



MAASAI WARRIORS LOOK OUT OVER THE MARA PLAINS. © ANGAMA MARA

Soul Safari

Angama Mara safari lodge in Kenya offers a fresh, modern alternative to the colonial safari aesthetic.

by Britt Collins

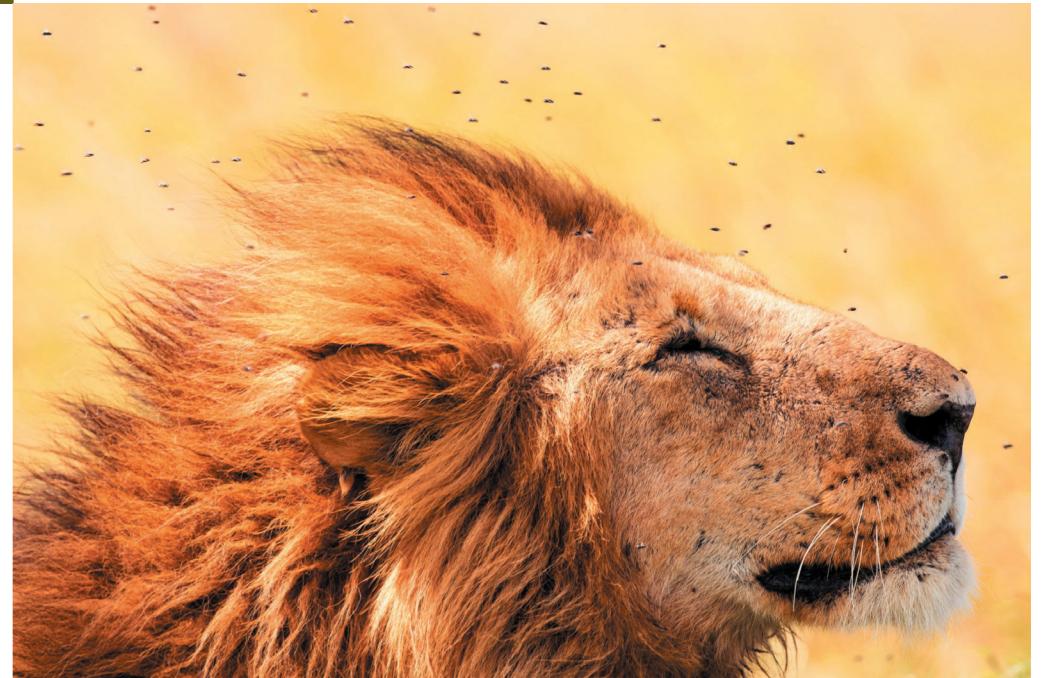
In the mist and the rain, winding across the golden-green savannas toward a secluded hilltop, I felt as if I was returning someplace I'd been before. Hanging high over Kenya's Great Rift Valley, Angama Mara safari lodge sits in the same setting where the most iconic scenes of Karen Blixen's *Out of Africa* were filmed. It's a soul-stirring dream of a place that seems to float 1,000ft above the Mara Triangle, the densest wildlife habitat in Africa.

Way before Richard Branson started colonising Africa with his luxury eco lodges, Steve and Nicky Fitzgerald were blazing the trail for sustainable tourism. The pioneering husband-and-wife hoteliers had long coveted this special parcel of land. When it became available they came out of retirement to lease the 700 acres from the Maasai community and created a fresh, modern alternative to the colonial safari aesthetic. The property — designed by Johannesburg-based architects Silvio Rech and Lesley Carstens, famed for modernist high-luxe, low-impact retreats such as North Island in the Seychelles — is cleverly split into two intimate 15-tent camps. The dramatic red-brick pavilion shared by both camps features a walled pool and African art gallery and studio, where Maasai women bead bespoke pieces.

I was met with a laid-back and inviting atmosphere. The warm Kenyan staff and Kate Fitzgerald, gracious daughter of Steve and Nicky, instantly made me feel at home. She brought me homemade tomato soup and lemon tea to soothe a cold, and changed my flights so that I could stay a little longer.



