

# Kenyan Adventure

BIG FIVE TOURS & EXPEDITIONS (2)



Both photos: Kenya offers the excitement of viewing wildlife such as leopards and elephants up-close.

**onsite**REVIEW  
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JETTA BATES-VASILATOS

Be they an average traveler or a veteran, global wandering thrill seeker, few would argue that just being in wildlife-rich Kenya can be an unsurpassed African adventure.

What can put a damper on it is the political reality of occasional strife that can spill out into the streets of Africa's teeming cities and certainly has recently in both Kenya and South Africa—both of which had been enjoying unprecedented numbers from the North American marketplace. But here's still another reality—not one tourist was caught up in the very brief chaos that ensued in the major cities of both countries, nor did it cut short any vacations, despite the fact there are literally thousands of tourists in-country, most of them unaware of what was going on.

"The problem is the image we're getting and having to battle people's perceptions that Kenya's under siege," says Maisa Fernandez of **Custom Destination Marketing Solutions**, the company representing Kenya in the United States, "but fortunately, it's just as safe as it ever has been. Yes, post-election strife did happen, but it stopped when the political parties came to a decision to share power."

Still, the challenge now is convincing the traveling public, Fernandez says, that, "...Kenya is back to normal. Is it fully back and running? Unfortunately, no. A number of hotels did have to close temporarily because of a lack of bookings and now they're slowly starting to open back up, especially with high-season coming up." ▶



JETTA BATES-VASILATOS (3)

One of the most captivating experiences of a trip to this African nation is the opportunity for game viewing at every turn.

In reality, however, that's a kind of bizarre plus for sales because this year is going to see some of the best pricing Kenya's offered for some time. There's been a steady escalation in tourism for the past five years and 2007 saw a record-breaking \$1 billion dollars in tourism revenues. The result—savvy travelers who've been there at least once are starting to book again because they know there's great travel buys on the horizon.

"It's interesting," Fernandez confirms, "we're starting to see more and more bookings for the summer months and a lot of it is from our clientele who's been there before, know what Kenya's really like and understand that this was just a very random situation that isn't going to happen again. As a result, I think they're all very confident about going back and this is a great time to do that because there's space in the most requested lodges, especially during the migration."

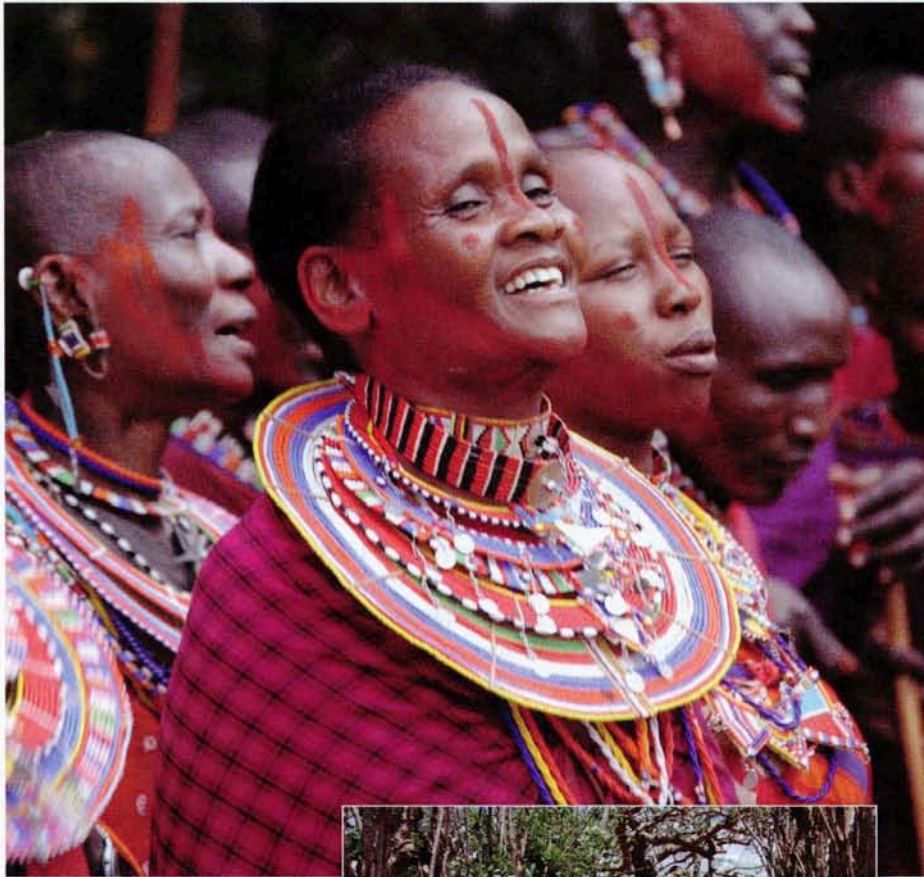
But strangely enough, Fernandez says, Kenya's tourism percentage cuts from North America fared better—believe it or not—than Italy, which took a huge hit from a cutback in charter business. "The U.K. has been down quite a bit, as well," she says, admitting that, "some of Kenya's top-source markets have really been struggling to get back on top of things. But we're confident that we've got some pretty hardy travelers here in the United States and that the person who's heading down to Kenya has an interest in Africa, has been to Africa before—if not to Kenya, then maybe South Africa—and they're looking to expand their horizons out there."

