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Wild + Tribal + Luxe

The Kenya Formula

written by [Carla Hunt](#) | Posted on February 5th, 2013

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Kenya is the land of the lion, the rhino, the elephant, the buffalo and the leopard—the classic safari destination. Kenya is also the land of living tribal cultures such as the Maasai of the sweeping savannah grasslands, the North’s nomadic Samburu, and the Swahili along the Indian Ocean. These are actually among the smallest of Kenya’s more than 40 distinct ethnic communities, yet they are the people travelers most frequently meet on today’s safaris that increasingly mix unparalleled wildlife viewing and cultural immersion to deliver the optimum Kenya experience.

Kenya is the perfect destination for the experiential vacation that today’s high-end clients are seeking, says Yvonne Whitcomb, assistant director of **Cox & Kings’** Africa division. And she explains why by making this comparison: “While South Africa has a fabulous luxury wildlife product, it lacks the cultural aspect; Kenya, on the other hand, offers the unique mixture of teeming wildlife and memorable cultural experiences.” Whitcomb also points out that while South Africa has a First World tourist infrastructure, “the road through Kenya is a little dustier, but worth every detour, with exceptional safari lodges and tented camps at the end of the day.”

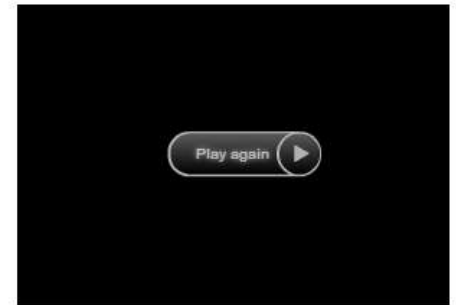
Whitcomb’s voice drops to an almost awesome whisper as she shares her latest lodging discovery: gorgeous **Lemarti Camp** on the Laikipia Plateau, owned and operated by a Nairobi fashion designer and her Samburu husband. “The lodge, combined with the neighboring private nature conservancy, gives guests all those things that are important to a top-of-the-line safari: authenticity, exclusivity and privacy.”

Jacada Travel’s founder, Alex Malcolm, views a luxury safari in terms of being a “unique and privileged experience.” One way he fills this bill is with a 9-night *True Tribal Kenya: March with the Maasai*, a new cultural safari (priced from \$6,802 pp dbl) that immerses guests in the Maasai way of life—its customs, folklore, survival skills and wildlife expertise. For further authenticity, guests stay in authentic tented bush camps: first class and superior.

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"When you're focused on experience, you often sacrifice a bit of comfort for more exclusive locations and activities," says Malcolm. "In a higher-end product, we offer a *Private Helicopter Safari* [more on that later] to the north of Kenya—wildly remote and untouched—where, if we forfeit a bit of luxury, not much, the exchange is truly exceptional encounters."



maasai lands

Tribal grounds: The Maasai—representing only 2 percent of the population—are for many of us the iconic symbol of Kenya. They are elegant and proud people in colorful dress—women bedecked in brilliant bead necklaces, men standing tall in red shuka blankets—mostly nomadic and with a reverence for cattle that represent status, wealth and livelihood. The centerpiece of Maasai-lands is the world-renowned Maasai Mara National Reserve where game abounds, particularly when the migration is on, and two million wildebeest and zebras make their way back and forth across the Mara River (between July and October). All the great predators—including the largest population of lions in Africa—are found among the 95 animal species of the Mara Reserve, which lies within the Maasai territory. Increasingly, families are tending their herds within "conservancies," established in conjunction with the Maasai communities who protect wildlife as a natural resource and source of improved livelihood. Malcolm comments that "for visitors seeking the most exclusive safari, the conservancies bordering the Mara Reserve are ideal. They share an unfenced border with the park, and therefore enjoy the same quality of game experience, without the larger crowds in the reserve itself." He also points out that conservancies not only offer easy cultural encounters, but activities not allowed in the Mara Reserve, such as walking safaris and night drives.

On safari: African Travel, Inc. blends a stay in fine wildlife territory with cultural heritage in its 4-day *Culture of the Maasai Tour*, a non-traditional experience offered as a customized extension to an individual or group itinerary. Guests are based in the spectacularly scenic Chyulu Hills at the luxurious **Campi ya Kanzi**, located within the exclusive and absolutely private Mbirikani Group Ranch, covering 275,000 acres. The camp is known for its six beautiful tented cottage accommodations (and two tented suites), candlelit dinners of Italian or local cuisine, and superb views of majestic Mount Kilimanjaro. The sojourn here includes not only Maasai-led walking safaris and traditional game drives, but the opportunity to help the Maasai preserve their wildlife and cultural heritage, and learn about their lifestyle and culture. All-inclusive price is \$3,965.

