



SAFE HANDS

Across Laikipia you will find remarkable stories of land being rewilded and transformed into wildlife and tourism havens. One of the longer established is Borana Conservancy. On a recent visit, **Sue Watt** asks if this is a model for the future of wildlife tourism?

On my first morning in Laikipia, I flew in a tiny two-seater plane above its open savannahs and rolling hills, over the dense Ngare Ndare forest of cedar and olive trees, past waterfalls and azure pools and the alpine moorlands on the foothills of Mount Kenya.

“All this heather and gorse is so beautiful, you can almost smell its vibrancy,” my pilot Michael Dyer said.

He knows almost every inch of this rich landscape. Since taking on the running of what is now Borana Conservancy in 1984, Michael has transformed the working cattle ranch into a tourism and conservation success that positively embraces the local

Il’Ngwesi and Maiyanat Maasai communities still adhering to their pastoralist way of life.

Together with its neighbour Lewa Wildlife Conservancy, Borana has also evolved into one of East Africa’s most successful rhino sanctuaries — home to nearly 300 between them. Both black and white rhinos were easy to spot from the air, along with giraffe patrolling the plains, buffalo in huge herds, and elephants drinking from the dam.

“Elephants have been on this planet for some 40 million years. We should be dancing to their music, not the other way around,” Michael said. “We’re the dominant species in this landscape: we need to take responsibility for how everything else

survives with their rights.”

This deep sense of responsibility and respect drives the third-generation Kenyan in his visionary custodianship of the 30,000-acre Borana Conservancy.

LOOKING FOR SOLUTIONS

After World War I, Michael’s grandfather acquired this land through the colonial settler policy and his father then developed it into a successful livestock ranch. They had a very different outlook in those days.

“Wildlife was seen as a problem. If you lost your cattle, you shot the lion. If zebra were eating your grass, you chased them to the neighbour’s property,” Michael

confessed. “But then you realise you’re perpetually conflicted with nature, and that makes your life harder.”

“Previous generations were conflicted with the community too. But we realised we were actually closely aligned and co-dependent. The relationship is about more than simply providing employment — it’s about sharing knowledge and resources and supporting each other. When that happens, all the bumps in the road start to iron out.”

Borana Lodge was built in 1993 by local craftsmen using sustainable materials from the conservancy. But it wasn’t just a cool place to stay: Michael’s intention was to use tourism to reintroduce wildlife and kick-start conservation. He and his wife Nicky began to partner with local villages on healthcare, education and employment, ensuring that their neighbours would also benefit from the wildlife and, in return, learn to value it.

Testimony perhaps to the deep connection that developed between

conservancy and community, Borana emerged unscathed from the conflicts between pastoralists and land owners during Laikipia’s extreme drought of 2018. Their precious rhinos, protected by 120 rangers from local villages, all survived. There has been zero poaching here for 11 years.

A TALE OF TRANSFORMATION

Today, Borana is unrecognisable as the cattle farm that rarely gave back, now integrating responsible ranching with a thriving regenerative tourism operation.

An ethos of sustainability permeates the operation. Most staff come from surrounding communities and the food we’re served is organic and locally sourced including deliciously fresh salads and fruit from Waitabit Farm, a regenerative permaculture project on the conservancy

that we visited on a fascinating tour. Tender beef comes from Borana’s ranch and their ‘Well Hung Butchery’. Chicken and eggs hail from nearby villages. And it’s all run on 100 per cent solar power, with its own recycling centre and a zero-landfill policy.

Borana follows the 4C framework of positive impact on Community, Culture, Conservation and using Commerce as a force for good, with transparent reporting of their operations. In 2020, it became one of only 12 operators to achieve The Long Run’s prestigious Global Ecosphere Retreat status for sustainability in tourism. One reason for their success is that they dedicate a considerable 24 per cent of room rates to conservation and communities, generating US\$700,000 ➡

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annually from just eight cottages. “We’ve done away with fixed conservation fees,” Michael explained. “They can amount to very little if room rates are expensive. If you pay US\$1000 for a room and US\$80-100 for the conservancy fee, that only equates to 8-10 per cent”

Borana is keen to share behind-the-scenes experiences with guests. I went rhino tracking with rangers and visited their high-tech Operations Room, learning how protecting these endangered animals is part of their everyday life, as is their morning circuit training that guests can join.

