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Camp followers answer call of wild

Lisa Grainger sees conservation pay off

LISA GRAINGER

Watching elephants drinking just a few feet away is always a treat. And at the newly luxurious Sarara camp in central Kenya, the sight is particularly moving because 20 years ago there were no elephants here. When hunting was banned in Kenya, in the late 1970s, and concessions abandoned, Somali bandits moved in. In one decade, about 30,000 elephants were slaughtered, and not one rhino was left.

Sixteen years ago, Kenyan conservationist Ian Craig started to involve the local Samburu community in conservation, encouraging them to make profits from tourists in return for protecting wildlife. In the past year, in Namunyak (the area surrounding Sarara camp and one of 18 areas that have joined the project), the initial 185,000 acres set aside by the community for conservation was increased to 850,000. The Samburu-owned site has recently been upgraded to a standard that makes it possibly the most luxurious community-owned camp on the continent.

When it was built, it was a simple bush camp. It reopened in July with six smart, large en-suite tents, including a honeymoon suite with plunge pool, a spacious thatched living area, a private family house, a natural

spring-water pool cut into rocks above a water hole, and a chef who produces food any five-star safari camp would be proud of. From its hillside view, overlooking the Mathews Range, there is not another camp, another foreigner, for nearly 1m acres. There is only the Samburu, in the distance with their cattle, and the wild animals that come to the camp water hole to drink: elephant, buffalo, warthog, impala, baboon and, at night, hyena, and leopard in search of their favourite food here: the little dik-dik antelope.

Before the camp was built, the nomadic Samburu lived off their goats and cattle, moving with the seasons to new pasture. Now, 30 Samburu have jobs in the camp (as guides, waiters, cooks and guards) and dozens are employed by their communities to protect and maintain the land. Guests can climb sacred mountains with Samburu, go on game walks with ornately adorned warriors and their spears, go on game drives with Samburu rangers and visit the singing wells, to which hundreds of tribespeople bring their animals and sing as lines of them haul buckets of water up from the earth.

Sixty per cent of camp revenue goes directly to communities. "The Samburu



Elephants at Sarara camp in Kenya

now realise that, if we protect wildlife, it is a good way of earning money," says Samburu guide Mark Lenanyankerra. "This camp has brought us schooling, clinics, money. Now everyone wants to take part. Nobody kills anything any more." ■ Sarara (sararacamp.com) costs from

£380pp per night, all-inclusive. A week's Kenyan safari, staying three nights at Sarara and three at Lewa Safari Camp, is from £3,720, all-inclusive, with the Ultimate Travel Company (020 7386 4646 theultimate-travelcompany.co.uk). The price includes flights from Heathrow with Kenya Airways and onward connections

Bushmen

Once a year the Bushmen of the Kalahari have an initiation ceremony that marks a boy's passage into manhood. On April 28, 2010, Ralph Bousfield, who grew up alongside the Bushmen, is taking outsiders on a rare trip to the ceremony. The eight-night Initiation Hunt, excluding flights, costs from £6,240 with Bailey Robinson (01488 689 700, baileyrobinson.com).

Luxury Lamu

An Italian family has transformed its own house into the 25-room Majlis boutique hotel on Manda Island. An exotic mix of ancient Swahili and Omani architecture, it is set right on the channel overlooking Lamu's famously long, creamy-sand beach, but its USPs are its pool and ayurvedic spa. Prices are not as high as many on Lamu: from about £435 per room per night, full-board (themajlisresorts.com).