

# NYLON

THE DENIM ISSUE

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BARTON,  
EXPOSED!

ROMPERS:  
ONE-PIECE  
WONDERS

GIRLS WHO  
LIKE BOYS...  
JEANS

DAZED AND  
CONFUSED-  
INSPIRED  
BEAUTY

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REASONS  
TO FEEL  
BLUE...

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# OUT OF AFRICA

After the violence that killed hundreds last winter, Kenya needs tourism dollars more than ever. Here's why there's never been a better time to visit this beautiful country. By Diane Vadino

*Holy shit.* I think as my caravan of Americans leaves the Nairobi airport for the city proper, not so much because we are in Africa, which I know chiefly through aid-relief sing-alongs and *Hotel Rwanda* and other entertainments inspired by mass deaths, but because there are giraffes walking alongside the highway. Maybe Kenyans would feel equally disconcerted by herds of, say, Texas longhorns drifting by I-35, I think, struggling for context. This will not be the last time on this trip that I fail to align the First and Third worlds, and in the end I give up and raise my camera like everyone else.

The African safari is, of course, one of the great clichés of travel—especially in Kenya, a poor country that regularly hosts the world's wealthiest travelers at luxurious lodges. (My trip, airfare excluded, would cost about 25 times the average Kenyan's yearly salary.) Consequently, there is no small amount of acquiescence involved with it: The conflicted white liberal traveling squeamishly through Africa is an even bigger, and more annoying, cliché, and there is, after all, so much to see.

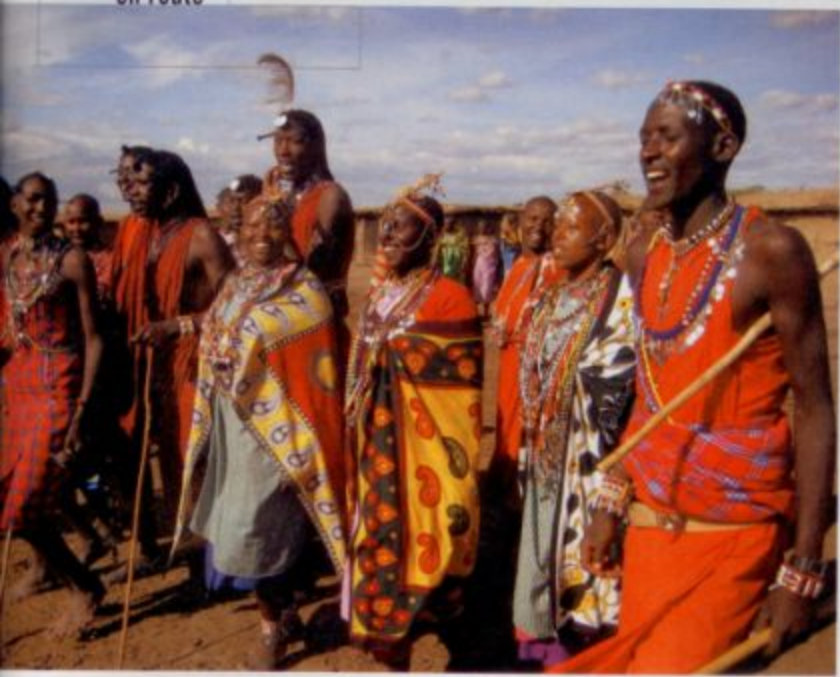
Our first stop, after a stop at Karen Blixen's farm, the failed coffee plantation she writes about in *Out of Africa*, and an obligatory night in Nairobi, is the Maasai Mara, a national reserve named for the Mara

River, which transects it, and the Maasai tribe, some of whose members inhabit it. The Maasai drink blood and hunt lions and a troupe greet our plane with a group song and dance that despite the unimpeachably legitimate setting feels a bit Epcot-style World Showcase. We each have a Mara Safari Club cabin, outfitted with a mosquito-net-enclosed bed and a pillow-top mattress, with a porch overlooking the river and the hippopotami sunning themselves on it. To understand it intellectually is one thing, but to experience it is another: It is all so beautiful and indulgent and disconcerting, a five-star hotel room in one of the poorest countries on earth, that at a certain point I begin thinking of the scene in *The Matrix* where Joe Pantoliano, eating his matrix-fueled steak dinner at a fancy restaurant, declares his contentment with what is a fundamentally inauthentic experience. In any case: What is the authentic Kenyan experience? A per-capita annual salary of \$390 and an average life expectancy of 55 and more than two million people infected with HIV? Tourism remains Kenya's top-producing industry; low wages in the service industry are amply supported by Westerners' tips. Number two is the exportation of flowers.



