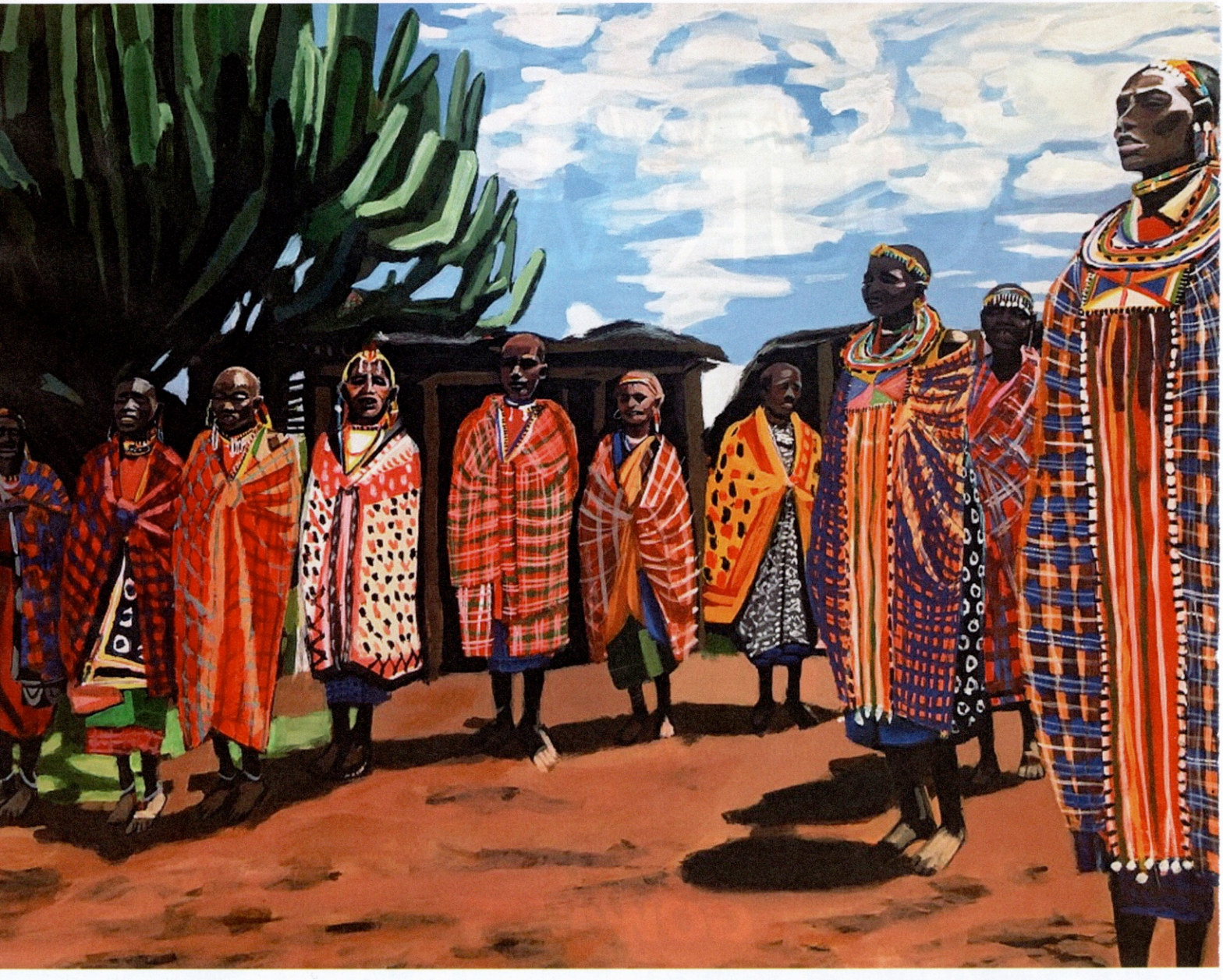
Connecting in Kenya

It's hard to forget a lesson **you learn by putting your foot in your mouth.**

by Jennifer Flowers



IT HAPPENED IN the middle of the vast savanna of Kenya's Maasai Mara. I was sitting on a portable stool in the shade of an acacia tree, eating breakfast with Nelson, my Maasai guide, and Peter, the safari director from Micato Safaris, who was traveling with me. Nelson had just told me that he moonlights as a livestock herder.

"So," I asked him, "how many cattle do you have?"

Peter began to chuckle over his Scotch egg. Soon Nelson joined in. I wondered what was so funny.

"Never ask a Maasai how many cattle they own!" Peter exclaimed.

"That's like asking someone how much money they have in the bank," Nelson said.

I didn't know, but livestock are a checking account that grazes. There's no way I would compare balances with friends at a cocktail party back home in New York City, and Nelson certainly wasn't about to do the equivalent at a bush breakfast in the Mara.

I was on a roll. Just minutes earlier, I had tried to use Swahili to ask for a cup of coffee—*kahawa*—but had asked instead for *kuhara*—diarrhea.

