



“Tourism is a curse to us”

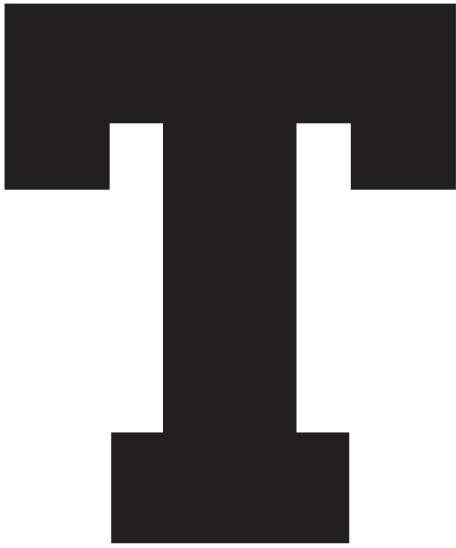
The Masai have been herding cattle across the great plains of Tanzania for generations, their nomadic lifestyle helping to preserve the wildlife of East Africa. Now, they are being forcibly evicted so that tour operators can turn their homelands into vast “nature refuges” for wealthy holiday makers

Investigation **Alex Renton** Photographs **Caroline Irby**



Masai from all over northern Tanzania and Kenya gather for the Saturday cattle market in Soitsambu village.

Two enormous tracts of land nearby have been taken over for tourism



Twilight is swift near the equator. As the cloud castles on the western horizon turn a tandoori red, the children are hurrying the goats into the thorn enclosure that keeps them from the leopards. A Masai elder passes on the path up the hill, striding easily into the slope. His purple plaid wraps him from shoulders to knees; there's a long-bladed spear in his left hand, a furred umbrella is strapped to his back. With his free hand he is busy with a mobile phone. He looks up to nod a greeting. I can smell the smoke of cooking fires from the nearby Masai village. It is an ordinary evening in the highlands of East Africa.

So it's particularly odd that I've just received a text message welcoming me to the United Arab Emirates. "Enjoy the best network coverage and other unmatched services only with Etisalat," it says. "Enjoy your stay in the UAE!"

The explanation lies just over the hill, at a place the locals call "Arabiya". It is a safari camp complete with a mansion, a runway capable of taking large jets, a fleet of off-road vehicles and, evidently, a branch of the UAE phone network.

This is the field headquarters of Ortelo Business Corporation (OBC), a safari company that does not advertise in brochures or on a website. Set up in 1993 by a UAE defence minister close to the Dubai royal family, it exists so that Gulf sheikhs and millionaires can play in the north Tanzanian wilderness, over an area, Loliondo, that is larger than Hampshire.

This sweep of low hills and savannah is just one of many tracts of land that the dollar-hungry Tanzanian government has pawned to foreign investors. The country's "development strategy" says there must be a million tourists by 2010 – and it seems that officials will do anything necessary to make that happen. One quarter of the country has been earmarked for "conservation". Generally this means development for safari tourism, with the people who live on the land in question often forcibly excluded by the government.

A few miles across the hills from Arabiya is a new enterprise, run by a different, rather more high-profile safari company. The Enashiva Nature Refuge is to be a hotel and camping development on 12,000 acres, planned by an award-winning US eco-tourism company, Thomson Family Adventures. While Thomson (which is no relation to the British holiday company) boasts of its philanthropic credentials, locals claim it has banned the Masai and their herds from their traditional grazing and watering grounds. Thomson denies this. "Pastoralists have always been given access to a spring during the dry season," it says. But more important, according to the semi-nomadic herders, is the right to move cattle through the land to seasonal grazing grounds. Thomson discusses these issues with a committee of local elders, but for two years the Enashiva border has seen shootings and violent confrontations between herders, Thomson guards and the police.

Liz McKee, the British general manager of Thomson's Tanzania operations, told me that the project would conserve the lands and the



animals. Personally, she didn't think the local pastoralists would be able to go on living as they have for centuries: "There ain't enough land," she says. "I don't see that the Masai can continue just grazing hundreds and hundreds of cattle till the end of time."

McKee has little respect for some aspects of Masai tradition. She particularly objects to their polygamy and their attitudes to women, such as marrying-off 12-year-old girls.

"It's very hard," she says. "I don't see any reason to uphold their way of life." Yet Thomson's website, like every safari company brochure, features the Masai in their red and purple robes, as part of the \$6,500-a-fortnight experience.

