

An aerial photograph of a vast savanna landscape. The terrain is a mix of green grass and brown earth, dotted with scattered acacia trees. In the lower right quadrant, a group of five people is walking away from the viewer, following a path through the grass. The lighting suggests late afternoon or early morning, with long shadows and a warm, golden glow. The sky is a pale, hazy blue.

STEP INTO THE SAVANNAH

An intrepid on-foot safari across the Kenyan savannah bordering the Maasai Mara National Reserve reveals, at rivetingly close range, the rich drama of this unique African ecosystem. Exploring terrain inaccessible to vehicles, walk between remote lodges and luxurious fly camps through lesser-visited conservancies, where guides share their intimate knowledge of its creatures, great and small

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FROM LEFT: Male giraffe grazing in Mara North Conservancy; guide Roelof Schutte leads a walking safari in Mara North Conservancy
PREVIOUS PAGES: Walking safari in Naboisho Conservancy



Early morning on the plains of Kenya, and we've wandered into a massacre. Predators swarm forwards. Their prey scatters, directionless and doomed. Bodies flail, jaws close, limbs tear. A massed battalion of Matabele ants has launched a dawn attack on a termite mound, and the result is mayhem — pity any poor termite hoping for a lie-in — although the bull giraffe wandering nearby, lithe and lonely on the grasslands, doesn't so much as blink a long-lashed eyelid. A vulture glides overhead in the blue, no less indifferent.

But when you're with the right guide, dramas swirl from the land. Facts, too. Matabele ants, we learn, take their name from a historical race of warriors known for their violent raids. Conversely, these pitiless insects are also the only invertebrates known to care for their injured. A termite mound, meanwhile, is as calibrated and complex as a metropolis, a nest inhabited by millions. "It's made of soil so rich in iron that pregnant women traditionally consume chunks of it daily," whispers the wide-hatted, khaki-clad Roelof Schutte, the guide in question. I look again at the skirmish taking place, a micro-battle for the ages in the morning light. When you're on foot, the reasons to stop and stare come in droves.

I'm part of a small group hiking through the Maasai Mara Conservancies, the vast protected areas that border the northern and eastern edges of the famous Maasai Mara National Reserve itself. The history of these conservancies — more of which later — stretches back only a decade. Here, visitor levels are more regulated

than in the national reserve, but the high density of wildlife is no less thrilling. And, unlike in the reserve, walking safaris are permitted. Should you be imagining a quick pre-sundowner stroll to admire the birdlife, think again. We're covering more than nine miles a day.

A walking safari is an extraordinary thing. Step onto the savannah, and in no time your perception of the world around you starts to shift: noises amplify, smells heighten, distances morph. When there's literally nothing separating you from the landscape, you can't help but witness it more clearly than if you were in a vehicle. On foot, the small and the subtle become as all-absorbing as the large and the hairy.

Although, wait — is that guttural, ground-shaking roar what I think it is?

"Stick with me at all times," instructs Roelof, a man so familiar with the Mara that Disney sought him out to help with logistics on its 2019 remake of *The Lion King*. From his shoulder hangs a .458 Winchester Magnum rifle. "We walk in single file," he continues. "Click or whistle to get my attention. And never panic."

The walk ahead of us is three days long, although longer and shorter versions can both be arranged. We've already spent a day on the national reserve, adjusting to the sweeping scenery by means of game drives and the kind of crisp-linen safari camp where you're woken with fresh coffee and handmade cookies. One of the aims of our itinerary — designed by East Africa specialist Asilia Africa, whose accommodation is used throughout — is to show the contrast between the well-trodden reserve and the lesser-visited Conservancies.

Which isn't to say, of course, that time spent on the former is some sort of booby prize. Just minutes after



our tiny plane touches down on the reserve's Olkiombo Airstrip (think red dirt, crisscrossed by baboons), we're driven to a watering hole astir with wallowing hippos. Beyond, big-screen Africa ripples out to the horizon, a zebra-dotted infinity of golden hills.

