

## LAIKIPIA

Laikipia is increasingly recognised as one of Kenya's best wildlife regions, challenging the Maasai Mara for overall safari experience, if not for raw numbers of animals. You won't need to escape from any crowds here: in an area not far off the size of Wales, there's plenty of room for a few safari visitors. Between Mount Kenya and the northern deserts, these high rangelands spread out between north-flowing streams and rivers which flow throughout most of the year into the Ewaso Nyiro, northern Kenya's biggest river. Formerly a patchwork of ranches, Laikipia is now where some of Kenya's most encouraging conservation success stories are unfolding, with the environment managed both to protect the wildlife and to generate an income for local communities.

Laikipia harbours a wealth of endangered species, including roughly half of Kenya's 600-odd black rhinos. As browsers rather

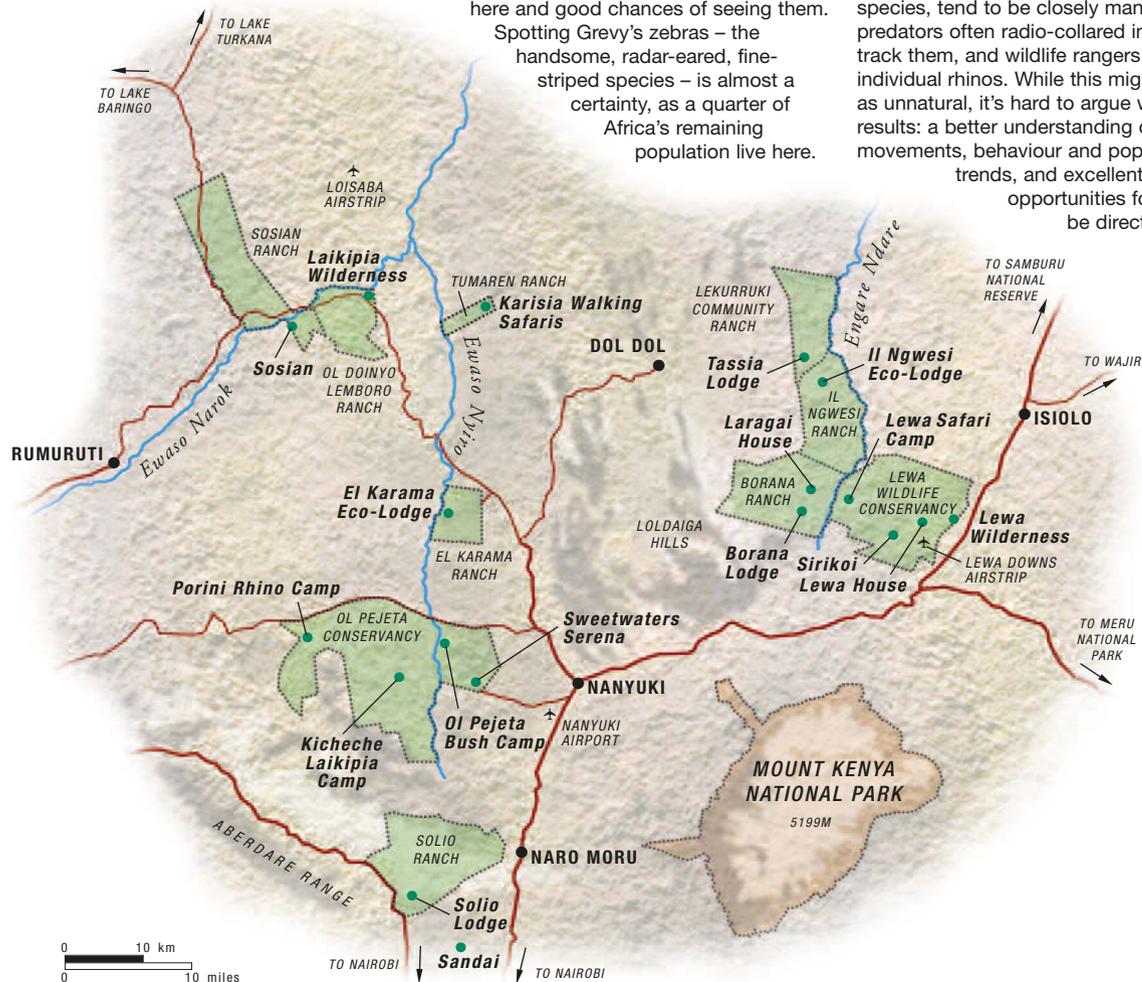
than grazers, they do well in the same environment as cattle as long as the bush isn't cleared. Also on the increase in Laikipia are wild dogs, with several packs here and good chances of seeing them. Spotting Grevy's zebras – the handsome, radar-eared, fine-striped species – is almost a certainty, as a quarter of Africa's remaining population live here.



