

# Kenya without the crowds

The Masai Mara, traditional tribes and breakfast with giraffes form a safari that seems far away from Kenya's troubles. Rupert Uloth meets the man behind the idea

**T**HE likes of Mikey Carr-Hartley should be the focus of their own conservation projects: his vision for the observation of Kenyan wildlife and the continuation of traditional tribal life in the bush is enlightened, sustainable and authentic. He has no time for the crowds of minibuses at a lion kill or pseudo-tribesmen who slip into jeans and replace the iPod as soon as the tourists have departed.

He's fourth generation—his great-grandfather first came to Kenya in 1896, and his father and grandfather were famed for their tracking and hunting skills. They helped on films such as *King Solomon's Mines* and a cousin mentored the Disney illustrators for *The Lion King*. Mr Carr-Hartley has distilled these genes into a travel business that gives visitors as real a taste of Africa as you can get in the few days most of us have to spare. He also took the wise step of marrying Tanya, herself from a distinguished Kenyan family, the Hopcrofts, and a determined and free spirit who was brought up on the shores of Lake Naivasha and who is undaunted by ferrying their three children under five vast distances across the bush. They met when working for the Wildenstein family, knocking down the family's remote lodge and rebuilding it for each visit. This test of Mr Carr-Hartley's imagination, patience and building skills is standing him in good stead.

As I arrive, he has just secured the purchase of Giraffe Manor, an extraordinary building on the edge of Nairobi. From the outside, it could be a solid manse in the Scottish



Excuse me, could you pass the marmalade? Rupert Uloth and a Rothschild giraffe



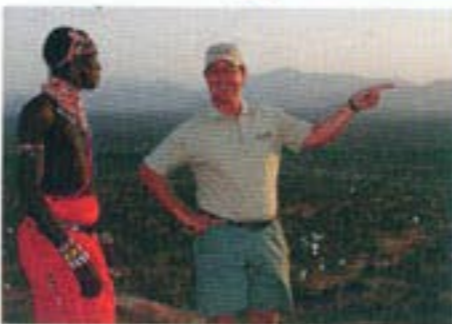
Game drives offer the chance to glimpse the psychedelic stripes of the rare Grevy zebra

borders. But rather than the skirl of pipes, breakfast is accompanied by the prehensile lips of Rothschild giraffes greedily helping themselves to nuts from a bowl right next to my own, the brown-patch-patterned neck a considerable hindrance to marmalade access. It's a fitting introduction to Africa, and a great stopover for many guests who arrive in the evening on the London flight.

These are tricky times for the Kenya tourist industry. As well as the worldwide economic downturn, the country's recent electoral unrest spooked international visitors. When I was there, the national papers were dismayed that the opposition, who entered into a coalition with the government, seem to be as enthusiastically corrupt. Democracy in a tribal society struggles on, but when we arrived in the remote bush of the Samburu area in northern Kenya, it was hard to believe that central government had much reach or influence into these traditional and fiercely autonomous areas. Indeed, one tribesman cheerfully admitted to raiding cattle from neighbouring tribes. 'They were our cattle,' he explained reasonably, with a gleaming grin,



Dancing in a swirl of sun-drenched colour: the tribespeople of the Samburu in northern Kenya live as their ancestors have done for centuries



Sharing the Kenyan dream: with his round, open, freckled face, crop of dark brown hair, bright blue eyes and ready smile, 37-year-old Mikey Carr-Hartley is the perfect host for fresh-faced newcomers and old Africa hands alike, drawing on years of experience and knowledge to answer all questions in his measured, good-humoured tones

adding: 'All the world's cows belong to us.'

With his own hands, Mr Carr-Hartley has built a dream lodge, Sasaab, on the bend in the Ewaso Ng'iro River, the only camp on this community-owned land. Separate thatched buildings each have a sitting room, bathroom, bedroom and plunge pool. On game drives, we spot the 'Samburu Big Five'—rare breeds indigenous to northern Kenya, including cuddly looking grevy zebra (of which only 2,000 are left in the wild) with its psychedelically close stripes and panda-like ears, and the gerenuk, the only gazelle that can stand upright on its hind legs to eat leaves. We visited the school, which has been supported by Mr Carr-Hartley's company, Tamimi. Children now have regular classes in a proper building, and the village has a regular water supply, saving women and children carrying it for miles every day. These pastoralists still live as their ancestors did and traditional ceremonies such as circumcision are still

a fundamental part of their social structure. We saw the low huts made of poles, mud and sheep dung, the propped-up sticks that indicate that elders are inside a hut, and women going busily about their daily chores as the men made themselves beautiful with beads.

In the evening, we heard them singing and dancing in the dried river bed, something they do every evening in the same way that people in the UK go to the pub. Everyone in our party was struck by how contented they seemed to be, despite having so few material possessions—there's no need to buy a toothbrush when you have toothbrush trees everywhere. Our spotter, Daudi, told us that 450lb of sugar were consumed at his wedding, yet his teeth would have shamed a Hollywood starlet with an on-call dentist.

The grassy plains of the Masai Mara are a contrast to the more enclosed landscape of Samburu with its trees and bushes. The trouble is that you're more likely to see crowds

of people. But most of the lodges are clustered in the north-eastern corner, and Mr Carr-Hartley has set up tented Sala's Camp on the site of a former poachers' camp on the Tanzanian border, with hot showers and comfortable beds. The camp is taken down for four months of the year, leaving the place to the rhino. We saw a lion kill, several rhino, dozing cheetahs, elephants—it was as if we were in our own private game park.

*Sasaab costs from \$590 pppn and Sala's Camp \$530 pppn—including food, drink and game drives. Six nights are available for the price of five until the end of June. (00 254 733 960 202; 00 254 728 601 212; www.tamimiea.com; www.sasaab.com) British Airways (0844 493 0787; www.ba.com) flies from Heathrow to Nairobi from \$350 pp return (includes all UK taxes). Safarilink (www.safarilink-kenya.com) flights from Nairobi-Samburu-Mara-Nairobi are from \$490 pp (excluding taxes)*