



## **Above Kenya's Mara, A New Lodge Marries Cinematic Allure with Maasai Community Impact**

Posted by [Patrick Dowd](#) on August 3, 2015



Angama Mara staff discuss lodge developments with a member of the local Maasai community. (Photo: Patrick Dowd)

Between 1994 and 2009, South African couple Nicky and Steve Fitzgerald led the development of over 60 luxury safari lodges throughout Sub-Saharan Africa and India.

They had planned to retire, but an unexpected opportunity to build one more – for the first time, under their ownership — on an extraordinary parcel overlooking Kenya's famed Maasai Mara wildlife conservancies was too alluring to resist.

This month, [Angama Mara](#), the result of a U.S. \$17 million fundraising campaign, 18-month construction sprint, and sales effort that involved individually pitching their new offering to over 1,000 travel agents worldwide, opens its doors.

The sweeping vistas afforded by Angama Mara's unparalleled perch above the Mara will be familiar to fans of the Academy Award-winning film *Out of Africa*. Portions of the film, which depicted the adventures and travails of a Danish baroness named Karen Blixen who was among Kenya's early colonial settlers, were filmed on the property.

As was the case in Blixen's day, the Fitzgerald's presence and success in Maasailand is dependent on a respectful, symbiotic relationship that they have forged – and must continue to foster – with the local Maasai community, from which they have leased Angama Mara's 700-acre plot and hired much of their workforce.



A lioness poses in front of the Maasai Mara's Oloololo Escarpment, atop which rests Angama Mara (Photo: Patrick Dowd)

After over a decade of persistently expressing interest in developing the property, the lease was offered exclusively to Steve Fitzgerald on account of the trusting relationship he had built with leaders of the local Maasai community, who own the land and graze their cattle in the surrounding area.

As Angama Mara welcomes its first guests and seeks to distinguish itself among the region's more established lodges, Steve's wife Nicky says that honoring this trust by ensuring that the property creates opportunities for the local community is their highest priority.

"To be successful, you have to make sure that all your community members have a stake in the business," she says. By "unabashedly catering to limited numbers of high net-worth, low-impact travelers who like to be taken care of," Nicky explains, she and her team envision Angama Mara as a vehicle of economic opportunity, employment, and workforce development for the surrounding community over 25,000 nearby residents, many of whom lack pathways to employment.



Angama Mara was designed by architects Silvo Rech and Lesley Carstens (Photo: Patrick Dowd)

Sitting at an elevation of 5,600 ft., Angama Mara's 60 luxury tents and brick common areas are designed in a contemporary style intended to evoke elements of Nairobi's Muthaiga Country Club, where elites have congregated since the early 1900s.

For guests wishing to delve deeper into the past, a library of works by celebrated African expatriates like American photographer Peter Beard attest to the region's enduring mystique and appeal to foreigner visitors. For those wishing to stay connected to the routines of modern life, there is a state-of-the-art gym, communal movie screening room, and reliable Wi-Fi throughout the property.

Beyond the comfortable confines of the lodge, Angama Mara offers game drives, nature walks led by resident naturalists, and *al fresco* dining experiences ranging from hillside picnics to lamp-lit *Nyama Choma* barbecue dinners in the surrounding bush.



Angama Mara owner Nicky Fitzgerald discusses their approach to community impact and engagement during breakfast overlooking the Maasai Mara. (Photo: Patrick Dowd)

After 18-months of breakneck work required to open the lodge in time for high season, Nicky Fitzgerald says that she is most excited to finally interact with guests, but also to run the lodge in a way that she thinks corrects the overly-heavy handed fundraising appeals that eco-tourism providers have pushed in recent years.

“As an industry, I think we’ve bludgeoned our guests with fundraising appeals...Most people don’t go on vacation to save the world; rather, they want to save their marriage, their sanity, or their relationships with their children.”

“And yet,” she adds, “if you don’t badger people for money, it is amazing how generous they can be.”

With this dynamic in mind, Nicky and her team have designed the [Angama Foundation](#) in a way that supports small, scalable community projects through micro-donations, as opposed to large-scale charity work that diverts staff attention away from the guest experience.

Though it may seem a trivial amount for a high-end lodge, Angama Mara charges all guests a \$10/day fee, which when the lodge is full contributes \$18,000 per month to the Foundation’s coffers.

The allocation of these funds is then determined in consultation with local leaders. The Foundation’s first investment will be a health clinic.



Members of an extended Maasai family that live in the community near Angama Mara.  
(Photo: Patrick Dowd)

Another way Angama Mara is supporting the community – beyond employing dozens of local workers and service providers – is by offering a six-week rotational hospitality training internship program for local youth.

“To have a piece of paper that speaks to their character and certifies their ability to operate within a high-end hospitality environment – this is an invaluable resource that dramatically increases their chance of earning full-time work throughout the tourism industry.”

Of course, such mechanisms for community impact are dependent on guests being open to looking past waves of daunting, if sometimes exaggerated, news reports – from terrorist attacks to Ebola virus (neither of which have affected the Mara region) – that led Kenyan tourism revenues to decline 7.3% in 2014.

That downward trend may yet turn, thanks to recently announced increases in government spending on national security and counter-terrorism. But even more encouraging than that is the fact that local Maasai warriors and their families have as much of a stake in Angama Mara’s success as the do the Fitzgeralds.

As Nicky sees it, the most material way for Angama Mara to positively impact the community is by paying their rent and staff wages on time, and by attracting foreign visitors who share an interest in celebrating and protecting its unique heritage for future generations.

“Our guests will tend to be a little more savvy, courageous, and open-minded,” she says, echoing the decorously resolute tone of *Out of Africa*’s famed protagonist, “We are ready to roll with whatever comes our way.”

*Disclosure: The author was hosted as a guest at Angama Mara for two nights.*