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Trunk show: a herd of elephants at Kenya's Lewa Conservancy.

A NEW DAY FOR KENYA

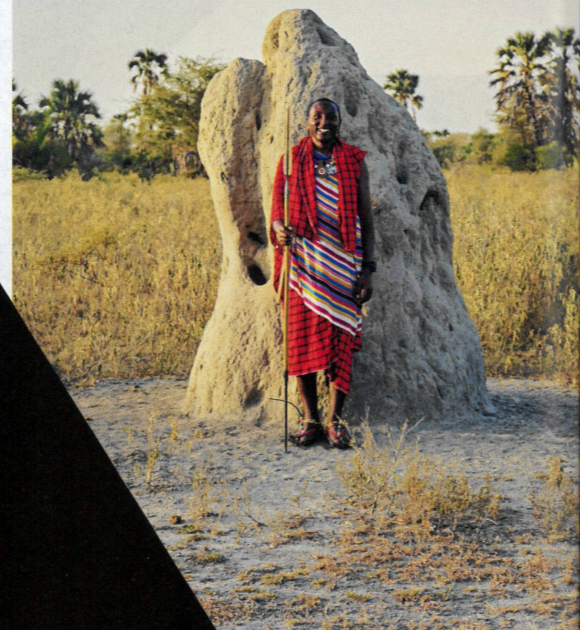
The wildlife safari was born in the nature conservancies of East Africa. **PETER TERZIAN** reports on why, after years of insecurity, this is the time to return.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY NICK BALLÓN



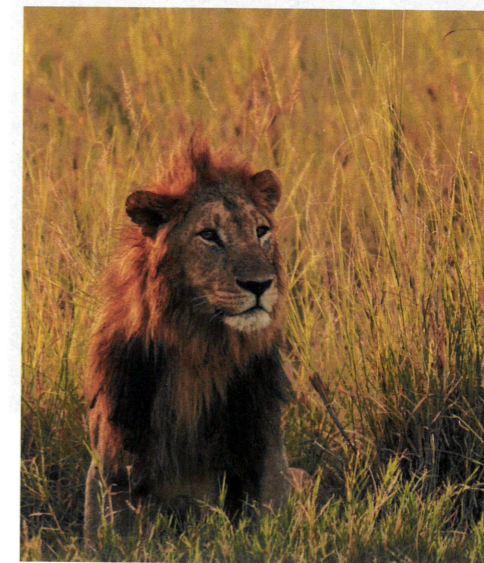
▶ A Masai guide in front of an abandoned termite mound at Tanzania's Chem Chem.

◀ Sarara Treehouses, a collection of six luxurious treetop suites in Kenya's Namunyak Wildlife Conservancy.



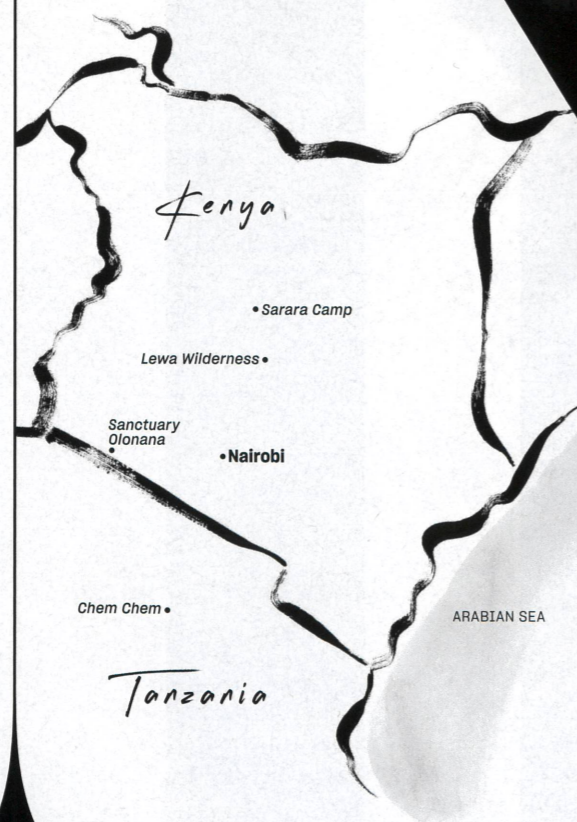
▶ A bush lunch under an acacia tree in Kenya's Masai Mara Reserve.

