

# RICH MAN'S GAME

Western tycoons are turning vast tracts of land in Africa into opulent wilderness retreats devoted to conservation. It's a controversial practice, but it may be the last chance left for struggling wildlife. **Lisa Grainger** visits three new camps in Kenya and Tanzania





**Big country** Giraffe on the plains near Segera, below. Above, from left, Segera's homely interior; a woman from the local community; an artwork by Walter Oltmann; meals are all locally sourced from Laikipia farms





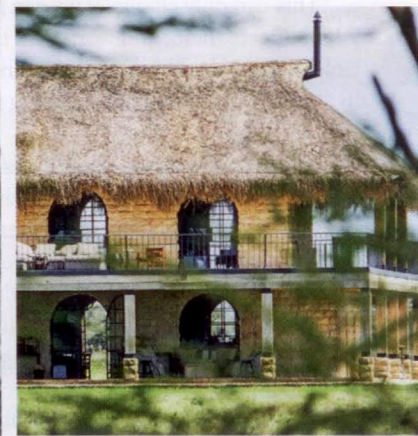
It is 6am, and in the dawn light an archetypal Kenyan scene is unfolding before my villa. In the dry acacia-thorn savannah, three buffalo graze by a stream. A pair of finger-sized emerald sunbirds flit between cactus blooms. And in the distance, against the backdrop of a cloud-covered Mount Kenya, the silhouettes of giraffe break the horizon. It's the East Africa Hemingway loved: a wild expanse of dry plains and vast skies, with a scattering of animals between.

Behind my villa, though, the scene is anything but archetypal. I am staying at Segera: the wilderness home of Jochen Zeitz, the former CEO of Puma, who seven years ago bought a 50,000-acre cattle ranch and turned it into a private bush home, with six villas for paying guests who wanted to join him.

Although it's in the middle of Laikipia's wildlife-rich



**Animal magic** Clockwise from left: Jochen Zeitz, owner of Segera, with the retreat's camels, which guests can ride; Segera's Paddock House living area; Satubo Women's Beading Project; the luxury spa; a family of elephant



plains, Segera could not be described as a bush lodge. Its double-storey stilted wooden villas are furnished in modern colonial style: an elegant mix of antique gramophones and low linen sofas, grand silver buckets and recycled-glass chandeliers. The 10-acre garden, protected from the wilderness by a thick cactus hedge, is landscaped with exotic cacti, goldfish ponds and an azure swimming pool. And beside the paths, on garden plinths, and in the stalls of converted stables is the biggest collection of contemporary African art on the continent.

The art is here, Zeitz says, because “I have seen it all over the globe and wanted to bring it back to Africa, to help put African art on the map”. By “art”, he doesn’t mean the sorts of masks and baskets often displayed in safari camps, but paintings by Chris Ofili, football pitch-sized installations by Strijdom van der Merwe, and prints by Owusu-Ankomah. It’s serious stuff, making Segera the closest thing Kenya has to an African Tate Modern.

When I first arrive at Segera – having spent a night in Nairobi, where there was no sign of tourism having been disrupted by the airport fire or the Westgate atrocity – I’m not entirely convinced by this strange beast of a place: part home, part gallery, part cattle ranch. It feels slightly incongruous stepping out into the heart of East Africa, after a dusty two-hour drive from Nanyuki, past the grim roadside “69 Paradise Hotel” and ramshackle “Drunked Teacher” bottle store, to find a two-storey, solar-cooled wine tower stocked with South African wines and French champagnes, a hangar housing a sunflower-yellow plane, and a garden peppered with African art.

But then, I soon appreciate, having spent a couple of days with Segera’s manager, Jens Kozany, who previously oversaw North Island in the Seychelles, Segera is not a camp but a home, not a Big Five destination but a wilderness retreat. More than that, it is a statement from Zeitz that tourism can be done in a different way.