Here in the heart of Tanzanian Masailand, you can also see what looks like the systematic destruction of the culture and livelihoods of Africa's most iconic tribe. Elegant, clever and maverick, the Masai have fascinated adventurers since the mid-19th century. With Egyptian cheekbones and chivalric warrior codes, the



nomadic Masai have been the backdrop to a bookshelf-full of white person's fantasies of Africa, from Ernest Hemingway to Peter Beard. But now they are being turned into a ghetto race, unwanted in Africa's new Disneylands. Some of the many foreign-owned tourist companies have been complicit in the Tanzanian government's parcelling up and flogging off of the lands over which the Masai roamed, evicting families in their hundreds from parks. In July and August, according to NGOs, hundreds of Masai farms were burnt by policemen in Loliondo, after herdsmen hit by drought had moved cattle on to the land leased by OBC. "A Masai is good for a tourist's photograph, useful to carry your bags to the camp, or even to guide you to see the animals," says Moringe ole Parkipuny, a grand old Masai rights campaigner, and Tanzania's first Masai MP. "But in the end the animals are far more valuable than people."

If proof were needed of his gloomy verdict, it comes in north Tanzania's honeypot

destination, the mountains of Ngorongoro. Here, the Masai are faced with eviction by the government in their tens of thousands, for the sake of the 25 rhino that are the star attraction of the Ngorongoro crater.

Ololosokwan is also to be found in northern Tanzania. A backwater village six hours' drive from the nearest tarmac road, it is a Masai trading post, and humming with gossip when we arrive. Rumour has it the Sheikh of Dubai himself is expected to arrive at the Ortelo Business Corporation's ranch in the next few days – which accounts for the hard-looking Arab men in a numberplate-less 4x4 we saw in a roadside café. Also visible are the red berets of Tanzania's feared Full Force special police. When important visitors arrive in Arabiya – according to local gossip – a carpet is rolled out all the way from the runway to the palace. We want to photograph this – but locals are nervous. "People are arrested when they go near the place. OBC have guns."

The Ngorongoro crater (above) is one of the world's richest game sanctuaries. Left: many Masai warriors have had to abandon their traditional lifestyles to go in search of work

The Sheikhs and their friends drive Japanese off-road vehicles at high speed through the bush and they shoot at the animals. No living thing, it appears, is safe, even in Tanzania, a country that sells itself to the ever-growing safari market as an eco-tourism destination, where "harassment of animals is avoided". A district councillor in Ololosokwan, the nearest village to Arabiya, told me that OBC's licence permits only five lions to be killed per season. But then, who's counting? He cannot. The area is closed to journalists and NGOs, and the locals have been warned by the police that even to speak about OBC will get them into trouble. A request to OBC's local agent for an interview was not answered. Discreetly, people in the villages tell us about ►



◀ “the Arabs” and their bizarre colonisation of Loliondo district. For six months every year, they say, they have to submit to the Arab managers’ orders about where and how they take their herds. If there are disputes with OBC over the land, Tanzanian policemen punish the villagers with beatings. A Masai herdsman told me that he’d seen traps set to catch leopards alive, which is apparently allowed under OBC’s unique deal with the government. An Arab tourist gave another herdsman a cola and then shot the guinea-fowl gathered around his cows.

It took him and his cousins all night to round up the frightened cattle. Other accounts tell of OBC using helicopters to round up wildebeest for the guns, and of wounded animals being left in the forest.

These things are terrible to the Masai: they despise people who kill wild animals for pleasure. To keep livestock on the dry, unyielding lands they range as wide as possible. That is not easy in what becomes a free-for-all shooting gallery. Last summer a 29-year-old Masai died, run over accidentally by an Arab tourist’s vehicle, according to the authorities. But the herdsman with him insists he was shot first, and then the vehicle ran over his body deliberately. There is no evidence to support the allegation, but the Masai are highly suspicious of the autopsy report.

OBC does some good work: in May, it donated sacks of maize towards a famine relief

effort in Loliondo. It pays several villages 25m Tanzanian shillings (about £14,000) each for the disruption caused by the hunting. In Ololosokwan they refused the money. “We weren’t consulted when the Arabs were given the hunting bloc,” said Kirando ole Lukeine, one of the elders. “So this village wants nothing to do with it. We were told we must obey the government but it’s just another trick to take land from us.” Another Masai elder told me: “We feel like refugees in our own country.”