▶ Lion-spotting on a game drive near Chem Chem.



ONE EVENING LAST SPRING, a group of visitors to Kenya was parked by a dry riverbed on the Namunyak Wildlife Conservancy, drinking gin and tonics on the roof of a converted Land Cruiser while watching the sun set. Suddenly, monkeys could be heard crying in alarm—the pulse-quickening sound that typically signifies a predator's approach. Fifteen minutes passed, during which the travelers listened intently. Finally, the sound of wooden cowbells announced the reason for the simian commotion. An eight-year-old boy, singing to himself, was driving a group of 40 camels out of the bush, determined to get the flock home before nightfall.

Encounters like this reveal the fragile balance between the indigenous people, the precarious populations of wildlife, and the dramatic landscapes of East Africa. Kili McGowan, the chair of the Safari Pros consortium of travel advisors, organizes and leads trips that venture beyond sightings of the classic Big Five—elephants, lions, rhinos, leopards, and buffalo. As an expert on the region, McGowan was guiding a tour of conservancies in Kenya, which is bouncing back after a half-decade



hiatus during which security concerns kept some travelers away.

McGowan is one of a growing number of specialists who are willing to go above and beyond for clients. She will even, on occasion, accompany them every step of the way, providing on-the-ground knowledge and a deep understanding of conservation issues. Once this trip was complete, McGowan would turn around and fly back to the continent with a group of women who will only travel in her company.

The Kenya group, which included the photographer Nick Ballón, began its trip at Namunyak, 850,000 acres of protected land accessible by private plane from Nairobi. "You fly over a very arid, scrubby landscape, almost like the American Southwest," McGowan explained. Then, as you approach Namunyak—the name means "place of peace" in the language of the local Samburu tribe—clusters of green appear. These are the Mathews Mountains, a compact series of hills that unfold the recently opened Sarara Treehouses, six luxurious

tented structures that sit in the branches supported by stilts and platforms. "One of the beautiful things about the Sarara Treehouses is that you wake up in the forest in the morning," McGowan continued. There are no fences surrounding the property. Your alarm clock might be the sound of monkeys playing in the trees—or warthogs and antelope walking beneath your tent.

Namunyak was founded in 1995, a time when poaching had reduced the number of elephants in the area of the mountain range from 15,000 to 400 and obliterated the population of black rhinos. Since then, the conservancy has helped increase the elephant count to more than 6,300. And it's now home to the Reteti Elephant Sanctuary, which was founded by Katie Rowe, the wife of Sarara's second-generation owner, Jeremy Bastard. The orphanage helps abandoned babies adjust to their environment. McGowan's group stopped by at feeding time. Ears flapping, the babies ran through the front gate, excited to receive their bottles of milk, each of which had been prepared to accommodate a particular elephant's nutritional needs.

THE SAMBURU, cousins of the Masai, have kept livestock on the land for more than 500 years. Clad in traditional garb—a colorful piece of cloth worn like a sarong and ornate beads—Robert Lemaiyan, Sarara's host, guide, and manager, took



◀ Lewa Wilderness lodge owner Will Craig takes guests on an open biplane flight over the Lewa Conservancy.

▼ A leopard watches the sun set from a giant anthill on the Masai Mara.