He is clearly a man on a mission. In 2009 he founded the Long Run, an organisation that grades tourism in



relation to conservation, culture, commerce and community (what he calls the 4Cs). He is on the board of Wilderness Safaris and, with Richard Branson, set up the B Team, a group of business leaders who engage with sustainability issues. He also has an extensive network of connections to call on – it was he who persuaded Dame Vivienne Westwood to sponsor the neighbouring Uaso Nyiro Primary School. But can he make Segera work as a tourism-cum-community venture?

“If we bring together the right people, communities can flourish and wildlife can survive alongside them,” he tells me, over dinner. “But that means everyone has to be on board. Unless the local community signs up, wildlife won’t survive. And without wildlife, no one will visit. Real success will only happen if all 4Cs are linked.”

Although there is a great deal of wildlife in Laikipia – it has the second highest density of game in Kenya after the Maasai Mara – most visitors to Segera don’t come to see animals. They use it as a bush home: a place where they can work out, have massages, lounge around the saltwater pool, and relax with a view of Mount Kenya.

Others, such as I, slightly wary of being over-cosseted

in this uber-comfortable bubble, opt to go out and meet the people whose lives this venture might affect. With local guide Omanda Jackson Etoot, I buy bracelets from a women's beading group whose products the Zeitz Foundation (an umbrella organisation for Zeitz's projects) helps to market, and visit a primary school it helped to build. I talk to local herdsmen who are allowed to bring 2,000 cattle a year on to the property to graze, and former Maasai warriors now employed as anti-poaching wardens.

Most interesting of all, I go walking with the property's manager, Mark Jenkins, the renowned Kenyan conservationist mauled as a child by one of George Adamson's lions, who understands more clearly than most why properties like Segera need to exist.

"What people don't realise is that an elephant is now being killed every 20 minutes in Africa," he whispers, as we warily watch a skittish herd browsing 50ft in front of us. "The days of national parks that were fenced pristine wildernesses are over; the pressure of people around them is too great. There probably isn't an elephant in this group that hasn't been shot at in the past month in the surrounding community areas.

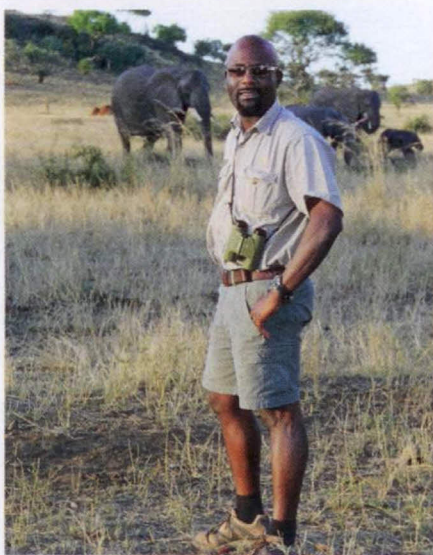
"This can only change if we can give communities jobs, educate them, and work with them. It's the only way. Unless they benefit from wildlife and want to protect it, in 30 years we won't have anything left."

**W**hile the privatisation of great tracts of wilderness such as Segera might be abhorrent to many – a sign to some Africans of a new wave of colonialism, and proof to others that the rich can have whatever they want – in wildlife circles it is seen as one of the more expedient ways to prevent the extinction of our planet's wildlife.

All over the continent, families that once hunted, and wealthy businessmen such as Zeitz, are investing their wealth in wildlife. In South Africa, the Getty family has turned 23,000 hectares of KwaZulu-Natal into the Phinda



**Home comforts** Singita Serengeti House in Grumeti Reserves, above; Alfred Ngwarai, its revered guide; and Mara River Tented Camp, below right



Private Game Reserve, and the Oppenheimer family has set aside 100,000 hectares of Kalahari desert as the Tswalu Reserve. In Kenya, the Wildenstein family, known for its art dealing, has turned its 53,000-acre private home, Ol Jogi Ranch, into a conservation retreat. In Mozambique, the voicemail millionaire Greg Carr is helping to repopulate with wildlife the Gorongosa National Park. High-tech billionaire Mark Shuttleworth is investing millions in Bom Bom Island, off the coast of São Tomé. And in Tanzania, the billionaire Wall Street trader Paul Tudor Jones has leased 350,000 acres of former hunting concession to create his Grumeti Reserves – my second port of call in a 10-day East African journey.

