

# Exploration

Conservation Tourism Protects Kenyan Wildlife

Story and Photos by Lauren Giannini

**N**ear sunset, glorious blood-orange sky: Lekopien at the wheel, me, shotgun, Barofa stands in the back. Their sharp eyes study the rolling terrain of the Mara, the spotted plain. The Maasai brings the vehicle to a swift halt, turns off the engine, and whispers in rapid Swahili. Barofa replies.

Lekopien leans toward me and says quietly, “Do you see the lions? So far we see 10 – they hunt for their dinner.”

I want to see these lions. For 12 days I have explored Kenya as a conservation tourist, feasting senses and camera on the wildlife which local game guides have spotted for me. My astigmatic eyes are starting to see Kenyan and pick out wildlife from bush, boulder or tree. This is very *sawa* (okay). Moved, I feel the prickle of tears and blink hard. I whisper, “Oh! Yes! Thank you!”

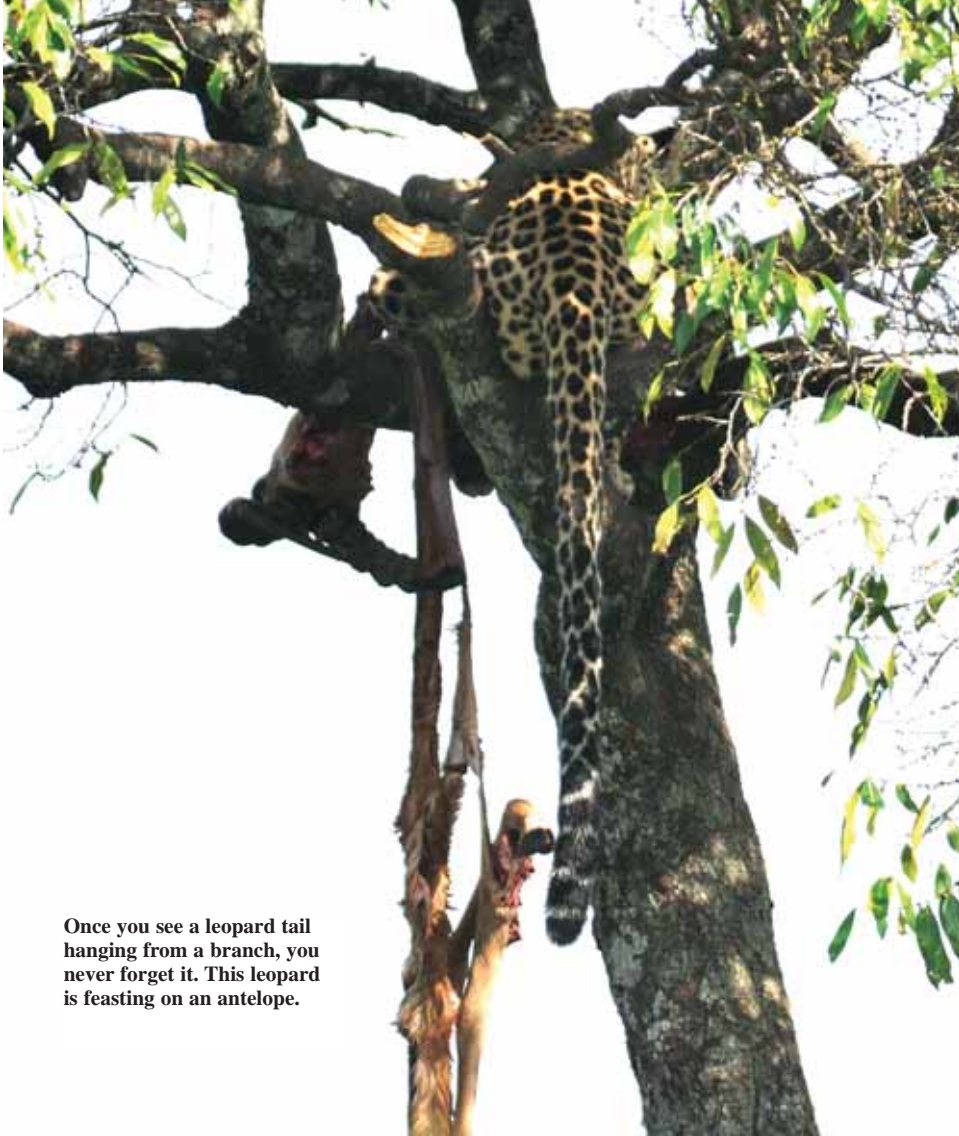
The elder male watches two lionesses.



