

# TRAVEL

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## RUNNING WILD

**Laura Millar** visits the first carbon-neutral safari camp in Kenya's Masai Mara before clubbing with the backpackers on an Indian Ocean beach



T'S 2am, and in the middle of the dance floor at a raucous backpacker hostel in Diani, a beach resort near Mombasa on Kenya's south-eastern coast, I'm exchanging Instagram details with a local. Unlike most of the other people here, however, he's not wearing shorts and a T-shirt but is in full Maasai warrior regalia - bare-chested with a bright-red length of checked cotton fabric known as a shuka around his shoulders with layers of intricate, colourful beaded necklaces and bracelets. Instead of the traditional stick Maasai men carry, he's holding a mobile phone.

It's a somewhat incongruous sight, as just a couple of days earlier, I'd met some of his fellow tribesmen at the local mud-hutted village of Kolong - where life mainly revolves around tending to sheep and cows, rather than checking Insta likes - within the vast, sweeping,

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**Good spot:** A leopard at Emboo River Camp



**Idyllic:** The Sands at Nomad hotel, located on Diani beach

# Safaris reinvented for the eco-conscious adventurer

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never-ending plains of the Masai Mara. One of the biggest and most vital wildlife conservation and wilderness areas in Africa, it covers over 580sq miles and is named after the Maasai people who have lived here for centuries. The land is distinctive, peppered with the occasional lone desert date tree, and inhabited by a host of incredible creatures, from leopards, hippos, giraffes and elephants to the tiny dung beetle.

I'm staying at Emboo, the very first carbon-neutral safari camp in the reserve. It was set up by three friends who felt safari trips could be done better and without leaving any mark on the environment. Eight spacious tents sit by the river of the same name and on arrival, one of the co-founders, Valery, proudly shows me around. 'Hopefully what we're doing here will become the norm,' she says.

Emboo is entirely solar-powered, while the kitchen cooks with gas made from biodigested food waste. Furniture is made from recycled and reclaimed materials, toiletries are eco-friendly, herbs, fruit and vegetables are grown vertically and hydroponically on-site and fresh well-water is used for showers and laundry. All guests are encouraged to plant a tree to offset the carbon from their arrival at camp, and Emboo's three Land Cruiser jeeps have been converted with electric batteries, with a range of up to 150 miles.

These electric 4x4s come into their own on game drives. As we glide past wheezing diesel-fuelled Land Rovers from other camps, belching thick black smoke, we're able to get much closer to the animals, as we can approach almost silently. On one drive, our passionate guides, Nas and Emily, point out hyenas loitering intently next to a herd of buffalo, three sleepy cheetahs who loll around lazily like oversized domestic cats, some skittish ostriches and herds of gazelles, their tails wagging rhythmically, like metronomes.



**Sticking their neck out:** Giraffes at the Masai Mara, a vital conservation area

## A GUIDE'S VIEW

Emboo River Camp's Nas Kimong'o, 22, is one of the few female safari guides in Kenya...

'I'm from a Maasai tribe, and was interested in the wild animals from childhood and wondered if there was a way to protect and preserve them. Research suggested that guiding would be the best route. When I turned 18, I joined the Koiyaki Guiding School, where I learned how to identify different birds, animals and plants, as well as about the geographical terrain. I also learned computer skills and how to drive a Land Rover.

'In the Maasai community, girls aren't expected to go to school - our role is to get married, have babies. To her father, a daughter equals a dowry. I had to sneak out



**Guiding lights:** Emboo camp

to primary school as my parents wouldn't be happy if I got an education but the school encouraged me, and a friend of my teacher sponsored my fees at Koiyaki. My father and I fell out for a bit but he unexpectedly attended my graduation, and told me he was very proud of me.

'I love my job at Emboo and the way they're empowering women.'

But the real result is being able to pull right up beside Jesse, one of the lions from the local pride. He strolls past us disdainfully a couple of times and yawns, unbothered. We also stop by a patch of long

grass where a weary lioness is trying to summon the energy to contend with the playful cubs.

After three days filled with extraordinary animal encounters, I decamp to the beach. The change in scenery is pronounced - my hotel sits on a stretch of bone-white sand, fringing water as warm as a bath (rooms from £141pn, [thesandsatnomad.com](http://thesandsatnomad.com)). Here, there are many more tourists - going on boat trips, snorkelling in the marine reserve of Wasini Island, and, yes, clubbing in backpackers' hostels. I already miss the wide, sprawling vistas of the Masai Mara - but in Kenya, gratifyingly, you can have both.



**Mane deal:** Eco lodges and lions at Emboo camp



Flights from London to Nairobi from £549 return, [klm.co.uk](http://klm.co.uk); stays at Emboo River Camp from £390pp/pn, including all game drives, meals, drinks, bush walks and tree planting, [emboo.camp](http://emboo.camp). For info visit [magickkenya.com](http://magickkenya.com)

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