

The Mane Event

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“I grew up thinking I had to kill a lion to become a man. It’s part of our culture,” says Jeneria Lekilelei, a quietly spoken, 27 year old Samburu warrior, his lithe body swarthed in purple and white cloth, arms and neck adorned with colourful beads. But with less than 2,000 lions left in Kenya, Jeneria now dedicates his life to lion conservation and helps lead the Ewaso Lion Project as the field operations and community manager.

“Lions are like gold,” Jeneria says. “They bring us people. Like you have come all the way from Australia and you want to see a lion in the wild.”

We’re perched on stools around a hand hewn wooden table inside the humble mess hut of the Ewaso Lion Project HQ in northern Kenya’s Samburu region an hour light plane flight from Nairobi. Named after the Ewaso Nyiro River system, the non-profit organisation was founded in 2007 by fourth generation Kenyan, Shivani Bhalla. After graduating from Oxford University Shivani came back to the Samburu region to research her PhD. In eight years her team (mainly drawn from the local community), has grown from 3 to 32, the lion population from 11 to more than 40. The project is also gaining international recognition. In 2014 Shivani was honoured with a Whitely Award and a National Geographic Emerging Explorer Award.

Today Shivani is away from camp leaving Jeneria in charge. There’s a lot to coordinate from sun up until sundown. It’s a team effort.

Lion scouts scan different parts of the approx 2650 square km region that forms the Ewaso Lion Project research area. Covering public, private and protected land it’s tough going. The scorched earth punctuated by acacia trees is home to lions, elephants and leopards but is also known for the ‘special five of Samburu’- Grevy’s zebra, reticulated giraffe, gerenuk, besia oryx and the blue-legged ostrich. Dressed in jungle greens, using 4WD’s and two-way radios the scouts record data and look for patterns in the movement of the carnivores throughout the area. Every lion is identified by its markings and named.

“Lion-human conflict is our biggest fear,” says Jeneria.

Samburu tribes are nomadic herders, constantly looking for enough pasture and water to graze their cows, sheep, goats and camels. Living even more traditionally than their Maasai cousins, if a lion kills livestock the natural response is to hunt it down. This is when Jeneria and the field team made up of local Samburu warriors intervene.

“I tell my people I know how they feel,” says Jeneria. “The cow or goat is already gone but if they kill the lion too, we lose our future.”

As a highly respected member of the Samburu community Jeneria also trains other warriors to love lions like he does. They help minimise conflict by holding meetings, helping to search for lost livestock and mending bomas (traditional stock enclosures fenced with thornbushes).

“We try to create corridors for the lions to move through without disturbing livestock,” he says.

Support also comes from the Kenya Wildlife Service by lending Samburu people lion skins, an important part of their coming of age ceremonies. Since Jeneria was a young boy, it’s now no longer necessary to kill a lion to show strength.

It’s this understanding and education that’s at the heart of animal conservation. Rhinos have already been lost to the Samuburu area and the Ewaso Lion Project is determined lions won’t suffer the same fate. Teaching the children is the key.

Although living in Kenya, many children have never seen a lion. Over five days local children selected for the Ewaso Project’s annual Lions’ Kid Camp shadow conservationists and step into the shoes of guides and researchers. They learn how to use cameras, binoculars and record information. It’s all about being positive about conservation. They present drama productions pretending they are lions and create artwork based on nature. Also having a first hand insight into the impact of tourism is a pathway to their future.

Working closely with the Ewaso Lion Project is Sasaab, a high-end sustainable lodge - my home for two nights. Owned by passionate environmentalists fourth generation Kenyans, Mikey and Tanya Carr Hartley, their heritage is as long as colonial Kenya.

Consistent winners of a gold eco rating by Eco Tourism Kenya, the nine soft-walled luxe en-suited canvas villas are based on Moroccan principles of airflow and overlook the river. In addition to immersing guests into the culture of the region, guests can make donations directly to the Ewaso Lion Project and a proportion of the tariff is paid as a lease to the Samburu people. Most of Sasaab’s guides are locals and double as lion scouts for Ewaso.

On an early morning game drive we come across two lionesses stalking the river bank. Our guide, Gabriel Lepariyo, his solid arms grasping the steering wheel, stops the open sided 4WD and we sit daring not to breathe. Two lean bodies pad past the vehicle and one crouches. There’s a rustle in the saltbush around 20 metres away and it’s game on.

Both lionesses spring forward, dust flying as they streak to either side of the bush. It’s two against one and a young waterbuck is no match for efficient hunters. Witnessing my first kill is almost a ghoulish fascination. Gabriel repositions the vehicle and three reticulated giraffes join us. Towering above our heads their large doe eyes also watch the action.

One lioness grips the neck while the other frantically rips into the flesh. As Gabriel pulls out his phone to take a photograph and record our coordinates to register with Jeneria’s team back at Ewaso HQ, there are mewling sounds. Five cubs emerge from a

bush and scamper across the ground. For the next hour the lionesses monitor ‘fair feed’ as the next generation of Samburu lions gorge on the spoils. Grabbing his notebook, Gabriel identifies the lionesses through his series of naïve art sketches. “See there’s Nabulu with the cut in her ear and has the cubs and her cousin Nanai,” he says excitedly. It’s a healthy sign – the future is in good paws.

Another afternoon Gabriel takes us to a local Samburu settlement. We walk amongst the round huts made of rammed mud, sticks and cow dung. As the sun sinks and bounces like an orange ball on the horizon, the men settle the cattle and camels for the night and the women squeeze the last drops of milk from the goats. Amidst the frenzy of bleating, mooing and clucking, the children hang off our hands, wanting to be whizzed around. They pose for photos then crowd around the small screen to catch a glimpse of what they look like.

“Without mirrors the children are fascinated to see themselves,” says Gabriel.

An elder watches us from under a tree. Faint beams of sunlight accentuate the wisdom in his eyes. I wonder what he’s thinking. It’s a fine balance - holding onto tradition and a generation moving forward with time.

Later that night as I lay in my four-poster bed draped with soft mosquito netting, the guttural roar of a lion cuts through the air. First one, then another answering the call. I smile and think of Jeneria less than a kilometre away and how happy he’ll be to hear his lions.