

Basecamp Explorer

Ecotourism with a difference



The Masai Mara National Reserve in Kenya is renowned for its varied wildlife. Conservationists often issue warnings on the creeping damage to the ecosystem and animal habitats through unplanned and unsustainable tourism.

Seeing the need to practice a more wholesome form of game viewing tourism, Basecamp Explorer introduced a concept that seeks to preserve the ecosystem while empowering local communities to improve their livelihoods through capacity building, conservation awareness and women empowerment.

One of the highlights of Basecamp Explorer's engagement with the local community in the Masai Mara is the Basecamp Masai Brand (BMB), a women's group that makes bead and leather handicraft to sell to tourists. The social enterprise, which has 158 members, has become so successful that even men from the patriarchal Maasai community turn up with requests that their wives be enrolled as members, according to Jemimah Sairowua, the Project Manager. The attraction is the financial independence that BMB has engendered among women in the Talek area, where Basecamp Masai Mara is located.

"I now earn my own money. I have stopped depending entirely on my husband," says Kimanyisho Sairowua, a young mother of three and a member of the Basecamp Maasai Brand. She no longer lives in a traditional mud hut, she says. The income from BMB has made it possible for her to build a house with a corrugated tin roof. One of her daughters is in boarding school because she can now afford the school fees.

Earnings from handicraft sales to tourists and online customers across the world are



PHOTO BY: KNUIT BRY/TINAGENT



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LEFT PAGE:
Basecamp Explorer Afforestation Project. Since its inception over 15 years ago, more than 80,000 indigenous trees have been planted.

TOP RIGHT: View from Basecamp Masai Mara.

BELOW RIGHT: Basecamp Masai Mara Viewing dining deck.

transforming lives. "More women would join if the market was larger," says Sairowua, the project manager. The enterprise has brought in millions of shillings with approximately 25 percent growth year on year.

At the BMB workshop the women are busy at work as they chat. The more items one produces the more individual earnings at the end of the month. Each month 75 per cent of the profits will go directly to the women. The remaining 25 per cent goes to the cost of materials and management of BMB, a fair trade certified enterprise.

Basecamp Explorer has also made efforts to restore the degraded ecosystem with a tree afforestation programme started in 2000 and which has become an expanding woodland with 80,000 indigenous trees planted. Each guest at Basecamp Masai Mara is encouraged to plant a tree during their stay. A seedling can be obtained from the tree nursery managed by Mwana, one of the local Maasai youth. Saplings are also given to members of the local community



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Big cats of Mara Naboisho. The density of lions within Mara Naboisho is one of the highest in the world.

who wish to plant trees elsewhere. The idea is to sensitize the community on the importance of afforestation and habitat conservation.

There are 12 tents at Basecamp Masai Mara. Each with a private veranda overlooking the Masai Mara Reserve, and an open air en suite bathroom with a hot solar-heated shower. An especially plush tent hosted then US Senator Barack Obama and his family in 2006. Each member of the Obama family also planted a tree in the afforestation area.

Back at Basecamp, our safari guide Joseph Ouko is ready. We venture out through the suspended foot bridge over the Talek river into the van and head out into the vast Masai Mara National Reserve where herds of antelopes, big and small, mingle with buffaloes, giraffes and zebras. At a distance Joseph spots two elephants ambling along the riverbank. We drive closer for a better view of the pachyderms.

Our curiosity satiated, we drive away in the opposite direction as packs of hyenas furtively criss-cross our path. In a thicket along the crocodile-infested river, four lionesses lie in deep slumber, oblivious of our purposeful photographing. Occasionally, one lioness or another rolls over, eyes opening up briefly, and back to sleep.

We head back to the camp for breakfast. Guests can enjoy game viewing from the convenience

of their dining table, set within the grounds of the camp. Visitors can also view wildlife from the tents, the fig-tree platform or while enjoying drinks at the open-air bar.

The next day, in the company of our Maasai safari guide, we set out for Eagle View, another camp managed by Basecamp Explorer in the Naboisho Conservancy, north of the Masai Mara. Enroute, a large herd of wildbeest graze in the lush savannah where recent rainfall has rejuvenated the grass. The gnu seem oblivious to the fact that a cheetah has brought down one of their number and is enjoying the meat not far away as a wake of vultures stand by to feast on the left overs once the big cat has eaten to its fill.

We stop to view and photograph. The cheetah is still panting from the sprint that preceded the kill and eats with some difficulty, the wildbeest flesh apparently too tough. The vultures waiting at a distance betray no impatience. The kill is a big one. A meal is guaranteed.

Time to proceed. We are scheduled to stop over at Wilderness Camp enroute to Eagle View.

Wilderness Camp is designed to be a reminder of the African safaris of yore – before modern contraptions of luxury spoiled authentic excursions into nature. Here at Wilderness you are away from it all, except the wildlife, the stars and members of the local Maasai community. Highlights include a guided walking safari.

We arrive at Eagle View where manager Shadrack Munoru and his staff are waiting with refreshments. We check in, have a late lunch and hop into the safari jeep for game viewing in Naboisho Community Conservancy, another of Basecamp Explorer's efforts to ensure that the Maasai community keep their land while earning decent returns from sustainable tourism. The community has leased the land to investors in safari tourism.

The 20,000-hectare Naboisho, which means 'coming together' in the local Maa language, is managed in a strict sustainability model. The more than 5,000 landowners are paid a land lease fee, a much needed income for nomadic herders of limited means.

As the sun sets on our game drive in Naboisho, we stumble upon a lion and lioness asleep. They will soon wake up and embark on a nocturnal hunt, says Amos. It shouldn't be too hard to find a meal. Naboisho teems with herbivores.

We are soon back in Eagle View, our abode for the night, perched on top of the hill overlooking a natural well where wild animals of all manner come to drink throughout the day. We sit by the fireplace in the extended lobby, an ideal spot for an evening drink listening to the sounds of different animals as night falls over the African wilderness.

Dinner is served and shortly afterwards we retire to our cosy tent. The morning game drive

BELOW: Eagle View is located atop a natural hilltop, allowing for exceptional views of Naboisho Conservancy. The camp overlooks a waterhole, frequently visited by a variety of wildlife.

would be the time we are rewarded with sight of a lion couple walking majestically in the bushes to a destination only they know.

Before embarking on our long drive back to Nairobi, we spend some time with students at Koiyaki Guiding School (KGS) and their principal, Julius Kisemei. A capacity building institution set up to train local youth on sustainable guiding skills, preparing them for employment within the safari industry in Kenya and beyond. Basecamp Explorer sponsors a number of students, mainly girls every year. Twenty-four-year-old Lorna Naisiai, a safari guide employed by Basecamp is one of the 247 KGS alumni, including 46 women, to graduate from the school since it was founded.

"The school has enabled women from the patriarchal Maasai community to participate in tourism," says Lorna, who was sponsored for the tour guiding course by the Robert Smith family of the United States. "I am now a role model in my village. Other girls admire me." ●

How to get there

Basecamp Explorer camps in the Masai Mara are accessible by air via Olkiombo airstrip or the Naibosho Olseki airstrip, which is approximately 20-30 minute drive from the camp. The flight to the airstrips from Nairobi's Wilson Airport takes about 45 minutes. By road from Nairobi, the drive takes 5-6 hours.

PHOTOS BY: BASECAMP EXPLORER

