



AFRICA



IT'S GOOD TO STALK

The vast horizon of the Masai Mara National Reserve was streaked with pale dawn sunshine as my eagle-eyed guide spotted a lion padding quietly across the bush.

He swung our 4x4 round and hurtled over the long, dry grass keen not to miss the moment – and it was the most memorable of my Kenya trip.

Getting closer, we slowed to a crawl and a majestic pride of more than 20 lions, lionesses and little cubs came into view, lazing among the trees just a few steps away.

It was only my second day on safari and already I'd spotted elephant, zebra, antelope and dozens of other species I'd only ever seen in books. Even when I arrived, on the short journey from the Mara reserve's Olkiombo airstrip to the lodge where I'd be staying, my red-robed Maasai guide stopped to point out more than a dozen hippos cooling off in the river. There's a very good reason for the Mara's enduring popularity as a first-time safari destination – big game, and lots of it.

● SAFARI FIT FOR A PRESIDENT

The Mara also offers the gamut of safari stay options, from big, budget-friendly hotels to smaller, more luxurious lodges located in the private conservancies surrounding the National Park.

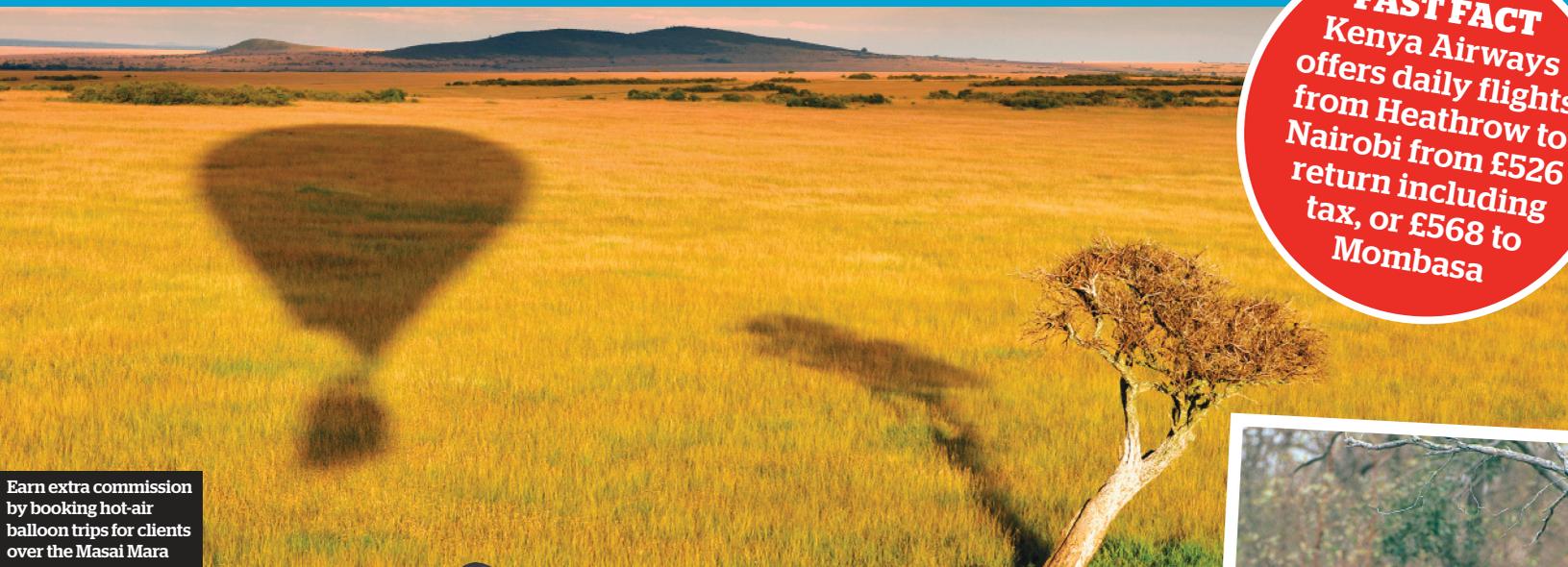
Basecamp Explorer is one of the latter: a 22-acre eco-friendly camp on the River Talek, comprising 12 large tents each beneath a thatched roof. With private outdoor showers, earth toilets and a back-to-nature feel (I fell asleep to the sounds of baboons rustling through the trees), it won't be everyone's cup of tea. But for an authentic experience with more than a touch of luxury, it's hard to beat.