A short while later, our four-wheel-drive vehicle comes to a halt by a leafy, low-slung tree. Unseen frogs croak a liquid chorus as long-tailed starlings glimmer across the sky. The evening is warm and full of earthy smells. On the bough above us, a female leopard surveys the landscape with regal insouciance, her rosettes picked out in exquisite detail by the glowing sunset. We stare in silence until our driver, Jacob, turns to face us. "Gin and tonic?" he asks, gesturing towards a cool box. Like I say, it's no booby prize.

The following day, we drive north to reach the conservancies. The journey is stop-start, thanks to sightings that range from a wandering crowd of wildebeest to a malevolent mob of Nile crocodiles. Despite both the reserve and the conservancies having mapped borders, there are no fences between the two. It means that wildlife roams freely from one to the other, as evidenced by the herds of Thomson's gazelles that line our route, their flanks striped in liquorice allsorts shades of tan, black and white.

We arrive in Naboisho Conservancy. Our base for the night is Naboisho Camp, where we're greeted with scented cold towels and a buffet lunch. An infinity pool glistens on the edge of camp. Our long walk begins tomorrow, but an evening drive hints at what the area has to offer. Jackals creep through the shrubland. Ostriches strut flamboyantly across the plains. And there's more: with heart-pounding suddenness, a dip in the land

reveals a resting pride of five lions. For 20 minutes, we watch the animals stretching and stirring. Then, as daylight fades to nothing, the male stands, shakes down his mane and stalks into the night. Lock up your impalas.

Human-wildlife frontiers

For all its prowling carnivores, the story of the region is as much defined by human influence as it is by wildlife. Prior to 2011, the areas now contained within the boundaries of the conservancies were enormous group ranches, grazed and lived in by communities of local Maasai herders. Human-wildlife conflict was common. The herders themselves benefited minimally from the lucrative tourism taking place next door, in the often-busy reserve, while their cattle, sheep and goats, through consuming vast quantities of grass and vegetation, shaped the wider ecosystem for the worse.

Then the conservancies project was launched, with the aim of benefiting local communities, wildlife, and tourism. It involved making the Maasai the official landowners of the group ranches. These areas were then leased back off the Maasai by tourism companies, to create wildlife-friendly conservancies with controlled visitor numbers. It would, in a sense, be a mass rewilding scheme. The Maasai would retain cattle-grazing rights in certain areas, although their sheep and goats (so numerous they're known, collectively, as 'shoats') would be restricted to land outside the conservancies.

"It took a year of negotiations," explains Daniel Sopia, CEO of the Maasai Mara Wildlife Conservancies Association, over a nightcap at Naboisho Camp. The net result is that the national reserve is now bordered by 15 wildlife conservancies, collectively covering more



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Zebras in Naboisho Conservancy; Maasai women sing in the village of Olsere, Naboisho Conservancy; Bahati, a female leopard, surveys the Maasai Mara National Reserve from a tree; Ashlina, a lioness, rests on a termite mound in the Maasai Mara National Reserve



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Mbatinga, a Ndorobo guide and tracker, during a walking safari in Mara North Conservancy; picnic beside the Mara River in Mara North Conservancy; giraffe in Naboisho Conservancy; women engaged in beadwork at the Maa Trust



than 350,000 acres. “They’re owned by 14,500 Maasai landowners,” Daniel continues. “The lease payments they receive add up to more than \$7m [£5.5m] a year.” Wildlife, meanwhile, has flooded in from the reserve. It’s been a project with a pachyderm-sized impact.

Daniel doesn’t join us at 6.15am the next day, when we stride out of the camp and onto the plains — resplendent in their dewy stillness. But we do have company. As well as Roelof, we’re walking with Mbatinga, an owl-wise Maasai tracker in a scarlet cloak. Within minutes, a roar cleaves the dawn silence. “Simba. Lion,” he says, smiling and gesturing towards a copse. We tread quietly around the perimeter of the trees. Nothing visible. The lion is somewhere in the thicket, probably with a kill. Closer investigation not an option. On we go.