Speke's weaver

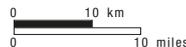
You can find most of Kenya's more common wildlife in Laikipia, too, including more than 2,000 elephants, which migrate between the slopes of Mount Kenya, the Laikipia rangelands and the Samburu region.

The animals in Laikipia, especially the rarer species, tend to be closely managed, with predators often radio-collared in order to track them, and wildlife rangers monitoring individual rhinos. While this might strike you as unnatural, it's hard to argue with the results: a better understanding of movements, behaviour and population trends, and excellent opportunities for visitors to be directly involved.



### Visiting Laikipia

As well as the little Nanyuki Airport, there are two main airstrips in Laikipia: Lewa Downs and Loisaba. Transfers from the airstrips to most of our lodges and camps can be done in under an hour, but in the case of longer transfers, or for particular itineraries where scheduled flights are less convenient, we may suggest chartering a plane to take you direct to the airstrip of your camp or lodge.



At the southern extreme of the Laikipia region, **Sandai** is a delightfully homely, German-owned, farmstay, run by a long-time resident of Kenya – artist, traveller and some-time tour leader Petra Allmendinger – who is deeply committed to her farm and the local Kikuyu community. The various rooms at Sandai remind you more of staying in a spare room on a friend's farm than of a lodge, and meals are taken together in complete informality at Petra's dining table. Horse-riding, excursions to Solio and into the Aberdare National Park or to other parts of the Central Highlands are all on offer.

## SOLIO RANCH

The privately owned Solio Game Ranch lies in the grasslands between Mount Kenya and the Aberdare Range. This area, once a key migration route for elephants, and later a cereal and cattle ranch, was a pioneer in saving the Kenyan black rhino from extinction, breeding them here for subsequent translocation into the national parks and other Kenyan reserves. More than 70 indigenous black rhino now live here, alongside more than 140 white rhinos.

While the ranch has been here for decades, **Solio Lodge** is a modern addition – a slick and spectacular hotel-style set up of six huge cottages with panoramic windows, luxuriously appointed bathrooms and open fireplaces. One of the cottages is family-sized and faces a small waterhole. As well as game drives, with virtually guaranteed rhino sightings, you can walk, cycle or ride among the wildlife (the lodge has its own stables) and do trips into the nearby Aberdare and Mount Kenya national parks.

## OL PEJETA CONSERVANCY

The busiest of the Laikipia wildlife sanctuaries, its eastern border just a few miles from the highland town of Nanyuki, the former Lonrho cattle ranch of Ol Pejeta is now run as a not-for-profit conservation and safari business. With its rolling short-grass plains with thickets of acacia woodland, the 365km<sup>2</sup> conservancy has big concentrations of mammals, including all the native plains game. Critically, however, it combines cutting-edge wildlife conservation work with running the world's largest herd of Boran cattle, Africa's best beef producer. At night, the cattle are herded into mobile 'bomas' – predator-

proof compounds – and by day they graze the conservancy savannah, under the watchful eyes of their herders, stimulating new pasture growth for the wildlife in a balanced system that shows that livestock and wildlife can co-exist.

Part of Ol Pejeta, in the east, was formerly the Sweetwaters Rhino Sanctuary. Now fully incorporated into the rest of the conservancy, it includes a special compound for a blind black rhino called Baraka, who acts as an icon for Ol Pejeta and an ambassador for his species. The rest of Ol Pejeta's 100-plus black rhinos are much less easily seen, deliberately tucking themselves into dense bush in order to browse. Much easier to spot are the conservancy's southern white rhinos, as they tank their way across the plains towards the next bit of succulent grazing.

Ol Pejeta's biggest project of recent years is to save the northern white rhino: a sub-species of white rhino of which the last three in the world live here in a closely guarded special sanctuary. While breeding efforts have failed, it is still hoped that Ol Pejeta can select for northern traits in the laboratory and thus steadily preserve the characteristics of the northern sub-species. Most of the rhinos at Ol Pejeta have had their horns trimmed to reduce their value to poachers: staying here, you are constantly aware of conservation issues and the huge stakes involved.

