WALKING WITH THE MAASAI

Friday, 3 June 2016

EXPLORING MAASAI CULTURE, WILDLIFE AND LANDSCAPES IN SOUTHERN KENYA
It was July 2014 and I was in Kenya’s Mara North Conservancy having a cup of tea and a homemade scone (yes, really!) with the manager of one of the camps in the area. We got chatting about hiking and he told me how just that morning he’d walked for miles through the conservancy. This was a revelation for me. My experiences of bush walks in much of East Africa were generally confined to very brief strolls close to the safety of camp. And now here I was being told it was perfectly possible to hike for hours, or even days, across these wildlife filled savannahs.

That evening I casually mentioned the conversation to my wife and, to my surprise, she suggested that I should come back to the Mara area one day to “spend a while walking and staying in Maasai villages and then write a book about it.” It was at that moment that the idea of the Walking with the Maasai project was born, with the aim of gaining a deeper understanding of contemporary Maasai life and the impact of the 21st century trends, conservation, political pressures and tourism on them.
In May 2015, a year after my tea and scones conversation, I set off on a five-week walk across a part of Kenya’s Maasai lands with Josphat Mako, a Maasai friend who worked as a guide in the Mara. Our walk began at the highest point of the Lebtero Hills, which are a densely forested, remote and very traditional corner of Maasailand. From here we walked westwards along the Kenya-Tanzania border to the edge of the famous Maasai Mara National Reserve. We hadn’t been able to get permission to walk through the reserve itself so when we reached the edge of the reserve, we veered north and walked through community land until we got to the hot springs at Maji Moto. Here we turned south-west, then walked clean across the renowned Olarro, Naboisho, Olare Motorogi, Mara North and the Lemek wildlife conservancies, which are essentially private game reserves that together constitute some of the finest wildlife habitat in East Africa. Our walk eventually came to an end on the banks of the Mara River at the foot of the Oloololo Escarpment.
Keeping a close eye on their surroundings using different devices ©Stuart Price, Make It Kenya
To find out more about Stuart’s journey, continue reading below the advert

ENJOYING THE JOURNEY
The point of this project was not so much the walk itself – especially as I don’t really know how far we even walked – but rather the opportunity it presented for me to get to know the Maasai people and their culture, as well as the landscapes and animals that they live with. Before I set off on the walk I vowed not to be tied to walking a certain amount of kilometres a day or sticking religiously to a predetermined route. I wanted to be able to deviate from a path as and when I felt like it in order to take in as many interesting encounters as possible.

Along the way we visited and slept in numerous Maasai villages and spent as much time as possible with the Maasai, interviewing them
and learning what we could of their traditional culture and their contemporary lifestyles. But it wasn’t all about the Maasai. By walking at a leisurely pace I hoped to also understand something of the landscapes and wildlife of the region. On the nights when we weren’t guests of the Maasai, we had the excitement of camping in the bush with the animals or, once we were inside the Maasai Mara conservancies where bush camping is banned and there were no villages to stay in, we stayed as guests at some of the safari camps, which gave me the chance to talk conservation and tourism with camp managers, guides, staff and field workers, as well as to visit some of their community projects.
A RAPIDLY CHANGING CULTURE

Walking in the renowned golden light of the region ©Stuart Price, Make It Kenya

Beaded jewellery worn by the Maasai ©Stuart Butler
Over the weeks I interviewed dozens of people and I always tried to keep my interviewees as broad in interest, and conflicting in views, as possible. If one day I interviewed a traditional Maasai healer then the next I spoke to a Maasai doctor working in a clinic, and if one afternoon I sat in the shade of a tree chatting with a hunter then the next morning I would meet someone working in the field of conservation. We met religious leaders, warriors, biologists, activists, scientists, artists, politicians, vision seekers, TV personalities, tourist industry representatives, shepherds, housewives and a host of others. I spoke to elderly Maasai about days past, and I listened, spellbound, as they recounted tales of cattle rustling, and hunting lion and ostrich with spears in order to prove their manhood. However, I also spoke
to an equal number of young Maasai – the ‘Digital Maasai’ as the elders called them – for whom stories of the old ways were as exotic sounding as they were for me.

If one thing became clear through all of these conversations, it was that Maasai culture was in the process of rapid change and that if I had wanted to catch the last of the old lifestyles then I was probably 10 years too late. Even the famous Maasai Moran (warriors) were now almost a relic of a bygone age, and most of those long flowing locks of hair are now made of string, while the lion mane headdresses tend to be hand-me-downs from fathers and grandfathers. In fact, in the whole course of our walk we only encountered three or four genuine Maasai Moran, and Josphat and Patrick, another Maasai friend I was walking with at the time, were so excited at meeting ‘real’ Moran that they asked if they could take pictures of them on their camera phones. The Moran declined!

