

▪ **Community**

Bringing hope for the wild

By partnering with the local community in establishing conservancies and creating eco-friendly camps, one company is walking the talk when it comes to green travel.

TEXT & PHOTOS SREEREMA BANOO



“S

ee those tracks...porcupine... those are the marks from the quills,” says Jonah Miseyeiki pointing to trail of pattern not unlike one that’s been made by a broom on dirt. A few steps further, he stops to point out a few more track marks, this time courtesy of the impala and a few feet away, the civet. Signalling us to keep our voices down, he leads us

through the bush towards a porcupine den with the hope that we may catch a glimpse of the animal. Threading cautiously, Jonah looks into the den and just as he is about to declare that we’re out of luck, a very startled porcupine darts out and disappears into the bush.

It’s a split-second sighting but enough to jolt us wide awake; in any other setting this would be quite an unusual way to start the day, but we are after all, in the African bush and this is but one of the unique experiences offered at the Amboseli Porini camp within the Eselenkei Conservancy in Kenya.

Our guide, Jonah is a Maasai warrior, who in another life may have been a lion hunter like his ancestors. Opportunity and a unique approach to tourism however, have put the 23-year-old on a path far removed from not only his forefathers but also many of the other Maasai in Kenya.

Financial constraints a few years ago put the brakes on his further education and so he took up a job as a wildlife spotter and guide with Gamewatchers Safaris, who operate the Porini

camp. It was to have been a temporary gig. But today, three years on, while Jonah may have saved up enough to go back to school, he’s content and happy to be a guide. “I learn about nature and I get to meet so many people from around the world,” says the affable Maasai.

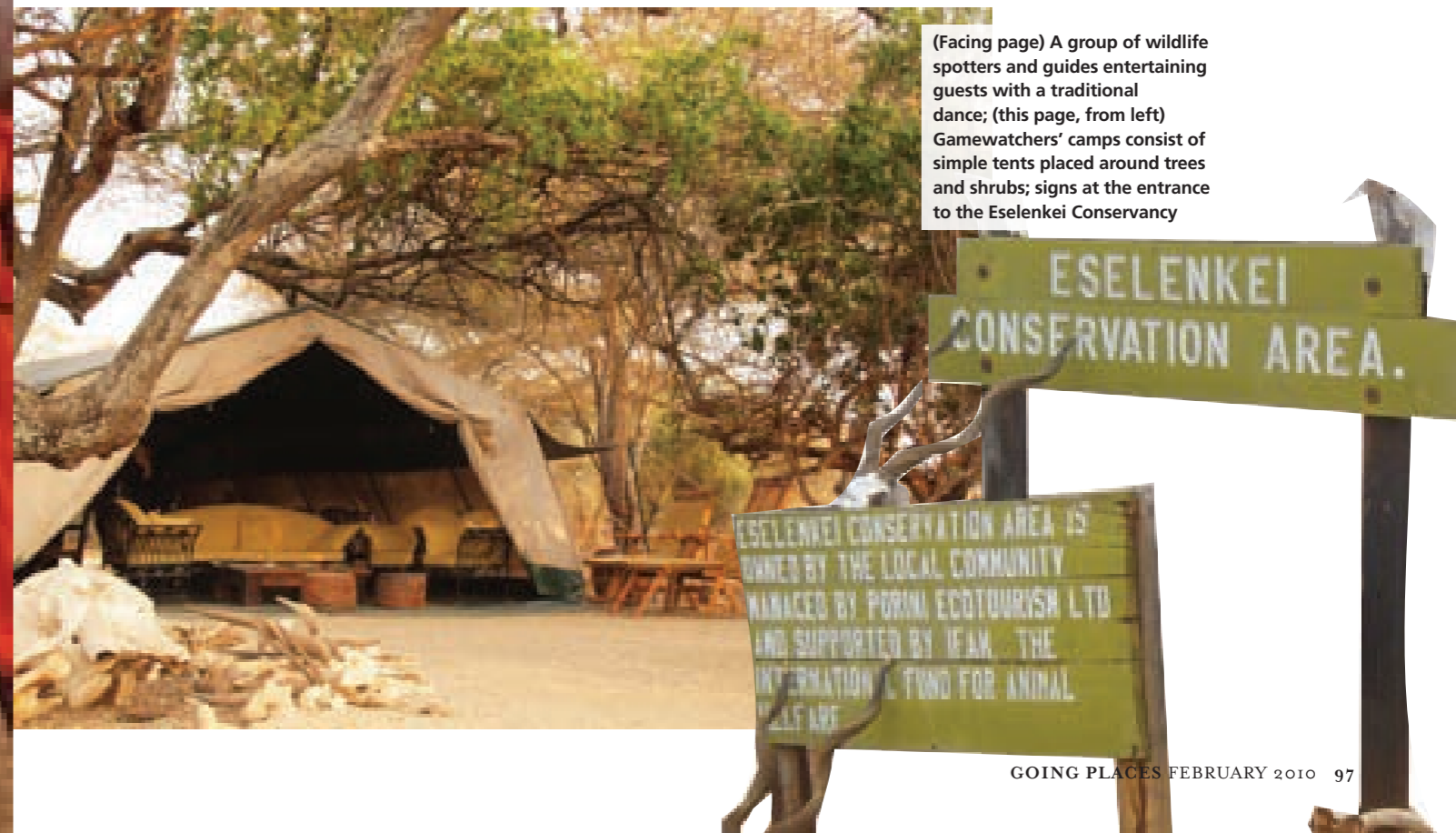
Like many of the guides and staff at the camp, Jonah hails from the Eselenkei Group Ranch, located within the Amboseli National Park ecosystem. Encompassing an area of 74,795 hectares, the area has a population of approximately 3,000 Maasai people from the Kisonko clan. Entirely dependent upon their livestock, the Maasai have suffered hardship as a result of the increasingly frequent droughts in East Africa.