On game drives, we saw plenty of predators, from gorgeous full-maned lions to a rare striped hyena skulking away, a lone cheetah on the hunt, and a tiny but beautiful serval. Leaving the Land Rover behind, I walked to our fly camp, spotting birds and bugs and distant wildlife, while others rode horses or mountain bikes and encountered lions on the way. That night, we camped out under the stars and danced with Borana’s team to Maasai drumbeats under a starlit sky.

The following morning, visiting the conservancy’s Mazingira Yetu community centre gave us the opportunity to meet Maasai women selling their beads and to learn about Borana’s work with local schoolchildren. Among its many projects, the Borana Education Support Programme currently provides bursaries to 26 boys and 27 girls, employs 12 teachers across different schools and helps fund nutritious breakfasts to some 4,000 children in 12 primary schools. The Borana Mobile Clinic sees on average 700 patients a month, advising on HIV Aids, pregnancy, family planning and nutrition. Its two nurses travel around 1500km monthly, visiting ten remote villages every two weeks.

In 2025 alone, the conservancy invested US\$1.2 million in initiatives benefitting wildlife and its human neighbours. But Borana doesn’t rest on its laurels: it always looks ahead, preparing for challenges down the line.

AN EYE TO THE FUTURE

It was that flight with Michael on my first morning that made me truly appreciate the complexities of running the conservancy. We flew above the savannah, where herds

of cattle were grazing, huddled in mobile bomas. An unexpected sighting on safari, it’s a sign of what’s to come as pressure mounts on wild habitats due to our ever-encroaching and increasing human population.

“Loss of habitat is the biggest threat to wildlife,” Michael said, explaining his new ultra-high density grazing scheme in which the bomas would soon be moved to another location, benefitting the soil and stimulating more grass for wildlife in this arid environment.

“A good rancher is a good conservationist, and properly managed cattle can be an important regenerative tool that improves land, wealth and community relations,” he added, referring to his bold new partnership with pastoralists.

Michael is developing a for-profit initiative called ShareStock, which enables pastoralists to earn dividends by lending their cattle to a managed breeding scheme.

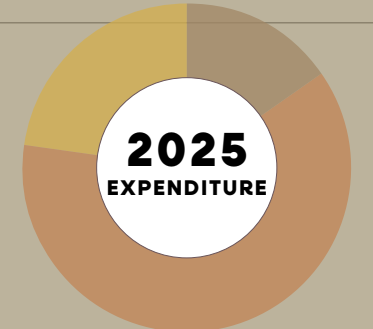
“Good land use requires creative mechanisms for the future. Our intention is to introduce regenerative best practice by reverting to the ancient pastoralist system of large herds grazing for short durations followed by long rest periods. The end goal is resilient rangelands and economic returns that build livelihoods and reduce stress on the land,” he explained. “Pastoralists are seen as a problem and that’s unfair, because they are very much a part of this landscape and livestock is their life.”

Michael’s drive to find innovative and collaborative solutions to Borana’s myriad challenges and his respect for everything this land is about are tangible and humbling. With those challenges in mind, Borana recently published its 10 Year Strategy for the conservancy and for safari tourism in general, sharing his learnings with the wider industry.

Borana’s future is clearly in safe hands. Whether managing habitats, protecting vulnerable species or caring for neighbouring communities, it provides a valuable framework that can truly benefit tourism, local people and the planet.

Sue Watt’s trip to Kenya was organised by The Ultimate Travel Company. She was hosted in Laikipia by Borana Lodge and internal flights were provided by Scenic Wilderness.

HOW THE MONEY IS SPENT



Wildlife and habitat protection
\$972,987
Community, Education and Healthcare
\$235,208
Admin and Overheads
\$568,434

All visitors to Borana Conservancy pay a contribution to conservation along with their accommodation costs. These funds are spent on a variety of different facets which ensure the continuation of Borana’s conservation efforts across this landscape. No shareholders receive dividends and retained earnings are committed to the conservancy’s social and environmental responsibilities.

From top, left to right: Sundowners at Pride Rock; Borana’s wildlife includes the iconic species plus local specialties such as Beisa oryx (bottom right); Borana Lodge has eight cottages; Activities include biking, walking, horse riding and behind-the-scenes tours, including to Mazingira Yetu community centre; Visit the conservation operations centre and go out on ranger deployments; Glass is recycled on site as part of a zero-landfill policy

ALL IMAGES UNLESS STATED: BORANA LODGE