Along the gouge of the Great Rift Valley,

Our passports were taken and we were escorted out of the region by armed police – there had been a complaint about our investigation

through Kenya and Tanzania, lie arid lands and great grass savannahs – home to the biggest concentration of large wild animals in the world. The Masai, leading their goats and cattle from one area of grazing to another as the seasons shift, fit in well with the life cycles of big game. But Masai don’t eat wild animals – they don’t eat much except goat, beef, milk and blood. They only kill the great predators for ritual purposes, or when threatened by them.

But this symbiosis, long recognised as effi-

A young Masai looks after a cow in Ololosokwan, northern Tanzania, near the headquarters of a shooting safari camp for Gulf states tourists

cient by ecologists, doesn’t fit with modern development strategies. In Tanzania particularly, the pastoralists have been pushed out of their richest grazing lands to make room for tourists – often with disastrous results, both for the landless people and for the ecology of the new parks. Governments, or some government officials, have got rich: Tanzania, which in 2008 ranked joint 102nd out of 180 countries on the list of the world’s least corrupt countries, earned \$9.3m in 2002 from hunting licences alone. (Repeated attempts to get the Tanzanian

government to comment on this story were ignored.) Very little of that money appears to have been spent on the communities that host the hunters: the poverty levels are among the worst in East Africa and much

of the main road to Ololosokwan seems to be not indistinguishable from a river bed.

In Tanzania, the process of removing pastoralists from the plains started in 1959, when the British colonial government made the great grass sea of the Serengeti – in Masai the name means endless plain – a human-free wildlife reserve. They did a deal with the Masai, a fairly honourable one, it seems, compared with what was to follow. The clans agreed to leave the plain and take possession of the adjacent volcanic highlands of Ngorongoro, famous for its enormous rhino-haunted crater. Here, the colonial administrators ruled, the Masai clans ▶

◀ could live in perpetuity, with full rights to the grazing and water.

Then, in 1961, a Tanzanian government took over. More national parks were created, and evictions followed. In 1973 the government of Julius Nyerere went back on the deal the Masai had done with the British, and excluded them from the crater of Ngorongoro. At the heart of Nyerere's socialist view of land ownership was a belief that all land must be productive. The pastoralists, although responsible for producing almost all the nation's beef, were not productive in the modern agricultural sense. They were shiftless, ungovernable and "uncivilised". The government banned their language (it is still forbidden in schools, which may account for the high level of Masai illiteracy) and their clothes, the famous shukas in red, purple and blue. Nyerere even ordered the women to put on underwear.

The Masai in the Ngorongoro conservation area cling on to the remains of the land the British promised them for ever, but in droughts they have to beg for water for their cattle from the luxury hotels that have been built on the crater rim. More of these are planned, despite objections from the international conservation bodies who monitor the area. Kempinski is the latest luxury hotel brand hoping to join the Serena chain, and others. The Masai have been told to make room; so far, 2,000 people have undergone forced eviction.

Very few benefits of tourism have flowed to the people who own the land. No management job in the Ngorongoro conservation area has ever gone to a Masai. But they may sell beads, and dance for the tourists at the Serena. Today, 70% of the people live below the poverty line, and 15% of children do not survive to the age of five. But a third of a million tourists visit their land every year, earning the government-run park authority \$10m.

The huge plains and hills of Oloosokwan and Loliondo are one of the world's most remote places – eight hours in a 4x4 from the nearest tarmac. They look vast enough for everyone. But the reality is that the Masai are painfully squeezed between national parks and tracts of land owned by foreign investors. The Dubai concession, unsafe for grazing for the six months of the hunting season, is just a few miles from the Serengeti national park, where any cows that stray will be seized by the authorities. And beside that is the land that the American owners of Thomson Safaris have renamed the Enashiva Nature Refuge. The word means "happiness", in Maa: the locals smile at the irony of that.

Lesingo Ole Nanyoi's *enkang*, the little village of cow-dung huts and thorn-fenced paddocks where his extended family is based, lies right beside Enashiva. For as long as he can remember – and he was born here, 34 years ago – his family grazed and watered their 200



"The life of a Masai is his cattle. It gives us all we need, our food, our shelter. To stop me keeping cattle would take my breath out"



cattle on the stretch of land. It was, as far as they understood, common land, a watering place and a route for the migrating cattle herds that existed long before anyone established land rights in Tanzania. For a couple of years the government-controlled national brewery company had grown a little barley on a small area of the grassland. No one ever objected to the cattle herds.