Barack Obama obviously thought so too when, while still just a senator, he and his family stayed at the lodge on a visit to Kenya in 2006. Those so inclined can even request the 'Obama tent'.

Game drives take place at dawn and dusk, when the animals are most active. But agents can boost commission by offering to book customers an extra-special sunrise balloon safari, including ▶

Security issues have shaken tourist confidence in Kenya, but safari and beach breaks can still be a big seller, discovers Katie McGonagle

FAST FACT
 Kenya Airways offers daily flights from Heathrow to Nairobi from £526 return including tax, or £568 to Mombasa



Earn extra commission by booking hot-air balloon trips for clients over the Masai Mara



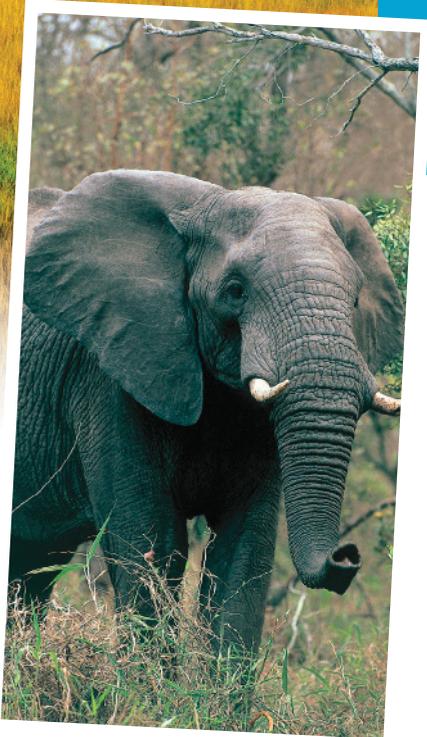
champagne and breakfast. In the heat of the day, guests can relax on their private terraces, take in the sweeping views across the savannah from Basecamp's raised viewing platform, or enjoy the delicious local food – though I



Katie with Maasai guide Steve

challenge anyone to get through the generous portions. Maasai guides also lead child-friendly activities for youngsters. First-time safari-goers always want to see the big five, but there are plenty of unexpected pleasures too. We paused to watch an

elegant crowned crane, Kenya's national bird, drinking from a watering hole as dusk fell and it was just as magical as some of the larger game. The Naboisho Conservancy is home to huge numbers of giraffe, as well as the Koiyaki Guiding School, where many guides have trained. They are the best source of knowledge about Maasai culture, but guests can also visit Basecamp's on-site project that employs local women



Tried and tested: Lantana Galu Beach

Lantana Galu Beach is a high-end beachfront resort in Diani Beach. It opened last year and offers more than 40 apartments, villas and penthouses ranging in size from one to three bedrooms. Each villa includes a fully-equipped kitchen, living/dining room and huge balcony, making it a good option for families or couples travelling together.



But be warned – once clients have stayed in these spacious apartments, they might never be happy with a hotel room again. My three-bedroom apartment was light and airy, with ultra-modern fittings topped off with a few traditional touches like carved wooden doors and locally-made

lampshades, which gave it a real sense of character despite having been open just a few months. But my favourite feature was undoubtedly the vast balcony with its breathtaking views over the coast and the resort's

beautiful gardens. I didn't quite wake up early enough to watch the sun rise over the sea (more's the pity), but it's a great place to get away from it all and relax with nothing but a gentle coastal breeze to disturb you – and a

perfect setting to enjoy a few sundowners too. With two swimming pools, a gym, spa and on-site restaurant, the resort ought to feel more crowded, but the size of the complex means guests aren't overlooked, so they can feel like they're the only ones whiling away their time by the pool or soaking up some sunshine on the beach. **Sample product:** Africa & Beyond offers seven nights' room-only in a three-bedroom villa at Lantana for £999 per person based on six people sharing, including flights, transfers and taxes. **africa-and-beyond.co.uk**
01948 861234