We’re less than 15 minutes into a three-day hike, but our place in the Mara hierarchy has already been made clear. Were we in a four-wheel-drive vehicle, we’d have nosed nearer, emboldened by the metal sanctuary of the vehicle. On foot, we’re just another group of animals astir on the savannah, minimising risk, looking around, plotting our next move. Caution is the watchword — and not just for us. In the still-dim light, a large topi antelope spies us from 50 metres away, emitting a gruff double-snort. “That noise is his way of saying ‘I’ve seen you,’” says Roelof. “He’s saying ‘you’re not going to catch me.’”

Which would, of course, be right. There’s nothing here with four legs that a human could outrun, and we’re emphatically in no rush. We walk at a measured pace, the grass knee-high, the heat of the day rising. The landscapes in the conservancies are essentially the same as those in the reserve — open grasslands studded by occasional trees — but there’s a greater peace, albeit

a sweaty one, that comes from travelling on foot. Our first day’s destination is a temporary fly camp, set up in the bush around seven hours’ walk away (a version of roughing it that, it transpires, involves chilled beers, three-course campfire meals, and hot water bottles under your duvet).

Before then, however, we cover the miles. Close-at-hand distractions come regularly. Here, a white-bellied canary nest made from spiderwebs and zebra hair; there, a horn-burrowing moth, which feeds exclusively on the hooves and horns of dead ungulates. I learn too that the animals here that pose the most threat to us aren’t what I’d imagined. Lions and leopards? They won’t approach, unless startled. On foot, it’s the hefty herbivores we need to avoid: the bulldozers that can turn from placid to pugnacious in a heartbeat. Hippos and buffalos fall into this category, as does one other heavyweight.

“Elephant,” says Mbatinga, stopping dead. We’ve been wallowing in the rhythms of mid-morning: hoopoes flitting from bush to bush, giraffes breakfasting on thorn trees, quick-trotting warthogs seemingly late for crucial meetings. Now a jumbo silhouette in the middle-distance brings a sharp tension. Of all the differences between a four-wheel-drive vehicle safari and a walking safari, this is one of the most pronounced. See an elephant when you’re driving, and it’s a chance to admire a huge animal up close. See one when you’re walking and your first thought becomes: careful, now.

Elephants, usually calm, can charge if they feel threatened. The single time Roelof has needed to use his rifle, he tells us, was to fire a warning shot at a rapidly advancing female. Over the three days, we have numerous encounters with these extraordinary, age-runkled giants, ▶



including one edgy, hour-long episode where we're forced to stay downwind of a testosterone-charged male. On a walking safari, you soon learn what respect means.

And they're not the only creatures to sharpen our senses. One morning, we're walking along the edge of an escarpment towards a prominent wild fig tree. An antelope carcass dangles from one branch, the remnants of a treetop meal. Then time freezes. A leopard materialises up the slope, no more than 15 metres from us. For a second, the world swims — shock, heat, panic — then the animal whips back the way it came. We see hindquarters, a tail, then nothing. My heart doesn't slow for hours.

Finding a balance

Safeguarding the future of the Mara, of course, is no easy task. Asilia works with, and donates funds to, various conservation groups. We meet representatives of the Mara Predator Conservation Programme — hearing, among other things, that cheetahs in the conservancies are raising more cubs than their counterparts reserve, where tourist numbers are far greater — and the Mara Elephant Project, which strives to protect the species and reduce human-elephant conflict. Poaching deaths have fallen a remarkable 95% since the organisation's founding in 2011, although the creatures' fondness for Maasai crops means tension is ongoing, as evidenced by the tangle of confiscated snares outside its HQ.

This also holds relevance for the other organisation we visit, the Maa Trust, which exists to find a balance between local conservation and sustainable human development. We reach the trust's offices to find a group of women sitting in the shade, engaged in intricate beadwork. "It's one of our social enterprises," explains

CEO Crystal Mogensen, who swapped life in North East England for a Maasai homestead, and now finds herself handling commissions from international designers.

The beadwork is just the start. The organisation generated an income of \$60,000 (£47,000) in 2014, the year it began. Through various projects, this has since risen to \$900,000 (£715,000) a year, which has greatly benefited local healthcare and education. "Our message to the communities is that this is only happening because of wildlife," Crystal says. "We now have children going home and telling their parents 'don't hurt animals — it's because of elephants and wildebeest that I can go to school!'"

