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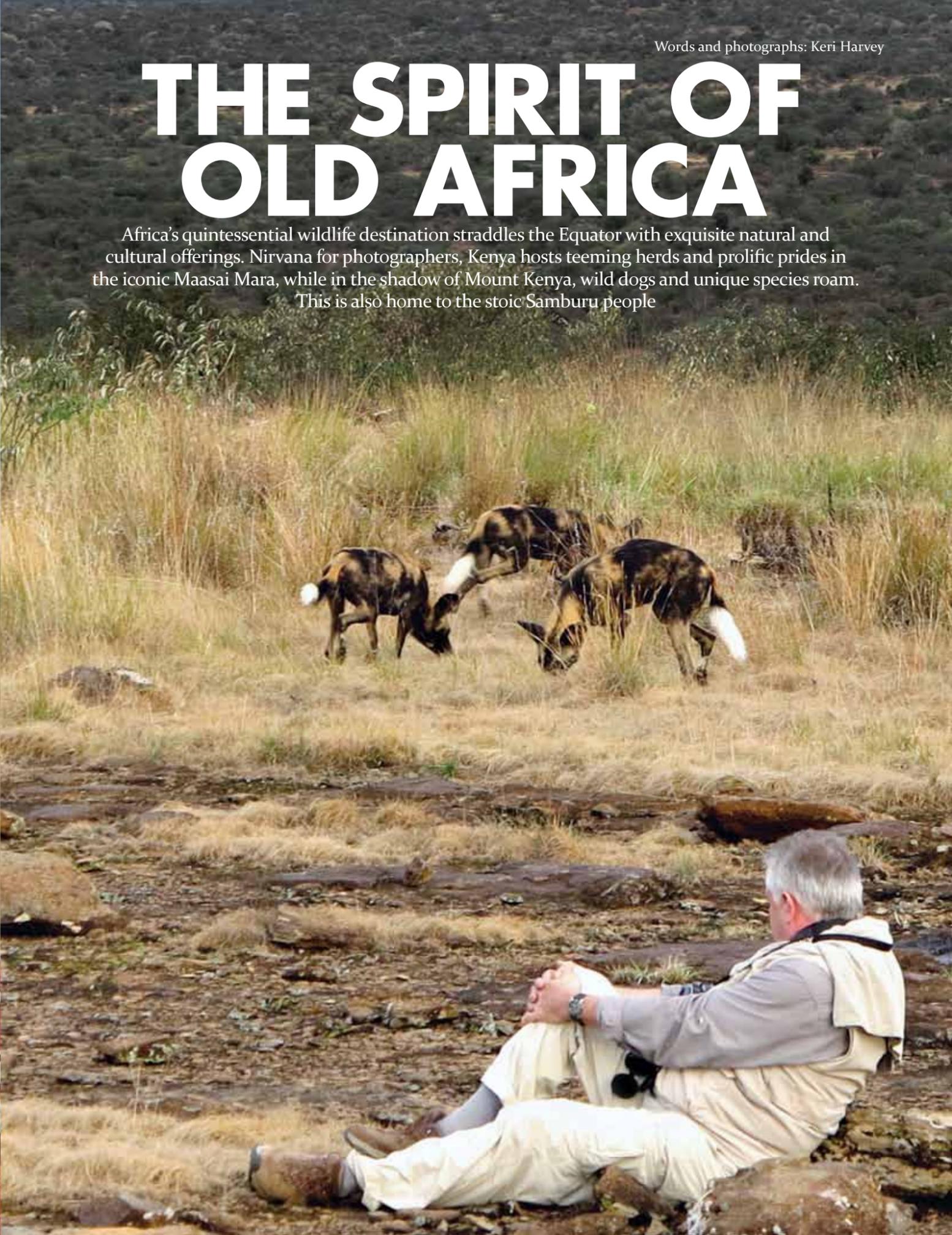
Samburu girl in traditional clothing.
Opposite: Watching a pack of wild dogs move across the mountain top in Laikipia Wilderness.