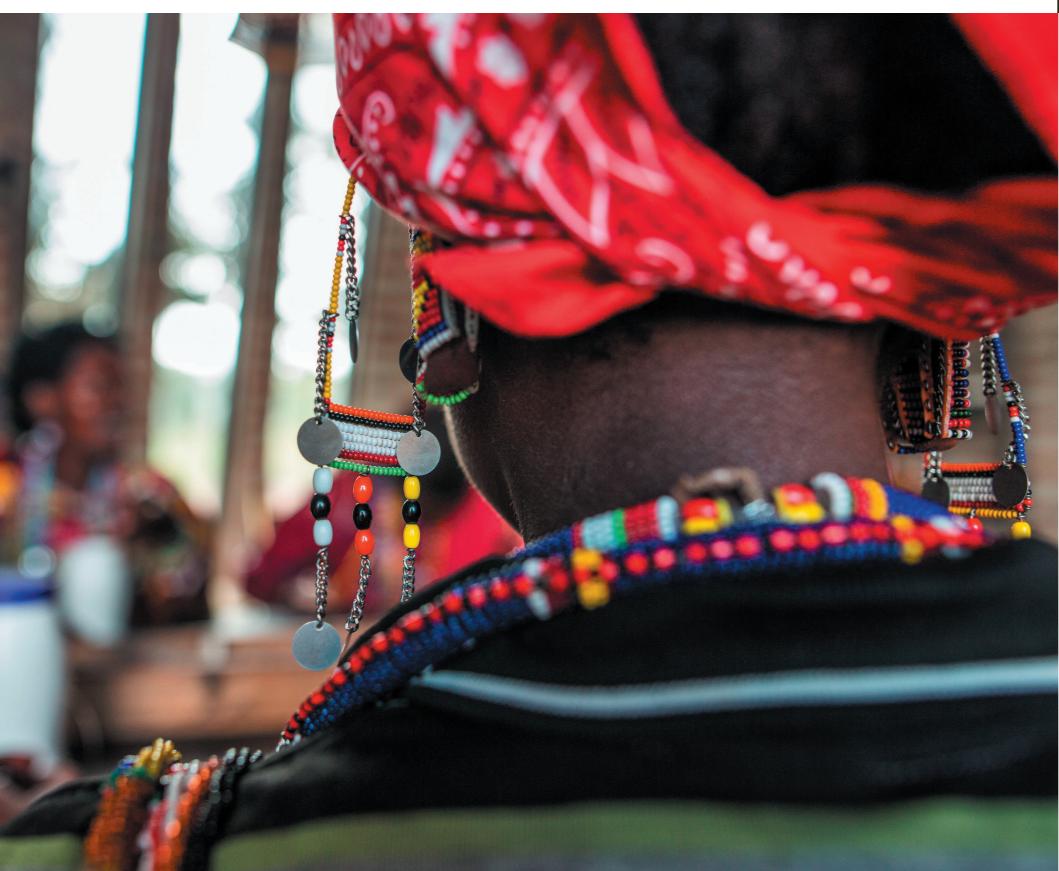
THE MARA IS HOME TO AFRICA'S BIG FIVE — LION, LEOPARD, RHINO, BUFFALO AND ELEPHANT — AS WELL AS LARGE RESIDENT POPULATIONS OF GIRAFFE, HYENA AND SEVERAL SPECIES OF ANTELOPE.
© ANGAMA MARA



"There, look," he says, flashing a wide smile and pointing out a black-maned lion, half-hidden in the hip-high grasses, rolling around on his back, his legs up in the air, with the playfulness of a kitten. The excitement of seeing a big cat in the wild never ceases.



The property — designed by Johannesburg-based architects Silvio Rech and Lesley Carstens — is split into two 15-tent camps. The dramatic red-brick pavilion shared by both camps features a walled pool and African art gallery and studio, where Maasai women bead bespoke pieces.



THE DRAMATIC RED-BRICK PAVILION SHARED BY BOTH CAMPS FEATURES A WALLED POOL AND AFRICAN ART GALLERY AND STUDIO, WHERE MAASAI WOMEN BEAD BESPOKE PIECES.