For me this clash of globalisation and the impact it’s having on Maasai culture was one of the most fascinating aspects of the walk, but of course nobody can walk across the Maasai lands without wildlife featuring strongly.
Two cultures go hand-in-hand ©Stuart Butler

A traditional lion mane headdress ©Stuart Butler
LOCAL ENCOUNTERS

Sometimes these wildlife encounters were simply wonderful. Walking for hours over the savannah as huge herds of zebra and wildebeest parted for us as we strolled by was certainly a highlight. Walking also allowed us to see all the little creatures we’d have missed in a vehicle – the ants and tortoises, the butterflies and lizards. Other encounters were less heart-warming though. Meeting the Maasai family who’d lost their three-year-old son to a leopard attack was the clearest such example. There were also the numerous families I spoke with who seemed caught in a never-ending cycle of conflict with hyenas, lions or leopards raiding their cattle bomas at night and elephants destroying their crops.
Over the weeks that we walked, we met dozens of conservationists, scientists and concerned individuals working hard to protect what’s left of Kenya’s wildlife heritage. That they’re doing a sterling job is undoubted. On my many previous visits to the Mara region I’ve seen the landscapes and wildlife through the prism of a safari vehicle and through the eyes of whichever expert wildlife guide was with me at the time. After driving around the conservancies and the Maasai Mara National Reserve, I had always been left with the impression that these vast spaces were home to healthy populations of wildlife.

On the other hand, walking through those same areas opened my eyes to another reality. Protected areas that I had once imagined to be nearly endless suddenly appeared very small when I realised I could walk clean across a conservancy in a day. Human interference, though a part of the environment ever since man’s earliest ancestors first swung out of the trees, was undeniably intense and was clearly
having an increasingly serious impact. All around the edges of the protected zones land is being demarcated, fences are going up, development is taking place, wildlife migration routes are being disrupted, human-wildlife conflict is increasing and, close to the Maasai Mara National Reserve itself, resentment against the reserve and conservation is strong.

The spots of Maasai giraffe – one of three subspecies of giraffe in Kenya

©Stuart Butler
To find out why conservancies are so important, continue reading below the advert
THE IMPORTANCE OF CONSERVANCIES

However, in and around the conservancies, where local communities are more involved and gain more benefit from safari tourism and conservation, the attitude is generally more positive.

It’s no secret that populations of some species are crashing and I knew all this before I set out on the walk. However, although I didn’t plan on any daring encounters with potentially dangerous animals, both Josphat and I had expected that we would bump into big cats, buffalos and elephants by walking so many kilometres over these grasslands – whether we liked it or not. But as the Mara River and the end of our walk came into view, I was struck by the overwhelming realisation that we had walked so far but had only encountered on foot one elephant, a handful of buffalo and not a single, solitary cat. When we mentioned this to older Maasai, the reaction was always the same – they shook their heads and told us how when they were younger they would encounter these animals on an almost daily basis as they walked with their cattle. They invariably told us that they had seen the number of animals falling over the
years, but then, without fail, they always expressed surprise and
dismay that after five weeks we had not seen a single lion as we
walked.

If one thing became clear from our walk it was that there were a lot
of very concerned people, Maasai and others, working to preserve
Kenya’s wild places and wildlife. It was obvious to me that the
conservancies could only be a good thing, but it was also clear that
right now they are simply not large enough. If we really want to save
the wildlife of the Mara ecosystem, then the conservancies need to
grow and multiply, and they need to do so quickly or there will be
nothing much left to protect.
A Maasai wears a traditional red shuka and the colour is believed to scare off lions ©Stuart Butler

Surveying the vast lands surrounding the national reserve ©Stuart Butler

To find out how to travel responsibly in the region,
TRAVEL TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

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Explore the northern-most limits of the Maasai Mara in search of its famous lion prides, plains game, birds, ancient acacias and breath-taking sunsets!

Book your spot...
If you’re looking to be part of the bigger picture to help protect Kenya’s wild places, its communities and its animals, then a stay at Kicheche Bush Camp or Mara Plains Camp in the Olare Motorogi conservancy may be just what you’re looking for. These camps not only supported the Walking with the Maasai project by hosting us when we were not allowed to camp independently in the conservancies, but they also still provided a relatively private experience in the region.

The 33,000 acre Olare Motorogi was the first private conservancy in the Maasai Mara eco-system and it dedicates itself to low-impact and responsible tourism. Its foundation is based on a partnership with
the Maasai community, whereby it serves as a strategic buffer zone that reduces human-wildlife conflict and provides an additional wildlife protected area in its natural state. In return for allowing this area to be used for conservation purposes, the Maasai receive monthly payments for the lease of the land and gain employment in the tourism sector.