When Tudor Jones opened Grumeti to paying guests 10 years ago, he had just one place for them to stay. Today, he has six, the latest being Singita Serengeti House. That the house is beautiful should come as little surprise, given Tudor Jones's wealth and connections (visitors have included Oprah Winfrey, George Bush and, last year, a honeymooning Justin Timberlake). What is a surprise is that its interiors are so tastefully understated, decorated with sculptural furniture covered in cream cottons and tan linens, tables of wood and rattan, Picasso-esque African paintings and bleached-wood masks. Equally pleasing is the provision of a private chef, butler, and staff to administer gin-and-tonics, together with a game guide, Alfred Ngwarai, with whom to explore this wilderness.

The Zimbabwean guide is so respected that he guides the Tudor Jones family and other wealthy Americans not only in Tanzania, but all over Africa. With him we discover the many pleasures of being on a private reserve – one of which is being allowed to do things that would be prohibited in national parks. In three days, we ride glossy stallions from the owners' stable of 16 horses, play tennis on lawns surrounded by grazing zebras, and practise

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archery between courses at breakfast. One morning we even ride mountain bikes on rocky tracks through huge herds of migrating wildebeest, closely followed in a Land Rover by Alfred and an armed guard, just in case an irritated creature should charge.

None does – surprising, given the numbers of creatures about. On still-green grasslands, thousands of bearded wildebeest thunder past in great herds, day and night. Lions lie under trees, their stomachs distended from overeating. Cheetahs snooze in the shade. Elephants huddle under trees in the midday sun, flapping their ears. And in the evening – as we sit beneath the stars, enjoying gazpacho, prawns, duck breast and creamy crème brûlée made by Tanzania's top chef, Michael Matera – they all join together in a spine-tingling orchestra of cackles, whoops, grunts, barks, squeals and trumpets that slowly fades, as the moon rises, into a long, low finale of moans signalling that the lions have come out to hunt.

For guests whose migration experience isn't complete until they have seen thousands of wildebeest hurtle across the Mara River in the Serengeti National Park, Tudor Jones has also set up Mara River Camp right on the river's banks. A 12-minute flight from Grumeti, this 16-bed canvas camp is modern to look at, and run on solar power. It is also very quiet. In this northern Lamai Triangle, just

below the Kenyan border, there are just three seasonal camps and, because the migrating creatures have just made their final crossing, there is hardly anyone else about. Each day, I watch the sun rise from my bed before warming my bones on a sun-lounger while watching elephant browse. I have a massage on an open deck, and sip cold South African wine. And every evening, Alfred takes us out on the Land Rover to traverse the Serengeti plains, where giraffe, zebra and Thompson's gazelle graze in their hundreds.

Although each camp is a treat, the highlight of my trip is the flight out of the area. Sitting in a Cessna Caravan, soaring low over the Serengeti, I begin to appreciate what we would lose if conservationists such as Jenkins weren't so dedicated, and men such as Tudor Jones and Zeitz spent their fortunes elsewhere. For an hour we fly over plains thick with game, over elephant bathing in rivers, over clouds of birds. That this landscape might one day have no creatures on it at all seems unthinkable. But, given the current rate of poaching, it is not just possible, but probable. These wealthy individuals could spend their billions on yachts and sports cars. Instead, they use their money and influence to prevent that destruction, and put in place strategies for Africans to save their natural heritage. Who can criticise them for privatising swathes of threatened wilderness?

*Africa Travel (020 7843 3586; [africatravel.co.uk](http://africatravel.co.uk)) is offering a seven-night safari, with one night at Hemingways Nairobi ([hemingways-nairobi.com](http://hemingways-nairobi.com)), three nights at Segera ([segera.com](http://segera.com)) in Kenya, and three nights at Singita Mara River Tented Camp ([singita.com](http://singita.com)) in Tanzania, from £6,495 per person, full board. The price includes drinks, activities, park fees, transfers and return flight with British Airways.*