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THE SPIRIT OF OLD AFRICA

Africa's quintessential wildlife destination straddles the Equator with exquisite natural and cultural offerings. Nirvana for photographers, Kenya hosts teeming herds and prolific prides in the iconic Maasai Mara, while in the shadow of Mount Kenya, wild dogs and unique species roam. This is also home to the stoic Samburu people





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Brown dust rises from the earth in the still morning air. The rhythmic “who-ha, who-ha, who-ha” is strangely primeval and hypnotic. It musters energy and focus. Then the jumping begins. One by one, lithe, muscular bodies rubbed red with ochre and wrapped in intricate beadwork rise higher and higher, like human arrows piercing the sky. Neon-coloured cloths drape the men’s waists and most wear simple shoes fashioned from old car tyres. The Samburu warriors are honing their impressive jumping skills. Over and over again, they thrust their shiny bodies into the air to the chorus of evocative chanting. This is how the warriors greet the day: dancing in the dust.

“Our herds are everything; our wealth and our life,” says lead warrior Lekolua Ltajio, his finely plaited braids held in place by elaborately beaded headgear topped with a single rose. “We jump to see the enemy, so we can protect our cattle.” Mostly the enemy are predators, not people, so the young warriors stay awake through the night to watch over their A

Clockwise from top left: Maasai giraffe have very distinct markings with ‘rough drawn’ white divisions between their patches. Dancing and jumping is part of the daily ritual of Samburu warriors. A vehicle provides an ideal lookout post for a cheetah. The vast open plains of the Maasai Mara are teeming with diverse species. The Maasai Chief stands proud alongside his prize cattle. Mount Kenya peeps through morning mist near Laikipia.



THE SHEER SCALE OF THE CONSERVATION AREA

livestock. They rest by day, dine on a mixture of animal blood and milk for stamina, and generally lead a charmed life, adored by the ladies. To attract the attention of warriors, Samburu girls craft elegant, beaded jewellery as gifts for them. Lekolua has a particularly fine collection, but smiles and says he wants to remain a warrior for at least another 10 years before he thinks of marrying. Samburu warriors must stay single and focused on their task.

The wilderness area of Laikipia, with its rustic Samburu villages, lies at the foot of lofty Mount Kenya. Here wildlife is truly wild and also unusual. Many species endemic to East Africa occur here, including the pin-striped Grevy’s zebra with round ears, Gerenuk or Waller’s antelope (which look like long-necked impalas) and reticulated or Somali giraffe with clear white borders between their brown

patches. Tiny, delicate Kirk’s dik-diks (antelope) are also plentiful in Laikipia and are the staple food of a large pack of wild dogs that inhabit this area.

There are few wildlife experiences as thrilling as tracking, finding and following a pack of wild dogs as they hunt for dinner across the high-altitude plateau. The terrain of Laikipia is rugged and makes for a rough ride, but the experience is raw nature, unfettered. After the adrenaline rush, a relaxed meal around the fire out in the bush ends the day. There must be worse ways to spend a Wednesday evening than kicking back in true wilderness, old Africa-style.

The vast, undulating plains of the Maasai Mara are the flipside of the wildlife experiences. Both are in Kenya – Laikipia in the northern and the Mara in the southern hemisphere – but in reality, they’re completely different worlds. Flying into the Maasai Mara, the sheer scale of the conservation area and the herds that live there will take your breath away:

AND THE HERDS THAT LIVE THERE WILL TAKE YOUR BREATH AWAY.

innumerable numbers and divine diversity in leaps, journeys and crashes of wildlife unmatched anywhere else on Earth. The Maasai Mara is extraordinary and will leave you grappling for words to describe it. “Mara” means “dappled” in the Maa language and refers to the acacia trees that sprinkle the rolling savannah and give the area its “iconic Africa” look.

The steep-banked rivers meshing through the landscape and forming the natural borders of the 250 000ha Maasai Mara are renowned among both nature-lovers and photographers for the million-plus wildebeest that cross them during the annual migration from Serengeti in the south. From September to November, it’s a feeding frenzy for crocodiles in these rivers, as they keep wildebeest numbers in check. Photographers come from around the world to the Mara with the single desire to freeze-frame this epic and dramatic wildlife migration. Darwin’s theory plays out before you, savage and real.

