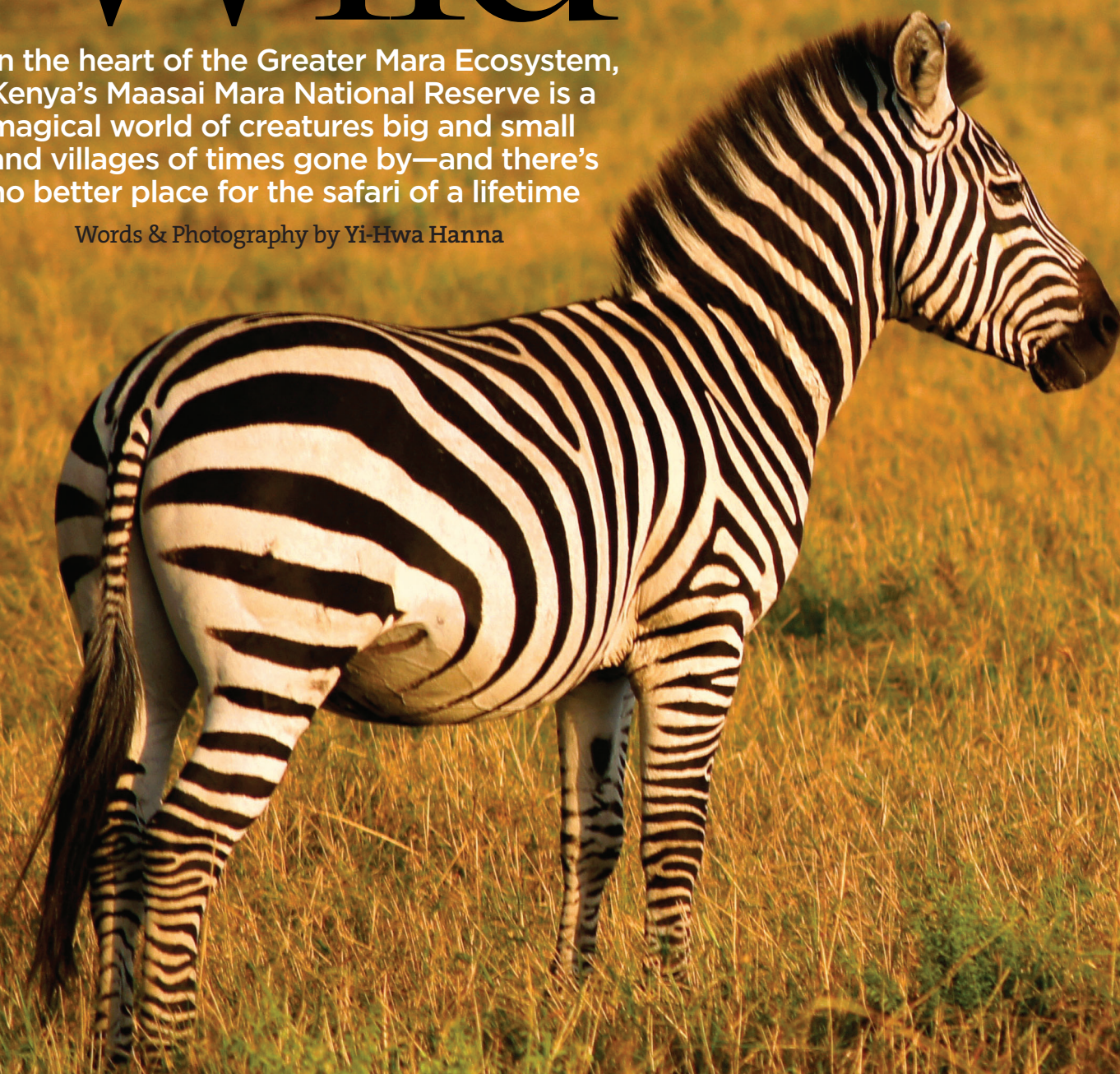


Into THE Wild

In the heart of the Greater Mara Ecosystem, Kenya's Maasai Mara National Reserve is a magical world of creatures big and small and villages of times gone by—and there's no better place for the safari of a lifetime

Words & Photography by Yi-Hwa Hanna



A bead of sweat drips down my face, trickling across my neck. The brisk morning sun shines on through the roof of our car, and we wait in silence. A telltale rustle of movement escapes from the tree ahead, the crackle of a stray twig snapping under a treading foot, and suddenly there he is—a curious giraffe peering around from behind an acacia tree. “See those markings? That’s a Maasai giraffe,” says Onesmas, a bright and charismatic 25-year-old Kenyan who is our safari guide in the Maasai Mara National Reserve, or as the locals like to call it, “The Mara.” Unlike the cartoon giraffes seen in the West, the Maasai giraffe’s spots have a jagged pattern, and it’s impossible not to fall in love with this elegant creature.

It’s the second day of our trip and we’re about to have breakfast out in the bush. Onesmas fires up the grill—a gas stove cleverly worked into the boot of our car—while his wildlife spotter, David, sets the table. Soon, we’re all munching on eggs, sausages, bacon and fresh fruit. Maasai-born David has been working as a spotter for years, and straight after breakfast he’s taking us to the local Ngama Maasai village just outside of the reserve.

