

Destination Profile



MAASAI MARA NATIONAL RESERVE, KENYA

Fact-file:

- **Altitude: 1,500 m (5,000ft)**
- **Area: 1,812sq km (700 sq miles)**
- **Distance from Nairobi 275 km (170 miles)**
- **4 airstrips**
- **National Reserve, administered by the local county councils**
- **Annual migration between Serengeti to the Mara from July-November each year**
- **Exceptional game viewing: lion, leopard, cheetah, elephant, rhino, enormous herds of plains game**
- **Traditional Maasai culture**
- **Panoramic views**
- **2 distinct eco-systems (upper & lower Mara)**
- **Game drives & escorted walks**
- **Hot air balloon safaris with champagne bush breakfast on landing**



A unique area:

The Maasai Mara is undoubtedly the Jewel in the Crown of East Africa, forever to be associated with vast numbers of game, the unique spectacle of its animal migration unchanged over the centuries. This is Hollywood Africa: vast rolling grass plains interspersed with rounded hills, groves of woodlands, dense scrub thickets and the riverine forest of the Mara River which bisects the area. Smaller rivers feed massive fig trees growing along their banks.

The word Mara is Maasai for “mottled” – and when flying over the plains of the Mara or observing them from the vantage

point of one of the surrounding hills, it becomes evident why this area was so named.

The Mara is the northernmost extension of the Serengeti ecosystem and is a micro-habitat in its own right. The inner reserve of 518sq km (200 sq miles) allows no intrusion of human settlement, while the outer remains basically undeveloped, an area where local Maasai pasture their cattle and co-exist with the game.

It is probably the most famous reserve in Kenya. Its breathtaking views became familiar worldwide when the film ‘Out of Africa’ was released, as much of it was filmed in the Mara. It is perhaps the only region left in Kenya where visitors may see the super-abundance of animals that existed a century ago.



Origins Safaris

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Wildlife and birds:



During the months of July to December the spectacle of the migration unfolds as a million and a half Wildebeest and Zebra, with all their attendant carnivores, Lion (including the rare black-maned variety), Leopard, Cheetah, two types of Hyena, three types of Jackal, the occasional Aardwolf and sometimes large packs of African Wild Dog move across the vast open plains. At a distance the plains appear to be infested with lines of black ants. A closer view reveals it to be Wildebeest - those curious creatures aptly called "the clowns of the plains". The sound of their grunting fills the air and the spectacle is almost unbelievable. All these animals have to cross the Mara, which provides another unique sight. As crowds of these ungainly

Wildebeest throng down the steep banks in a cloud of dust and swim across the churning brown water, some of them are swept away and others grabbed by crocodiles. Engorged crocodiles bask on the banks, while flocks of vultures and other scavengers congregate to clean up remains.

The rest of the year is never dull either, as large numbers of predators remain resident, and are commonly seen hunting herbivores. The plains' game is also always present in varying numbers, and includes Thompson's and Grant's Gazelles, Coke's Hartebeest, Topi, Eland, Waterbuck, and Impala. Elephants are plentiful and it's not uncommon to be held up by elephants on the road. Hippo and Crocodile are easy to see, basking in the river – and it is not so unusual to see a hippo grazing on the river banks before nightfall.

Birdlife is varied and profuse. Turacos, the rarer Crested Guinea Fowl, Blue Flycatcher and Pel's fishing owl can be seen in the riverine forest while several varieties of Bustards (including rarer ones) can be seen on the plains – as can the spectacular Ground Hornbills and comical secretary birds. Vultures and eagles can be seen circling overhead or perched on trees, while over 50 different species of birds of prey have been recorded. From November to March many annual migrant visitors are present in large numbers and bird-watchers will always be rewarded with much to record.

The Maasai People:

"A Maasai warrior is a fine sight. Those young men have, to the utmost extent, that particular form of intelligence which we call chic; daring and wildly fantastical as they seem, they are still unswervingly true to their own nature, and to an immanent ideal. Their style is not an assumed manner, nor an imitation of a foreign perfection; it has grown from the inside, and is an expression of the race and its history, and their weapons and finery are as much a part of their being as are a stag's antlers."

Extract from 'Out of Africa' by Karen Blixen



Perhaps more than any other communities in Kenya the Maasai have learned to live in complete harmony with their environment and the wildlife which surrounds them. They still follow their traditional way of life to a large extent. But throughout Maasailand changes are inexorably happening: more children attend school, more women are earning money from the sale of their colorful beadwork, and more young men are seeking employment in towns and tourist lodges.

Traditionally, the Maasai are a cattle-keeping people. Cattle once provided almost all their daily needs: milk and blood as food, hides for leather and meat on ceremonial occasions. Sheep, goats and donkeys are also kept and the size of the herds is still a significant measure of wealth and power amongst the Maasai community.

Each Maasai male passes through three main life stages: boyhood, warrior-hood and elder-hood. Young children tend the calves, sheep and goats near the settlements.

Older youths go out daily with the cattle herds in search of good grazing. Before becoming warriors (*il-Murran*) the youths are circumcised. Girls, too, traditionally undergo female circumcision at puberty, making them eligible for marriage.