Engaging the local community

With Gamewatchers’ approach to tourism however the future looks brighter, both for the local community and the environment. Headed by managing director Jake Grieves-Cook, the Nairobi-based safari company leases the land from the landowners on which it establishes the ecofriendly Porini camp. Income from the camps is used to manage and improve the conservancies, pay the lease and tourist entry fees, and pay salaries of the camp staff as well as the conservancy rangers and workers.

A majority of those employed at the camps are from the local community. They work as cooks, watchmen and guides. For the visitor, having a tall, Maasai warrior serve you leek and potato soup (or ask you if you’d like scrambled eggs) for breakfast is truly a surreal experience.

Explaining the rationale behind the company’s approach, commercial director Mohanjeet Brar, says: “Our aim is to work ▶



(Facing page) A group of wildlife spotters and guides entertaining guests with a traditional dance; (this page, from left) Gamewatchers’ camps consist of simple tents placed around trees and shrubs; signs at the entrance to the Eselenkei Conservancy

Community

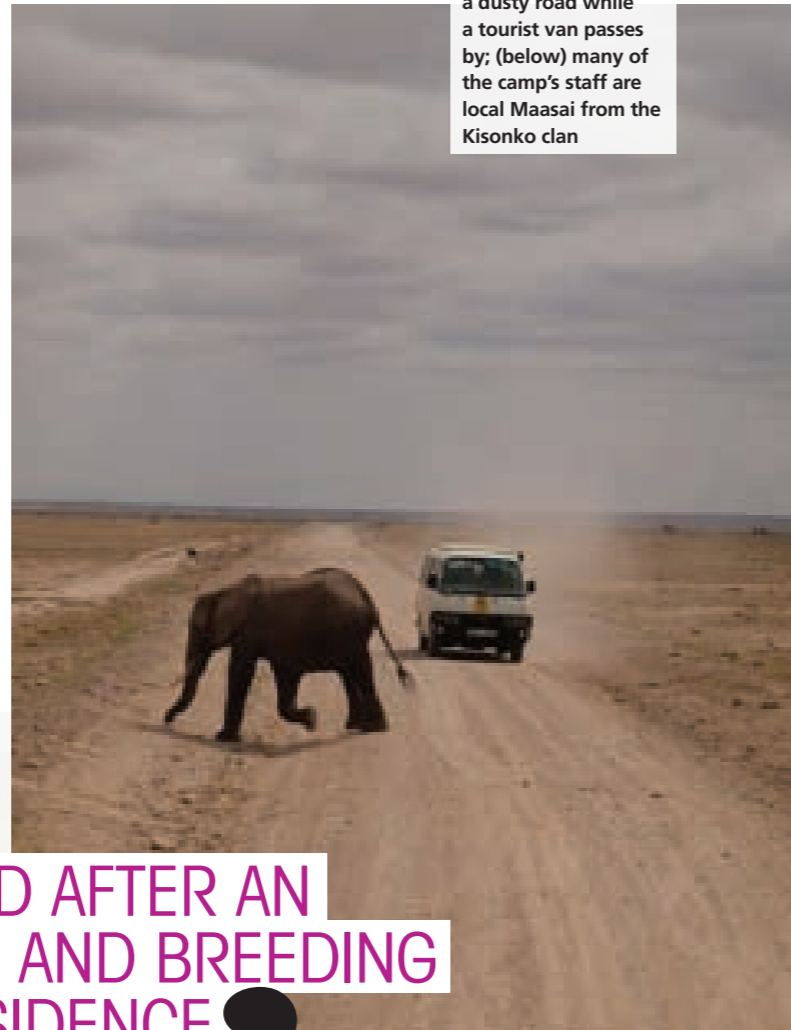
closely with communities living alongside national parks and wildlife reserves to help them derive benefits from conserving wildlife species and the indigenous habitat.”