Kenya's Diani Beach resort offers a wide range of hotels



Watch the migration over breakfast at Basecamp Explorer in the Mara



KENYA NEWS

● Disney's *African Cats* was filmed in the Masai Mara and will be on general release in cinemas in the UK from April 20.

● **Gary Barlow** (below) headed to Kenya last week to seek inspiration for his next big song. Working with Andrew Lloyd Webber, he'll pen a song for the Queen's Diamond Jubilee, and is visiting Commonwealth countries to find out what Her Majesty means to ordinary people.

● The five-star **Ocean Beach Resort** opened at the end of 2011 on quiet Sand Dunes Beach near Malindi town. The 31-room boutique has a spa, and there are snorkelling and dive sites, plus golf and tennis facilities nearby.

● Kenya is growing at a rate of 160% year on year for specialist safari operator **Natural World Safaris**. The operator offers tailor-made itineraries through its World Big Cat Safaris brand, and usually offers agents 10% commission.

TOP TIP
Visit the Mara between July and September to view one of the world's natural wonders, the wildebeest migration

to make traditional souvenirs (maasaibrand.com), tour nearby villages or visit the local school.

Naibosho means 'coming together', and this new conservancy is the result of a collaboration between local Maasai and the tourist industry. Camps pay rent to Maasai landowners, who are incentivised to move their cattle, leaving the

land for tourist-friendly big game. With Maasai also employed as guides, tourist pounds are trickling down into local pockets, rather than being skimmed off by big business. And it's not just the Maasai and the animals who benefit. Tourists – welcomed with open arms by the traditional inhabitants of the area – find their experiences are enriched by extensive and authentic interactions with the local culture.

● KICK BACK ON THE COAST

There are few better holiday double acts than safari and beach, and Kenya, with its glorious Indian Ocean coastline and white-sand beaches that really are as good as they look in the brochure, delivers it as successfully and cost-effectively as anywhere.

Mombasa is the gateway to Kenya's beaches. Diani Beach is the busiest resort, with plenty of shops, banks and other facilities for those keen to venture outside their hotel.

For quieter areas,

try Galu or Msambweni to the south of Mombasa, or Turtle Bay to the north.

There is plenty for those who want more than sun, sand and sea. Kitesurfing is becoming increasingly popular, along with other watersports and activities such as mountain biking tours of local villages.

The popular Wasini Island excursion packs a dolphin-spotting dhow tour, the country's best snorkelling and diving at Kisite Marine Park, a sumptuous lunch of specialities like crab with steamed ginger, and a visit to the



KENYA: SAFARI ALTERNATIVES

Although the Mara is the best-known safari area in Kenya – thanks almost as much to its red-robed warriors as to its first-class game – plenty of other reserves offer an unforgettable experience.

Tsavo National Park is the largest in Kenya and is closer to the coast than the Mara, providing the perfect springboard for beach holidays. It has huge herds of elephant and buffalo, and combines well with a visit to Lake Amboseli or the Shimba Hills Reserve on the coast.

Aberdare National Park is nestled within a mountain range and is bound to get a royal boost as a result of the Diamond Jubilee, as it was here that the young Princess Elizabeth was staying, at Treetops Lodge, when she heard about her father's death and with it her accession to become queen in 1952.

Samburu National Reserve is known for its big cats – lions, cheetahs and leopards – while **Meru National Park** attracts fewer tourists, offering a quieter safari experience.

Women's Boardwalk community project into a single day (£81 adults, £42 children; thomsonexcursions.co.uk).