As we pull up outside of a circle of mud huts surrounded by a fence of thick tree branches—“To keep predators out,” David explains—a tall, dark figure is waiting. He is wrapped in a red chequered cloth, with strings of beads wrapped across his torso and hips, leaning on a thin stick as high as his chest. “Welcome to my village,” he says in fluent, albeit accented, English. “I am the son of the chief, and I welcome you to my home. You can call me by my Christian name, Daniel,” he says with a smile. Daniel—whose Maasai name is Lukosh—explains that they do ask a fee of 1,700 Kenyan shillings to enter, but once paid you are welcome to explore the village and take as many pictures as you like.

The moment we hand over the cash, a loud tribal yell sounds and a row of men dressed in vivid scarlet clothing appear, whooping and jumping. “These are our warriors—all young boys between the ages of 12 and 25—and they are performing a dance to officially welcome you to our village,” Daniel explains. The men are all at different stages of their warrior hood (determined by whether they have undergone their circumcision ceremony or not) but they are all just as eager to partake in the antics. Some have their earlobes stretched into deep hoops of skin, while others have braided their

hair into elaborate, tightly woven styles symbolising victory or masculinity.

Part of the welcome ritual is the jumping dance, wherein the man who jumps the highest is elected the most eligible bachelor. The rhythmic chants, vibrating from deep within their throats, soon die down and we are shown into the village, where the women are lined up, adorned in vibrant hues of yellow, green, blue and orange, singing their own lullaby to welcome us in. Their children line up eagerly in a row alongside one of the houses, shyly smiling at me.

“A tall, dark figure is waiting, wrapped in a chequered cloth, with strings of beads across his torso”



Maasai warrior

The houses—known as “enkaji”—are all built by the women and made up of a mixture of twigs, soil, grass and cow dung. They consist of a small room in which the cows and goats are kept at night, and a central space for cooking, sleeping and storage of their few possessions. It’s cool and dark inside the house, with just one small hole atop the glowing embers of a dying fire letting in a stream of light. “This hole also lets the smoke escape when we cook,” Daniel says, explaining that the women usually sleep on one bed with their daughters, while the men sleep with their sons on the other, until the children reach the age of 10 and move out.

“We don’t have much money, so we trade cows for materials like beads to make handicrafts. The money we make from them goes towards educating our children in the local schools,” Daniel says. While the goods are more expensive than I expected, they are beautifully made and the Maasai people’s sincere kindness makes me not even want to try and barter. As we hop into our car to leave, Daniel shakes my hand, insisting, “Next time you come to Kenya, don’t stay in a hotel—you come stay in my village as my guest.” →



African elephant



Sunset in the Mara

FAST FACTS

● **Getting There:** Kenya Airways flies to Nairobi direct from Dubai from Dhs1,200 return and the flight takes approximately five hours. While you can hire a car from Nairobi, the drive takes five to six hours over bumpy and uncomfortable terrain, so we suggest flying instead. A flight with SafariLink starts from Dhs1,125 and takes 40-60 minutes depending on the number of stops along the way to the Mara's Keekorok Airstrip, about a 45-minute drive from Sala's Camp. We recommend getting in touch with the Camp or your safari operator to help coordinate your internal flights from Nairobi.

● **When To Go:** While the Mara has game to see all year round, the Great Migration takes place from July to October each year. Please note that to stay anywhere in the reserve itself, additional park and conservation fees are charged at Dhs422 per person per night.

● **Visas And Vaccinations:** For details on visa entry requirements for Kenya, please check with your respective embassy as well as visiting www.immigration.go.ke. Routine vaccinations are recommended, as well as vaccinations for Hepatitis A & B, Typhoid, Yellow Fever and Tetanus. Malaria tablets are also recommended. We suggest the Dubai Health Authority's Travel Clinic at Al Mankhool Health Centre (04 502 1200).

● **Safari Mania:** If you've been bitten by the safari bug and would like to venture elsewhere in Africa for a safari experience, we suggest checking out the following places: Abu Camp in Botswana (www.abucamp.com), Serengeti Serena Safari Lodge in Tanzania (www.serenahotels.com), and Bwindi Safari Lodge in Uganda (www.volcanoessafaris.com).

Ten minutes later, we're back in the savannah. As we drive in the grasslands, wind rushing through the reeds with a soft "whoosh," impala antelopes leap gracefully over the rocks and a lone buffalo bull grazes in the background. The car suddenly grinds to a halt. David's eagle-sharp eyes have spied movement in a far-off tree, and as we draw closer to investigate, we realise with a start that there is a leopard hidden amidst the branches. "It's resting now," Onesmas explains, continuing, "It's too hot at this



Maasai jumping dance



Young male lion



Acacia tree

time of day so they only tend to hunt in the morning and evening. They stay up in the trees for the shade, unless it rains. That's when they go running for the caves since, like domestic cats, they don't like water!"