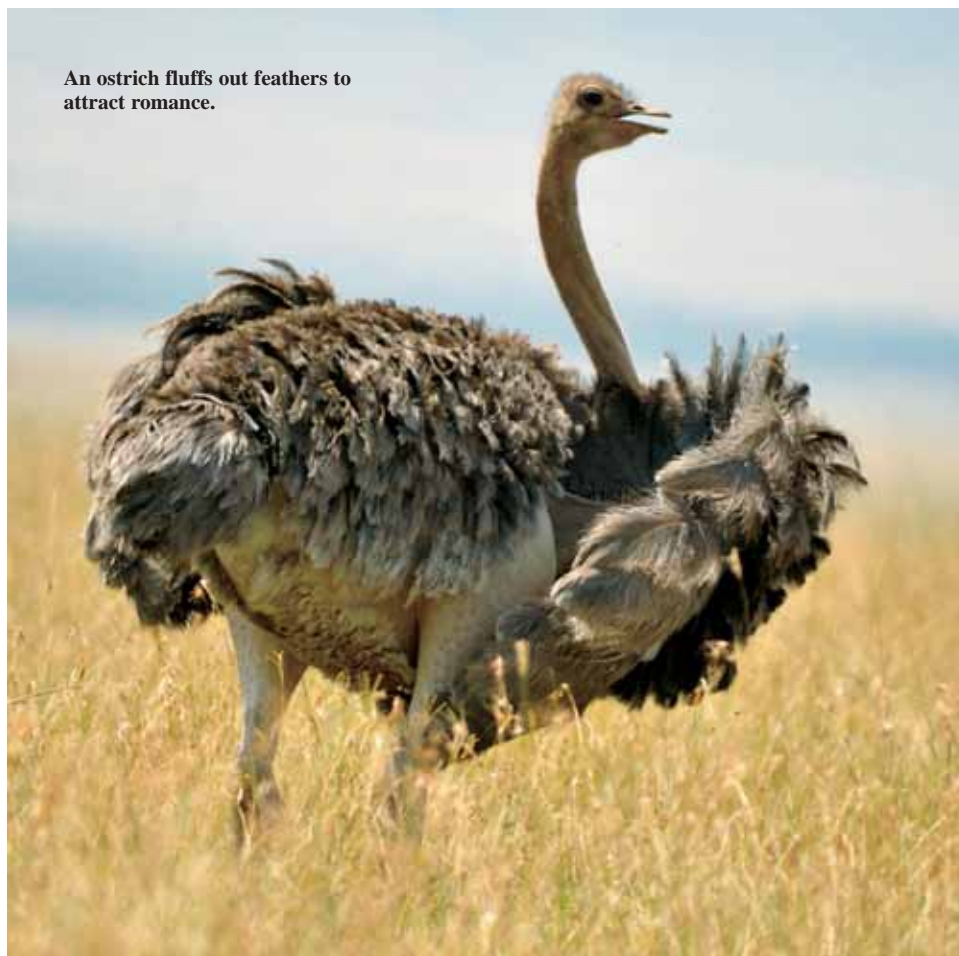
A male lion watching the lionesses hunt

Zebra graze peacefully, mingling with antelope, impala and Thomson’s gazelle





Once you see a leopard tail hanging from a branch, you never forget it. This leopard is feasting on an antelope.



An ostrich fluffs out feathers to attract romance.

Primary stalkers, they slink swiftly, gracefully toward the grazing game, halt and freeze. Their gaze never leaves their quarry several hundred yards up the slope. Farther behind, farther apart as if to flank or sweep, are two more lionesses. Younger lions follow closely behind a darker-maned male moving slightly to one side along with the elder male. I am awed by their total focus. I take many photos, hoping for some good ones.

The lions' teamwork is brilliant. How do they get organized without charts and walkie-talkies? Their hunt is beautiful, even though I know they are hungry and another creature must die. It is natural. It is the bush. The front lionesses are halfway up the northern slope where immense herds of impala, zebra, wildebeest, and antelope are grazing. We watch in awed silence.

The moment my jet landed at Nairobi's Jomo Kenyatta International Airport late Sunday, June 17, I fell in love with Kenya, the wildlife and the people. When they say *Karibu* (you are welcome), they mean it. *Safari* is journey in Swahili, but 'amazing' should be included in the dictionary definition. Visiting Kenya has been a life-long dream. I love to travel, but I'm not keen on crowds or glitzy resorts or tourist-trappy destinations. I almost didn't go, due to major aversion to needles (why I don't have a tiny, discreet tattoo), but I got essential vaccinations and malaria pills (isn't that why gin and tonic was invented?) I'm good to go for years.

