

FACE TO FACE

Known as the birthplace of the traditional safari, Kenya is home to a broad array of wildlife – protected and championed by the East African nation's vital conservancies, says Sue Watt

IMAGE: AWL IMAGES





Left: A Samburu warrior looks out across the eastern scarp of the Great Rift Valley in northern Kenya

Previous pages: An adult male lion in Maasai Mara National Reserve

Kenya has been one of Africa's top destinations since Arab traders began traveling to the country in the first century, leaving their legacy on the Swahili-imbued culture of the coast. Modern tourism boomed from the 1980s and today's visitors come as much for iconic wildlife and wild places as they do for the sparkling Indian Ocean.

Kenya's mosaic of diverse habitats draws myriad species, including the famous Big Five: elephant, lion, leopard, buffalo and rhinoceros. The country's national parks showcase dramatic landscapes, from the craggy peaks of Mount Kenya — Africa's second-highest mountain — to the sweeping savannahs of the Maasai Mara, home to one of the world's most spectacular natural phenomena: the Great Wildebeest Migration.

Much of Kenya's wildlife lives outside the unfenced national parks, however, making it vulnerable to poaching and human-wildlife conflict. Local communities are key to conservation here, among them the renowned red-robed Maasai pastoralists who are as much a part of the landscape as the lions and elephants that share their land.

Since the 1970s, some 200 conservancies have been set up across the country. These are areas of land — sometimes private ranches, sometimes parcels of individually or communally owned pastures — joined together to help protect

IMAGE: ANA IMAGES

BOOKS TO INSPIRE

1 Kenya Wildlife and Safari Guide by Diane and Peter Swan 2024 (Meserani Publishing)

This engaging field guide is full of information, not just on the physical characteristics and identification of animals you might encounter, but also on their behavior and threats they face. Easy to read, the book offers chapters on endangered species, habitats and vegetation and areas of interest. All profits go towards developing schools for the Meserani Project in Tanzania.

2 The Marsh Lions – The Story of an African Pride (Bradt Travel Guides)

This beautiful book by renowned Africa travel writer Brian Jackman offers an extraordinary insight into the ways of lions and their habitat. With photographs from Jonathan and Angie Scott, the reader follows the trials and tribulations of the marsh lion pride over five years in Kenya's Maasai Mara. Fifteen years later, the BBC's classic documentary series *Big Cat Diary* portrayed the lives of the pride descendants.

3 Wilder Kenya Travel Guide by Ben Morison and Jan Fox (Wilder Guides)

This highly readable and relevant guide is focused on sustainability, with conservation, communities and local culture at its heart. With valuable insights for the eco-conscious traveler, chapters cover everything from safaris in the Maasai Mara and Laikipia to climbing Mount Kenya, exploring remote Lake Turkana and lazing on the beaches of Lamu Island. The authors don't shy away from difficult subjects like greenwashing, climate change and the virtues or otherwise of carbon offsetting, offering all-important tips on traveling with a lighter footprint.



Clockwise from left: A Maasai man dressed for a cultural event at his village near Aitong; zebras drinking at Maasai Mara National Reserve; a herd of wildebeest and Burchell's zebras at Sand River, close to the border of the Serengeti National Park and Maasai Mara National Reserve

wildlife. Conservancies provide a win-win situation. Wildlife benefits through habitat restoration and more rangers on the ground, while the community secures much-needed income from employment and lease fees paid by upmarket camps on their land. And visitors staying in the camps, limited to a small number on each conservancy, enjoy a richer, more varied and exclusive safari experience that directly gives back to local people.

Today, Kenya's conservancies collectively cover more of the country's wild habitats than all of its national parks put together, often protecting some of Africa's rarest species, including rhinoceroses, wild dogs and the little-known hirola antelope, of which only around 400 survive.

WHERE IN KENYA IS BEST FOR WILDLIFE?

