

WHERE THE LIGHT *shines bright*

Awash with deep earthy shades of green and gold, brown and grey, Lewa is adorned with a serenity that is rare in an ever changing Kenya. With human and wildlife conflict ever on the increase and the over commercializing of the country's wildlife as well as the encroachment into protected areas landing a painful blow on wildlife conservation, Lewa may truly be one of Kenya's most unique and important wildlife conservancies

By **Brennen Matthews**



It has also been said that **Lewa** is the new **Mara**

Situated on 62,000 acres of what must be some of the loveliest land in Africa, rests Lewa Wildlife Conservancy, home to the Craig family and perhaps equally as important, the white and black rhino and Grevy's zebra. With its mix of acacia forest, open grasslands, rich wetlands and rolling grassy hills, the conservancy is not only breath-taking, it is inspiring. Why so? Well, there is something spiritual about being in a somehow lonely, off the normal path, part of the country where only the wind that sweeps the plains and the numerous and diverse range of voices that rant the air, offer company and solace. Standing in the middle of Lewa one feels a little closer to God and to creation in its simplicity.

Charting a Way Ahead

Originally a thriving cattle ranch, Lewa turned the corner in 1983. As fate worked its magic, the Craig family were approached by an inspired Englishwoman named Anna Merz who had a fantastic idea to start a rhino sanctuary on the ranch. The ranch did not actually have any rhino living on the property at the time, but was believed to be the perfect habitat for their breeding and survival. Forward through all of the headaches and hassles, red tape and setbacks and the Ngare Sergoi Rhino Sanctuary was born and a new chapter in the life of Lewa started. However, there was

little time for soaking up the excitement of such a wonderful accomplishment. It was the 1980s and Kenya's elephant population was being decimated by relentless poachers who slaughtered Africa's great pachyderms to near extinction, in an effort to make a quick profit from their ivory. Ian Craig realized that with such a vast piece of real estate under his family's care, it was time to act.

Creating functioning partnerships with the local communities that bordered Lewa, Ian sought to build local commitment to wildlife conservation and protection. In 2010 it all sounds quite the norm, but back in the 1980s, few people were working in collaboration with local communities and fewer were sharing their hard earned revenue – mostly earned through international visitors – with their community partners. This was a momentous and very creative way to move forward. With growing success under its belt, Lewa finally became the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy in 1995 and even in 2010, the Craig family seem to only be looking ahead.

Unblemished Time with Game

Unlike some of Kenya's other scenic treasures that are home to safari, Lewa offers something unique, a taste of yesteryear if you will. In the early 20th century, Kenya's plains and forests were teeming with game. Elephant populations were in the range of a hundred thousand and rhino were viewed as mere pests. Compared to today's figures

Kenya's human population was quite low and as such, competition for land and resources was not the problem that it is today.

I am always amazed by the sheer number of different companies offering safari in modern day Kenya. Visit any of our national parks or reserves and you are guaranteed to share the experience with dozens of vehicles, many of them from competing companies. With the exception of five or six large operators, I reckon that you may not see the same logo on any two vehicles. This plays a large role in the destruction of our natural resources and a reduction in the quality of Kenya's tourism product. Most of us have experienced the joy of witnessing the majesty of one of the big cats, sadly, only to be surrounded by endless mini-buses.

Once on Lewa things take a different direction. With only six visitor venues on the entire 62,000 acres (Sirikoi, Kifaru, Lewa House, Wilderness, Lewa Safari Camp and Ngiri), the Conservancy has ensured that guests get a quintessential safari experience. During my recent visit I watched in awe as we slowly followed three cheetah brothers as they hunted a quite large female kudu. As the two kudu – a male and a female - approached the valley where the stealth-like cheetah were waiting, there was electricity in the air. We watched. We waited. And then bam, it happened and the chase was on. The moment was over within a few seconds, as the kudu bolted away and the breathless brothers flopped under the shade





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of a thorn tree, still hungry but not defeated. They continued on their way as we headed toward the ever-green swamps. Other than the wild witnesses who wearily grazed nearby, we were alone on the plains.

