

What's New in Kenya

By Eric Wechter

You are what's new in Kenya. More of you than ever have made Kenya your dream safari destination. If you're thinking that more people means less enjoyment of the wildlife, we say "Ngoja kidogo." (Hang on a minute!) Although Kenya's visitor numbers are swelling, its tourist circuit remains compact and accessible, and most of all profoundly beautiful. It can stay that way

indefinitely as long as you demand and support environmentally and socially conscious organizations.

Growing Pains and Park Balance

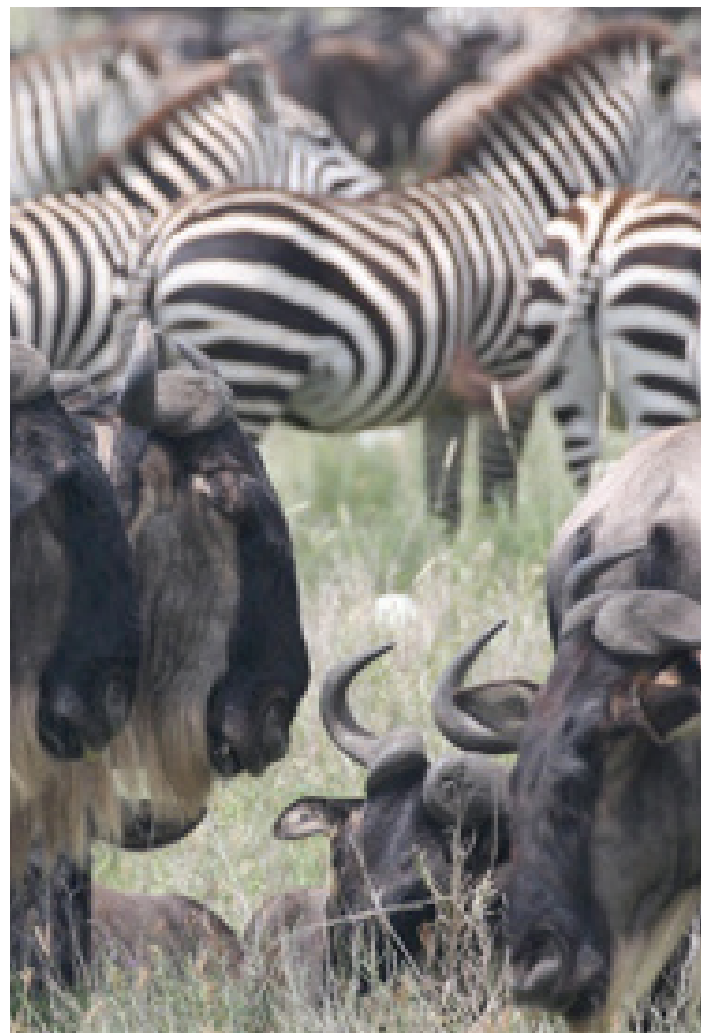
American visitors increased by 10 percent in 2010, and international arrivals are expected to grow by 4.5 percent through 2011. Partially in response to this, the Kenya Wildlife Services (KWS) revised their park entry system in 2011 to include a conservation fee. KWS hopes this highlights the importance of contributions to "conservation and continued survival of wildlife . . . for generations to come." Visitor numbers are carefully monitored, and efforts are being made to increase visitation during low season in popular parks and reduce congestion during peak seasons.

According to Paul Eisenberg of Micato Safaris, this means, "travelers should begin making arrangements with their tour operator at least 6 to 8 months in advance to ensure that they are able to book their preferred itinerary."

Top Green Lodgings and Operators

To help you choose lodgings that maximize your contribution to the lives of locals and minimize your impact on the environment, Ecotourism Kenya manages an Eco-Rating scheme based on sustainability and social impact. Their currently featured property, Sasaab (pictured), a luxury camp in Samburu, has a staff made up of 90% locals and uses solar energy for more than 70% of their lighting and heating, earning it a Silver certificate.





Similarly, certain U.S. based tour operators such as Travel Beyond work closely with local ground operators such as African Horizons, to ensure that local communities directly benefit from tourism dollars. A great place to begin researching responsible, reputable tour operators is the Kenya Association of Tourist Operators member directory.

Serengeti Highway Revisited

How's this for a switch? Increase in tourism was recently a major factor in the halting of a potentially devastating development project. In July 2011, the Kenyan Ministry of Tourism along with international environmental organizations convinced the Tanzanian government to stop construction of a highway that would have cut directly through the Serengeti National Reserve and obstructed

the Great Migration. This dramatic spectacle of nearly 2 million wildebeests, zebra, and gazelles is the largest mammal migration on Earth, attracting global visitors to both the Masai Mara in Kenya (late August until early October) and the Serengeti in Tanzania.

Local Drought Conditions and Giving Back

Although Kenya's tourism growth can affect positive changes, the worst drought in half a century in Horn of Africa countries, including northern Kenya, as well as conflict in Somalia are causing what the United Nations says is the world's most severe humanitarian crisis today. If you'd like to make donation to famine relief, see a list of charitable organizations on MSNBC.