Home to the Big Five, antelopes and big cats aplenty, the world-famous Maasai Mara National Reserve in Kenya's southwest is the go-to place for most visitors. This is especially so from July, when some two million wildebeest and zebras come thundering across from Tanzania's vast Serengeti plains in search of greener pastures. The action-packed Mara River crossings are a compelling if gruesome sight: braying beasts lured by the smell of rain risk crossing waters brimming with crocodiles. Should they survive, they'll find predators waiting for them on the opposite banks.

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Wildlife-rich Amboseli in the south is hilly and lush, set against the backdrop of snow-capped Kilimanjaro and home to huge herds of elephants



IMAGE: ANIL IMAGES

Elephants roaming Amboseli National Park



TOP THREE: SOUVENIRS

Kenyan fabrics

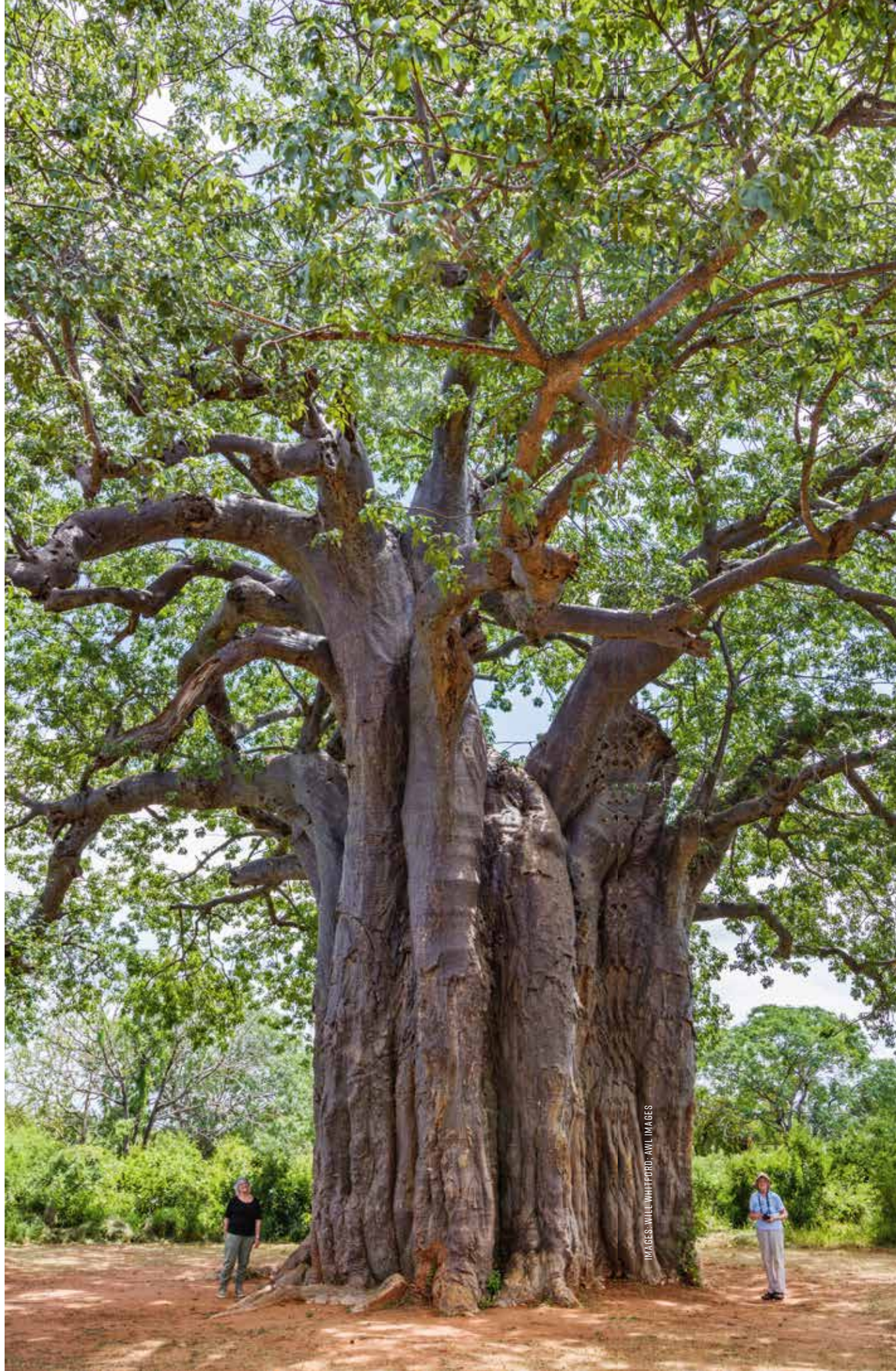
The vibrant red wraps that evoke classic images of Maasai warriors wandering the plains are called shuka and make ideal gifts for taking back home — to be used as throws, blankets or shawls. Like tartan, they come in various colors and patterns, but red is the most ubiquitous shade, traditionally believed to frighten lions away. Buy them in local Maasai markets. Similarly, kangas and kikois are wraparound sarongs usually in brightly colored fabrics and often with Swahili proverbs in their design. Ideal as beachwear, they're also cool and comfortable when relaxing in camp during the hot afternoon downtimes. Check out local markets and craft shops, particularly on the coast.