Jacada Travel meets with the Maasai, as well as the Pokot, and Samburu tribes during its 9-night *Private Helicopter Safari*, flying by private air charter from Nairobi to the northern area of the Greater Maasai Mara to spend three nights at **Richard's Camp** for a supremely comfortable, classic under-a-canvas safari experience, with expert guides introducing a wildlife spectacle like no other. Lift off from here by helicopter to fly north: up the Rift Valley to Lake Baringo, home to a famous flamingo population; to Silali Crater, landing on the rim; and through the changing landscapes of Hoodoo, Painted and Suguta valleys to Lake Turkana, for a stay at the **Desert Rose Lodge**. Continue south to **Robert's Camp**, to watch the Samburu herdsman draw water for their livestock from the deep "Singing Wells," as they sing traditional songs; stop finally at Lewa Wildlife Conservancy for three days of top wildlife encounters from homebase at the beautiful **Sirikoi Lodge**. The all-inclusive cost is \$29,635 pp.

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Living luxe: In the stunning Mara North Conservancy (excellent website: maasaimara.com), there are many beautiful lodgings among the 11-member safari tented camps. **Mara Plains Camp**, one of the 11 members, is located in the private 700-acre Olare Orok Conservancy. Under canvas and on raised decks, each of the seven rooms opens on three sides (with net walls) to the great outdoors; rooms have dressing areas, en-suite bathrooms, and private verandahs with grand views. In addition to including all meals, the camp serves refreshments on game drives and traditional sundowner cocktails. Mara Plains is surrounded by territories hosting a number of lion prides; cheetahs are established close by; and white leopards wander through the camp.

Saruni Mara is a deluxe, intimate, and eco- and community-friendly safari lodge, accommodating 10 guests in five cottages and one family villa for four. All are furnished with colonial antiques, Persian carpets and African art, as well as large bathrooms with canvas fronts that open to a shower with a view. Saruni also has an award-winning spa called *Maasai Wellbeing Space*, and serves up gourmet cuisine with a strong Italian flavor.

Royal Mara Safari Lodge, located on Hippo Bend Lagoon on the Mara River, lies directly on the wildebeest Great Migration route. Accommodations are in eight luxury riverfront suites, furnished with hand-carved African furniture and elevated off the ground on wooden decks with a private balcony verandah. The lodge prides itself on gourmet meals served in varied wildlife settings: breakfasts taken near a hippo pool, barbecue lunches by the river, dinner in the bush under the stars—with protection from Maasai warriors.

samburu lands

Tribal grounds: The Samburu occupy arid areas directly north of Mt. Kenya. Like the Maasai, they live the nomadic life of their ancestors, but herding camels and goats. Home bases are usually small villages of five to eight families, whose women wear their own styling of the colorful beaded necklaces for which Kenya is famous, while men decorate their faces and upper bodies with intricate designs. Many Samburu pastoralists have become more sedentary, grazing livestock on land they own and control as

part of a Community Conservancy. There they provide security for wildlife, accompany visitors as trackers on bush walks, game drives and camel walks; and host guests in their villages. Samburu National Park, whose green spaces are watered by the Ewaso N'giro River, has its own roster of "Northern big five" species: the Beisa oryx, reticulated giraffe, gerenuk antelope, Somali ostrich and Grevy's zebra (bigger and with narrower stripes than their plains cousins). Here also, the river draws herds of roaming elephants and resident crocodiles—and occasional white-water rafting. Less visited than other wilderness reserves, peaceful Samburu offers an authentic wilderness experience.

On safari: In the dry northern reaches of Kenya, Samburu National Park is a high-beam attraction on Cox & Kings' 12-night *Quintessential Kenya*. Highlights include tracking herds of elephants against the backdrop of Mount Kilimanjaro in the Chyulu Hills near Amboseli National Park; spotting the "Northern big five" in Samburu; seeing thousands of flamingos and searching for rhinos (white and black) near Lake Nakuru; watching predator and prey; and floating above the herds on a hot-air balloon ride in Maasai Mara. Traveling during June through October, the all-inclusive cost with private guiding starts at \$11,275 pp, staying in luxury lodges and tented camps such as **Oi Donyo Lodge**, **SaSaab Camp**, **Lake Elementaita Serena**, **Mara Plains Camp** and **Fairmont The Norfolk** in Nairobi.