This is only one aspect of the Maasai Mara, though. Because of its vastness, fertile volcanic soil and abundant rainfall, there’s always grass here, so resident wildlife is abundant and diverse. The Big Five are everywhere and on a single drive, you’ll likely see more wildlife than you can count. Just four days there yielded herds of elephant and wildebeest, hunting cheetah and leopard, mating lions, mating giraffe, buffalo, caracal, endemic topi and Thomson’s gazelle, hippos and even a zebra crossing. Predators are abundant, kills are everywhere and the game are accustomed to vehicles, which means the photography’s awesome – and that goes for birdlife too. Sightings are spectacular and guaranteed, giving photographers a meze of unusual and creative images to capture. Being in a private vehicle customised for photography, a skilled



Maasai driver up front, accompanied by an experienced wildlife photographic guide, makes possible in days what could otherwise take years to photograph anywhere else in Africa.

Henry Sadera, our driver, grew up on the edge of the Mara and has been driving in the park all his adult life. Always dressed in his blood-red *shuka* – the traditional





us and has donned his ceremonial lion's mane for the occasion. "It's just for you," he says, as we greet him. "Lions are important to the Maasai, but we don't kill wild animals to eat." Inside the circular kraal, demarcated by rough-cut branches, the Maasai villagers are going about their daily business. Some are checking the cattle, while others do the washing or clean their dwellings. A group of young warriors sit in a circle to one side, talking among themselves. Then one gets up and the rest follow. They stand side by side.

In silence, with just the whistling of the wind, they begin to jump. Higher, higher, higher into thin air they leap, one by one. "They stay lean so they can jump high," comments the chief, after one warrior reaches for the moon. Their red *shukas* against the indigo sky are blindingly bright and I ask the chief why the Maasai chose this colour for their traditional clothing. "So that we can see each other far across

blanket of the Maasai – he explains the Maasai people's respect for wildlife. "We just don't eat wild animals," he says. "The Maasai Mara doesn't have any fences, so the wildlife sometimes wander out and graze with our cattle. It doesn't bother us. But our cattle will never cross the river into the Mara. That we don't do. The Mara is for wildlife only." He wrinkles his nose when we offer him biltong. "No, thanks," he says. "It might be springbok."

Leaning over his steering wheel as if to look a little closer, Henry points ahead and says simply: "Cheetah." Nobody on board notices anything in the long grass surrounding us. We only see the cheetah when she lifts her head, though Henry had spotted the tip of her tail some time before. Slowly she sits up and looks around. Starts walking directly towards us. Stops. Sits.



Clockwise from above: Laikipia Wilderness Camp. A new born elephant calf accompanies her mother who searches for whistling thorns to eat. A lioness in the Maasai Mara, known as Scar for the bad facial scar she has on her right side. She's both a successful hunter and mother to her cubs.

Watches – and changes course towards our second vehicle of photographers.

Then she takes everyone completely by surprise. In a single leap, the cheetah lands on the vehicle's roof, oblivious to its alarmed occupants. She's completely relaxed. However, the photographers can't take a single frame, because the spotted cat is sitting out of sight



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atop the vehicle. "Her mother taught her to do that," says Henry, casually leaning back and watching the unusual scene. "She also used vehicles as vantage points to see further across the plains. It's really clever." Three minutes later the cheetah jumps off the vehicle's roof and continues her leisurely trip across the open plains, as if what she's just done is absolutely normal. It may be for her, but all aboard are speechless.

Past a rare sighting of mating hyena, we head to a Maasai village outside the park to meet the chief. He's expecting

the land," he smiles. "We only like red – not like the Samburu, who like all bright colours. I think red also scares away lions." I smile back, unconvinced. "OK," he says, "the Maasai chose to wear red so that in tribal battles, the enemy couldn't see when we were bleeding. Now we just like the colour and are proud to wear our *shukas*."

They're also proud custodians of the dappled savannascape of the Maasai Mara – that slice of timeless Africa where the herds still gather, just as they always have. And the people jump for joy. 🌈