Competing with Ol Pejeta's rhinos in terms of international fame in recent years have been its wild dogs. A large and very active pack of these fascinating, fleet-footed and highly social animals has often frequented the conservancy in recent years, even denning close to one of the park roads, allowing visitors unusually close views.

**Kicheche Laikipia Camp** is a small camp of six tents, offering the most luxurious stay in Ol Pejeta and managed by warm, enthusiastic and highly experienced safari hosts. The very spacious tents have some unusual touches, including wooden bathroom furniture and tropical plants, and the convivial, hosted dining offers excellent food and wine. The seasonal lake in front of the tents is a wildlife magnet, where you can canoe, and on clear mornings Mount Kenya can be seen through the bush. We'd happily stay here for days.

**Ol Pejeta Bush Camp** has six tents on the banks of the Ewaso Nyiro, including one big family tent, with solar lighting and



guides from the local community. The camp has been recently fully upgraded and the new tents are now more spacious and stylish but still have a rustic safari feel – it certainly remains a bush camp. The owner Alex Hunter is a warm and interesting host, the camp is good for photographers, and at night they scatter salt on the opposite bank to attract rhinos.

A low-impact bush camp, **Porini Rhino Camp** consists of seven very spacious tents erected along a seasonal watercourse. Although the entire set up is reasonably comfortable, nothing here is strictly permanent; the camp is run on entirely sustainable principles, with safari showers, solar power throughout, and all non-biodegradable waste returned to Nairobi. The staff and guides are excellent, but if you're looking for lots of style and luxury you might find this camp a bit simple.

**Sweetwaters Serena Lodge**, a large bush hotel dating from the era of Sweetwaters Rhino Sanctuary, is the oldest place to stay at Ol Pejeta. With high standards of service and a choice of tented rooms or comfortable chalets (most with views towards the floodlit and fenced-off waterhole), this is a good-value option that is ideal for younger families, and they offer enjoyable bush walks as well as game drives.

*Predator-tracking is a popular option in the Ol Pejeta Conservancy*

### Chimps at Ol Pejeta

Ol Pejeta's 1km<sup>2</sup> chimpanzee sanctuary is a refuge for more than 40 confiscated pet chimps and orphans of the bushmeat trade from several Central African countries. They live in two troops, separated by the Ewaso Nyiro River, and lead lives of relative freedom in their extensive, fenced enclosures, despite being on contraceptive doses to prevent them from breeding and being fed market fruit and vegetables rather than foraging for food. Guided visits, to the outside of the fence, are organised twice a day.



*Oi Pejeta Conservancy is home to the world's last three northern white rhinos, easily visited in their secure sanctuary*

## EL KARAMA

A wildlife sanctuary and working cattle ranch on the banks of the Ewaso Nyiro, El Karama ('treasured possession' in Arabic) was named for purely sentimental reasons by its owners, the Grant family.

The only accommodation here is **El Karama Eco Lodge**, a small, rustic retreat. The welcome here was one of the warmest we've experienced in Kenya; the food is exceptionally good; and the wildlife outstanding, including elephants, lions, leopards, herds of plains game and even an aardvark. El Karama isn't a fancy place, and doesn't set out to be – though the beautiful pool adds a real touch of luxury. We love the genuine, low-key hosting, the flexible approach to guests' requirements and the friendly staff.

## OL DOINYO LEMBORO RANCH

With the meandering Ewaso Narok flowing along its northern boundary, Oi Doinyo Lemboro Ranch covers more than 80km<sup>2</sup> of rough and bushy grazing land, pimpled with rocky kopjes. The largely roadless ranch is now mostly devoted to wildlife conservation and open to visitors who stay at a single, small, environmentally friendly safari camp. The wildlife here is diverse: it's good leopard country and has plentiful grazers. The region swarms with dik-diks and these form the main diet of the two wild dog packs that roam the area and are a highlight for visitors.

*Sweetwaters Serena Lodge*



Located above the Ewaso Narok River and opened in 2012 by an expert Zimbabwean guiding couple, **Laikipia Wilderness** is a simple camp with five platform-mounted, en-suite tents with plumbed-in, open-air bathrooms. Activities include short or long game walks with an armed escort, day and night game drives, river rafting, flycamping, river-swimming, rock scrambling and birding. Most guests go wild dog-tracking here, bouncing along a rocky riverbank in an open-topped vehicle as the signal bleeps faster and faster, until the pack appears, streaming through the bush like painted wolves. To improve your chances of seeing wild dogs, we'd recommend staying for at least four days.

