



Where to Go in 2015: Angama Mara, Kenya

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Nicky Fitzgerald and her husband Steve are pioneers in African tourism. The couple has opened more than 50 luxury safari lodges across sub-Saharan Africa and India and for years worked with the pioneering safari company [&Beyond](#). The couple has spent the last year building [Angama Mara](#), a very special property that sits on the border of Kenya's Mara Triangle and will open June 2015. Here, Nicky shares why everyone should have Kenya on their 2015 travel list and why her new hotel project might just be the best place to experience the Maasai Mara.

You and your husband have been in the hotel and tourism business for years. What made you decide to open your own lodge finally?

Our friendship with the Maasai, the people who own the land Angama now sits on, goes back more than 15 years and my husband Steve begged them for the lease on the property. Out of the blue, and to our surprise and great joy, Steve received a call last year asking him to come to Nairobi to sign the lease. It was well worth dumping retirement for this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

Africa and Kenya in particular have been in the headlines lately. How has this affected tourism in the area and why should people still consider a trip to Kenya in 2015?

I think 2015 will be a quiet year for tourism in Kenya, but that said, if you want a beautiful place all to yourself and you don't suffer from ebola hysteria then it's a very good reason to go now. Just the other day my daughter Kate and I drove the whole Mara Triangle from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. and didn't see another safari vehicle until 3:30 p.m. There are of course concerns when you go into the wild, but those concerns aren't terrorists lurking behind every bush or ebola.



You have described the location of Angama Mara as “what must surely be Africa’s most beautiful site.” What makes it so special?

A lot of people will recognize the site instantly because it is where all of those dreamy Ngong Hills scenes from the movie *Out of Africa* were filmed. Our property sits high on the Rift Valley’s Oloololo Escarpment and borders the Mara Triangle. If you stretch out from the guest tents’ decks chances are that your fingertips will be in the Triangle. That’s how close we are. Our guests will just roll down the escarpment along a private track that takes them straight into the Reserve, about a 15-minute drive at best.”

For those unfamiliar with Kenya, where does the Mara Triangle fall within Maasai Mara National Reserve?

The greater Maasai Mara essentially consists of two zones: the Maasai Mara National Reserve, which itself is divided into the more exclusive Mara Triangle to the west of the Mara River, and the Mara National Park to the east of the river; and the Maasai-owned conservancies bordering the Reserve, more than doubling the size of this great ecosystem. The Mara Triangle has far fewer safari vehicles and far fewer beds than you’ll find across the river in the Mara National Park. I might sound like a snob, but you could say that the Triangle is the Chanel of the Maasai Mara area. I think the Mara Triangle ranks up there as being one of the few places in Africa that consistently delivers great game viewing. It’s a dream for photographers as you’re pretty much guaranteed to see everything. There is no fence between the Mara and the lodge and we have heaps of giraffe on our property.”

What does the name Angama mean?

Angama is the Swahili word for ‘suspended in mid air,’ which is exactly what the camp feels like. We have two camp areas, each with 15 tents. We wanted to keep the tents feeling like a classic East African safari tent but they have glass fronts so you can be lying in bed in the morning and see the area’s famous hot air balloons float past in the air. You really get the feeling of that ‘forever view’ looking out to Tanzania. Tents all come with decks and we made it so the decks were set one step down so you aren’t sitting in bed and staring out at the guardrail.



Any other special touches in the tents?

We kept the design pretty classic and uncluttered. We understand that Angama Mara is part of the East African safari journey. We know we will share our guests with Singita and &Beyond and we don't want to compete with them, we want to complement those experiences. I must say I really like our bath tubs. They are tin tubs so it looks as if you're bathing in a big galvanized bucket from the outside.

Most people come to Kenya for the safari experience. What will the Angama Mara safari experience entail?

We want Angama Mara to be all about flexibility. We have 30 tents and a staff of 140 people to take care of our guests. We won't offer a set program each day. We want to find out as much about our guests as possible: where have they already been, where are they going after their stay with us; what does their safari dream look like?

Food seems to be a big part of the safari experience. Will you serve proper sundowners and bush dinners?

We can't compete with the Singitas of the world and offer fancy tasting menus. What we want to do is to celebrate the best Kenyan ingredients and bring picnicking to a whole new level. We want our picnic experiences to rival the animals and the scenery. Each night our guests can dine inside the lodge at tables with lovely linen tablecloths that are lit by candles. But we will also offer *nyama choma*, which is the Kenyan version of what Americans call a barbecue, South African's call a *braai*, and Argentineans call an *asado*. The meal is basically heaps and heaps of grilled meat eaten outdoors in an informal, fun, relaxed way. Our barbecue will be served family style and we will have chunks of cheese and tomatoes and bread to make steak sandwiches. We want people to eat with their fingers and drink lots of wine. After dinner guests can go back into the lodge and we will have a table with individually portioned desserts and cognac and coffee.

How will you involve the local Mara community in Angama Mara?

We have 140 staff, all of whom are local with the exception of one expat American couple. We designed and built the staff village and I cannot wait to take guests to experience it. We built a community clinic as part of the

village and we will employ a medical officer and will pay for medication for our staff. Community members will pay cost for medication but the services of the doctor are free. Ten dollars per guest per day will go to the Angama Foundation and to working with the community to meet their needs and part of the donation will go to NGOs already working in the Mara.

Many hotels have a boutique or shop to sell souvenirs and often in Kenya you see a Maasai lady at the door making crafts. I wanted something more authentic so we built a Maasai craft studio that will be attached to our shop. The studio will have a long work table where Maasai women will be beading and we will bring in carvers from Lamu to do traditional Swahili wood carving. The items made will be sold in our shop. The studio will also offer bespoke services. For instance, if you want your shirt cuffs beaded they can do that. We want this to be interactive so if guests want to learn to bead they can sign up for lessons.

From \$1,250 per person during high season, all-inclusive. Images courtesy of Angama Mara.

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