Later in the day we watched in excitement as three enormous white rhino munched away on the open grasslands, perhaps seven feet away. Suddenly, the larger male began grunting and kicking dust up in the air, as he

pocked the other male with his gigantic horn. The two pushed back and forth before finally breaking away. It was mating season and the lone female upped the ante by defecating in what may be, for the rhinoceros that is, a romantic gesture. It seemed to work for the two old boys as the moment that her dung hit the dusty soil, they were once again locked in battle, the air being filled with dust and small particles of dirt, before the smaller of the two

backed off and passively sauntered away to dine in peace.

Sharing the Wealth

As Lewa has found much deserved success in its aim of conserving Kenya's wildlife, the Conservancy has endeavoured to give back via translocation of much needed game to other parts of the country where severe loss of wildlife has been experienced. Lewa has

donated animals to many of Kenya's national parks and reserves and is keen on supporting recognized conservation programmes. As such, the team at the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy has developed quite an expertise at capturing and relocating wildlife such as giraffe, zebra, impala and buffalo. At times this translates into large numbers.

It was the Lewa team that were called in to partner with KWS in 2003 to restock the beleaguered Meru National Park, a wildlife refuge that had been almost totally wiped out by disease and poaching. The park had received international funding and along with improved security, Meru took the important decision of restructuring its management. In the end LWC translocated 504 zebra, 412 impala and 51 reticulated giraffe from the Conservancy and the

▶ A recent study conducted by the United Nations Environmental Programme has found that Kenya's Masai Mara wildlife reserve has lost more than 50% of its large animals

▶ Populations of big game animals such as lions, zebra, and buffalo have fallen by an average of 59% since 1970, according to a recent joint survey of Africa's wildlife reserves

▶ Kenya has an estimated 1,800 lions, down from 2,800 in 2002 and 30,000 in 1963

▶ Kenya's population of Grevys zebra

declined from 13,500 in the late 1970s to just over 2000 in 2007

▶ Black rhino numbers declined from 20,000 in the 1970 to the current population of 577

▶ Kenya's elephant population has reduced from a high of 160,000 in 1970s to the current population of approximately 30,000

▶ 80% of Kenya's elephants were lost in the 1970s and 1980s, mainly due to intensive poaching

**Source Kenya Wildlife Service 2010*



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surrounding Laikipia district. Today, Meru has been transformed into a well respected park that is successful with both tourism and conservation.

A Time of Reflection

Heading back from a bush lunch of pizza and salad we passed around the large herds of zebra, impala and giraffe that joined us next to the swampy marsh. A trio of white rhino who were relaxing some 40 feet away raised their enormous heads and sniffed the air while a pair of territorial

crowned crane kicked up an impressive raucous, demanding that we give them their space.

It has been said that 30 is the new 20 and grey is the new black. It has also been said that Lewa is the new Mara. I am not sure about any of this but one thing is certain, Kenya is incredibly blessed to have such a special haven within our borders and such blessings need to be nurtured and protected. Lewa Wildlife Conservancy offers top of the line game viewing, terrific venues and best of all, that exclusive

feeling of being alone, deep in the heart of Africa.

Laying in bed on my last night I listened to the wind as it washed over the thorn trees, howling in the night sky. A hyrax screeched in the darkness. There was no moonlight to cast shadows. Nocturnal birds called in the air, somehow mournful. The sounds of safari were coming alive. Soon the crackling of the glowing fire overpowered me, lulling me to sleep, leaving the voices of the primal night to live out their story. **D**

The giraffe is one of the most difficult animals to capture and transport due to its size and fragility. The entire operation – from the moment that the animal is darted to being roped and fully revived – has to be completed in 12 minutes.



Photographs: Brennen Matthews, Teeku Patel, Daryl & Sharna Balfour

Useful Info

Getting There

By Road: Four hour drive from Nairobi

By Air: Safarilink and Air Kenya have daily scheduled services into Lewa from Nairobi
Safarilink

Tel: +254 20 600 777 / +254 20 600 787

Air Kenya

Tel: +254 20 391 6000 / +254 721 415 346

Accommodation

Lewa House, Kifaru House and Wilderness Trails

Tel: +254 20 600 457 / + 254 20 605 108

Email: info@bush-and-beyond.com

Website: www.bush-and-beyond.com

Sirikoi

Tel: +254 727 232 445 / +254 722 522 542

Email: amy@scckenya.com / bookings@sirikoi.com

Website:

www.the safarianandconservationcompany.com /

www.sirikoi.com

Lewa Safari Camp

Tel: +254 20 604 053/4

Email: info@chelipecock.co.ke

Website: www.chelipecock.com



