

KENYA

FEEL AT HOME

FRIENDSHIP, PHILANTHROPY, AND THE CALL OF THE
WILD PREVAIL IN THE CRADLE OF HUMANKIND.

Story and photography by Joel Centano

“YOU ARE NOW IN THE REAL AFRICA,” George Omuya, lead guide with Micato Safaris, grandly announces as my eight travel companions and I arrive in Kenya. “This is where all the game is.” True — possibilities to spy the “big five” abound here, but, as we’ll find over the next ten days, abundant wildlife represents only a fraction of the nation’s bounty. For an enriching journey, the birthplace of humanity has it all: contemplative vistas of the Great Rift Valley; sweeping savannahs of the Masai Mara; authentic encounters with indigenous tribes; and, thanks to socially-conscious safari outfitters, opportunities to contribute to the nation’s future while forging those lasting friendships for which the Kenyans are famous.

Out of Africa:
early morning in Kenya’s
Great Rift Valley.

a warm reception

“WELCOME . . . FEEL AT HOME! WELCOME . . . FEEL AT HOME!”

Ablaze in crimson sweaters and beaming smiles, scores of schoolchildren chant in unison as my companions and I enter their classroom. Kenyans are renowned for their warmth, but here in the Mukuru slum near the capital of Nairobi, this eruption of cheer is unexpected at best. As the children draw us closer, sharing their names and stories, we soon discover that our long drive through dusty roads and scenes of abject poverty doesn't need to end in despair. It has in fact led to a place filled with hope and heartfelt joy.

Both are hallmarks of the Harambee Centre, the vibrant base of Micato Safaris' AmericaShare program, founded 25 years ago as a way for safari-goers to give back to the Kenyan people. Before heading into the bush, visitors can lend a hand by planting trees, for instance, or delivering supplies to Harambee's women and children in need. Micato also matches Mukuru orphans with travelers who are able to sponsor the children's educations in Nairobi, and through its new One for One Commitment, the company also sends a child to school for every safari that it sells. Such programs are crucial for Kenyans: In Mukuru alone, nearly half of children between the ages of 6 and 13 (an estimated 100,000) are too poor to attend school.

True, the numbers are daunting, but as today's visit to Harambee (Swahili for "all pull together") proves, change here is both possible and palpable. As our celebrity reception in the classroom subsides, older children appear to show off additional facets of the center. Brian teaches us how to navigate video games in an arcade created to promote behavioral changes regarding HIV/AIDS, and in the library, the studious Ali and other adolescents proudly share their names, favorite subjects, and career goals. Later, we join many of the kids on their new basketball court, a generous gift from a teenage friend in the U.S. who donated his bar mitzvah money after visiting Harambee.

Such acts of kindness often follow visits here, and though leaving the center can take its emotional toll, our group finds further solace in the numerous sites in and around Nairobi that are also effecting change. From our base at Fairmont's legendary Norfolk Hotel, we tour the Gemini Desai jewelry gallery, which helps employ disadvantaged women and abandoned street children,

and also supports the New Life Home, an orphanage for babies born with AIDS. At The David Sheldrick Wildlife Orphanage, we watch rescued elephants parade around waterholes, pig-pile in the mud, and push footballs with their trunks. And at Giraffe Manor, we gaze at endangered Rothschild giraffes within an Edenic garden setting that sets the perfect stage for heading off on safari.

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game on

“DON'T BLAME ME IF WE GET LOST,” Jeremiah jokes as he rockets our Land Rover across labyrinthine paths that crisscross the seemingly infinite savannahs of the Masai Mara in southwest Kenya. “Blame a leopard.”

Our local Masai guide and driver has heard rumor that one of these elusive felines is stirring, and with the late afternoon sun heading west across the veldt, he makes haste and lets the dust fly. The reputed sighting is miles from our plush lodging back at the Mara Safari Club, but, given Jeremiah's track record, we're all up for the adventure. In the past two hours alone, he's successfully led our group to three of Africa's famed “big five”: African elephant (including a mother escorting her calves across a sunlit plain), Cape buffalo, and lion (Jeremiah was able to ease our vehicle within five feet of a male napping on his back). Having also glimpsed the threatened white rhino in a nearby refuge, our group readily agrees: The leopard now reigns on our list of must-sees.