The loft-like tents, tucked into a tangle of acacia shrubs along a forest walkway, are big and beautiful with polished wooden floors, mid-century furniture with subtle splashes of Maasai-red and a 35ft wall of retractable glass doors opening onto spacious private terraces. The low-slung couches, super-plush bed and steel bathtub all face those stellar views.

Kate, who now runs the lodge, says the intention was to create a slick modern camp, "while protecting the wildlife and supporting local people, artists and producers in ways that benefit Africa in the long term".

The lodge is open and breezy with communal spaces spilling across a hilltop and scattered throughout are playful nods to *Out of Africa*: a pair of old plantation chairs in the lounge similar to those in the movie, a tiny replica of a yellow Gipsy Moth biplane in the library, along with an antique box camera and a cardboard crow perched on a shelf (the original name of the property was Olkuruk, which means crow in the Maasi language).

All the small and lovely touches — crystal decanters of whisky and vodka with mixers and fresh limes, Mason jars crammed with freshly baked ginger biscuits, binoculars and stacks of African-themed books — make it easy to switch off and lounge around doing nothing. From a cosy perch on the deck, I lost an entire afternoon flicking through a Peter Beard book while watching the fleeting thunderstorms, shifting light and raptors gliding by.

For animal lovers and adventurers who come to touch the wild and languish beneath the sun and starry skies, this romantic folly couldn't be more perfect. The swathe of bush is set on the most preserved, untamed and untouristy part of the Mara Triangle, the site of the seasonal migration when over 2.5 million wildebeest, zebras and other creatures travel between Tanzania's Serengeti and the Mara's plains, crossing treacherous crocodile-filled rivers, chasing the rains and last grasses.

At sunrise the next day, after the rains passed, I set off with Jackson, my Maasai guide, to the Mara National Reserve. As we descended the hill, I saw zebras and antelopes, their silky coats shimmering in the gauzy morning light. The sheer volume of wildlife out on the Mara was staggering. All around us, families of elephants, giraffes, great elegant herds of buffalo, and antelopes of every shape and size grazed amid the lush, misty expanses of wilderness.

A stately Cape buffalo, with a line of yellow-billed oxpecker birds on his back, sat on the roadside near the park's entrance. "An old general," Jackson says affectionately, saluting the buffalo who continued staring ahead without giving us a passing glance.

Everything seemed so peaceful and exotic. Every so often, we stopped to take in the stillness across the endless acacia-studded plains with wildebeests, waterbucks and zebras dotting the horizon as far as the eye could see. Jackson, who knows every aspect of the bush and all the creatures it sustains, told me stories about growing up in a Maasai village in the 1960s, a time when elephants and lions ruled the continent from coast to coast.

"There, look," he says, flashing a wide smile and pointing out a black-maned lion, half-hidden in the hip-high grasses, rolling around on his back, his legs up in the air, with the playfulness of a kitten. The excitement of seeing a big cat in the wild never ceases, even for those who've spent their entire lives among them.

Settling under a solitary balanite tree in the middle of nowhere, Jackson set out a blanket and picnic hamper full of fruit, snacks and chilled drinks. Unlike most safaris, which revolve around meal times, these are entirely bespoke so you can wander out for a few hours or the entire day as far as the Tanzania border.

"Looks like we have company," Jackson says cheerfully, and starts packing slowly. Just a few yards away, a pride of sun-dazed lionesses and their tawny cubs were dozing in the shade of thorny brush. To be sitting in this out-of-this-world nowhere exposed to feline predators felt simultaneously spine tingling and quite incredible. Watching, mesmerised, I suddenly understood what Karen Blixen meant when she wrote: "You know you are truly alive when you're living among lions."

At sundown on my last evening, Kate and I, and handful of other guests, a mix from Scotland, UK and the US, walked up to a steep forested glen for a communal fire-lit bush dinner. As the skies turned violet in the dusk, the warriors arrived from a nearby homestead and we danced with them on the cliff's edge under a crescent moon. ◇

From £2,720 for a full-board four-night stay, per person, including laundry, safaris and air-strip transfers; aardvarksafaris.co.uk