Spying a leopard in a tree is a rare occurrence, but seeing a predatory cat in the wild is no surprise in the Mara. The most iconic safari destination in Kenya, it's home to the highest concentration of wild animals and birds in Africa and is famed for the Great Migration that takes place across the plains to and from the

Serengeti each year. Game is abundant in the Mara, and many tourists visit with the hopes of seeing the "Big Five." A term coined by big game hunters and popularised by safari guides, these are the five most difficult animals to hunt, and they consist of the leopard, lion, African elephant, Cape buffalo and rhinoceros. We've seen four already—the leopard, a big family of elephants (complete with mischievous babies tickling each other with their trunks), moody buffalo standing firm while grazing at dawn, and a group of lionesses with their fuzzy cubs napping under the shade of a tree, their bellies full from feasting on a kill.

Life is simple in the Mara and it's easy to settle into its rhythm. Every day, we wake at 6am for our dawn game drive. At around 1pm, we return to camp for lunch, where we relax until the harsh heat has

Additional photography (Sunset in the Mara): Shutterstock.



goodescapes

in the searing heat. As we watch, one provokes another's baby and its indignant mother opens her jaws wide in a deep, guttural roar. Nearby, a crocodile almost blends into the scenery, camouflaged against the sandy banks. A colony of vultures is pecking at carrion on a small island in the middle of the river, with a couple of Marabou storks trying to slip in and join the feast unnoticed. The smell is overwhelming—a harsh reminder of the necessity of death to sustain the circle of life in the wild. It clouds my nostrils, sickly and pungent, and we quickly move on.

As we head towards Rock Valley, an eerie silence has spread across the land. A herd of deer are frozen still, all staring in the same direction, their ears pricked up in alarm—a predator looms. We draw closer, and with an elegant leap, out darts a cheetah. She prowls daintily through the grasses, searching for her next meal, when we hear it—a deafening roar that rocks us from deep in our bellies. Standing proudly atop a rock ahead is a lion, his distinctive mane ruffling in the wind, awakening my childhood memories in his resemblance of *The Lion King*. As he turns to look at me, his deep golden eyes staring into mine, a fluffy cub comes around the corner and tumbles playfully into his paws. And just like that, the threat of the predator is gone—it's just a father and son enjoying another glorious day in the Mara. ■

cooled before heading out again. By dusk, however, the sun—setting the sky alight in a riot of pink, magenta and gold—begins to set and it's time to head back home: Night drives are not allowed in the reserve so as not to disrupt the animals' natural cycle. While there are numerous lodgings around the Mara, our home base, Sala's Camp, is one of the furthest. Tucked away near the Tanzanian border, Sala's is a cosy spread of luxurious tents dotted between the trees, overlooking the Sand River. With every comfort you could desire—each tent is outfitted with hot showers, flushing toilets and running water, not to mention dressing gowns, a full range of toiletries and a seriously cushy bed—this is camping made perfect. While armed guards patrol the site to ensure guests are kept safe from wild animals and poachers alike, delicious home-cooked dinners are shared as a group in the main mess tent each night, the warm conversation borne around the campfire leading to a familial vibe. Come bedtime, hot water bottles keep you warm despite the chilly air, as you snuggle under the covers and listen to the lions roar off in the distance.

Each morning, we're woken with a smile (and hot, freshly-brewed Kenyan coffee) by the friendly staff calling outside our tent. The song of the birds chirping in the trees, punctuated by a whistling bat, is a soothing wake-up call. While we've seen countless wildebeest awkwardly tripping

over their own gangly legs and innocent-faced zebras munching on the abundant grass—not to mention warthogs, monkeys and even a leopard tortoise—by our third day, we have yet to see a hippopotamus, so we head down to the river. Looking like stocky rocks glistening in the sunlight, the hippos are lazing in the water to keep cool

WHERE TO STAY

Located in one of the most remote spots of the Maasai Mara, Sala's Camp is a truly unique place to stay. Here, you can experience the feel of really getting down to nature while enjoying camping at its most comfortable in the fully-equipped luxury tents. The location ensures an excellent view, particularly during the months of the migration, with many sightings happening from the camp itself thanks to its strategic location. Sala's excellent guides are knowledgeable and friendly, and will happily tailor your safari experience to your needs—dining out in the bush at least once is a must-do experience. The Camp also offers a wonderful range of activities for children, including a trampoline, learning how to make a bush toothbrush or cook in the bush, searching for glow worms at night, going out with a ranger to search for the "Little Five" and plenty more.

Run by The Safari Collection (www.thesafaricollection.com)

—which also owns Giraffe Manor, an excellent place to stop for a restful night's sleep before having breakfast with its resident giraffes during your layover in Nairobi—rates for Sala's Camp run from Dhs1,500-2,160 per adult and Dhs880-1,400 per child, per day, depending on the season. This rate includes all transfers to and from the Keekorok airstrip, game drives, all meals, house wines, soft drinks, beers, spirits, laundry, bush breakfasts and sundowners. The Camp is closed during the months of May and November, but as a permanent camp it is open during the rest of the year.