Less than 35 years ago, such pursuits might have been different. Beginning in the late 1800s, African safaris were largely defined by death, and the colonialist-designated “big five” were coveted mainly for the challenge they posed as hunting targets. Since 1977, however, sport killing has been banned throughout the country. To discourage retaliation on suspected predators, the Kenyan government also reimburses tribes living on park peripheries for wildlife-related losses in livestock.



Clockwise from top left: Pachyderm playtime at The David Sheldrick Wildlife Orphanage; deep-seated peace at Shompole Lodge; heartwarming hospitality at Micato's Harambee Centre; nosy neighbors at Giraffe Manor; and safari-style at Shompole.





Clockwise from left:
Lion in the sun; a dazzle
of zebras; and setting
out on the Masai Mara
superhighway.

Determined to catch up to the cat before sunset, Jeremiah races against time and space as I fathom the enormity of the Mara Game Reserve, a veritable animal planet that covers more than 10,000 square miles when coupled with the contiguous Serengeti to the south. Together, the two parks harbor an estimated 2 million animals that participate in the Great Migration, an annual march in which herbivores commute from Tanzania to Kenya and back again in pursuit of food and water.

Though a month removed from the migration, we zigzag past untold numbers of zebra, hyena, giraffe, impala, dik dik, and topi as a pyramid of sunbeams pierces towering cumulonimbus clouds and alights on the savannah. Newly trimmed prairie grass turns gold and strangely shaped wildebeest, amassed in enormous

congregations, turn a velvety purple-brown. Darkening desert-date trees punctuate the landscape and etch umbrella-shaped silhouettes against a powder-blue sky.

When at last we reach our destination, Jeremiah cuts the engine and points to a lofty perch hidden in the verdant branches of an acacia tree. At first we see nothing. Then, two eyes ignite. Staring back at us through the foliage, the leopard studies our group for a spell then dips his body to feed on the hanging viscera of a recent kill. We watch in silence as he rises, struts toward an exposed chamber of the acacia, poses in a pool of light cast by the setting sun, and then, as if to signal the show is over, leaps from the tree to repose on a plush blanket of grass.



Masai guide
Koike Parsaloi in
Shompole
Conservancy.

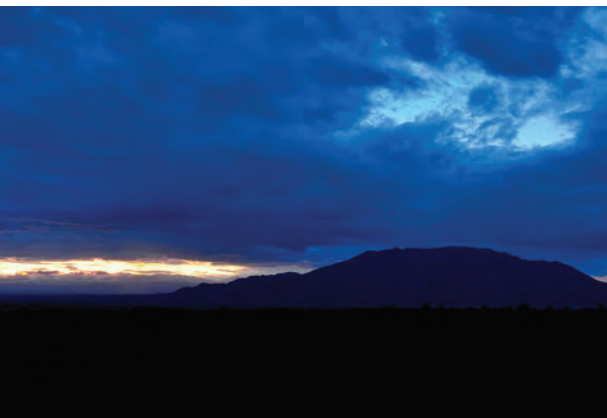
a small world

A METHODICAL TRANSITION OF COLOR marks dusk's arrival in the Shompole region of southern Kenya, our second safari destination. Skies pass from deep blue to indigo to violet as countless pink flamingoes coalesce with their reflections across the shallows of Lake Natron.

Sundowners in hand following our afternoon game drive, my companions and I raise a toast to Daniel, Issa, and Koike, our Masai guides who have delivered us to what must be one of the most powerful spots on earth to celebrate happy hour. Due north of here, Richard Leakey discovered the first human fossils on the shores of Lake Turkana, and here in Africa's Great Rift Valley, so much silence and space affords a sense of what it would be like to have the entire world to ourselves.

It's one of many gifts the Masai have bestowed upon us during our stay at the Shompole Lodge, where we've witnessed the peerless hospitality that has remained a constant in the tribe's traditions since its primary members emigrated from the Turkana region a millennium ago. Over the past three days, the Masai here have transcended the role of hosts and become good

Under African skies (from top): a ceremonial Masai dance performance; shades of twilight enshroud Mount Shompole; and thumbs up at the Pakase Primary School.



friends as they've welcomed us inside their villages, performed vivid dance ceremonies, and provided every possible comfort back at the lodge.