Living luxe: The exclusive SaSaab Camp combines the romance and adrenalin of a game drive with a boutique hotel-style luxury within the vast Westgate Community Conservancy, home to 600 Samburu families. Each of the nine huge (1,000 sq. ft.), distinctive rooms, furnished with Morocco flair, has wireless Internet access, a west-facing verandah and private plunge pool overlooking the river and wildlife below. On site is *SpaSaab*, and activities include twice daily game drives, night drives, walking safaris, and day trips to Samburu Reserve. Sasaab offers special insights to Samburu life, arranging visits to traditional ceremonies such as blessing rituals, weddings and Moani dancing, and to a Samburu market selling handmade jewelry and traditional attire.

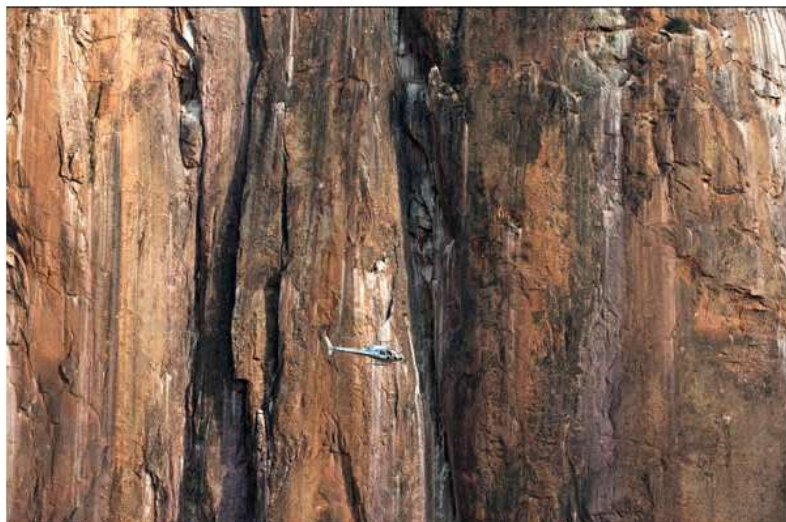
South of the Samburu National Reserve, travelers to Kenya can experience the incredible wildlife—sheltering 10 percent of Kenya's black rhino population and home to the world's largest concentration of Grevy's zebra—in the private 62,000-acre Lewa Wildlife Conservancy. To enter this superstar among conservancies, clients must be staying at one of **Lewa's** chic bush-lodges. One choice, **Lewa Wilderness Lodge**, has eight individually decorated cottages with private sitting areas, fireplaces and verandah with grand views of Mt. Kenya. Facilities include a pool and tennis court. Adventurous guests are offered the chance to go *Walking Wild*, a mobile safari accompanied by guides, led by camels and "glamping out" (three-five nights) in a private tent under the stars. On the other hand, it was at the beautiful **Lewa Safari Camp**, with 12 permanent tents—fitted with en-suite bathrooms and oh-so comfy beds—where Prince William and Kate Middleton stayed before he popped the question during their 10-day safari. Common to both Lewa lodgings are bush walks and night safaris, horse and camel safaris, cultural visits, picnic lunches and dinners under the stars.

swahili lands

Tribal grounds: The Swahili people, ethnographically part of the Bantu tribe, first settled on Lamu Island, a tranquil outpost accessed by air from Nairobi. Continuously inhabited for more than 700 years, Lamu Old Town, a UNESCO World Heritage site, is not only the oldest but the best-preserved Swahili settlement in East Africa. Built of coral stone and mangrove timber, its narrow lanes are lined with traditional houses enriched by inner courtyards and elaborately carved wooden doors. Elsewhere on the island are rolling dunes, endless beaches and tiny villages nestling among coconut and mango plantations. Transport here moves by donkey on land and traditional sail-rigged dhows offshore. In fact, for a special client experience, arrange a dhow safari around the Lamu archipelago. While today the 300-mile-long coast is a favorite of beach lovers, scuba divers and history buffs, in the past, Swahili lands absorbed Spice Route traders from Portugal, Turkey and Oman, resulting in a cultural blend of Bantu and Islamic traditions. Swahili, the national language of Kenya, contributes an important word to the English language: safari.