## SOSIAN RANCH

The 100km<sup>2</sup> Sosian Ranch is one of Laikipia's mixed ranching and conservation areas, where they manage a herd of 900 Boran cattle alongside a wide range of wildlife, including large herds of elephants, reticulated giraffes and hippos and good numbers of predators, including wild dogs. The ranch works with its neighbour, Mpala Ranch, on predator research, particularly focusing on the wild dog packs that roam Laikipia.

First built in the 1940s, then abandoned during the 1990s, **Sosian Lodge** was completely restored as a horseriding and game-viewing base. The main building is an Argentine estancia-style ranch house with views across lawns to the remote savannah of north-west Laikipia, close to the Ewaso Narok River. What we like about Sosian is the sense of being a house guest on a long-established country farm with a huge variety of distractions. A safari that includes river swimming and camel or horseriding is far from the norm, but typifies the sort of activities you can find at Sosian. Add in excellent cuisine that relies greatly on the

lodge's own garden produce, very comfortable rooms and top-quality guiding and hosting, and it makes for a highly recommended stay.

## TUMAREN RANCH

**Karisia Walking Safaris** is a small, family-run set-up in a remote part of central Laikipia. Based on Tumaren ranch, a 12km<sup>2</sup> wildlife conservancy, Karisia specialise in camel-assisted walking safaris that explore the farther reaches of Laikipia. Karisia either use overnight fly-camps to make a multi-day safari from A to B, or do day walks out of the permanent camp on their ranch.

## BORANA RANCH

The 142km<sup>2</sup> Borana Ranch is a former settler farm that has evolved into a model of integrated sheep and cattle herding, wildlife management and adventure safari tourism. Borana is home to some 300 elephants (including 12 radio-collared matriarchs), black rhinos, four prides of lions, hyenas and cheetahs and a maximum of 32 visiting humans. If you're one of the latter, you can see the stunning landscapes of the ranch from a 4WD, on foot, on horseback (they have a stable of 26 horses suitable for experienced riders, plus other ponies for novices and children) or on a mountain bike.

**Borana Lodge** itself, privately owned by the Dyer family for three generations, is stunning: the views from the front are something to behold. It's a family home, where you're invited by the delightful hosts and staff to relax, and treat the main areas like somewhere you've lived for years. With its own swathe of private wilderness and no 'park rules', it offers an exclusive safari experience with a wide array of possible activities – including first-class riding



*Wild dogs are making a comeback in Laikipia and can often be seen on several conservancies, including here at Oi Pejeta*

opportunities. Although Borana may not be ideal if you're looking for wall-to-wall wildlife, the whole set-up runs seamlessly, and will suit you if you like getting into the great outdoors.

If you want to explore Borana Ranch but stay in ultimate exclusivity, then you might want to consider the totally private **Laragai House**. Only 8km from Borana Lodge, and run by engaging hosts, this exclusive property can be booked out by families or groups. Sitting at the edge of a stunning, rocky plateau, Laragai has eight bedrooms in two colonial-style houses. They share a pool, lounge, and indoor and outdoor dining areas.

## LEWA WILDLIFE CONSERVANCY

The efficiently managed Lewa Wildlife Conservancy currently protects 68 black and 63 white rhinos as well as around 350 Grevy's zebra. One of the oldest of the Laikipia conservancies, Lewa includes the rolling grasslands of Lewa Downs, and a mixture of riverine woodland, scrubby bush and open plains – excellent environments for a very wide variety of game.

**Lewa Safari Camp** has 11 well-spaced, homely and very comfortably furnished regular tents, some of which have fine views, and 2 family tents each comprising two en-suite bedrooms. The main building is of thatched cedar, and has a lounge overlooking a floodlit waterhole where rhino and elephant often come to drink. Dining here is usually at individual tables, so there is more of a feel of a lodge than a small camp, but the service is excellent and it certainly has a warm and sociable atmosphere. There's a pool for warm days, and a nice shop for purchasing souvenirs.

The home of the Craig family, who came to Lewa in the 1920s, **Lewa Wilderness** has nine stone-and-thatch cottages, of which the three 'garden cottages' are for families, each with a room on either side of a private lounge area. Lewa Wilderness's main socialising area, where guests gather for informal drinks and very good meals (making great use of ingredients from the organic garden), has a fantastic English country house atmosphere, maintained by the congenial hosts and staff. Riding is available at the large stables, and there's an infinity pool. If you're feeling adventurous you might also want to try a quintessentially Out of Africa-style flight in a biplane – one of only a handful in Kenya.

