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## Leopard Hill: Basecamp Explorer's New Lodge In The Masai Mara

It's no surprise that the night sky in Kenya's vast southwest Masai Marai region is spectacular. Let's say you're not exactly the most rugged of campers, though. You're in luck at [Leopard Hill](#) in the 77-square-mile Mara Naboisho Conservancy where your luxury tent has a retractable skyroof, a cool feature that is said to be the only one among the conservancy's camps.



Sunrise over Leopard Hill's signature "double" fig tree.

CREDIT: KEN GEIGER/BASECAMP EXPLORER

Opened in spring of last year, Leopard Hill is the newest in the [Basecamp Explorer](#) company's small family of luxury and quasi-rugged camps. On your visit, you may well find yourself staying up late to watch the stars, but also happily waking up well before 6 a.m. to the sounds of perhaps, say, a herd of impala passing by to drink in the ravine or the watering hole in front of your tent.

There's plenty of rich birdlife out there as well, and many of your tinier new friends will be landing on your tent's netting and perching themselves on the railing of your deck.

As the sun rises, the acacia trees in silhouette are a show in themselves and maybe you'll spot a hot air balloon rising over Leopard Hill, the nearby small peak for which the camp is named. These mornings may all be all about quiet moments, but they're packed with lots of action in fact.

With so much out there to see, you might be tempted to make your elevated deck your home. But with indoor/outdoor showers, cool wooden floors and a carved wooden sofa wide enough for napping on, your tent built in a traditional round house style is a sanctuary once the day heats up.

In addition to four deluxe tents, a family suite has a lovely Omani-Swahili style decorated door, while a honeymoon suite has an ensuite lounge and desk tent—you know, just in case you might wish to retire and work on your memoirs.



Well-stocked with books, the Leopard Hill lounge is right off the camp's dining room.  
CREDIT: KEN GEIGER/BASECAMP EXPLORER

As you head down the narrow path in the morning for breakfast in the spacious dining tent, that quiet continues. And it does as well as you scan the bush further while enjoying coffee on the deck before sitting down to an à la carte breakfast at the large wooden table.



The same holds true while sipping your sundowner cocktail after a long day of game drives when you return for a hearty dinner of, say, leak and celery soup and roasted chicken with rice. The adjacent lounge with comfy sofas and plenty of conservation and Africa-related books is always a welcome place to retire before you go back to lie under your skyroof.

When you're ready to book a massage at Leopard Hill, you can expect it to be much more satisfying than the wild one, i.e., the one you get while being jostled around in the 4x4 Safari Land Rover vehicle all day on game drives, or so the guide crew's favorite and quite true joke goes.

Apart from the luxury of camp, the real reason you've come to the Naboisho Conservancy is indeed those game drives where you might see a dozen or more giraffes within less than a minute of leaving camp.

To visit a hippo pool and look down from the safety of the heights of a river bank is a fascinating and sometimes smelly experience, especially in low-water season as dozens of the massive creatures from this ancient species crowd into tight space. Utter silence as they keep cool is punctuated by moments of fierce jawing at each other and great splashing about when conflict arises.

And on the opposite spectrum of animal watching, you could spend thirty minutes above the same river as well just watching a heron or snowy egret sitting patiently but highly alert on the rocks waiting for the chance to dive in and spear lunch.



The spacious deck to a Leopard Hill tent.

CREDIT: KEN GEIGER/BASECAMP EXPLORER

As for your lunch, a post-game drive picnic under a lone tree on the plains of the vast Masai Mara is matched in delight only by another day's pasta lunch back at Leopard Hill on tables set up under the camp's famous "double" fig tree.



Continuing your afternoon game drive along the edge of the Masai Mara national reserve boundary, you might stop and watch a lioness that you encounter as she lazes on the edge of the dirt road conserving her energy. As you're within the confines of your vehicle, she couldn't care less about your presence as you linger for a good forty-five minutes observing her occasional perking of ears and scanning of the savanna in between mostly slow, majestic yawning.

As you head back to camp as the equatorial sun starts dipping, you and your travel mates recount the excitement of other creatures you've seen: a mongoose clan, some young crocs, an African fish eagle and little bee-eater birds.

And then suddenly, it's high drama on the grassy savanna as a herd of Thompson's gazelles are hightailing it en masse across the plains. As he scans the horizon with binocs, Big Moses, Co-founder and Head Guide of Basecamp Explorer, explains that it's most likely a hyena or jackal causing the stir.

On another late-afternoon game drive, you might be led by Nashipae Ntokoiwuan who is the youngest of twenty kids in her family and the second woman guide to have completed the company's Koiyaki Guiding School (KGS).

Nash will know where to take you to see some lion cubs stashed by mom in the bushes. She'll show you everything from huge buffalo bulls and wildebeest to tiny, gorgeous lilac-breasted roller birds and a noisy species that vies for the title of greatest name in the world of crazy bird names—the bare-faced go-away-bird.



Communal bush lunch under the "double" fig tree at Leopard Hill.

CREDIT: KEN GEIGER/BASECAMP EXPLORER

A *boma* is an enclosure for livestock and by extension a protected home or community place. On your last night of Leopard Hill life, your Maasai guides will take you to *boma* for a presentation of dancing and jumping around a bonfire. The food and drink flows as usual at this time to say goodbye to your hosts.

But, the adventure never really ends. On your mid-morning hour drive to the Ol Seki Airstrip to return to Nairobi, you'll spot more of the usual suspects of giraffes just outside of camp and some elephants and more along the way.

And then, Nash might take a detour to look for a cheetah that she heard is lounging about on a rugged hillock. You may find the elegant cat, or you may not, and that thrill of anticipation is just what you came for.

*Travel Notes:*

*In the fall of 2018, Kenya Airways inaugurated the first ever non-stop flight between Nairobi and New York City. The Boeing 787 Dreamliner makes five flights a week based on seasonality, with a fourteen-hour westbound and fifteen-hour eastbound timeframe. On arrival in Kenya, visitors pay a visa fee of \$51.*

*From Jomo Kenyatta International Airport, travelers headed to Basecamp sites in the Masai Mara can break up their journey with an overnight stay in the ten-story Villa Rosa Kempinski Nairobi near the central business district and the National Museum. Among the property's many dining venues, the Levantine-themed Tambourin restaurant is designed to mimic the traditional Arabic Majilis style of reception rooms. Guests there enjoy shared dishes such as mezze platters, while a belly dancer performs daily.*

*In order to reach the Mara, Basecamp Explorer guests will transfer the next day to Nairobi Wilson airport for a charter flight in a Safarilink aviation company Cessna Caravan propeller plane to the Mara Naboisho airstrip.*

*In addition to the five Basecamp Explorer safari destinations in the Masai Mara, the company operates five camps on Spitsbergen island in the Svalbard Archipelago in the Norwegian Arctic, including Basecamp Hotel at Longyeardalen town, the Nordenskiöld Lodge and Trapper's Station with its teams of Alaskan huskies.*