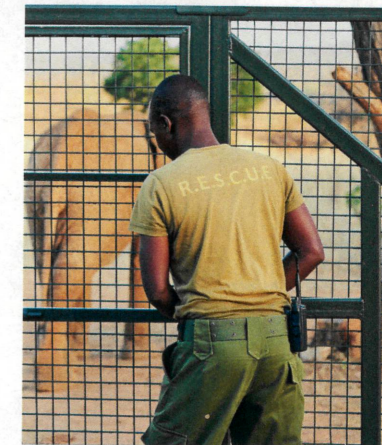


McGowan's group on a walk to the "singing wells" on their first morning at the camp. These wells are deep holes that Samburu families dig into riverbeds until they strike the water table. (There's no standing water on the conservancy.) Once a day, young men bring their cows, donkeys, and goats to the wells to drink. The holes range in depth from 18 to 30 feet, with steps carved into the earth. A human chain is formed to pass buckets of fresh water up from the bottom of the hole. As the men pass the water, they sing in a rhythmic chant, naming their cattle and proclaiming their love for them. "Cows are precious," Lemaiyan explained. "You have to tell them how pretty they are, that they are part of your family."

It's refreshing to learn that, in this pics-or-it-didn't-happen Instagram era, no photography is allowed at the singing wells, which are considered sacred. "Professionally it's frustrating," said Ballón, the photographer, who had to leave his camera behind. "But from a personal point of view, it's magnificent that there are still places that aren't tainted." The group returned to the wells in the evening, when the local wild animals came to drink—and got to observe an elephant extending its trunk all the way down to the water.

AFTER TWO NIGHTS at Sarara, McGowan's party flew by chartered plane to the Lewa Conservancy, a short distance from Mount Kenya. This 62,000-acre reserve—situated on high, flat meadows of tall grass—used to be made up of cattle ranches owned by British settlers. The Kenyan government

▼ A suite at Lewa Wilderness.



▲ From top: The main lodge at Lewa Wilderness; the Reteti Elephant Sanctuary, which helps abandoned babies acclimate to life on the Namunyak Conservancy.

asked the ranchers to create a small rhino sanctuary, which became so successful that, in time, the entire area was given over to it. Today there are more than 150 rhinos within its borders. White rhinos have been imported here from South Africa, in an effort to repopulate the Meru region, where the species had gone extinct. There are black rhinos as well—about a tenth of the estimated 5,000 left in the world. When Anthony Bourdain included Lewa in the 2018 season of his CNN show *Parts Unknown*, the number of visitors to the conservancy jumped. (It didn't hurt that Prince William had proposed to Kate Middleton there in 2010, either.)

McGowan's group stayed at Lewa Wilderness, which was established in 1972. Will Craig, a descendant of one of the original cattle ranchers, runs the lodge with his wife, Emma, and together they continue the tradition of the classic Kenya country estate. There are nine appealing cottages, decorated with an eclectic mix of antique and locally made furniture, separated by large rolling lawns. Almost all of the food is grown in the five-acre organic garden, from the strawberries served at breakfast to the limes in the gin and tonics. In the evenings, visitors gather around the fireplace in the main lodge, and Johnson, the head guide and a member of the local Masai community, tells stories. The vibe is less chic hotel than inviting home.

The game drive McGowan led at Lewa was "one of the best of the trip," she said, with sightings of elephants, buffalo, and a leopard sitting on top of a vine-covered log. At the edge of a reedy swamp that

has formed around the springs that bubble up from Mount Kenya's watershed, the group spotted gray crowned cranes. "The birds have these beautiful feathery tops to their heads, and we were looking at their gorgeous colors against the greenery of the swamp—not realizing that on the other side of the vehicle there was a sleeping lioness a mere ten feet away."

The Craigs offer an alternative method of seeing wildlife. Will has been a pilot since age 18 and takes visitors aloft in his open-cockpit biplane. "Aviation is a way of life in Kenya," McGowan said—think of aviator Denys Finch Hatton giving Isak Dinesen her first ride over the Ngong Hills in *Out of Africa*. Bourdain flew in Craig's plane while filming the Kenya episode. McGowan reports that, after disembarking, he said, "That was better than sex."

Rhinos at Lewa Conservancy, which is home to more than 150 of the endangered animals.

A table set for a poolside breakfast at Sarara Treehouses.



