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Olpejeta Conservancy

HOPE FOR WILDLIFE IN KENYA - OL PEJETA CONSERVANCY NOW A PREMIER TOURISM DESTINATION

The 90,000 acres **Ol Pejeta Conservancy**, straddling the equator on the Laikipia plains between the towering **Mt. Kenya** and the **Aberdare Mountains**, has in recent years turned into a premier tourism destination in its own right, more so since the boundaries between the working cattle ranch and the area initially and separately dedicated for wildlife were removed and a single, major conservancy created, where cattle and wildlife now happily co-exist.

The cattle are kept overnight in secure "bomas" to ensure predators, now very common on the conservancy, do not have a chance to mistake livestock for food, but the herds graze during the day alongside the game in small manageable groups overseen by herdsman. This integration is most amazing to witness and groundbreaking in many ways, as the experience there may in fact in coming years find favor with several of the Masai group ranches outside the **Masai Mara** and **Amboseli**, which are presently still pondering what to do with their land, either turning it into an exclusive wildlife conservancy – making more money for them than their cattle herding – or into a combined ranch and conservancy as showcased at Ol Pejeta, or if they will in fact retain the pure cattle ranching side of things, which is fraught with risk considering the recent prolonged draughts. And as far as the bottom line of Ol Pejeta goes, since the full integration of the cattle and tourism business, there is a very significant improvement by over 30 percent - not bad in times of otherwise challenging economic circumstances.

Ol Pejeta was once owned by one of the major wheeler dealers of the 70s and 80s, Adnan Kashoggi, but the ranch and its buildings changed hands when he failed to pay back loans taken from the late "Tiny" Rowland of then LonRho, an absolute equal if not superior in wheeling dealing and one of the star performers on the African continent with his varied investments and carefully nurtured political connections to all major seats of power across Africa. Kashoggi suddenly found his jets grounded, and significant for Kenya, his properties including the Mt. Kenya Safari Club and the Ol Pejeta ranch taken over by LonRho.

Much has changed since those days in Kenya, of course; LonRho has become LonZim, and Ol Pejeta is now managed, on behalf of the new owners of Ol Pejeta Conservancy Limited, by Richard Vigne, a former resident of Uganda, and his team. The ownership of Ol Pejeta is split between Flora and Fauna International of the UK, The Arcus

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Foundation, and the Lewa Conservancy, and the company operates as a not-for-profit organization, where neither shareholders nor directors received dividends or any form of remuneration, quite similar to the Rhino Fund in Uganda. All financial surpluses are, therefore, ploughed back into the property to help in paying for the very costly conservation efforts and constant further improvements in the infrastructure.

Flora and Fauna International, besides being shareholders, are also development partners, together with a range of other donors, helping the conservancy in many issues on the international platforms and with practical support and financial assistance, where necessary.

Over the years, Ol Pejeta has become the largest rhino sanctuary and breeding project in Kenya for the Eastern Black Rhino, now having over 80 of these animals on the conservancy while alongside a number of the Southern White species are happily coexisting with their cousins. The Eastern' species are "browsers" and the Southern' species are "grazers" hence not having a conflict over food sources, which is important when it comes to carrying capacity of the conservancy.

However, the most significant recent development was the introduction of the rarest of rhino species, the Northern White, four of which were donated by the Czech Republic in December, when they arrived in an airlift at the international airport in Nairobi, before being trucked to Ol Pejeta. There they will now make a permanent home on Ol Pejeta, and hopefully succeed in breeding. Four more of them are left in Czech zoos, but are thought to be too old already for reproductive purposes.

The last remaining wild Northern White population, as often pointed out by this correspondent in the past, were more than likely poached to extinction in the Garamba National Park in Congo by Ugandan rebels, who – after being pushed out of Northern Uganda and Southern Sudan – made camp in Garamba. An earlier planned airlift, with aircraft engines literally running already, to bring them to Ol Pejeta and into a secure refuge until conditions in Congo were conducive again to conservation, was cancelled by a minister in the Kinshasa regime at the time, who deluded himself that Congo was able to ensure the protection of these rare animals and clearly misled the world at the time over their abilities, their real commitment, and true intent.

Aerial and ground surveys are ongoing in Garamba, now that the rebels have been pushed out of the park and further away, but to date, no signs of any Northern White alive have been found to the disappointment of those who hoped beyond hope and as a confirmation of others who believe that they are indeed gone forever.

Hence, the four Northern White now at Ol Pejeta are the one and only remaining chance to save the species, and going

by the conservancy's track record, if they cannot do it, no one can. My host, Richard Vigne, made it possible for me to get close up to the Northern Whites and not only see them but also speak with their wardens and rangers to get first-hand information about how well they have settled into their new and permanent environment on Ol Pejeta. Richard even had me walk with a little Eastern Black orphan brought to the conservancy a couple of weeks ago when she returned to the overnight enclosures with her personal ranger from their daily walking routine. It reminded me of the challenges of wildlife conservation and our responsibility to look after them well, so that future generations of humans can still enjoy what seems so normal still for me and my generation.