He points out that environmentalists have recognised the setting up of conservancies as being critical to the conservation of biodiversity within an ecosystem. At the same time, earning an income from ecotourism gives the local community a greater sense of ownership; community members see the wildlife as a resource that belongs to them and are enthusiastic about encouraging wildlife to move into their conservancies.

“While the protected parks are central to the conservation of game in a region, in and of themselves, they are too small to support the biodiversity of the ecosystem,” Mohanjeet explains. “Most wild animals in Kenya live outside the park boundaries where they can sometimes be viewed as pests and killed. Conservancies allow for the establishment of safe dispersal areas and migratory corridors for animals and act as buffer zones.”

The elephants are back

Where there used to be wide scale snaring of wildlife for the bush meat trade, within a short time of the establishment of the conservancy, wildlife numbers improved. What's more, vegetation was renewed in areas that were previously over



An elephant crossing a dusty road while a tourist van passes by; (below) many of the camp's staff are local Maasai from the Kisonko clan



(Clockwise from far left) The conservancy's pristine environment draws not only tourists but also wildlife, whose numbers are increasing in the area; a local woman shows the way to make a kalabash; a close look at the guides' colourful garb and simple footwear fashioned from motorcycle tyres

“ELEPHANTS RETURNED AFTER AN ABSENCE OF 20 YEARS AND BREEDING CHEETAH TOOK UP RESIDENCE”




Into the wild

Staying true to its eco-friendly rationale, Gamewatchers' camps have no permanent structures, just nine tents (that can house a maximum of 20 guests at one time) placed strategically around the available trees and shrubs. When the time comes to remove the camp, the area will revert to its original state with no visible signs of a camp or people ever having been there.

Around a campfire that's lit each evening at dusk, guests mingle and chat about their day while the ever-attentive Maasai staff serves you your libation of choice. Eager to share their approach to tourism, visitors are also invited to visit nearby villages for an insight into the daily life and culture of the Maasai, whether it's a traditional game or a crash course on building fire from donkey dung.

For the visitor, a stay at the Porini camps means being far from the ubiquitous minibuses and tourist vans; it's a chance to commune with nature more intimately, like sneaking up on a porcupine or spotting the elusive armadillo on a night game drive. (Night game drives and nature walks are forbidden within the national parks.) And after a long day out spotting wildlife, who can say no to the Porini camp tradition of sundowners? Then, there's the opportunity to meet youths like Jonah whose passion for the wild and enthusiasm in sharing the beauty and magic of nature with jaded city slickers lingers long after you leave. ☑

For more information on Amboseli Porini camp, go to www.porini.com
 Malaysia Airlines flies non-stop from Kuala Lumpur (KUL) to Johannesburg (JNB); from there local transport can be arranged to Kenya

grazed by livestock. “At the Eselenkei Conservancy (the first one established by Gamewatchers, in 1997), elephants returned after an absence of 20 years and in the Mara conservancies, breeding cheetah took up residence in addition to an influx of other species,” says Mohanjeet.

Following the successes at Eselenkei, Gamewatchers proceeded to duplicate the model and establish the Ol Kinyei and Olare Orok Conservancies on Maasai owned land in the Mara eco system. Here, the company has set up the Mara Porini Camp and Porini Lion Camp.

The local community is reaping the benefits of this partnership. For one, they no longer need to rely on livestock as their sole income source. A junior guide at the camp can earn up to USD160 a month, a sum that is much higher than the average salary here. Today, Mohanjeet adds, the three projects generate a cash flow of over USD500,000 per annum directly into the local communities and that sum increases annually.

