



SMALL IS BEAUTIFUL IN KENYA'S TSAVO EXPANSES

By Hannah Marsh

When you think of a Kenyan safari you probably think first of its famous plains, the majestic Masai Mara or romantic Tsavo. But as ideas around tourism and conservation shift, there are other options, hidden gems and smaller, community-minded reserves with big plans. Nestled between the borders of Tsavo East and West and neighbouring Taita, LUMO Community Wildlife Sanctuary may not have the big-name draw of its better known cousins, but there's a lot more to it than its relatively modest borders suggest. Community-owned and run, the reserve was formed when three

ranches, Lualenyi, Mramba and Oza, decided to pool a 46,000 hectare sprawl and dedicate it to conservation, officially registering as a trust in 2001. A wildlife corridor to its larger neighbour is teeming with game, but for many visitors its appeal lies in its community ethos – and ambitious plans for the future. For Iain Leckie and his wife, Helen, the chance to take on the reservation's lodge, Lion's Bluff, with a 25-year lease didn't take much agonising. "We'd been camping here for years as it was well within reach of the coast, where Helen runs an eye clinic, for long weekends," explains Iain, a genial host - as many glowing reviews on Tripadvisor attest. "So when the place came up I already understood quite a lot about what we

were facing." The community-owned lodge supports LUMO's projects as it earns money from the lease, separate bed night charges and an overall percentage. "There's a huge passion there," says Iain. "The real reason we went for the long lease is because we want to be in this area for the rest of our working lives. "It's a forgotten little part of Kenya and even though places like nearby Salt Lick Lodge have been there since the early 1970s, somehow it's been taken off the tourist map." Iain and Helen overhauled the lodge completely, giving it the rustic, boutique feel it now has. Walking along winding, wooden walkways above the dramatic sweep of the bluff, up to the open-sided