But in 2006 they found that the brewery had sold the farm to Thomson – one of the longest-established luxury tour companies in Tanzania. Thomson came up with a plan for a hotel, safari camps, shops and, of course, the "nature refuge". The award-winning Thomson sells encounters with the Masai and other "Tanzanian friends", but at the beginning of

Lesingo Ole Nanyoi (top) was shot in the jaw while trying to stop guards confiscating his herd; and the website of America's Thomson Family Adventures

2008 its guards, reinforced by armed police, began turning the herds away from their tribal pastures.

Liz McKee, told me there would be jobs available on Enashiva, which is expected to begin operations next year. Thomson also plans to set up an independent not-for-profit organisation that will assist communities on conservation and development efforts. McKee reminded me that Thomson was widely praised by conservation groups for its brand of ethical tourism; indeed, earlier this year it was named by *National Geographic* as one of the top 10 "Best Adventure Travel Companies on Earth". Thomson has also co-sponsored a conference on philanthropic tourism.

McKee invited *The Observer Magazine* to visit Enashiva and interview its local manager, Daniel Yamat. Before going, I asked Lesingo Ole Nanyoi if he would like a well-paid job in the hotel. "No!" he said. "That would not be possible." Lesingo's speech is slow and slurred, the result of a police bullet that shattered his

jaw during a confrontation at Enashiva, in April last year, when guards and the police tried to confiscate the family's cattle. He sounds like someone who has had a bad afternoon at the dentist, but the injury left

him with a mess of ugly scars beside his chin, and his jaw is still so weak he cannot chew. "The life of a Masai is his cattle. It gives us all we need, our food, our shelter. To stop me keeping cattle would take my breath out."

Lesingo is a tall, very dark man, solemn and still. He is a junior elder, and the father of four young children by his two wives. He wears a beaded necklace with a disc of mother of pearl, bracelets, and beaded bands above his knees. The great distended hoops of his earlobes are looped for convenience over the top of his ears. Lesingo had to sell five of his best bulls to pay for his hospital treatment, at 300,000 Tz shillings each (£160). Seven of his family were arrested in the same fight.

Angry confrontations occur with the unarmed Thomson guards all the time, Lesingo and other herdsmen told us. Often cows are confiscated for a day. If the police are called the herdsmen are arrested and have to pay bribes to be released. In Soitsambu village, a fear-filled place, old Masai men beg for change to buy alcohol alongside spies working for the American tourist company.

Other stories emerge from the three remote villages bordering Enashiva. Two herdswomen claim they were beaten in one fracas last year; both were pregnant and both lost their babies. We set off one morning with a local NGO, Women Pastoralists Committee, to interview them, but halfway down the track the officer was called on his mobile by his boss and told to turn back. "It's too dangerous for our work, and dangerous for you, too," she explained.

James Lembikas, the chairman of Soitsambu village, told me that Thomson's enforcement ▶

◀ of the boundary – and closure of the traditional pathways the Masai would use to access other grazing – had destroyed life in the three villages closest to the land. Up to 4,000 people had been affected: children were unable to get to school and 1,000 families had moved their cattle to other over-crowded grazing, close to the border of the Arab hunting camp.

“Thomson did employ 12 local men as guards, but half of them left when the trouble started,” said Lembikas. (Thomson says it now employs 11 unarmed Masai as wildlife scouts, who would be sacked if they became violent.) Lembikas supports the idea of development, “but the Thomson people and the government have to discuss together how to best use this land. This idea cannot work unless they agree to share the grass and the water.”

Lembikas agreed to accompany us to visit the three blighted villages, but he changed his mind after a phone call from Daniel Yamat, Thomson’s manager at Enashiva. So we rang Yamat and arranged to meet at the disputed “Refuge”.

It is a gorgeous rolling plain of grass and acacia trees, framed by low hills, and amazingly empty compared with the bush outside it, where red-cloaked Masai with goats or cattle are visible most of the time. On the ranch we saw only a few zebra and a herd of grazing wildebeest. Yamat told us he could not show us anything or answer any questions. The reason for his invitation became clear 10 minutes after we left the site, when we were stopped on the road by the Tanzanian police. We were sent to the District Commissioner, who took our passports and ordered us to be escorted out of the region by an armed policeman and taken to Arusha, the regional capital, for investigation. The DC’s secretary told us they were acting because of a complaint from Thomson about our questions.

Two days later, in Arusha, an immigration official finally gave us our passports back, and apologised. “Those officials up there, they don’t know the law and everything they do is because of politics,” he said.

