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OF THE MANY upmarket ecolodges dotted about Kenya's game reserves, only one is owned and operated by the local tribe upon whose land it stands, providing employment and total profit share for the community.

In 1996, following an approach from neighbouring Lewa Wildlife Conservancy (where the Duke of Cambridge spent part of his gap year), the Il Lakiak Maasai community finished building the lodge, which overlooks 16,500 hectares of preserved land.

Today, there are six rooms at Il Ngwesi, each hewn out of wooden beams and deliberately left open to take in the spectacular views. It is particularly delightful to take a morning

Game on

Stay at the centre of the action in the Maasai Mara

shower while eyeing the reticulated giraffes and elephants gathered around a nearby watering hole.

On arrival, visitors are greeted by the entire community, and in the evening there is singing and dancing, where the Maasai leap several feet off the ground.

The tribe's name translates roughly to 'people of wildlife' and the Il Ngwesi tour guides possess unparalleled knowledge of the local flora and fauna. We took a walking tour through the surrounding bush flanked by great flocks of roaming vulturine guinea fowl and past steaming piles of rhino dung, followed by sundowners in the bush. But the best part of all comes at the very end of the day: lying in bed, safe under the stars, hearing a lion's roar electrify the valley below. — *Joe Shute*

A FINE COMPLEMENT to Il Ngwesi would be to spend a few days in Mara House, one of three 'bush houses' available to rent in the Mara North Conservancy of the Maasai Mara. It's an unusual option, and the advantages of having your own house are obvious. You also have a guide at your disposal all day, which makes everything more flexible. After our morning game drive, we ended up spending five hours following a cheetah and her three cubs, a rare treat.

IL NGWESI

Nine days from £5,295 per person, including three nights at Il Ngwesi and three nights at a 'bush house', international flights, domestic flights, transfers, guiding, activities, meals and house drinks (steppetravel.com)

The sights at Il Ngwesi lodge, Topi House and Mara House



The game sightings at the Mara are spectacular – the wide open plains host herds of elephant and giraffe, and clusters of wildebeest having morning conference in the shadow of the acacia trees. We also had prolific lion sightings, at one point coming across a pride

of Il snoozing under the bushes. A private chef provides delightful meals, packed lunches or breakfasts to eat off the roof of the Land Rover while taking a break from tracking lions. On our last day we had a pop-up lunch on a picnic table overlooking a spectacular view of the Siria escarpment.

Perfect for an elaborate celebration, Mara, Acacia and Topi House each sleep six, and Mara House has a glorious veranda overlooking a small watering hole, as well as a pool and barbecue area, shaded by a giant yellow fever tree. One afternoon an enormous eland wandered down the steps, took a casual drink from the pool and started grazing on the pot plants. He's a friend of the family, apparently. — *Jessamy Calkin*