Tour operators to Kenya are equally positive about travel to the country. Kathleen Doheny, v.p. of marketing for **Kensington Tours**, says, "We are totally confident about Kenya as a destination. In fact, we never lost

confidence, but we did understand that some people were unsure for awhile. There were, indeed, some ugly incidents but by and large the media coverage did make the problems seem more widespread than they were." In fact, she adds, the incidents were quite limited and isolated away from tourist areas and were very tribal with no incidents whatsoever involving foreigners. "Very few of our clients in the end ended up cancelling and all our clients that were in country had uninterrupted safaris; they felt safe and welcome."

Indeed, she says, "We have noticed confidence in Kenya is certainly returning as our tours are selling more and bookings are back up at our tented camps in East Africa." As a result, the company recently announced a new product for Kenya, BMW motorcycle tours. "We think our BMW motorcycle tours will particularly appeal to one of the fastest growing segments of the travel industry—adventure travelers looking for a unique experience. These tours will no doubt resonate with the growing ranks of bike enthusiasts with disposable income, as well." And, she adds, "Like all our tours, these are private tours so they will also appeal to special groups, friends looking for a once-in-a-lifetime trip and milestone celebrations. But in addition—because all our tours are customized—clients can also book a 4x4 to travel alongside for mixed groups with some travellers looking for more traditional safaris. So we think there's great potential."

While the tours—like all of Kensington programs—are customized, the company has highlighted two sample itineraries clients can build on. The first is the 6-day *Kenya Motorcycle Discovery*—priced from \$3,104—where the riders drive north from Nairobi on the newly paved highway to the misty reaches of Mount Kenya, one of only two snow-



Both photos:  
Maasai women and  
entering a Maasai village.

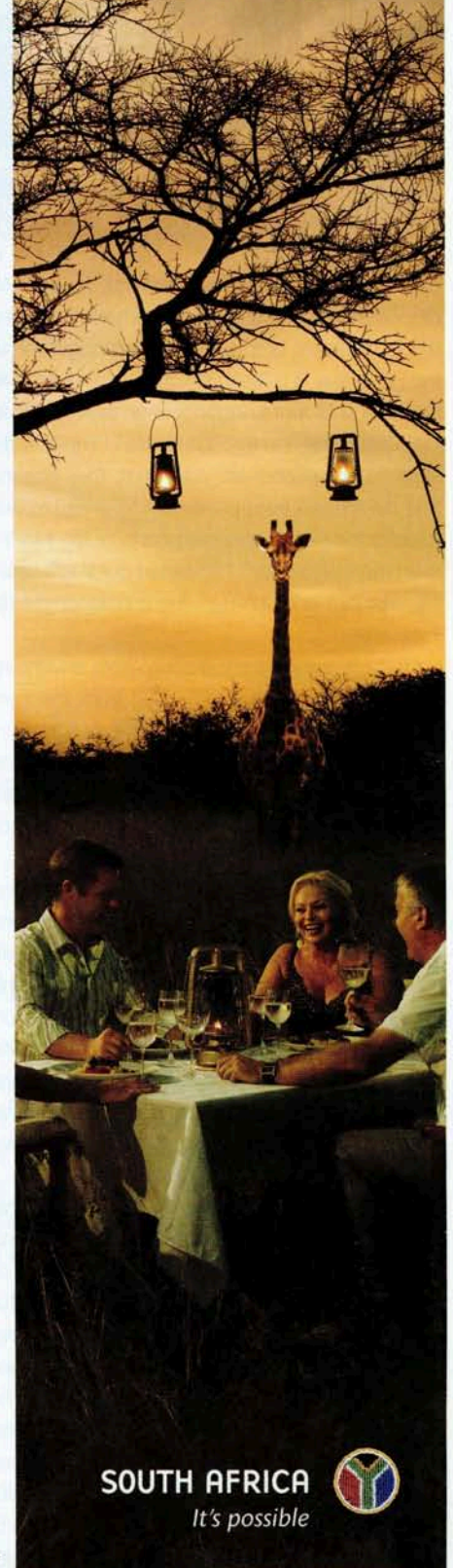
capped peaks in Africa, and the second highest mountain on the continent; clients stay at the exclusive **Serena Mountain Lodge**. This "treetops" hotel is designed to allow guests a bird's-eye view of animals as they wind down the mountain slopes to the nearby watering hole. From there, riders descend into Samburu's hot, arid desert. Here, the animals concentrate at the sparse watering holes and clients will have the opportunity to see a very different part of the wildlife spectrum. They then head south back to Nairobi to do some souvenir shopping or simply relax in the exclusive Kensington Nairobi lounge and bar.

