areas, large showers

and stand-alone brass baths.

Details Six nights' full board costs from £5,217pp, including all internal flights, transfers and safari activities (expertafrica.com)

Alfajiri Villas, south coast

Arguably Kenya's most opulent beach lodge – for those who want some post-safari slumber. Alfajiri consists of three large, thatched villas, each one available for exclusive hire. All have private pools and 24-hour service, but only the four-bedroom Cliff Villa has a top-floor suite affording 270-degree views. They are raised just above the sand and palm trees of Diani Beach and combine easy seaside access with privacy and the romance of a sea-facing terrace. The all-inclusive board covers reef snorkeling, massages and food.

Details A night's all-inclusive costs from \$800 (alfajirivillas.com)