

Cities Are Getting Wilder...

The Kenyan capital of Nairobi—the only metropolis where you’ll find endangered black rhinos roaming freely in their natural habitat—just doubled the size of its national park. Will other places follow suit? **BY JENNIFER FLOWERS**

NAIROBI NATIONAL PARK isn’t on the must-see list for most travelers to Kenya, who are more likely to head straight to the vast, predator-filled savannas of the western Masai Mara or south to Amboseli National Park to see big-tusker elephants. Yet the relatively diminutive reserve—47 square miles of acacia-dotted savanna south of the city center—has long punched well above its weight as a symbol of pride for many Kenyans.

Here, in the world’s only urban game reserve, many young Kenyans

had their first experiences with wildlife—in the actual wild, rather than in a zoo. It’s the training ground for the country’s thriving guide industry, as well as the site of several elephant-tusk burnings held in protest of the illegal wildlife trade. (Enormous ashen mounds of tusks are still on display as a sobering reminder.) During the travel bans of the COVID-19 pandemic, the park also served as a respite for thousands of locals who were ordered to stay within city limits.

Nonetheless, Nairobi National Park has struggled to survive decades

of aggressive urban expansion. Since its founding in 1946, the area has been under constant threat of encroachment from private and public developers. Some of their efforts have been successful: in 2019, an elevated railway was constructed, and conservationists are concerned about current plans to fully enclose the park, which currently stands open on its southern border to allow for wildlife migration.

But there are glimmers of hope. In September 2020, Kenyan officials announced the protected land

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Over 100 mammal species, including giraffes, leopards, and buffalo, call Nairobi National Park their home.

would more than double in size, thanks to a collaboration with the International Livestock Research Institute and the Swara Plains Conservancy. Together, the groups donated over 47,000 acres of park-adjacent land, which, along with another 2,000 acres from the government, expanded the habitat to 122 square miles.

The new land will connect Nairobi National Park to key migration corridors, explains Najib Balala, Kenya's cabinet secretary for tourism and wildlife. Balala hopes to take protections a step further by developing a management plan that, if approved, could prevent the government from taking land from the park in the future. "Tourism has financed conservation and created jobs and wealth for this country," he says. "And without conservation, we can't have tourism. We have had time to reflect, and we've had time to engage."

For visitors willing to take a couple of hours and drive through the park, the sight of Masai giraffes grazing with the Nairobi skyline in the background is a reminder that no matter how far removed we feel from nature, we are still very much a part of it—and now, more than ever, we must find ways to coexist harmoniously.

Micato Safaris can plan custom Kenya itineraries that include a visit to Nairobi National Park. micatosafaris.com; from \$950 per person per day (based on double occupancy).