For clients who want a quieter life, suggest they eat their way along the coast by sampling the wonderful local food. I'd recommend the seafood platter at Ali Barbour's Cave Restaurant, set in a 180,000-year-old coral cave near Diani Beach. I wasn't sure what to expect as I ventured downstairs through the rocky entrance, but I emerged into a beautiful candlelit cave with stars visible above – perfect for an extra-special occasion.

● **Safety update**

The Foreign & Commonwealth Office continues to advise against travel to the luxury resort of Lamu on Kenya's northern coast – despite last week's release of British hostage Judith Tebbutt – following two attacks on western tourists by gangs with links to Somalia. The ban has boosted demand for resorts around Mombasa as agents switch-sell.

For properties offering Lamu-style barefoot luxury in a safer location, try Lantana Galu Beach (see review) or the Swahili Beach Hotel, a five-star property on Diani Beach. Kuoni offers seven nights' half-board in a Superior room at the latter from £1,166 per person including flights in May. **TW**

Swahili Beach is a five-star hotel in Diani Beach



FAST FACT
Safarilink flies daily to all major game parks - a Nairobi-Mara return is \$292 in low season. flysafarilink.com

Dine in a coral cave at Ali Barbour's Cave Restaurant



NEWS FROM ACROSS AFRICA

On the Go Tours has launched a selection of overland, lodge and tailor-made safaris in its 2012-13 brochure. Land-only prices start at £345 for a 12-day Garden Route Discovery overland safari, rising to £1,999 for a 13-day lodge-based option in Botswana. onthegotours.com

Sun International's **Wild Coast Sun Resort** in South Africa's KwaZulu-Natal region has undergone a £33 million

refurbishment over the past two years. The resort, which overlooks the Indian Ocean on the Eastern Cape, has added 150 rooms, bringing the total to 396. There are four restaurants, a food court and three bars, and activities on offer include squash, tennis, bowling, go-karting, jet-skiing and golf. An on-site waterpark, Wild Waves, opened at the end of 2011.

suninternational.com/wildcoastsun

Luxury operator **&Beyond** has created a family safari circuit in Tanzania by adding spacious family suites at its three lodges: Ngorongoro Crater Lodge, Serengeti Under Canvas and Mnemba Island Lodge. Children aged between six and 16 pay 50% when sharing with their parents, while under-fives stay free. &Beyond's rangers are trained to look after kids, with game walks designed for youngsters. andbeyond.com

SAFARI & BEACH PACKAGES

Travel 2 has a seven-day Kenya Classic tour to Nairobi, the Masai Mara, Lake Nakuru and Amboseli, plus five days at Serena Beach Hotel & Spa, including flights and transfers, from £2,219 per person (April to June). Add a hot-air balloon flight over the Mara for £309.

travel2.com
0800 022 4182

Somak Holidays offers a four-night Thorn Tree Safari taking in Aberdare National Park, Lake Naivasha and the Masai Mara, plus five nights' half-board at Southern Palms in Diani Beach. Prices from £1,839 including Kenya Airways flights, valid August 28-October 22.

somak.com
020 8423 3000

Virgin Holidays has a four-night safari to Lake Nakuru and the Masai Mara with a stopover in Nairobi, then seven nights' half-board at Sarova Whitesands Beach Resort & Spa, from £1,499 including Kenya Airways flights. Add a balloon safari for £279.

vhols4agents.co.uk
0844 5573973

Hayes & Jarvis offers an Images of Kenya Safari for seven nights, including Shaba, Lake Nakuru and the Masai Mara, then two nights' half-board at five-star Diani Reef Beach Resort & Spa, from £1,929 including flights in June.

hayesandjarvis.co.uk/agents
0871 200 2211

Rainbow Tours' Turtles and Trunks Safari combines three days at Basecamp Explorer with six nights at Turtle Bay Lodge near Watamu National Marine Park, from £8,195 all-inclusive for two adults and two children, including flights, transfers and one night in Nairobi.

rainbowtours.co.uk
020 7666 1250