Sister property to *Lewa Wilderness*, **Lewa House** is an elegant residence based around three large, original cottages, each with a double and a twin room, and four quirkiest, recently built, stucco-style, single-room cottages. Set in lawns and gardens, they all look out over the sweeping landscapes of the northern Lewa Conservancy. There's a spacious central dining and lounge area, where guests eat together, and a swimming pool overlooking the waterhole.

**Sirikoi**, set on manicured lawns shaded by acacia trees, with just four, huge and well-appointed tents on wooden platforms, plus a cottage for four and a house for six, is an intimate, very high-quality lodge, with a great number of activities on offer: horseriding, bush walks, quadbiking and even helicopter flights (some at extra cost). The tents face a large, natural waterhole with a small saltlick frequented by animals, including white rhino and friendly giraffe. Other wildlife, including plenty of birds and many species of antelope, pass freely through the grounds.

## IL NGWESI CONSERVANCY

Preeminent among the traditional pastoral and wildlife areas north of Lewa is the Il Ngwesi Conservancy, a 145km<sup>2</sup> group ranch between the Mukogodo Escarpment and the Ngare Ndare River. It's home to the 6000-strong Laikipiak Maasai community, who traditionally herd their livestock through this wild bush country. Since the building of Il Ngwesi Eco-Lodge in 1996, they combine their pastoral lifestyle with income generated by tourism and conservation.

When it opened, **Il Ngwesi Eco-Lodge** was Kenya's first community-run safari lodge. Operated on strict environmental principles, this delightful, six-cottage property, set on a stony, bush-covered hilltop, is entirely staffed and managed by people from the local community. Scattered along the ridge, away from the central dining-lounge area and small infinity pool, the spacious, open-fronted cottages are raised on platforms jutting from the hillside. Their decks look out over the Leguimieni stream, down which elephants and other animals walk daily to the local waterhole, which is set up near Cottage 5. Cottages 1 and 5 both have a 'star bed' option, which allows you to sleep outside on the deck, beneath an inky black sky.



## LEKURRUKI GROUP RANCH

The wild and hilly 240km<sup>2</sup> **Lekurruki Community Ranch** is a superb part of Laikipia, and acts as a migration corridor between the Samburu Reserve to the north and the Lewa Conservancy and Mount Kenya to the south. The conservation charity, Tusk Trust, has provided more than 20 rangers to patrol the livestock-free areas of the ranch where cattle aren't grazed. Although wildlife can be hard to spot, this is excellent country for walking, birdwatching and appreciating the wilderness. And if you're interested in learning about the local Mokogodo Maasai community, you'll be able to make uncontrived visits to local villages and community projects.

**Tassia** is a rare gem, and a real favourite of *Expert Africa*. A unique, natural and rustic lodge, it's set on a rocky outcrop on the edge of an escarpment, and consists of six open-sided rooms with stone walls and floors. Run as a partnership between the local Mokogodo Maasai community – who own the lodge – and the managers, this is a place to relax, enjoy the views, and dictate your own pace. In front of the main areas, a swimming pool is dug into the rocks, enjoying the same panoramic views over the valley. Generally, the game at Tassia is a little dispersed and shy. Big cats are only occasionally seen, but you can expect better sightings of giraffe, gerenuk and plains wildlife, and good numbers of elephants arrive during the rains. We were lucky enough to spot wild dogs on our visit but we understand that to be a relative rarity. The emphasis here is on enjoying the pure wilderness and absence of other tourists in the area, and perhaps on getting involved in some of the outstanding community and wildlife projects set up by the people who manage Tassia so enthusiastically.

*Mother and cub cheetah in Ol Pejeta conservancy*

### Our planning manual

To plan your trip with our help, we recommend you use this brochure in conjunction with a copy of **The Directory**. This is *Expert Africa's* planning manual. It contains costed sample itineraries (our "trip ideas"), details of flights and everything you need to arrange an African safari or beach holiday with us.

*Order a printed copy, or download it from [expertafrica.com/order-directory](http://expertafrica.com/order-directory)*

### The Lewa Marathon

If you're a runner, you might want to know about the Lewa Marathon, run on the conservancy every June to raise funds for conservation and development. You could combine a safari with running with the wildlife, along with more than 1,000 other entrants from Kenya and around the world.