



With Respect

Karen Blixen Camp, Kenya

AS OUR ELDERLY 36-seater Bombardier Dash 8 settles into a teeth-rattling dirt landing at the Mara North Conservancy Airstrip in southern Kenya, few of the nearby gazelles and wildebeests deign to look up from their grazing. This oddly benign relationship between humans, their noisy machines, and the wild animals of the Maasai Mara National Reserve becomes even more apparent during the ride to our ultimate destination. We pass a big male lion and lioness snoozing together in shade just 10 metres away, then slow down to watch heavy-tusked elephants lazily ripping branches from acacia trees to chew on. Warthogs, bright-eyed hyenas, nervous baboons, fat zebras, and stately giraffes further add to the visual cornucopia, making the 40-minute journey through the arid, pale-green Serengeti landscape to Karen Blixen Camp feel much quicker. As we pull up in front of

the camp's open-air, thatched-roof foyer, staff member Virginia steps up to offer hot towels for wiping our dusty hands while general manager Lillian Kathambi greets us with a warm and genuine "Welcome home."

Considered the birthplace of humanity, Africa, indeed, is home. And Karen Blixen Camp, with its luxury canvas tents scattered amidst acacia and greenheart trees, perched above the gently sloping bank of the Mara River, has an air of familiarity about it. This may be because *Out of Africa*—the Academy Award-winning movie starring Robert Redford and Meryl Streep, and based on Danish writer Blixen's novel—was filmed close to the camp that bears the author's name. But it could also be the David Attenborough-style nature drama unfolding just below the dining area, where more than a dozen female hippos and their corpulent

offspring float sedately in the river, communicating in sonorous grunts. As camp administrator Benedict Walubengo says, "In the Mara, people are the guests and the animals are the hosts."

The camp epitomizes "glamping," providing a rustic opulence for guests, with accommodations that hearken back to the days when Blixen herself camped along the Mara River in the early 20th century (albeit now with solar panels). But Karen Blixen Camp has also redefined ecotourism. Of equal primacy to guests' comfort is protection of the Maasai Mara region's Mara North Conservancy, which is under threat from deforestation, poor water and grasslands management, and rapidly increasing demographics (according to the 2020 World Population Review, the country's population has doubled in the past 20 years). In Kenya, conservancies are privately managed areas that are run for the benefit of not only tourists but also wildlife and the Maasai tribespeople who populate the area and have run their cattle over vast tracts of the Serengeti—which spans both Kenya and Tanzania—for centuries. Today, the Maasai are the legal owners of the 30,000-hectare Mara North Conservancy.

This conservancy is crucial to the well-being of wildlife, including wildebeest, zebras, and gazelles. Every year, upwards of two million of these creatures undertake the Great Migration, travelling north about 800 kilometres from the Serengeti plains in Tanzania into the Maasai Mara, starting in May and peaking in October. Wildlife, tourism, and the Maasai are inextricably linked: tourism, an economic stalwart in Kenya that employs more than one million people, is dependent upon the wildlife that attracts visitors; wildlife is dependent upon the Maasai agreeing to leave this vast area unfenced in order to preserve critical ancient migration routes. (All 14 safari camps in the Mara North Conservancy, including Karen Blixen Camp, pay lease money to the local Maasai to ensure they keep their lands open to



This page: The tent interiors are luxurious yet still rustic (above); Maasai Rianda Women Group supports beadmaking, the jewellery sold to tourists as well as overseas in Europe (right).

Opposite page: Stately giraffes dot the Maasai Mara landscape.





wildlife migration and grazing. This is especially crucial for elephants—ever on the move due to their need for up to 270 kilograms of food daily.) Influencing this delicate balance is climate change, which is believed to be affecting rainfall so severely that there were worries this past spring that the Mara River might dry up.

Lillian Kathambi believes that the camp has a huge role to play in the preservation of this fragile ecosystem and to this end has created a comprehensive suite of programs via its non-profit, Karen Blixen Camp Trust, launched in 2014. The trust supports the Maasai, helping ensure local families benefit from the millions of tourism dollars flowing into the region, providing them with alternatives to traditional cattle raising—which ultimately competes for scarce food resources with wild animals. Currently, 85 per cent of Karen Blixen Camp staff are Maasai. The trust further supports

community empowerment, as well as childhood and vocational education, through initiatives such as a culinary arts program, which trains Maasai youth to be chefs (an enormous organic garden is the source of vegetables and herbs for guests' meals). Gender equality is also a consideration, and the female culinary students visit primary schools, telling girls and teens that a career as a chef can be an alternative to more traditional expectations. "They talk to the village girls and say, 'you don't have to get married.' It's really catching on," says Walubengo.

The trust has also stepped up to help stem the slaughter of elephants for their ivory, permanently donating a helicopter in 2015 for conservation use by the Mara Elephant Project, a nearby NGO that is working to protect pachyderms against habitat loss, poaching, climate change and increasing human-wildlife conflict. (The MEP pays for fuel

and maintenance.) The camp also provides language, IT, and business studies for members of the local Maasai community and camp staff. This includes instruction in basic math and English for the women who participate in the trust's Maasai Rianda Women Group, which supports beadmaking and beehive projects. The gorgeous beaded jewellery the women produce is sold not only to camp guests but also overseas in Sweden and Denmark, providing an income stream to mothers who, under Maasai tradition, are forbidden ownership of land or cows. With Walubengo acting as interpreter, mother-of-six Nasale Naimodu says that income from the beading has allowed her to put her three girls and three boys through school. With the youngest now in high school and the others in college, her children will become self-sufficient, Naimodu says proudly.

The trust's Mararianta Women Briquette Project is another way

to provide women with income. Rather than cutting down trees and burning the wood to create charcoal for cooking and heating, the women gather twigs and leaves to be turned into renewable fuel in a briquetting press. The camp's adopt-a-tree planting program encourages guests to pay \$10 for acacia seedlings that will later be transplanted in the Mara. It has also begun programs to teach local children about reforestation and get them interested in tree-planting initiatives.

The stunning herds of grazing ungulates dotting the vast, acacia-scented, rock-strewn vistas, as well as the predators dozing in shade until hunger drives them to seek and kill their next meal, are keen reminders of the value of such programs, emphasizing Walubengo's sage observation that the animals are the hosts and people the guests.

—*Roberta Staley, photography by Tallulah Photography*