

# The Lion's Share

Can travelers, herdsman and big cats coexist in the Maasai Mara?



TEXT AND PHOTOS BY AMANDA CASTLEMAN

The safari jeep trundles over the savannah, lurching in ruts worn by water and hooves. “Do you see how all the antelope and gazelle are alert?” asks guide James Kipetu of Serian Camp. “There could be a big predator out there.”

In Kenya's Maasai Mara — the northern quarter of the Serengeti ecosystem — that could signal a cheetah or lion. Maybe even a leopard, though they prefer to hunt at night, sometimes dropping down like Batman.

Our expedition had gotten off to a slow start, thanks to a baby zebra, more knock-kneed than a fashion blogger pimping new shoes. We had gotten all tangled up cooing and photographing its heart-crushing cuteness. Soon the crisp morning light faded, along with our chances of witnessing nature more red in tooth and claw. But I still hope to glimpse some big cats settling in for a snooze, at least.

I scan the tawny grass for motion and see something dark flash close to the ground. “There! At one o'clock.”

The driver changes course and picks up the pace. All three of us guests lean forward, intent.

Suddenly a bald tribesman rises up from the seemingly flat earth in front of our vehicle. His long limbs unfold from a three-inch depression. A dwarf mongoose couldn't origami into the space. How did this extra-dimensional wizard pull it off?

But more importantly, *why* had he?

Then I notice the short spear... and the other dozen warriors, clad in the scarlet-and-royal-blue-plaid togas of the Maasai, who materialize from invisible crannies in the grassland.

We had interrupted a lion hunt.

By some counts, only 23,000 of these big cats remain in Africa and their population has dropped by two-thirds since the 1980s. The Mara's last 150 may go extinct, because of initiation rituals and herdsman retaliating against prides who eat their cattle. Some don't even challenge the animals directly. They just sprinkle carbofuran, a tasteless and odorless pesticide, on half-eaten carcasses — and this cached meat becomes the lions' last supper.

MPs and environmentalists, including world-famous Kenyan conservationist Richard Leakey, have called for a ban on this toxic chemical, already outlawed in Europe and

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the U.S. But, as the Living With Lions project points out, “in a world increasingly dominated by humans, crops and livestock, we must find ways to make predators more valuable to the rural people who share the land with wildlife.”

Deep-pocketed tourists certainly help the cause. Not to mention ones like us, who stumble across poachers.

Kipetu and his driver square off with the tribesmen. After a tense conversation in Swahili, they radio to report the incident. The hunters take off, running with the lope that makes Kenyans such formidable marathoners. Last we saw, they were streaming over the savannah's horizon.

One skirmish over the Mara had ended peacefully. I could only hope the tourists, herdsman and big cats would find an enduring harmony.



Opposite page: A lion from the Cheli & Peacock pride near Elephant Pepper Camp; This page: Cheetah brothers lounge near a Mara Leisure Camp jeep.

>travel making a difference: **Kenya**

## How To Help Kenya's Big Cats

### Living With Lions

The Mara Predator Project monitors lions with the help of guides and visitors. Email [donate@livingwithlions.org](mailto:donate@livingwithlions.org) about contributing funds or old cameras. ([www.livingwithlions.org](http://www.livingwithlions.org))

### Big Cats Initiative

Backed by National Geographic (and Betty White!), this non-profit works for better legislation and conservation. It also helps fortify Maasai livestock enclosures to stop vengeance-killings, and operates anti-poaching patrols alongside the Mara Conservancy and Kenya Wildlife Service. Text "LIONS" to 50555 to donate \$10 or give online at <http://animals.nationalgeographic.com/animals/big-cats-initiative>.

## Safari Experiences That Pay It Forward

### Elephant Pepper Camp

Brass and dark wood — the trappings of campaign furniture from the British Raj — spice up these luxury safari tents, along with beaded accents typical of the local Maasai tribes. It may feel *Out Of Africa*, but Elephant Pepper won its second gold eco-rating from Ecotourism Kenya, as well as the 2013 Eco-Warrior Award for Best Tented Camp. So expect to see hurricane lamps and solar panels intermingled in this low-impact, mobile lodge, not to mention animals rambling in from the unfenced savannah. (<http://elephant-peppercamp.com>)

**Get Involved:** The camp has been a driving force behind the Mara North Conservancy, a 74,000-acre wilderness established five years ago. ([www.maranorth.com](http://www.maranorth.com)) It leases land from more than 800 Maasai, generating substantial and direct income — a first!

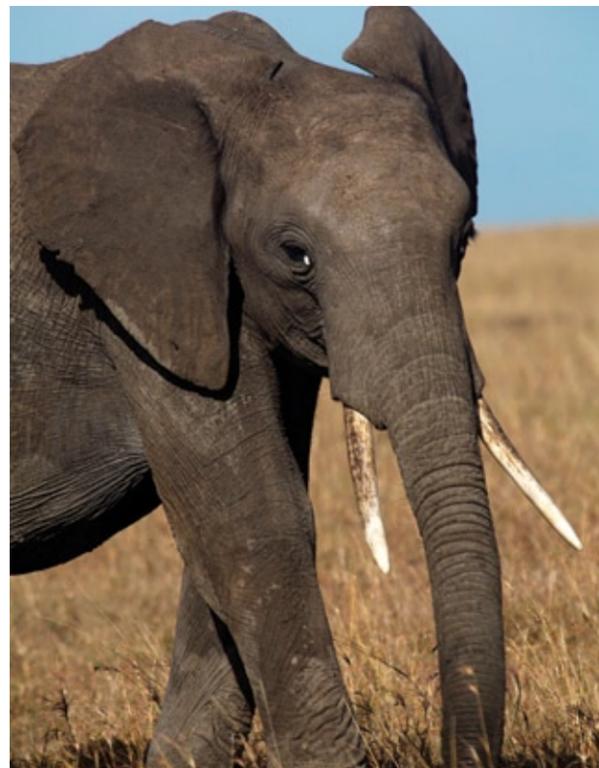
The conservancy welcomes donations, but Elephant Pepper also offers bespoke volunteering experiences for visitors who raise a minimum of \$1,000. On a more casual basis, guests can bring stationery, text books and sports equipment for the Ololomei Primary School, where the camp recently donated a kitchen and classroom.

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### Mara Leisure Camp

Draw up a front-row seat to the Great Migration! In May or June each year, 1.5 million wildebeests thunder from their Serengeti calving grounds to the lush grasslands of "the Mara" reserve. The perilous route takes them past hungry big cats and across crocodile-infested rivers, including the Talek, which runs through camp.

On the Maasai Mara Game Reserve's northern boundary, this gracious lodge mixes cottages and deluxe canvas



tents. Known for dawn balloon safaris — complete with champagne breakfasts — it also does a mean sundowner (cocktail hour) in the bush. In between, wash off the game-drive dust in the swimming pool: a rarity in this region. ([www.maraleisurecamp.co.ke](http://www.maraleisurecamp.co.ke))

**Get Involved:** The camp teams up with Pack For A Purpose, an organization which encourages travelers to bring five pounds of supplies, from maps to watercolors to antibiotic ointment, for the Loigero Primary School. An associated program called Passback sends participating travelers four, free deflated soccer balls for the kids.

*Travelgirl Tip:* Passback requests should be made at least three weeks before departure. ([www.packforapurpose.org](http://www.packforapurpose.org))



Clockwise from top left: Giraffes on the lush grasslands; A Maasai welcome; Baby and mother zebra; Jumping — to spot game — has also evolved into a courtship ritual; A cottage at Mara Leisure Camp; Habitat loss and ivory poaching threaten the Mara's elephants.