Beadwork

Along with the Maasai, the Samburu people in particular are known for the mass of colorful beads they wear around their necks, as headwear or on earrings, belts and bracelets. They're made by local women, who sell them in village markets. The colors and patterns all have meanings, some indicating the status of the wearer — whether they're warriors, married or unmarried, for example — or symbolizing traits such as courage or purity.

Glassware

Kitengela Glass, just over an hour's drive from Nairobi, is an inspiring workshop supporting local artisans and communities that sells distinctive gifts made from scrap or recycled glass. Brimming with creativity and innovative design, it sells everything from beads, glasses and animal figurines to huge chandeliers, fences and furniture. Tours of the glass-blowing studio are available.



From right to left: *Najin and Fatu, the last two surviving female northern white rhinoceroses in the world at Ol Pejeta Conservancy in Laikipia; a huge baobab tree, Tsavo East National Park; Maasai men dressed in traditional clothing*

Around October, they repeat it all on their return to the Serengeti. Unsurprisingly, the Mara is far more crowded during the migration, and this is when neighboring conservancies come into their own. Away from the crowds, they may be further from the river, but many will offer full-day game drives for the experience.

Second only to the Mara for wildlife, Laikipia is a high-altitude plateau, upon which sits a patchwork of vast private ranches and conservancies lying in the northern shadows of Mount Kenya. This is Kenya's rhinoceros country, with many conservancies involved in remarkable successes. The best known is Ol Pejeta, home to East and Central Africa's largest black rhinoceros sanctuary, with over 165 of the critically endangered pachyderms.

In southern Kenya, the Tsavo ecosystem spans 16,000 square miles, roughly the size of Switzerland. It includes Tsavo East and Tsavo West national parks

with a tapestry of conservancies and ranches. Kenya's biggest national park, Tsavo East, has vivid terracotta-colored tracks cutting a swath through vast plains that stretch for miles to the Sagala Hills. Its smaller sister, Tsavo West, is a hilly, wooded wilderness interspersed with lakes, volcanic lava flows and iconic views of Kilimanjaro towering in the distance. Along with diverse wildlife that includes buffalo, hartebeest, zebras, lions and leopards, nearly 15,000 elephants roam these plains, a staggering 40% of Kenya's entire population, all tinged red from Tsavo's soils.

Other regions worth visiting include Meru National Park, the former home of Elsa the lioness, raised by George and Joy Adamson, whose story is told in the film *Born Free*. Wildlife-rich Amboseli in the south is hilly and lush, set against the backdrop of snow-capped Kilimanjaro and home to huge herds of elephants.