Travel, to me, suggests total immersion experiences – exactly what I enjoyed for nearly three weeks, thanks to Tamsin Corcoran, managing director of New African Territories, who designed the personalized itinerary that carried me into the very heart and soul of Kenya. Corcoran said that the red dust was hard to get out of your system. Longtime friend Alice Laimbeer who introduced us warned that this safari would be life-changing. They were both right: Kenya and conservation tourism transcended my wildest dreams:



exciting, affirming, healing, revitalizing – and much more.

I flew on the same flights as Alice, her husband Rick, their daughter Margot and their Highland School group: Dulles to Heathrow to Nairobi. I peeled off with Corcoran, who had Highland all set for their first stop at Ol Donyo in the Chyulu Hills. They spent six days in the Maasai Preservation Trust at Highland’s sister school, Enkijape Primary. They built desks, taught and interacted with the students, their families and the school staff, and spent plenty of time on game drives to view the wildlife – conservation tourism at its best. Our paths didn’t cross again until the last three nights in Kenya.

Corcoran has great expertise in matching people to their dream safaris. My conservation tour included Mbulia Conservancy/West Tsavo (Kipalo), Laikipia Plateau (Sabuk Lodge), Maasai Mara (Speke’s Camp), Loita Forest/Maasai Trails (Jan’s Camp), Tana River Delta/Indian Ocean (Delta Dunes), and one weekend in Nairobi to attend Thoroughbred sales and races at Ngong Racecourse.

Wherever I went, I enjoyed the hospitality of Kenya’s people. Simple things, like getting on the right small plane at Nairobi’s Wilson Airport: they asked passengers to identify their luggage before



**Robert and Gus, two outstanding Samburu guides, are very knowledgeable about the wildlife and local flora used for medicine and other practical purposes.**

**Cape buffalo, locally called “black death” and “widowmaker,” are among the most dangerous animals in Africa’s big five which also includes elephant, rhino, leopard and lion.**







Three hippos frolic in the hippo pool on the Ewaso Nyiro (Black River), a short game drive from Sabuk Lodge.

Tamsin Corcoran (Director of New African Territories), Marian Slade, Dorcas Kyeli, Mutiso Kyeli (Mbulia/Kipalo Conservancy Anti-Poaching Patrol), and Craig Allen (Kipalo manager) enjoy breakfast with Mt. Kilimanjaro in the distance.



boarding. Mine wasn't there. They asked for my boarding pass: blue, not the color for that flight. One of their crew escorted me several planes over. My suitcase was there. *Hakuna matata*, don't worry – *Asante sana*, thank you so much. I have never felt safer or so well cared for in my life.

Conservation tourism owes its existence to pioneers like Corcoran who made it their business to involve the local communities. Traditional pastoralists, such as the Maasai, and agriculturalists now protect and co-exist with their wildlife.

"Saving wildlife is what triggered my involvement," acknowledged Corcoran, a veteran with 30 years of safari experience in the bush. "In order to lease the land that is Mbulia Conservancy and to establish Kipalo, I spent four years sitting under trees, talking with the Teita community about how protecting the wildlife would benefit them, that they could make money, because their wildlife would attract paying guests to Kipalo."

The Mbulia Group Ranch Conservancy and Lodge gave new hope to the people and to the 700 elephants and many buffalo that frequent this dry-season dispersal area. Kipalo offers breathtaking views: on clear days you can see Mt. Kilimanjaro, but vegetation provides thick ground cover for snares and other poaching traps. I was honored to spend an afternoon with two champions of conservation tourism, Mutiso and his wife Dorcas. For two years Mutusi has trained local men and led anti-poaching patrols. They have removed nearly 1,000 wire snares, made more than 30 arrests, and lost only one elephant. Mutusi and his team work closely with Kenya Wildlife Service, which patrols Tsavo West, adjacent to Mbulia's 12,000 acres.

Wherever I went, I viewed wildlife: elephant, hippo, wildebeest, buffalo, giraffe, zebra, dik-dik, gerenuk, antelope, impala, topi, eland, crocodile, lion, cheetah, leopard, hyena, warthog, baboon, bushbaby, mongoose, ostrich, amazing birds. The only member of the big five I missed seeing was rhino; we saw fresh dung but the culprits were gone.

The final stop was Delta Dunes,

accessible only by boat on the river, the ultimate "get away from it all" for beach and water lovers—no one for miles. Amazing seafood caught that day, delicacies like mangrove crab with handmade ravioli. Breakfast and lunch in the top mess, 300 feet up, spectacular views. I shared Delta with the Highland group: a great end to our safaris.