Olonana consists of a main lodge and 14 glass-enclosed suites with sumptuous furnishings. But the highlight is the new Geoffrey Kent Suite, named after the founder of Abercrombie & Kent, who is credited with first developing safaris centered around photography rather than hunting. Set on a private road, the suite has floor-to-ceiling windows that open onto a wraparound deck, and it comes with its own vehicle and guide, as well as a private chef.

McGowan's group made one last stop, across Kenya's southern border in Tanzania. The Chem Chem Association manages a 40,000-acre strip of land that connects the Serengeti and Tarangire national parks. The communities who live in the area are often in conflict with the wildlife that impede upon their land; in some cases, they have turned to poaching. The association helps ease difficulties by encouraging local people to see wildlife, and the visitors it brings, as an asset. It also creates economic opportunities by hiring them to work at the lodge or as part of anti-poaching units.

Founded a decade ago as a passion project of former Swiss banker Fabia Bausch and French-born hunting guide Nicolas Negre, Chem Chem has developed a cult following, thanks to its traditional design and warm hospitality. The group stayed at the newest of its three lodges, Forest Chem Chem, an exclusive-use camp of four tents. McGowan organized a treat: an outing to take soccer balls to a local school that the conservancy supports. There, a couple of members of her party started a joyous pickup game with the older children.

At Chem Chem, the group drove to the shores of Lake Manyara. Thousands of flamingos stood in the distance. "We stopped the vehicles on the partially dried lake bed," Ballón recalls, "and walked closer to get a better view. As we neared the water's edge it became very muddy, so we took off our boots and socks. The flamingos were quiet and shy, and as we approached they dispersed around us to take up new spots. We could have gone on like that all day." +

THE MASAI MARA NATIONAL Reserve is possibly the most famous in Africa. Located one degree south of the equator, it occupies a hillier terrain than Namunyak or Lewa. The Mara River runs through the reserve, providing a place for hippos to splash and crocodiles to sun themselves. The group's next base was nearby: Sanctuary Olonana lodge, established in 1999, its cottages tucked into a forest.

McGowan calls the Masai Mara the African equivalent of Big Sky Country. "It has the most prolific wildlife viewing in Kenya. You drive across those plains and they're covered with herbivores," she said, listing zebras, wildebeests, buffalo, and antelope. One morning, her group spied a cheetah in low grass, enjoying a breakfast of baby gazelle while the rest of the herd watched.



Pelicans and flamingos at Lake Tarangire near Chem Chem. Below left: Safari paraphernalia at Sarara Camp's main lodge.



Exploring Kenya and Tanzania's Conservancies

TRAVEL ADVISORS

Safari Pros (safariprofessionals.org), a consortium of travel advisors who specialize in travel to Africa, organized the trip that Killi McGowan led to Kenya and Tanzania. Its advisors can customize a vacation according to a client's needs. A number of trip planners under the Safari Pros umbrella are members of *Travel + Leisure's* A-List. To find a safari planner, call 888-337-2377 or e-mail info@safariprofessionals.org.

GETTING THERE

In 2018, **Kenya Airways** (kenya-airways.com) introduced daily nonstop flights from New York's John F. Kennedy Airport to Nairobi's Jomo Kenyatta Airport, making the capital more

accessible to American travelers. The airline also offers connections to Kilimanjaro Airport in Tanzania. Each lodge can arrange transfers by car or charter plane.

THE LODGES

The six treetop suites at **Sarara Treehouses** (sarara.co; from \$930 per person, all-inclusive) are part of the larger Sarara Camp on Kenya's Namunyak Wildlife Conservancy. **Lewa Wilderness** (lewawilderness.com; from \$843 per person, all-inclusive) is a classic Kenyan lodge and cottages. **Sanctuary Olonana** (sanctuaryretreats.com; from \$535 per person, all-inclusive, Geoffrey Kent Suite from \$6,050 per night) is set along a river that runs through Kenya's Masai Mara National Reserve. **Chem Chem** (chemchemsafari.com; from \$960 per person, all-inclusive), in Tanzania, has a variety of accommodations, from tents to more luxurious cottages.