By staying here, you not only get to cross the unfenced borders that the conservancy shares with the Maasai Mara National Reserve, but you can also be privy to some more exclusive sightings away from the crowds, thanks to the conservancy having one of the lowest tourist densities in the region.

The success of this pioneering community conservancy has helped to pave the way for similar projects, which all follow the belief that conservancies are the future for wildlife protection in Kenya. Kicheche Camps are also located in the Mara North and Mara Naboisho conservancies, and other operators like Porini Gamewatchers have also been instrumental in the success of conservancies around the national reserve thanks to Porini Lion Camp in Olare Motorogi and Porini Mara Camp in Ol Kinyei.

No matter in which camp you choose to stay, by basing your safari in a conservancy, you can rest safe in the knowledge that you will be helping local communities to live in harmony with the wildlife, as well as benefit from a source of income.
Conservancies are the way forward to help the Maasai communities and the wildlife ©Stuart Butler
About the author

Stuart is a writer, photographer and the author of the Lonely Planet Kenya guidebook, as well as numerous other Africa and Asia titles for Lonely Planet, Rough Guides and Bradt.

*Once We Were Lions*, a book about this walk, the Maasai, wildlife and conservation will be published in late 2016. At the same time a travelling photographic exhibition and a series of speaking dates by Stuart and Josphat will take place. Stuart will also guide an exclusive safari, which focuses on walking, conservation and the traditional cultures of the Samburu and Maasai people.
Photographer Daniel Schuhmacher recently visited the Samburu National Reserve in Kenya, where he had the opportunity to spend time with a local Samburu tribe, as well as enjoy the incredible wildlife safaris that the region has to offer. A local guide took
Daniel to a Samburu village where he was welcomed by the tribe, which showed him around the village in exchange for a bit of money. The local guide explained that any money earned from tourism is then shared with the rest of the village and a big part goes towards the education of children.

The Samburu are related to the Maasai and share a few traditions, but they inhabit Kenya's north-central plains whereas the Maasai are concentrated in the region surrounding the Maasai Mara. Both tribes are thought to originally have come from Sudan in the 15th century, but they parted ways when the Samburu settled just north of the equator in Kenya's Rift Valley area, while their Maasai cousins moved further south. The Samburu language is similar to the Maa language spoken by the Maasai, and both tribes are semi-nomadic pastoralists who value cattle. However, the Samburu are thought to adhere more to cultural traditions than their Maasai kin, as their more remote location means they are slightly less affected by modern trends.

The members of the village that Daniel visited showed him their houses and animals, and demonstrated their traditional dances, which are a significant part of the Samburu way of life. While Daniel was in the Samburu village, he was allowed to take a few pictures - the results of which he put together in this photography series.

To find out more about this photographer, read the last page of this gallery after enjoying this small selection of his work.

Cover image by ©Daniel Schuhmacher, daschu MEDIA
ABOUT THE PHOTOGRAPHER

Daniel Schuhmacher is a 26-year-old, self-taught photographer from Germany, who has a love for nature and animals, and an infinite passion for taking pictures. In his travels, he finds himself always hunting for the best light, and he makes it his goal to photograph the places, the people and the things that he loves the most.
Upon Daniel's arrival, he received a warm welcome from the Samburu men in front of their village, and this photo symbolises his introduction to the totally different way of life of this brightly attired tribe.
During his visit, Daniel found that many of the young warriors enjoyed posing in front of the camera, which was great for him as a photographer.
This photo is of the tribal leader, who was happy to pose for this great portrait.
Some of the men showcased their survival skills with regards to making a fire from scratch.
The Samburu and Maasai tribes are known for their beautifully beaded jewellery, and both men and women adorn themselves with earrings, bracelets, anklets and necklaces. The number of beads or necklaces that a woman wears is said to be indicative of
her beauty, wealth and status.

This photo shows an older woman selling some of her handiwork to tourists in order to earn money to support her community. Traditionally the Samburu depended on their cattle to survive, but the impacts of drought on livestock numbers has meant that the tribe, like their Maasai cousins, has become more involved in the tourism sector.
The Samburu tribe has a patriarchal system wherein the elders decide how many wives a man can have. Generally speaking the women take care of collecting food and firewood, cooking, child rearing and craftsmanship, while men are responsible for cattle herding and security.
During his visit to the tribal village, the community showed Daniel how they live. This man took him inside his house so that he could see what it looked like on the inside - it had a bed, a kitchen and a small goat.
The houses of the Samburu tribe are built from materials that can be sourced locally, such as sticks, mud and cow dung. They also tend to use bits of plastic - collected from waste products - to offer additional protection from the rain.
The *manyattas* (settlements) cater for the Samburu’s polygamous system of marriage, and each *manyatta* is home to about four or five families, with each wife having her own house. The *manyatta* is then protected by acacia thorn bushes to protect the families and their cattle from any roaming predators.