On the 10-day *Kenya Motorcycle Exclusive*—priced from \$6,844—clients will enjoy a trip of true contrasts, from the desertscape of Samburu National Park to the lush greenery of Mount Kenya and from the lakes of Nakuru and Naivasha to the savannah of the Maasai Mara. Clients start in Nairobi at the famed Giraffe Manor where they will have a tutorial from their expert private guide on local riding habits and a gentle introduction to Nairobi traffic. Riders then head north for game viewing in the cool altitude of Mount Kenya, then head north to the desert of Samburu before turning south and traveling through the Aberderes, ▶

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JETTA BATES-VASILATOS (2)

past the flamingos of Lake Nakuru, to Lake Naivasha. Famous for its hippos, riders can use the opportunity to rest and relax or take a boat trip to Crescent Island and hike amongst the wildlife. The riding day in the Rift Valley is a real highlight. Hell's Gate is known for its geothermal steam and Mount Longonot is an extinct volcano with spectacular vistas. Clients will ride through herds of zebra and giraffe while honing their skills on gravel and dirt. After that, they continue on to Mara on roads that deteriorate from pavement to gravel to pure off road where they'll explore the private reserves north of the Mara where game is at times even more abundant. The expert guide will take riders up the Nguruman Escarpment and through the surrounding hills to get the best sightings.

"Today's travelers are getting more adventurous and looking for new experiences that set them apart from the norm," Doheny points out. "More and more it's about the 'experience' not just the destination. And that's just what these motorcycle safaris are all about—the experience—connecting clients to a sense of adventure, the road less traveled, the pioneering spirit and perhaps most of all, the freedom of the open road."

And why not? Kenya does not disappoint those longing to experience nature in an uncontrolled environment that promises an unforgettable African travel adventure. The Maasai Mara, that magnificent wilderness reserve on the Kenyan side of the great Serengeti Plains, offers safari-goers amazing year-round opportunities to observe elephants, lions, zebra, and a vast array of other animals roaming freely in their natural habitat, safe from poachers. But the really special time is between June and September when clients can experience the heart-pounding great migration of thousands upon thousands of wildebeest and zebra into the Maasai Mara from the Serengeti.

Maasai Mara is also home to members of the Maasai tribe, infamous for long-distance running and fierce adherence to cultural traditions and today, still go about everyday life herding cattle in concert with the wild. Indeed, on the Mara, it's a perfect mixture of peace and spine-tingling action. You never know when a sparring match between young elephants might break out, making it wise to heed your guide's warning not to exit the vehicle for that perfect shot. For tourists in the mood to get within petting distance, the Giraffe Centre in Nairobi's Lang'ata suburb allows you to feed pellets to, and receive kisses from, endangered Rothschild giraffes who roam up to the observation deck from the surrounding wildlife preserve. There are more than two dozen national parks and reserves in Kenya, each uniquely interesting; it is definitely

worth visiting more than just one. The Kenya Wildlife Service has a complete list on its site.