After becoming *il-Murran* traditionally the warriors protected the herds against predators and cattle raiders – and went on raiding forays themselves. They also help to herd cattle.

Approximately every seven to ten years a Maasai *L'Oiboni* or priest announces the induction of a new generation of warriors. Those who have already served their time as warriors then pass into junior elder-hood in a colorful ceremony called *eunoto*. This marks a period of greater responsibility, beginning with marriage (which may be polygamous) and the acquisition of wealth and security in the form of cattle and children. Maasai elders are treated with deference by younger persons and have the right to sit in council with other elders to dispense justice and make decisions about important matters.

As they migrate in search of fresh grazing, the Maasai build their settlements: often temporary structures, quickly built using wooden sticks and poles, plastered with cow manure. These transient homes are abandoned when the grazing is finished and the herds must move on. Around the Mara it is possible to see many of these dwellings – both occupied and unoccupied.

With their long and slender bodies, their proud and hieratic faces, their colored clothes and plaited, red mud-stained hair, the Maasai are a visual temptation to photographers, but it is strongly advised never to take pictures of them without their consent: out of courtesy as well as regard for your personal safety. Maasai *moran* (warriors) are known for their warlike demeanor and they may not take kindly to being photographed without being asked!

RECOMMENDED ACCOMMODATION:

SERIAN (meaning “peaceful, calm or serene” in the Maa language of the Maasai people) is the charismatic bush home of Alex Walker, filmmaker and guide in the Masai Mara. An exclusive wilderness camp set in a secluded valley flanking the Ol Are Orok River close to its source.

Alex was born and bred in East Africa and is an accomplished film maker, photographer and experienced safari guide. His passion for conservation and for involving visitors and local people in the preservation of the game makes this a unique bush experience in the world-renowned Maasai Mara. Alex will lead guests on a guided walking safari to observe the wildlife from a unique perspective. He is a trained (and licensed) walking guide with a fire-arm permit and is an accomplished tracker.

Serian is a fantastic base for the true bush aficionado as well as a wonderful chill-out zone for people in pursuit of escapism and peace in a rustic-luxury setting. The private marquee tents are set in the shade of large *walburgia* trees that cover the site, a tranquil location that borders one of the finest Game Reserves in the world. The camp is seasonal, open from early June until the end of February

There are eight ensuite “Marquee’s”, each set on a grass plinth, measure 80sq m, and identical in design. They are constructed of canvas and supported by hardwood poles with the interior walls and ceilings made from Kenyan canvas. Entry to each tent is through a screened door that zips closed to form a totally insect proof barrier. The verandah is furnished with two directors chairs and a small round drinks table.



The “bedroom” area is fitted with a king-size bed flanked by twin writing desks. The “bathroom” area includes a shower, soaking tub and separate toilet. The dressing area contains the cupboards with hanging space and twin basins. Hanging swathes of cotton and canvas walls provide complete privacy. Furniture is minimal and unobtrusive, evoking the traditional safari camps of an earlier time.

The Mess Tent at Serian is furnished with tables and chairs. Meals are often served in different locations throughout the camp and dinner is most often concluded around a roaring outdoor fire that serves as a focal point in colder evenings.



Situated in front of the mess tent this outdoor spot with its nightly log fires in many ways serves as an informal lounge and dining area. Lamu beds and hammocks are to be found in secluded shady spots, offering daytime retreats for a rejuvenating siesta.

The mess is furnished with large comfortable sofas, day beds, reading tables and chairs. The library provides a wide collection of coffee-table books on the national park, the game, the history and culture of the Maasai, as well as on other aspects of East African culture and history. Also on offer is a selection of novels, magazines and board games. A small range of fine artwork, local handicrafts, fabrics and sundries are available for purchase.

A personal Butler is allocated to each Marquee, at your personal beck and call. The day starts with early morning tea or coffee in the comfort of your bed or on the verandah for sunrise aficionados... You then discuss with your butler whether you require laundry service, what your day's gameviewing plans are and what menu he should brief the chef on to suit your own taste. Your butler teams up with your safari guide to organise picnic breakfasts, lunches, sundowners, and starlit dinners. He will also organise whatever drinks you require and set your table under the shade of trees or alongside the Ol Ari Orok river under the stars.



The experience at Serian is focused on viewing wildlife, in particular, the big five. Cape buffalo, Lion, Leopard, Elephant and Rhino. The 1,512 km² Maasai Mara National Reserve was declared a wildlife sanctuary in 1974. This when paired with the inextricably linked Koiyaki /Lemek Conservation area of around the same size gives guests access to a huge natural wildlife area.

Following the initiation of the Campfire Conservation enterprise and other concerted preservation efforts to save the big cats, the Lion and Leopard population are very visible and stable. For the keen ornithologist there are four hundred and fifty three recorded bird species in the Mara, fifty three of which are raptors. Conception of the wide open spaces and the traditional Maasai culture are eye-openers for first time travelers.



***Destination profile by journalist & author: Juliet Barnes; property notes from information supplied by the lodge owners**