Returning in the dusk from the hippo pool to Sabuk with Samburu guides Robert and Gus, they spot something. Robert halts the car, motions toward my side of the track. I turn. The open window frames a large bull elephant with huge tusks about 10 feet away. My camera is in my lap, the lens too slow for this light. That elephant stares at me. I'm spellbound. He lifts his head, flares his ears: *go away!* Robert turns the key. We glide up the track.

Red dust, the magic of Kenya. Living green—using solar power, not wasting water, recycling everything. Living in luxury, comforted by the knowledge that local people earn valuable income and are being trained for jobs in conservation tourism, their children educated, local schools supported. Wildlife, clean air, healthy living, camaraderie, excitement. Every conservation tourist can

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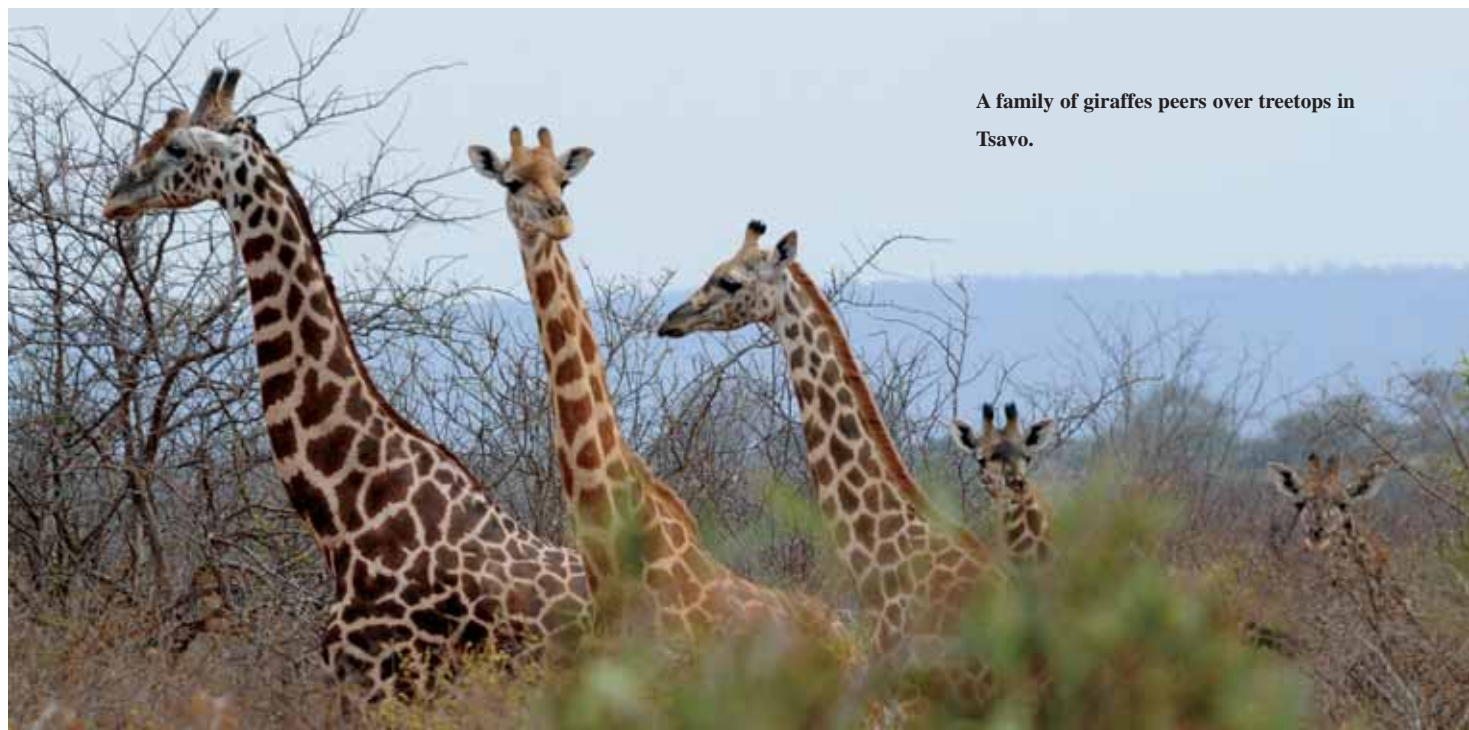
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Lauren R. Giannini is an award-winning writer, who specializes in stories and photos about the equestrian world. Her work appears in *Sidelines Equestrian*, *In & Around Horse Country*, *The Horse of Delaware Valley*, *Middleburg Life*, and *The Virginia Sportsman* among others.



A family of giraffes peers over treetops in Tsavo.