From top: A Maasai giraffe in front of Mount Kilimanjaro; a Nile crocodile in Maasai Mara National Reserve

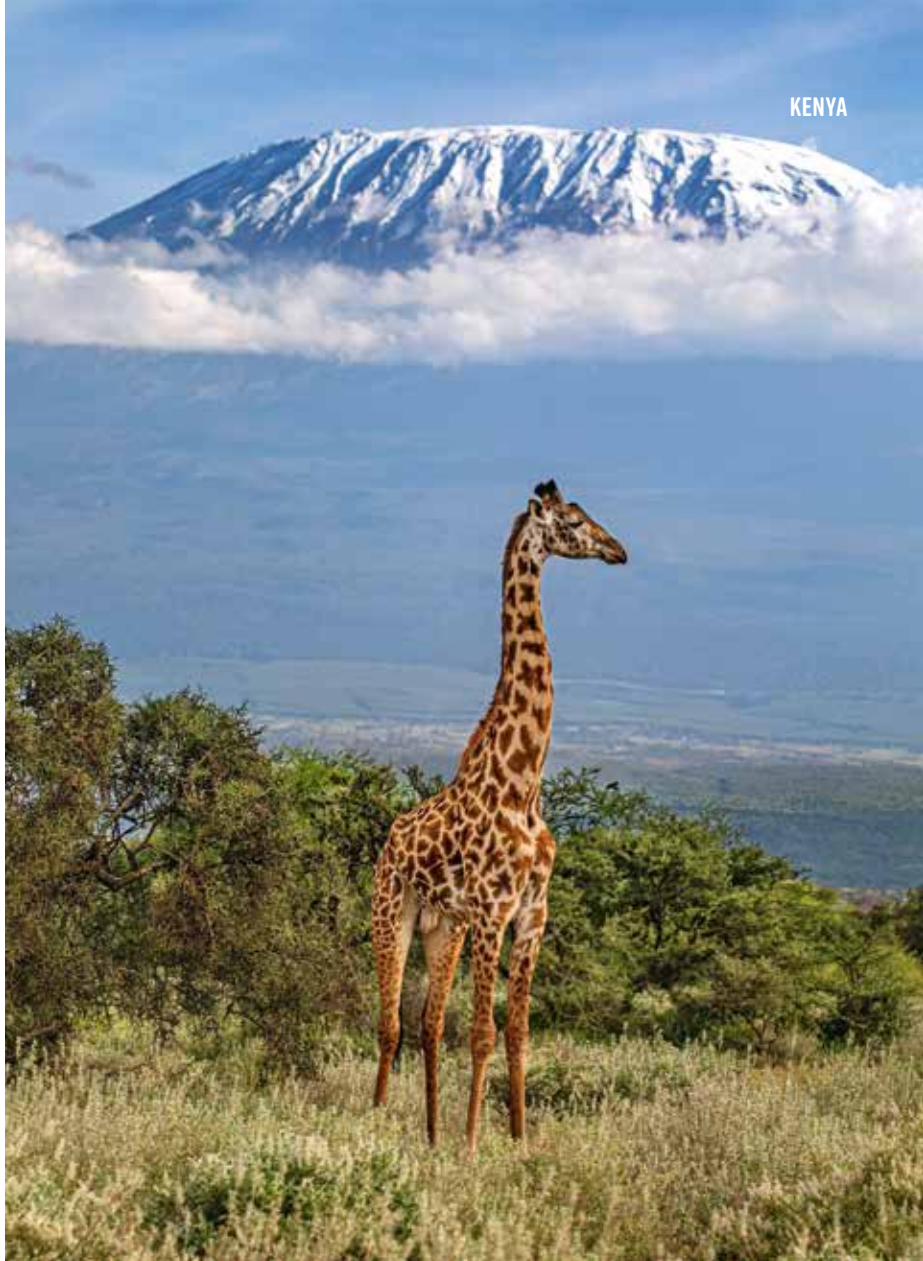
Lesser-visited Samburu National Park is dry and dusty with rocky outcrops and hills sustained by the Ewaso Nyiro River. Together with the remote northern Kenyan conservancies, it harbors some desert-specialist animals not so easily seen elsewhere, including Grévy's zebras, reticulated giraffes, wild dogs and long-necked gerenuk antelopes. On the Ethiopian border, you'll find Turkana, the world's largest permanent desert lake, home to thousands of crocodiles.