For a little diversity, the island city of Mombasa off the Kenyan coast, offers a gentle breeze, swaying palm trees, and gorgeous white sandy beaches—the perfect place for a little shoreline zen. The Indian Ocean is a vivid-blue with calm warm water, which is a nice bonus for snorkelers and divers opting to visit the protected coral reef full of aquatic wildlife. Pristine beaches dot the luxurious shoreline to the north and south of Mombasa, including the Swahili settlement of Malindi and the quaint, relaxing town of Lamu—both an authentic slice of paradise, unique in their own right and worth a spot on your client's Kenyan itinerary.

Now that Kenya's back to normal, don't forget to remind clients of the shopping, dining, art and fashion available there. The exciting open-air markets in Nairobi and Mombasa feature local arts and crafts, spices, tea, and coffee, while the socially conscious can find Kazuri beads in Karen, a suburb of Nairobi where single mothers from the community hand-produce fine ceramic beads, jewelry and pottery that's distributed all over the world. Upscale shoppers, too, will find unique home decor, chic, bold fashion, and modern art galleries. Kenya's dining choices are just as varied—wild game like zebra and crocodile plus more traditional fare are roasted and served on Maasai swords at Carnivore in Nairobi; fresh seafood is the specialty of the coast; and savory Indian, Italian, African, and vegetarian are easily found.

A walk around Mombasa's old town guarantees your clients the opportunity to experience true diversity—African, Indian and Middle Eastern influences that show up in the architecture, clothing, and faces of playing children. Indeed, no matter what city or town your clients are visiting, urge them to take an opportunity to connect with Kenya's most precious resource—its people. Most are welcoming and happy to engage in a good discussion about the personality differences in tribes, insight into the Kenyan way of life and you can guarantee your clients they most certainly get their enthusiastic views on the latest news.

### Accommodation Options

- **The House of Waine:** This 11-bedroom, mansion-like boutique hotel is located on 2.5 acres of vivid gardens in Karen, a suburb of Nairobi. Here, the themed rooms, which range from the *Safari* and *Victoria*—featuring a clawfoot bathtub—to the desert-themed *Sahara* suite, are all tastefully decorated. The onsite dining menu is exquisite; tell truly adventurous clients to request traditional Kenyan food.



This photo: Upscale home decor store in Nairobi.  
Opposite page: Visiting a giraffe center in Kenya.

#### CONTACT INFORMATION

**Amboseli Serena Safari Lodge:** serenahotels.com  
**House of Waine:** houseofwaine.com  
**Kensington Tours:** (866) 445-8978; kensingtontours.com  
**Kenya Tourist Board:** (866) 44-KENYA; magicalkenya.com  
**Kenya Wildlife Service:** www.kws.org

• **Amboseli Serena Safari Lodge:** This traditional, luxurious lodge is framed against the glorious backdrop of Africa's highest mountain, the magnificently beautiful Mount Kilimanjaro, surrounded by miles of rolling grasslands, patrolled by vast herds of elephant, shaded by the lush, feathered-green of an acacia grove and hugging the banks of a gently flowing river. Here, individual dwellings are modeled after Maasai huts nestled in beautiful gardens and connected by winding brick paths. Amenities here include bush dinners, private picnics, a swimming pool, nature walks, jogging trails, birdwatching and game drives.

#### Don't Let Your Client Leave Without...

• **Experiencing Maasai culture:** every visitor to Kenya should be provided the rare opportunity to visit a Maasai village. The elegant, traditionally garbed tribal leaders are very hospitable, willing to answer questions about day-to-day community activities, and proud to greet guests with

their customary jumping dance, introduce them to their wives and children, and invite them inside the hut-like dwellings lovingly hand-built by the women of the tribe for their families.

• **Touring the African Heritage House:** A grand example of African mud architecture with a modernist flair, the African Heritage House sits majestically on a plain overlooking breathtaking views of the Nairobi National Park. As visitors drift through the exquisitely decorated rooms showcasing furniture, textiles, and art from around the continent their guide will share the history behind the acquisitions and delight them with stories of co-founder and designer Alan Donovan's exciting life.

• **Taking a bubble bath in the bush:** upon request, some upscale lodges will set up a tub outside to keep the excitement going as they bathe away the inevitable "safari dust." ■

—Editor-in-chief Rick Shively contributed to this report.

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