"We are very happy," Koike tells me as I savor my domestic Tusker beer and inquire about tourism's impact on the local people, who are not only employed by Shompole Lodge, but who share in its ownership. To emphasize his point, Koike speaks of his three children, whose health and education have benefited from lodge proceeds. Hearing our discussion, Issa joins in and gushes about his newborn son, and Daniel, all smiles, shares that his first child is on her way. When I reveal that my wife and I are also expecting, the three men kindle in a blaze of affection and well wishes that has come to define our experience here. Though my companions and I are far from our own families, we feel entirely at home, and tomorrow's departure will arrive all too soon.

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As the surrounding bodies of Mount Shompole and the farther off Mountain of God begin to blend into the color of night, our guides signal it's time to leave. Daniel rides shotgun in our open Land Rover as Koike deftly navigates the vicissitudes of the road leading back to the lodge. The darkness spreads, and for a long while there is no sound but the hum of our engine. The enormity of the Great Rift Valley, of the African continent, of our planet, compacts into the smallest sphere comprised only of our vehicle and what can be seen in the span of its headlights. For once the world feels perfectly understandable and simple.

Then, smiling, Daniel turns to ask if any of us are on Facebook. In its context, his question is at once startling and a summation of the sea changes our species have seen since those original days on Lake Turkana. Yet with his next words come the abiding beauty of connection, the enduring warmth of the Kenyan people, and the comfort that some things will never change: "If you 'friend' me," he tells us, his smile still shining, "I promise I will accept you right away."



DOING IT CAUSE FOR TRAVEL

GO

Limousine transfers, transatlantic perks such as 79-inch flat beds, and stopover-Shangri-la at the 8,000-square-foot Clubhouse in London's Heathrow Airport (think spa, gourmet fare, and cocktail bar) — they're all part of the Upper Class Experience from **Virgin Atlantic**. If it all sounds slightly indulgent, rest assured: Change is in the air. In-flight donations collected by the airline garner an average of \$70,000 each month for charities such as Free the Children, which helps fund education projects throughout Kenya. *Your Virtuoso travel advisor has additional details on Virgin Atlantic seating classes, services, and flights.*

SEE

Globetrotters can give back with **Micato Safaris** by volunteering in sustainability programs such as tree planting or by delivering much-needed supplies to women and children at the Harambee Centre. Having hosted the likes of Indira Gandhi and Robert Redford, Micato owners Jane and Felix Pinto are also well versed in providing VIP experiences for each of their guests, along with their signature brand of "home hospitality," which begins with dinner at their family residence in Nairobi. From the country's capital to the indulgent solitude of Shompole, a safari with Micato includes stays in luxe hotels and bush lodges that are also committed to positive change. *Contact your Virtuoso travel advisor to create a customized journey with Micato Safaris suited to your unique interests and needs.*

From left: A bird's-eye view at Mount Kenya Safari Club's animal orphanage; high above the Masai Mara in a hot-air balloon (top); poolside at Shompole Lodge (bottom); and a proud caretaker stands before a white rhino near the Mara Safari Club.

STAY

At the forefront of hospitality and philanthropy in Kenya stands **Fairmont Hotels & Resorts**, beginning with the classic **Norfolk Hotel** in Nairobi, where the city's past can literally be read on the hotel walls. Signature suites are embellished with artifacts from influential colonial icons, including Karen Blixen, whose novel *Out of Africa* helped put Kenya on the tourist map (visits to her homestead are just a jaunt away). Six dining venues — including the legendary Tea Room and Lord Delamere Terrace — are headed by Executive Chef Hubert Des Marais, who sources all menus at Fairmont's three Kenyan properties from local farmers and small-scale producers.

Equatorial elegance reigns at the **Mount Kenya Safari Club**, where visitors clear their minds in the English labyrinth, ride horseback through Mount Kenya National Park, and stroll the rose gardens that bloom directly on the equator. Established by Club founder and former actor, William Holden, the onsite animal orphanage serves as a breeding and rehab center for endangered African fauna. Toward empowering the community, the Club's farming coop provides local children with chickens, and pays members for their free-range, organic eggs. Reforestation initiatives here have also helped school kids plant and foster more than 10,000 trees.

Call it creature comforts: Wild times meet tented luxury at the **Mara Safari Club**, where, from four-poster, pillow-top beds, guests can listen to a chorus of hippos bellowing from the Mara River below. Nighttime game drives and morning hot-air balloon rides over the Masai Mara are a must, as are visits to the local Masai village and bazaar. Proceeds from the Club support education, medical facilities, and water treatment for villagers. The property also helps fund sustainability programs and a local animal refuge where intrepid souls can stand mere feet from wrestling white rhinos. **VI**