

SLEEPOVER: LODGE IN THE HEART OF KENYA'S BIG GAME COUNTRY

Rhinos at your doorstep

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Olonana Safari Lodge The Masai Mara, Kenya, about 270 kilometres from Nairobi; about five hours by road; flights departing twice daily from Nairobi's Wilson Airport reach the Mara in about 45 minutes; <http://www.sanctuarylodges.com>

[olonana.htm](#).

Rooms and rates From about \$230 a night for the tented camp in low season - April 1 to June 30 and Nov. 1 to Dec. 15.

"The journey not the arrival matters," T.S. Eliot wrote. Perhaps the great poet never had the opportunity to arrive on an East African grass airstrip in a small plane as warthogs scurry out of the way, majestic elephants and giraffe graze nearby, and a battle-scarred male lion dozes at the end of the runway. A short ride by Land Cruiser across the open savannah delivers you to Olonana Safari Lodge, a luxury tented camp in the Masai Mara Game Reserve, the heart of Kenya's big game country. Olonana is a superb example of progressive pampering. At the forefront of ecotourism in Kenya, the lodge runs on solar power, uses only biodegradable products and manages wetlands water recycling and tree planting projects, among other community initiatives. It also conforms to local architectural and cultural standards of the Masai people, who live in the adjacent village, or *engang*.



Location Nestled along the banks of the Mara River just outside the Masai Mara's western boundary, Olonana occupies a prime location from which to view the reserve's spectacular array of wildlife. The reserve's 320 square kilometres of open savannah, woodlands and tree-lined rivers form an ecosystem that supports huge numbers of bird and mammal species. Lions are found in abundance throughout the park, as are elephants, giraffes, a variety of gazelle species and zebras. Cheetahs and leopards are also regularly seen.

On a good day, you may spot a female rhino named Mary, famous in the Mara for her long-distance romance. Mary once walked across the border into Tanzania in search of a suitable mate. She found him in the Serengeti and brought him back to start a family. They now have a daughter, Mary Jr.

Ambience Olonana's rustic and intimate style is reminiscent of the romantic safari era of the turn of the 19th century - think *Out of Africa* set decoration with all the creature comforts of a five-star hotel. (In fact, Robert Redford and Meryl Streep shot a key scene on a nearby hillside that offers a panoramic view of the savannah.) The main cottage's lounge and dining area has a relaxed, cozy feel, while its large riverside deck is the perfect spot for breakfast, afternoon tea, sundowners or stargazing. There is also a workshop where local artisans demonstrate their traditional crafts. Guests can visit the nearby Masai *engang* to experience their village lifestyle. And if you feel like cooling off after a game drive, head for the swimming pool, situated along the pathway between the tents. But be warned: Hippos sometimes mistake it for a watering hole. One recently panicked when it couldn't climb out of the pool, and staff had to drain the water and pour a dirt escape ramp.

Rooms The camp features 12 spacious bush pavilions, each outfitted with two comfortable queen-size beds, locally handcrafted furniture and an en suite bathroom with a hot-water shower. Floor-to-ceiling walk-through windows open onto private verandas with views across the river, where the resident hippo pods spend their days snorting and wallowing in the water while huge crocodiles sunbathe on the banks.

Food and Drink Olonana's Belgian-trained chef prepares sumptuous cuisine, which can be served in the lodge, al fresco on the Siria escarpment overlooking the Mara plains or as a picnic deep in the bush. In addition, each pavilion is assigned its own butler, on call 24/7. An especially nice touch is the daily pre-dawn delivery of freshly baked cookies and a steaming pot of Kenyan coffee to your tent.

Activities You move entirely at your own pace at Olonana - nothing is pre-scheduled, and all activities are à la carte. Meals, guided game drives in custom-built 4x4 Land Cruisers, night game drives outside the reserve and walking safaris with a Masai warrior-guide are all offered at guests' convenience - subject, of course, to the changing patterns of animal activity. Bush skills programs such as archery, spear throwing and fire making are also available.

Bottom line Olonana Safari Lodge offers an intimate, highly personalized and eco-friendly way to enjoy the African safari experience in arguably the best park for game viewing in the world.

The author stayed as a guest of the Olonana Safari Lodge.

Hotel vitals

Top draw

Magnificent wildlife.

Needs work

Darn hippos.

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