Ol Pejeta has accommodation facilities on the sprawling estate available for tourist visitors staying overnight or for several days, and most notably, Gamewatchers have established their Porini Rhino Camp at a pretty corner of the conservancy, away from prying eyes, away from the tour busses, and set in the midst of plenty of plains game, giraffes, dozens of rhinos, and a sizeable number of predators, as witnessed during a recent stay. In fact, anyone wanting to see the "big five" within one reserve and limited time, should consider a safari by road or by air from Wilson Airport with SafariLink, to the Ol Pejeta Conservancy. Here, the sightings are nearly guaranteed, and whether by road in 3 ½ to 4 hours from Nairobi or by air in 35 minutes to the Nanyuki aerodrome, visitors will have rich rewards waiting for them, game galore, and some of the very best safari camp experiences available today on the market in Kenya.

Like their sister property in Amboseli, the Rhino Camp also offers visitors exclusivity with only 6 of their custom-made supersized tents, set along a little riverbed and overlooking a watering hole, which especially during the dry season, is an assembly point for game coming to still their thirst.

The attention to detail again, like in Amboseli, was impressive – to give one example, after the first night, quite cold owing to the elevation of over 2,000 meters above sea level, I happened to mention that the hot-water bottle was most welcomed, but I wished I had more of them – only to find three lined up under my duvet and blankets for the second night. They do stay from hot to warm the entire night as they are filled with boiling water and then placed inside an insulated cover keeping the precious heat until morning.

Breakfast is prepared to order and includes all one's heart can desire, and if going out for an early morning game drive, sandwiches are prepared, as are fruits and flasks with tea or coffee, to keep that peckish feeling under control before breakfast proper is served upon one's return to camp.

I commend the Porini Rhino chef for his roast leg of lamb, which was decidedly delicious, as was, in fact, all his food, including the soup creations he put before me and the two other travelers I shared the camp with during my stay.

The game drives into the conservancy were rewarded with plenty of sightings, including two cheetahs on one occasion and another separate sighting of one later on, but we also spotted rhinos in the wild, and the most exciting aspect was the opportunity to walk across the conservancy.

My trackers, spotters, and guides were first rate, very conversant with the birds found on the conservancy, and holding silver ratings as awarded by the Kenya Professional Safari Guide Association. We walked for several hours in a wide circle around the camp, reached the perimeter fence, and I managed to see firsthand the "gaps" created to facilitate migration in and out of the conservancy, a key element to maintain migratory patterns engrained in game, and ensure a constant source of new genes introduced into the resident populations on the conservancy. The Laikipia plains of old were a key crossroad for migration of elephant and other game from Mt. Kenya to the Aberdare Mountains and also for game migrating to and from the Northern Frontier District, as it was called in the old days, with evidence that elephant did come and go all the way to Marsabit and back, as eloquently explained by my guides.

These gaps are monitored every morning to ascertain from prints in the loose soil which animals came in or went out and these reports are correlated for research and monitoring purposes. One of the best features though, during the walk, was the repeated encounter with widow birds, when the males in all their black splendor did their mating dance in mid air, a sight to behold and normally rewarded by flying off into a thicket with the courted female.

Today though, the Aberdares are fenced and plans are underway to maybe even fence the entire lower slopes of Mt. Kenya, to keep animals inside the conservancies and the national park, which extends from a certain elevation upwards the mountain.

And talking of Mt. Kenya, the mountain was visible every day I was on Ol Pejeta, towering in the background, but sadly now almost bare of snow and ice fields, a definite sign that climate change has come home to Eastern Africa to roost, progressively stripping away the icecaps of the Rwenzori Mountains in Uganda, the snow and ice cap of Kilimanjaro, and the glaciers of Mt. Kenya. It was the most shocking recognition of this trip to see the extent of the melting off, and it is extremely worrying to imagine what these mountains will look like in another 15 or 20 years.

Fencing does have merits, but also cons, and all considered, it is for the local conservation fraternity to decide in a consultative exercise which option serves them, the animals, and the human population best, to minimize and largely avoid human/wildlife conflict, which due to fast-growing populations along migration routes and around the parks, conservancies, and game reserves, is ever present.

I enjoyed my all too brief visit to Ol Pejeta and again highly commend all their staff, those serving with keen anticipation in the mess tent by the names of Amos and Hesbon; Kariuki making the bed and bringing the hot water bottles at night; Babu, Saruni, and Solonka safely escorting guests to and from their tents; the guides, spotters, and trackers from Dominique to John; and last but not least the manager Paul Magiri himself, a hospitality veteran taking extreme pride in his work and how he kept the place in ship shape. They all have gelled into one fine team any camp operator can be proud of, and they were putting real life into the camp.

The splendid solitude, having a large tract of the conservancy to myself, only shared with two other guests during one of my two days there, brought back fond memories of long gone days, when driving into the wilderness was my regular pastime for weekends and whenever else a chance arose to go bush side. I never felt that I missed any of the usual gadgets or superfluous luxuries, as the real bonus once again was the isolation from the masses; having the game, the birds, and the wilderness to myself; and the option to walk and do night game drives, all of which brought me as close to nature as is possible in this day and age. I told someone, when I was eventually enroute home several days later, that "when you can hear the silence, you know you are in the right place for your safari." [Porini Rhino Camp](#) is one of those rare places.

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