

Exploring Kenya's Masai Mara through the eyes of a hotelier

 By Josephine Wawira 14 Sep 2017

Kenya boasts diverse destinations that remain major attractions for tourists from across the world. From the classic wildlife safaris to the sandy beaches at the coast and metropolis cities full of vibrant life, this east African country has a full bucket list of marvels to explore.



David Kuria

As part of its “Destination Campaign” aimed at accentuating Africa’s tourist destinations, Jumia Travel talked to David Kuria, the managing director of Olumara Camp, who expounds on the hotel business in the Masai Mara. Located within the Natio Reserve, the camp is an exemplary destination to enjoy Kenya’s wild as it is designed to blend with the natural surrounding. In the interview, Kuria highlights performance during the migration season and election period, domestic vs. international tourism receipts as well as challenges of operating a hotel business in Kenya’s Savanna.

How is your bed occupancy performance during this year’s Great Migration season?

This time it coincided with the general elections period making it a little shaky. However, we maintained a 40% rate in bed occupancy from mid-August. Between June and July, our numbers stood at 70% when the migration was at its peak in the Masai Mara.

How would you classify your guests, particularly in percentages of domestic vs. foreign tourists?

We appreciate that over the years we have experienced a rise in domestic guests seeking to visit the Mara as compared to earlier years when we primarily received mostly foreigners. But, it is noticeable that the numbers still vary greatly, with 20% and 80% resident and non-resident guests respectively. Families and groups of friends frequent more during the holidays such as Easter and Christmas, while solo travelers and couples are our more frequent guests at Olumara. We tend to attribute these trends to some factors such as poor infrastructure, forcing most tourists to the Mara to opt for flights which are quite expensive.

Take for instance a family of five paying for a flight, accommodation, and meals for a minimum two nights, not to mention exorbitantly high park fees that range about \$80 (Kshs 8,000) for non-residents and approximately \$10 (Kshs 1,000) for Kenyan citizens. These will require plenty of planning and saving, especially for locals, with most of them opting for other destinations such as the Kenyan coast. Thankfully, travel agencies such as Jumia Travel are easing the hustle to travel to Mara, with their exclusive resident rates, as well as discounts and affordable packages.



Olumara Camp (Image Supplied)

The Masai Mara is reckoned as the jewel of Kenya's wildlife viewing areas. Are you satisfied with the maintenance of the reserve, and if not, what would you say needs to be done?

The Masai Mara ecosystem is a collection of parks and conservancies, the creation of which was a great idea because it helped solve the problem of the Masai Mara National Reserve being penned in by private development, giving the animals migration space. But what was once a very good idea has now become unproductive, in that many segments of the conservancies are fencing themselves off and limiting movement of wildlife within the entire Masai Mara - Serengeti ecosystem. Also, of great concern is the over-development of lodges and tents especially in Talek.

Further, the MICE industry has not fully exploited conferencing products in the wild, which in our opinion is a good corporate getaway giving ambience for productive deliberations.

Access to the Mara by road is a big challenge especially past Narok. Two airlines dominate fly-in safaris - Safarilink and Airkenya Express - with recent entries like Governors Aviation and Mombasa Air. Yet, the conservancy remains out of reach for the average East African guest in terms of cost. A lot needs to be done, with roads development being at the top of the list, if the ecosystem is to enjoy more diverse and frequent guests.

ABOUT JOSEPHINE WAWIRA

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