With a few safaris under my belt, I had come to Kenya ready to shake up the traditional game drive routine. I wanted to see the country through the lens of its people and cultures—while also taking in the incredible flora and fauna that keep bringing me back

ILLUSTRATION BY ERIN FITZPATRICK

TIPS FOR BEING A GOOD GUEST IN KENYA

When you encounter remote communities in Kenya, there are a few things to keep in mind. Ask permission before taking pictures in villages, Micato Safaris managing director Dennis Pinto recommends. "Reactions may range from people wanting to look their best to an expectation of a small token amount in exchange for a photo session," he says. If you are approached by a local for money, Pinto recommends politely declining and instead donating to a reputable nonprofit group doing work in the region. Pinto also encourages travelers to learn a few words of Swahili, one of Kenya's national languages: "Even a simple 'jambo' [hello] or 'asante' [thank you] helps travelers show that they're respectful and appreciative of the locals' culture."

to Africa—and let my curiosity lead the way. I turned to Micato Safaris, a Nairobi-based luxury company that specializes in custom-built safaris. The plan: Get me out of the vehicle, away from other tourists, and put me in the hands of extraordinary Kenyans who could tell me the story of who they are.

But back to diarrhea. Asking for it during breakfast was actually quite fitting, because over the course of my trip, I had become something of an expert on poop.

Before I committed my cultural blunders in the Maasai Mara, I had first traveled to Laikipia County, a 3,650-square-mile patchwork of agricultural communities north of Nairobi where relatively few tourists go. On a walking safari at Elewana Loisaba Tented Camp, a property the Nature Conservancy has worked to protect, I was delighted as always by sightings of zebras, giraffes, and elephants, but what had really grabbed my attention was the weird, wondrous, and often impressively abundant piles of animal defecation.

Under the tutelage of Samuel Lengalai, my Samburu guide who goes by the nickname "Brown," I could soon identify hyena poop (chalky white from the bones they munch on); recognize elephant poop (enormous piles—up to hundreds of pounds a day per animal!); and—I'm really proud of this one—distinguish between plains zebra and Grevy's zebra droppings. (Both are kidney shaped; the latter is slightly larger.) I started putting my new skill to work, making educated guesses about how long it had been since a particular animal had passed by.

A desire to learn about daily life in Kenya's remotest corners had led me to this part of the country. For generations, the communities on the Laikipia Plateau, with their own individual cultures and traditions—Samburu, Maasai, Kikuyu, to name a few—have coexisted with white farmers, some of whom now run tourism lodges or cattle ranches on the land. Before my time at Elewana Loisaba, I got a glimpse of that system at Ol Malo Lodge, where owners Colin Francombe and his wife, Rocky, hosted me.

The Francombes, who have worked as farm managers in the area for decades, have a reputation for maintaining good relations with the area's Samburu leaders. They hire Samburu to work at the lodge, and they help their neighbors with resources such as water in the inevitable times of scarcity. In exchange, the Samburu open their doors to guests who stay at the four-bedroom Ol Malo Lodge, inviting them to visit their homes or the school that Julia Francombe, Colin and Rocky's daughter, created through the Samburu Trust, her nonprofit foundation.

In the Samburu-owned land surrounding Ol Malo, life seems to hum along without much interruption from outsiders. I saw this firsthand at the market in a tiny town called Kirimon, a half-hour drive from Ol Malo, where the only other traffic we passed was an enormous herd of bull elephants near the road. Leading the way was Laban, who has worked as a guide at Ol Malo for the last decade. I had noticed Laban's *rungu*, a club-like weapon made of wood that hangs on the belts of Samburu and Maasai men, who use it for the occasional run-in with wildlife when protecting their herds. As a martial artist with a thing for weaponry, I had my heart set on buying my own rungu. They were in short supply at the market that day, but we finally found a man who sold me a beautiful piece made of acacia wood for a mere three dollars.

A day later, Laban took me to a neighbor's *manyatta*, a Maasai home composed of a small enclosure with several huts. The occasion for our visit: a courting dance between young men and women in the area. Wary of the cliché of cultural performances staged for paying tourists, I asked Laban on the hour-long drive to the manyatta whether the courting dance was being performed for my visit. He assured me that, as it was a full moon night, there was bound to be a courtship dance, visitor or no. The only courtesy the family had offered to Ol Malo was to call the lodge and let them know about the event, in case someone like me wanted to observe.

When I arrived, I saw each young man take the arm of a girl decked out in disc-shaped beaded necklaces made large enough to cover her breasts. The couples moved rhythmically in a circle, single file, while the older men, with their deep bellowing voices, chanted a song in unison. Every now and then, the women would gather around the young men, who would each take turns jumping as high as they could—a gauge of their worthiness as a mate.

After a few minutes I lost myself in the rich sensory landscape: the sound of the chanting, the smell of a fire burning in the eldest wife's hut nearby, the golden light of dusk creating long shadows at the feet of the dancers.

This wasn't the typical safari experience. In fact, none of my favorite memories of my Kenya trip were. They were something better. They were moments when I revealed who I truly was—a scatalogically curious martial-arts geek who needs to work on her Swahili—and connected with people who revealed who they were, too. A

HOW TO DO THIS TRIP

Deputy editor Jennifer Flowers traveled through Kenya as a guest of Micato Safaris. Micato specializes in custom-designed safaris in Africa and India and also organizes a handful of set departures for groups. A safari director travels with the guest or group for the duration of the trip, and all vehicles are private. Jennifer's itinerary focused on cultural encounters in Nairobi, the Laikipia Plateau, and the iconic Maasai Mara. *From $10,050. micato.com*