We weren’t entirely surprised. A brave Arusha-based journalist who has covered the Thomson and OBC stories told me the only way to visit was in secret and to work only after dark: Masai activists are regularly arrested and threatened. After the death at the hands of the police of a Masai leader who had protested to the Tanzanian president about the Thomson development, a New Zealand journalist, Trent Keegan, interviewed Masai victims of Thomson’s policing last year. He was murdered a few days later in an apparent robbery in Nairobi. His friends believe his death is linked to his investigations, but there is no evidence to support that. The New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists is soon to issue a report on its investigation into his death.

When I told McKee about our expulsion from the district, she told me categorically that Thomson does not pay the police or the



During droughts the Masai have to beg for water from the luxury hotels that have been built on the Ngorongoro’s rim

authorities. “It’s not in my budget,” she said. And while she agreed there was a regrettable dispute, she said the violence was all coming from the other side – poisoned arrows were shot at visitors by the Masai, she claimed. Lesingo Ole Nanyoi and others hotly deny this. (Thomson has since invited me to revisit the site. I said I would consider doing so if I could bring local journalists and activists, a request they said they would consider.)

McKee did admit that there was reason behind the Masai’s grievances over the rights to the land – but that the dispute dates from the original acquisition of the ranch and was therefore the government’s problem. Thomson had acquired the ranch legally (paying a reported \$1.2m in 2006 for the 12,000 acres). “We’re stuck in the middle of clan warfare and politics,” groaned McKee. What would be best, she said, was for the Tanzanian government to pay the Masai compensation. “We could take the government to court, but we’re not going to do that. We have to stay on the right side of them.” Compensation, though, is not how the Tanzanian government works with the pastoralists. Notoriously, eviction and bullying has long been their preferred way of dealing with troublesome natives.

In the malarial badlands by the Kenyan border, beneath the mountain called Oldonyo Sambu, I met a Masai with a hoe, an unusual sight among a people who usually look down on agriculturalists. But when these people

At Oldonyo Sambu, people evicted from the tourist honeypot of Ngorongoro are now forced to scrape a living far from the cattle plains

were moved, over the last two years, their cattle did not last long in the alien land. Food was immediately a problem.

In one hut I met Habo Gidagurja, bent over a large flat rock in her twig and mud hut – doing something straight from the Stone Age. With another piece of granite she was slowly grinding dried maize ears, turning them into a rough flour. She let me try – it was back-aching work, and in a couple of minutes my forehead was wet with sweat. Habo’s hands were blistered from her hand-milling. A widow, it is the only way she can earn a few shillings and feed her two children and baby. They are among 1,200 former residents, mainly Masai, of the Ngorongoro conservation area. In the past two years the Tanzanian government has been serving them with letters ordering their removal to Oldonyo Sambu, a process that the government has assured worried observers from the international community is voluntary. It is not. The people we met said the government had promised each adult two acres

to cultivate, financial compensation, a police post, water, tin roofs for their huts, a health clinic and a school. All they got was the latter – but since there is no means of earning money here, hundreds of miles

from the tourist trail, few can afford the fees demanded by the teachers. They are 10km over rough tracks from the nearest village.

Most of the younger men have returned, illegally, to Ngorongoro. One of the oldest, a Masai named Merinyeki Leina, shook my hand, grateful for our visit and pathetically hopeful of my power to help. “We miss Ngorongoro. If they told us we could go back, we would now. We could work there. We could grow food. Please tell everyone that if we stay here we will die.”

But if anything, more people from Ngorongoro will be sent to this harsh place on the north Tanzania steppe. Some 4,000 more people have received eviction letters. The government authority has proposed a reduction of the population of the conservation area from 65,000 to 25,000. There are plans being considered for 14 more luxury tourist hotels, so people can access “the unparalleled beauty of one of the world’s most unchanged wildlife sanctuaries”, as a Tanzanian government brochure puts it. Unchanged, that is, except that 40,000 people will have made way for 25 rhinos and hundreds of thousands more tourists.

“What is the answer?” one young Masai activist asked me in despair. (I cannot name him for his own safety). “People say to me, ‘What has brought so many bad things on us? Are we being punished for our friendship with the British?’ Could the British government persuade Tanzania to respect the agreements made 50 years ago?” I said I thought that was unlikely. “So what shall we do?” asked another activist. “Tourism is a curse to us now. Shall we poison the waterholes? Shall we kill all the animals so this bad time goes away?”★