



RICHARD BRANSON GOES WILD

Kenya's new Mahali Mzuri camp is way out in the Maasai Mara—**with a sense of international style.**

FROM FORBES TRAVEL GUIDE: TOP LODGES IN THE MAASAI MARA, KENYA

Mara Serena Safari Lodge

Fairmont Mara Safari Club

Sanctuary Olonana

Kichwa Tembo

Mara Intrepids Lodge



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: MAASAI STAFF AT MAHALI MZURI; A HIDDEN TENT; SIR RICHARD LUNCHEs WITH A BABY ELEPHANT; THE NEIGHBORS; THE BUSH FROM THE POOL DECK; WILDERNESS LUXE.

➔ With all eyes on Virgin Galactic, high-flying billionaire Sir Richard Branson opened a safari camp at the edge of Kenya's Maasai Mara last month that is otherworldly in its own right. Mahali Mzuri's 12 tents—let's call them "tents"—are downright Spielbergian, with arcing steel girders and shiny obsidian-colored canopies. The comforts are out of this world, too: claw-foot bathtubs and rain-showers-with-a-view in each tent; a spa and infinity pool; and top-notch grub and grog—which during a recent visit included free-flowing Veuve Clicquot 2004.

Bringing touches of over-the-top luxe to the bush is the point, and the reason Branson imported the chef from his private Necker Island in the British Virgin Islands (to stay) and the food-and-beverage director from the Roof Gardens in London's tony Kensington (to get things up and running). "Our goal is to develop Mahali Mzuri as a unique destination in its own right," Branson says. "The safari experience is a fantastic added bonus."

He broke ground on the project in 2007 and has since invested more than \$1.2 million. Imported chef aside, he has worked to keep things local: "We've employed over 50 Maasai staff so far, and we're both learning from them and training them. Their culture is fascinating."

Branson's lifelong love affair with Africa began with trips as a teenager and now includes his being inducted as a Maasai elder in 2007.

He decided to put his money where his heart is after his friend Jake Grieves-Cook, the former chairman of the Kenya Tourism Federation and now the operator of a partner camp in a neighboring conservancy, told him about the environmental threat to the Maasai Mara and the need for investment to preserve it.

The result is that Mahali Mzuri has taken its place as one of five boutique-size camps in the virtually tourist-free Olare Motorogi Conservancy, smack on the route of the famed Great Migration of millions of wildebeest and zebra. Altogether, the five camps have just a few dozen beds and a ratio of one guest per half a square mile of wilderness.

While its conservation credentials are strong, Mahali Mzuri isn't just a feel-good place. The isolated setting means that animals are uninhibited about strolling through the grounds—you eat breakfast and lunch watching elephants and buffalo at the watering hole. The resort's "high-value, low-density" model means you won't see other vehicles on game drives or—maybe the greatest luxury in today's Mara—any hint of other visitors. —ANN ABEL