

# GOING ALL IN

For **today's savvy travelers**, staying in the hotel all day isn't an option. Vacationing is all about **the experience, digging deep into the landscape and really getting to know the culture**. But with a number of world gems to discover, one location should definitely make the **top of your travel bucket list**—the Kenya safari. As one of the world's most popular tourist destinations, **Kenya's Maasai Mara** is the epitome of wildlife experiences due to its diverse ecosystem and dense animal population. From the **marvels of nature** to the incredibly rich culture of the Maasai tribe, the **awe-inspiring beauty** of the savanna will satisfy all of your wanderlust curiosities—and more.

BY NINA HEMPHILL REEDER



Comp. photo (left) courtesy of Basecamp Explorer, Elephant Photo: Ken Geiger

**T**he sound of not-so-distant growls and pants resonates outside my tent. I wanted immersive, and I guess mobile camping in the heart of the open Maasai Mara doesn't get any more immersive than this.

After enjoying our provisional dinner setup (which included wine and three satisfying courses under the light of the stars, lanterns and campfire), I find myself in my portable tent, belly full but fully alert, listening. The sounds, I ponder, could be nothing more than a snort from a sleepy gazelle or something far more menacing, like a lion on his usual nocturnal hunt for a snack. Either way, I embrace it (who needs a white noise machine when you can have legitimate sounds of nature?), and I nestle down into my surprisingly supple sheets, knowing I'm in good hands.

This overnight camping experience with Basecamp Explorer includes a failsafe in the form of around-the-clock Maasai guards to protect us from any animals who wander into our camp. These mobile camping accommodations, called Dorobo Mobile Camp, are inspired by the hunter-gatherer lifestyle of the Maasai culture. So needless to say, I feel very confident here under the guardianship of Basecamp's Maasai escorts, guides and guards, who are well acquainted with the land. Not only knowing the securest places to set up tonight's camp, they know the ins and outs of every corner of the Mara—even familiar with all the prides of lions down five generations of family history.

I've done safari before, but this Kenya safari is quite a different experience. Home to the Big Five (elephants, lions, leopards, buffaloes and rhinos) and other wildlife like cheetahs, zebras, crocodiles, giraffes, hippos and several species of antelope and birds, Kenya's Maasai Mara is guaranteed to be packed with animal activity.

As a guest of Basecamp Explore, I'm privy to access the 50,000-acre private Naboisho Conservancy, which neighbors the more tourist-heavy Maasai Mara National Reserve. With a limited number of tourists and lodgings permitted in the Conservancy, Basecamp gives its guests the opportunity to really dig into the safari and Mara culture. Furthermore, local Maasai staff the properties as guides, guards, chefs and even artisans.

And I admit, I much prefer learning about the Mara from an actual local as opposed to a transplant whose wildlife expertise comes solely from university studies. Not that there's anything wrong with the latter, but I find myself far more engrossed in all the animal stories when there's context. And Big Moses, one of Basecamp's veteran guides, tells the best stories. Because he is such a local celebrity for his humor and wealth of knowledge, he personally led tours for the Obama family when they came to Basecamp in 2006.

**I completely miss the rising of dawn due to the tent's blackout fabric.** Instead, I awake to the sounds of running water from the rather impressive tented bucket showers, in

which warm water is released through a self-controlled pulley system. Surprised how soundly I slept in the wilderness, I unzip my tent to find a beautiful scene of the full morning sun shining over camp. A newly built campfire warms water for tea and coffee, which is paired with tea biscuits.

I indulge in a cup of coffee since we are to depart our camp on foot as part of the Dorobo Mobile Camp experience. I need all the caffeine I can get, especially after our guide Big Moses briefs us on walking safari protocol. We are to walk swiftly and compactly as a group; we are to talk quietly; we are to be alert and heed signals from our head guide, who will divert our course should he see any lions or dangerous animals on our path; and if by chance we encounter a buffalo, we are to climb the nearest tree. And if we can't climb a tree, we are to lie flat on the ground, where we'll be out of reach of the buffalo's horns—though not his feet. I take another big gulp of my coffee, and we're off.

Fortunately—and unfortunately—we have no close animal encounters in our two-hour morning walk through the bush. I spot many majestic acacia trees, Thomson's gazelles far off in the distance, open plains that stretch pass my line of sight and a few random droppings and plants. Big Moses stops to educate us about the Maasai's medicinal uses for each plant—and even some droppings.

My overnight in the bush and morning's walking safari are definitely the ultimate travel brag, but I can't deny that I'm beyond thrilled to spend the rest of my nights in the Mara inside Basecamp's newest luxury lodgings at Leopard Hill. You can't even label this glamping, since my tented cabin is nearly double the size of an average studio apartment. From the unique décor to expected trappings of resort luxury, you have everything and more: hardwood flooring, electricity, finely crafted furnishings, Kenyan batik throws, a full bathroom, indoor and outdoor shower and a retractable, mosquito-netted sunroof. And the view? The tented walls, which if unzipped reveal a 360-degree view of the Leopard Hill campsite, where its focal piece is a massive fig tree. This is how you safari, no?