**Location:** East Africa **Population:** 31 million (approximately)  
**Official language:** Swahili **Currency:** Kenyan Shilling

en route



The routine for the next few days is as follows: We wake early enough to spot the animals ambling about in the cool that precedes the afternoon heat, and split into two groups, each with its own driver and guide. Everyone wants to be with Philip Rono, our Micato Safaris guide, a married father of two. I do not expect to feel strongly—at least, strongly positive—about someone whose job it is to tell us what to do, but Philip is brilliant. In addition to supplying more information than we could possibly digest on the names, natures, sleeping patterns, breeding particularities, and everything else regarding the wildlife that surrounds us, he does what he can to explain the invisible-to-us cultural currents. There's a lunch, and a nap, and then it's back to the car for a second trip out, ever in search of the Big Five: an elephant, a lion, a cape buffalo, a rhino, and a leopard, which comprise the safari-goer's Holy Grail—a term that feels equally 1930s "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber" and 2007 marketing campaign. We tick all the boxes so quickly that there is not much to do but sit back and regard the next permutation of lions, elephants, and giraffes. There is no small amount of giraffe fatigue, though I could never tire of the zebras and take more than 100 pictures of them.

Soon enough, after a transfer in Nairobi and a plane ride that swoons to a stop on a grass runway, we arrive at Campi ya Kanzi, a collection of eco-lodges near Tanzania: Though obscured by clouds for nearly our entire stay, the massive plank of Mount Kilimanjaro, 35 miles away across the border, dominates the southeastern view. Founded by an Italian couple, the

camp benefits the Maasai Wilderness Conservation Trust, which keeps the surrounding land out of the hands of developers and in those of the Maasai tribe—one of whose junior chiefs, Samson, takes us on walking tours across the terrain, more green than gold, as the Mara had been. The young volcanic hills that surround us—only 500 years old—are known here as the Chyulu Hills but more familiar, at least to American high school students, as Hemingway's titular *Green Hills of Africa*. We visit a new school nearby, nearly constructed, and a clinic staffed by a Kenyan doctor trained, in part, at Brown. Samson tells us about going to New York and staying at Edward Norton's apartment—the actor is the trust's highest profile supporter, though Cartier is another. This is easily the most spectacular place I have ever been. To accusations that it is not the "real Africa"—luxury eco-lodges and safaris in Land Rovers—there could hardly be one real Africa across the breadth and width of the continent; it is one experience of many, and in this case, one that financially supports many others.

That was in late November. Two days after Christmas, the opposition candidate, Raila Odinga, lost a contested election to Mwai Kibaki, president since 2002. (Polling problems abounded: One constituency reported voter turnout of 115%.) More to the point, Kibaki is a Kikuyu, a member of Kenya's long-dominant tribe, while Odinga is Luo; after the election decision, the kind of resentment that is often described as

opposite page: wildebeest and zebra. this page: maasai tribespeople, the airport lounge on the maasai mara, giraffes

a rainbow near Campi ya Kanzi, northeast Kenya, where the author's family has a lodge. A few months later, the violence would change their destinations—to Tanzania, or South Africa—would mean a few phone calls for them and the unmooring of Kenya's most important industry: In the first quarter of 2008, revenues dropped by 54%.



"long-simmering" blew up, with some Odinga supporters attacking their opponents, in several weeks of particularly ghastly violence—three dozen women and children burned alive in a barricaded church, one neighbor beheading another. The fighting would leave up to 1,500 people dead and displace a quarter-million. The fact that tourists would change their destinations—to Tanzania, or South Africa—would mean a few phone calls for them and the unmooring of Kenya's most important industry: In the first quarter of 2008, revenues dropped by 54%.

Following a power-sharing accord between the rival political parties, brokered by the U.N., Kenyan tourism is recovering, thanks in part to support from powerful parties—including the American ambassador to Kenya, who issued a statement encouraging hesitant travelers: "There have been positive developments that are opening up the economic climate, making Kenya once again the perfect locale for business and tourism." Richard Branson, whose Virgin Atlantic serves Nairobi from London and supports the national rugby team, was named an elder in a Maasai tribe last summer in honor of the airline's efforts in the region: he recently attended the opening of a local elementary school and plans to lease land from the Maasai for a new lodge. Multi-million dollar improvements, made possible by years of increased tourism revenue—like those at Nairobi's historic Norfolk Hotel—are recommencing. "The skirmishes are over," says Richard Kimenyi, the Norfolk's general manager, who says completion of his hotel's construction projects are a month behind schedule. "Now what's going on is the healing process between the tribes. Even during the skirmishes, no foreigner was injured or hurt, as they were mainly in the slums and outside the areas where tourists go." The reality is that though the fighting was obviously calamitous for those involved, it was limited in its physical scope: "When there are gang clashes in L.A., you don't stop going to California," says Luca Belpietro, the Italian founder of Campi ya Kanzi. "When the Bronx had serious problems, one did not have to avoid visiting Manhattan. Kenya is slightly smaller than Texas, and the incidents were located in very few contained areas and did not at all affect the entire country. Please let your readers know that tourism employs nearly a million people, and ecotourism in particular has a huge economic impact on poor communities." From here, last winter's violence can look all encompassing—perhaps the way the poverty unmasked by Katrina seemed to European onlookers. Americans should know better than anyone that everything is local.



For more information, please contact author, 415 855 5422, 2008, or see [www.kenya.com](http://www.kenya.com)