Back on the plains, the routine of walking has become addictive. The majority of our route falls within two conservancies, Naboisho and Mara North, and regularly crosses terrain that would be impassable by vehicle. The mornings start early, with mist on the plains and a blood-orange sun creeping above the horizon. We rest under trees, or on basalt outcrops, staring out at the hills of the Serengeti. We overnight at a different fly camp on each of the first two days of walking, taking open-air bucket-showers as fireflies blink in the trees, then sleep to a trilling, croaking soundtrack. Over three days, we see just three tourist safari vehicles.

Processing everything you see during 30 miles of wilderness-walking takes some doing. There are the obvious highlights — watching a trio of cheetahs slinking over the savannah, and a hyena in crazed pursuit of an ill-fated impala — but just as memorable are the under-your-nose dramas. At one point, we're grouping behind a low bush to observe an elephant when Mbatinga slaps me on the shoulder, his face creased into a smile, his finger pointing two metres away. "Sleeping python," he says. ▶

ABOVE: Naboisho Camp in Naboisho Conservancy



Roelof, too, is equally observant. He locates aardvark nests, bat-eared foxes and spider-hunting wasps. He leads us across the frothing Olare Orok River, trousers rolled up to our knees, to find a hippo-watching spot. He finds an entire tree cloaked, Halloween-style, in the silk of ermine caterpillars. No oddity is left unexplained (mongooses rooting through buffalo poo? There's a reason for that: highly nutritious).

"When the conservancies started, there was much less wildlife," Roelof explains, at the end of the walk, as we unlace our boots at the hillside Mara House, part of Mara Bush Houses. "But within three years, things really started to change. There was more grass, which meant more diversity of species. And you've seen how things are now."

The conservancies project has, in various ways, been a marked success, although its future is less than certain. Tourism income won't be enough to support the conservancies indefinitely, leaving them in need of corporate donations. Likewise, the Mara Elephant Project and Mara Predator Conservation Programme are both looking at major shortfalls in their funding.

Awareness of what's at stake can only help. More than anything, I now realise, the walk has been a way of zooming in on an utterly spectacular ecosystem, and beginning to understand the interdependence and ingenuity of its countless moving parts. An experience like this demystifies the large and magnifies the small. I'll remember the spine-tingling, big game encounters. I'll remember the sunrises. But I'll also remember the butterflies, and the dung beetles, and that somewhere out there, in furious combat on a remote plain, a colony of termites is having a really bad morning. □

ABOVE: Young elephants in the Maasai Mara National Reserve

ESSENTIALS



Getting there & around

British Airways and Kenya Airways fly daily between Heathrow and Nairobi, and various carriers offer one-stop services from the UK to Nairobi, including Ethiopian Airlines, KLM and Air France. ba.com kenya-airways.com ethiopianairlines.com klm.com airfrance.co.uk

Average flight time: 8h40m, direct to Nairobi.

Transfers from Nairobi to the Maasai Mara can be done by road, taking five to six hours, or by internal flight, taking between 45 minutes and an hour. These flights use small aircraft and leave from Wilson Airport, around half an hour by road from Nairobi's international airport.

When to go

Walking safaris can be organised between November and May. For more general safaris, spring is the ideal time in which to visit, with rains turning the landscape green and the air largely dust-free. July-September is peak season, coinciding with the great wildebeest migration. Temperatures don't change drastically through the year, with daytimes in the mid to high 20Cs, and cooler evenings.

Organisations mentioned

Maasai Mara Wildlife Conservancies Association. maraconservancies.org
Mara Predator Conservation Programme. marapredatorconservation.org
Mara Elephant Project. maraelephantproject.org
Maa Trust. themaatrust.org

How to do it

ASILIA AFRICA offers Traverse the Mara Conservancies, a five-night safari from £3,200 per person based on a group of four. It includes five nights' accommodation, all meals, house drinks and safari activities. asiliaafrica.com Ethiopian Airlines flies daily from Heathrow and three times a week from Manchester to Addis Ababa, and operates two daily onward flights to Nairobi. Return fares from £774. To book and see updates on coronavirus measures for passengers, visit ethiopianairlines.com