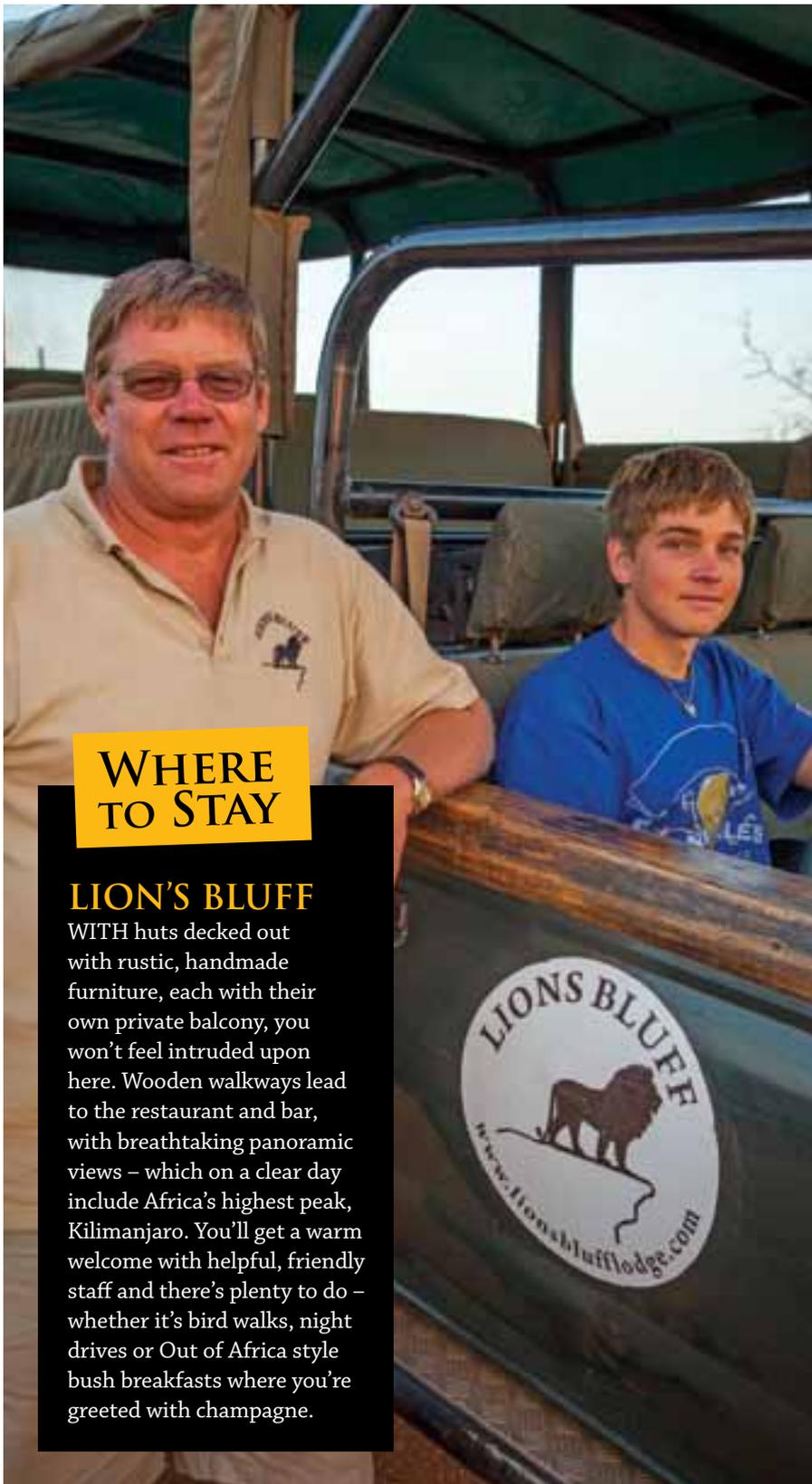


restaurant or along to the 12 timber-built rondavels where bedrooms with wooden four poster beds await, it has won itself plenty of fans. Most of the staff live locally - many are shareholders - and most of the food is grown nearby, while the reserve provides other employment with rangers working alongside Kenya Wildlife Service to keep poachers at bay. Run by a board of nine directors, three from each ranch, it has big plans for the future to offer the kind of employment opportunities that are only just creeping into the rural area. Sanctuary manager Oscar Wadero originally left the area to work in

the hotel business in Tanzania, but returned to take on the position, marking a huge development in prospects for talent in the area as management and skilled jobs are created. His interest in conservation dated back to childhood and he was delighted he could combine his passion with his professional management expertise - and return home. Oscar sees the community's involvement, working hand in hand to support themselves and conserve the wildlife, as the best way to instill a similar interest in youngsters who may in turn plough their skills back into the project in future years.



"When it comes to conservation I think it has to come from someone's heart," says Oscar. "It has to be a passion." Iain adds: "This is why LUMO's so important, if it can create the income and the atmosphere where youngsters can get educated and get qualifications here then in time we'll have real skills in the area."



WHERE TO STAY

LION'S BLUFF

WITH huts decked out with rustic, handmade furniture, each with their own private balcony, you won't feel intruded upon here. Wooden walkways lead to the restaurant and bar, with breathtaking panoramic views – which on a clear day include Africa's highest peak, Kilimanjaro. You'll get a warm welcome with helpful, friendly staff and there's plenty to do – whether it's bird walks, night drives or Out of Africa style bush breakfasts where you're greeted with champagne.

CHEETAH CAMPSITE

IF you prefer safaris stripped back – or don't have the budget for luxury – you won't compromise on the view. Perched down from the main lodge, it's perfect for a pre-campfire sundowner, and you may even get an elephant wandering by. There are basic but clean kitchen, toilet and shower facilities and you can hire tents, bedding, cooking stoves and kitchen equipment.

For Lion's Bluff and Cheetah Camp **visit:** www.lionsblufflodge.com

TSAVO VOLUNTEERS

If you like your experiences abroad to do some good, check out the grass roots organisation that sees projects bridging the gap between community and conservation. You'll patrol the reserve, release animals from poacher snares and work in schools.

Visit: www.facebook.com/pages/Tsavo-

WHAT YOU'LL SEE

Elephants, elephants and more elephants. Lion, an abundance of the usually elusive lesser Kudu, swathes of buffalo, impala, hartebeest, dik dik, klipspringer and water and bush buck. And if you're lucky, there's a pair of leopards with cubs.