Well, as gorgeous as your accommodations are, don't get too comfortable. The magic of the Mara stretches beyond the walls of your tent. With early morning, afternoon and/or evening game drives included in your stay at Basecamp, you'll want to head out into the bush. From the comfort of a Land Cruiser, you get an up-close-and-personal experience with all manner of wildlife. In the predawn hours, a lioness, completely unbothered by our presence, brushes up against the truck—so close I can hear her wet, heavy breathing. Later that day, I see a leopard on the prowl, several elephants at play and scores of zebras, giraffes and wildebeest. And I pull up to see the devastation of a kill just seconds before a pack of jackals took down a baby buck; the mother, realizing her baby had already met her death, looked on from a distance.

Every minute I spend in the Mara feels like a *National Geographic* exploration of both wildlife and culture. Though the wildlife is fascinating, my reward is connecting with Maasai culture. I see the homesteads of the Maasai people, I interact with them, learn their ceremonies, traditions, foods and way of life. Their life as chiefly cattle farmers is symbiotically tied to the land. There is and has always been a great respect for their environment—before and after the influence of colonizers, then game hunters and recently tourists.

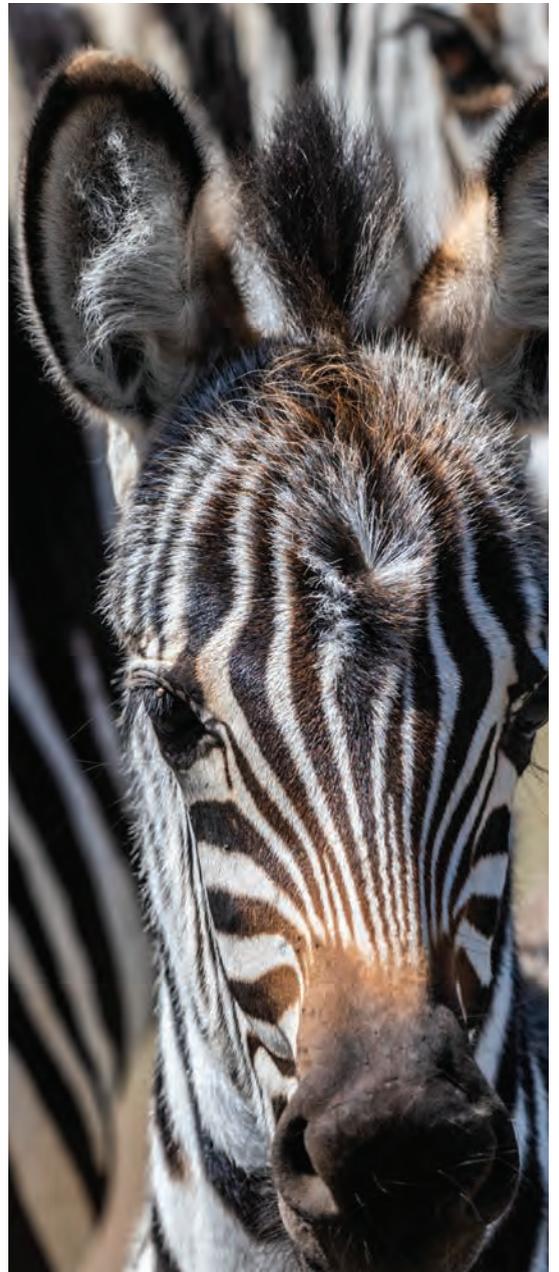
I find it troubling when people ask why the Maasai haven't completely assimilated to Western society. Their decision to preserve their heritage was their choice, and they should be admired for the ability to carry on centuries-old traditions. Few modern-day cultures can boast this.

The campfire burns hotly. Enclosed by towering trees, our campsite gets little moonlight, so it's nearly pitch black. My eyes can barely see 10 yards beyond the fire, but I'm able to make out the red shuka robes of the Maasai. On my last night, we're treated to a bush dinner and a performance by the Maasai staff who all in some way assisted us throughout our stay. The larger groups chants in cadence while the song leader sings in Maa; they do this as they trot in unison around the camp fire.

I try to think of any other experience that comes remotely close to this. I can think of none. And I can't think of anything that gets anymore immersive than this.

## GETTING THERE

Opened in October 2018, Kenya Airways now allows U.S.-based guests to fly direct from New York's JFK to Nairobi. Guests can stay overnight in Nairobi at properties like the five-star Villa Rosa Kempinski before driving (five to six hours) or flying (one hour via SafariLink and Air Kenya connections) into the Mara.



Zebra Photo (top): Ken Geiger; Camping Setup, courtesy of Basecamp Explorer





Cheetahs (top left), Lions (top right), Cattle herder (bottom left), Ken Gaiger, Giraffes courtesy of Basecamp Explorer