On safari: **TunisUSA's Iconic Journeys Worldwide** division delves deeply into the history and culture of the Indian Ocean outposts of Lamu Island and Mombasa during its 9-night *Kenya—Nature, Animal Life and Cultural Diversity* tour. Starting in Nairobi, tour members have a private visit to the National Museum; in the Maasai Mara Reserve, wildlife comes into full and spectacular view on early-morning and late-afternoon game drives. On the Swahili coast, the first stop is Lamu Island, with a 2-night stay at luxurious **Lamu House**, a beautiful restoration and combination of two historic mansions. Special activities include a curator-guided tour of the Lamu and Swahili museums; and a visit to the traditional Swahili village of Shela, and the coral palaces and mosque of the 15th century Gede Ruins at Malindi. Finally, clients spend two nights outside Mombasa at the deluxe **Serena Beach Resort**, styled to recall a 13th century Swahili town. In Mombasa, tour members visit Fort Jesus (a UNESCO World Heritage site) and the Swahili Museum, dining out on traditional cuisine: a fusion of Arab, Swahili, and Indian flavors. Departing June 1, the tour cost is \$3,800 pp dbl.

Living luxe: **Abercrombie & Kent**, operating luxury tours in East Africa for 50 years, knows Kenya and calls "the endless white beaches and turquoise waters of the Kenyan coastline the perfect finale to any Kenya safari." Among luxury beach hideaways, A&K recommends **Kinondo-Kwetu**, on its own private sands in Diani. All guest accommodations—five tropical cottages and spacious suites decorated with antiques and Swahili handcrafts—have sea views. Activities center around two swimming pools, sailing, kayaking, tennis, excellent snorkeling and scuba diving. The accent is also on luxury at **Msambweni House**, an all-inclusive, boutique hotel that stands on a 40-ft. cliff overlooking a 700-ft. beach; it is surrounded by 28 acres of nature. Located south of Mombasa, this owner-managed resort offers daily massages, gourmet French cuisine and Swahili-influenced, seaview suites and villas for 12 guests that are nothing short of grand. Guests enjoy a huge infinity pool, local village visits, deep-sea fishing, scuba diving and snorkeling in Kisite Marine Park.



Jambo! Relais & Chateaux

Recently inducted as the first hotel member in Kenya of the **Relais & Chateaux** hotel group is **Oi Donya Lodge**, located on the 275,000-acre Mbirikani Group Ranch, a concession of communal Maasai-owned land nestled on the foothills of the beautiful Chyulu Hills National Park. The enchanting lodge has 10 exquisitely decorated villas—eight with their own plunge pools—and all with al fresco showers on private verandahs, rooftop star-gazing suites, and views of majestic Mount Kilimanjaro. The contemporary-colonial main lodge features a menu and wine list to satisfy the most gourmet of explorers. Priced from \$910 per suite in low season and high season starting at \$1,500 per suite, everything is included, from day and night game drives to candlelit dinners under the stars. Visit greatplainsconservation.com.

OTHER AFRICAN TIDBITS: Find Bliss in Tanzania

Extraordinary Journeys Africa (extraordinaryjourneys.net/blog/yoga-safari-in-tanzania) has joined forces with **Asilia Africa** to offer a series of three limited-time yoga retreat—March, June and December 2013—at **Sayari Camp** in the northern Serengeti in Tanzania. The retreat includes a 5-night stay at the 15-tent Sayari Camp, a 1-night stay at **Onsea House** in Arusha, scenic game drives through the Serengeti National Park, domestic travel within Tanzania, and all meals, drinks and activities including two daily yoga sessions and game park entrance fees.

The yoga instructor, Shannon Paige, emphasizes deep spaces of calm and connection with the land through her own brand of Anjali Restorative Yoga, in which meditation and synchronized breathing exercises are guided by the rich imagery of the natural wilderness. To that end, students will wake each morning to a restorative sunrise game drive across the Serengeti plains and take advantage of guided afternoon drives or bush walks in between daily yoga sessions. Sayari Camp is outfitted with king-sized beds, private verandahs, luxurious amenities, and a fireplace, library, bar and lounge for guests to relax in. Rates for the retreat begins at \$3,900 pp dbl.



Archived related articles (available on recommend.com):

[Africa Rising](#) (December 2012)

contact information

Abercrombie & Kent: (800) 554-7094; abercrombiekent.com

African Travel, Inc.: (800) 421-8907; africantravelinc.com or africantravelinc.com/agents

Cox & Kings: (800) 999-1758; coxandkingsusa.com or coxandkingsusa.com/agents

Jacada Travel: (866) 610-1533; jacadatravel.com

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