Surprisingly, you don't even have to leave Kenya's capital to see wildlife. Elephants are absent but Nairobi National Park, with its strange backdrop of sparkling skyscrapers, has rhinos, giraffes and plenty of plains game that are prey for its lions and hyenas.

WHAT ARE THE MOST POPULAR SPECIES WITH VISITORS?

Symbolizing strength and courage, the lion is Kenya's national animal. They're easily seen in the Maasai Mara, Laikipia and the Amboseli-Tsavo ecosystem, and are sleepy creatures in the heat of the day, hunting mostly in the cooler early mornings or evenings. During the migration, wildebeest provide many a predator's meal. Gawky and graceless, with long faces, thick necks, sloping shoulders and puny hips, local legend has it that God created them using leftover bits of other animals. Yet, en masse, they have a certain allure, their hides a glossy palette of gray, mink, brown and black.

Among Kenya's estimated 34,000 elephants are the iconic but incredibly





rare 'Big Tuskers', whose huge tusks almost drag along the ground. But you'd be lucky to spot them: only around 20 survive, of which 10 are believed to be in Tsavo. Far easier to see are orphaned elephants in the Sheldrick Wildlife Trust's sanctuary in Nairobi and the Reteti Elephant Sanctuary in the northern Namunyak Conservancy, both doing sterling work in rewilding rescued youngsters.

Many of Kenya's 2,000 precious rhinoceroses are protected by conservation projects. Loisaba recently received 21 black rhinoceroses in the country's biggest relocation project, the species having been locally extinct for almost 50 years. Neighboring conservancies Lewa and Borana took down their fences in 2014, now sharing 250 black and white rhinoceroses between them. And in Ol Pejeta, guests are able to meet Najin and her daughter, Fatu, the last two surviving

northern white rhinoceroses in the world. This was also home to their famous father and grandfather, Sudan, who became the poster boy of conservation as the last male northern white. Sadly, he died of old age in 2018. Scientists here are working to preserve the species, breaking new ground in protecting its genetics by creating an IVF baby using frozen sperm and eggs from Najin and Fatu.

HOW CAN I MAKE THE MOST OF MY TRIP?

Kenya's conservancies allow much more freedom than government-run national parks — depending on where you stay, you can join walking safaris, boat trips and go horseback riding or even cycling. You're not restricted to times on game drives either, with night drives allowing you to see the world of nocturnal species.

Above: The view from Ithumba Hill Lodge in Tsavo East National Park



A lilac-breasted roller watching for insect prey from its perch



ESSENTIALS

When to go: June to October (the dry season) is best for wildlife-watching, including the Great Migration. January and February offer a gap in the rainy seasons, the heaviest rains being in April and May.

Currency: Kenyan shillings (KSh) with U.S. dollars also widely accepted

Language: English and Swahili

Getting around: Safaris generally involve fly-in or vehicle transfers from airports, organized by private tour operators, with 4WD vehicles in national parks and conservancies. Car rental is available and main roads in cities are generally good, while rural roads are more variable.



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It also pays to get up early. This is when the natural world is at its most active: hear the dawn chorus in full song, watch silent, stalking predators on the hunt, sense the sudden fear of their potential prey as they dart away — all playing out under the rising sun.

Be sure to take warm clothes for the surprisingly cool morning air or suitable layers in neutral shades of khaki and beige to subtly blend in with the bush, especially on walking safaris. But avoid blue and black since these attract the nasty nip of tsetse flies. Take your own field guide and binoculars to avoid missing out on the finer details of wildlife-watching.

Finally, don't dismiss the little creatures while you're there. Although the Big Five are justifiably popular, birds such as lilac-breasted rollers doing their acrobatic courtship dance or an army of sizzling ants on their march to massacre termites can be equally fascinating. □

