

Just below my private elevated deck, I spot the welcoming committee — three hyaxes rustling in scrubby bush. Beyond that, the land drops 1,000 feet to the Mara Triangle, the northernmost point of the Serengeti-Mara ecosystem. Using the powerful Nikon binoculars supplied in my suite, I scan the sky-bordered, amber-hued savanna. Amid solitary Balanite trees, forests splotted with murky mudholes, and emerald green wetlands splashed with shimmering blue, I spy buffaloes, elephants, giraffes, and zebras.

Welcome to **Angama Mara**, the new luxury safari camp overlooking the Great Rift Valley in Kenya's Maasai Mara. Veteran safari camp operators Nicky and Steve Fitzgerald waited 15 years to gain the lease on this property, a location enshrined in the *Out of Africa* movie poster. Picture Redford and Streep picnicking atop the world: That's *exactly* where you'll find Angama Mara. A Swahili word for "suspended in midair," Angama is an apt name. The resort hugs the Oloololo Escarpment's rim and floats above the wildlife-rich Mara Triangle. Framed by the escarpment on the west, the Mara River on the east, and the Tanzanian border in the south, the triangle tips the Maasai Mara National Reserve, 580 square miles of marshes, open plains, and forested lands owned by the Maasai people and managed by the Mara Conservancy.

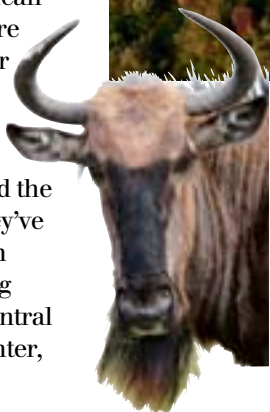
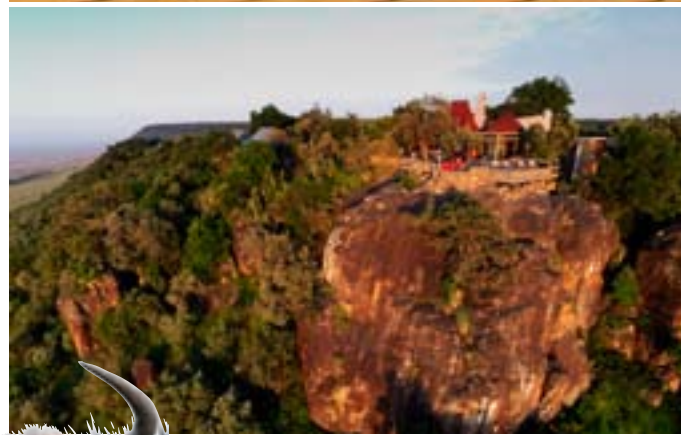
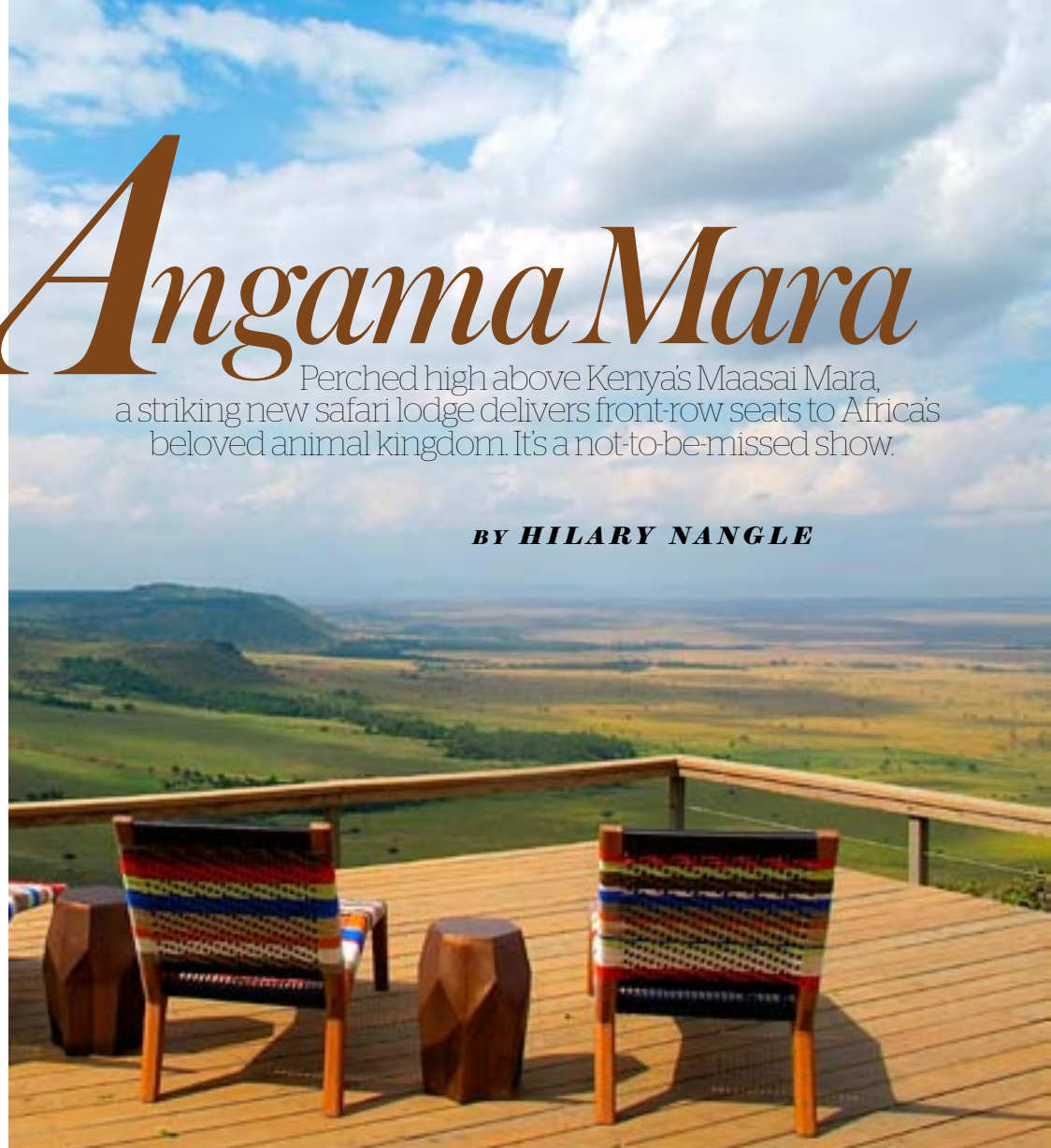
"Very few places in safari Africa have this kind of grand *aha!*" Nicky says. "We feel that all the things we've done in our life, which are many, have come to this place. This is our elegant swan song."

The Fitzgeralds, whose African hospitality career began in 1982, are best known for their 15-year career with CC Africa (now andBeyond), during which they not only grew the company from three to more than 55 properties but also elevated the luxury safari experience. Here, they've created two conjoined camps, each with 15 suites and its own lounging and dining lodge, and sharing a central pavilion housing a pool, fitness center, gift shop, and beading workshop.

Angama Mara

Perched high above Kenya's Maasai Mara, a striking new safari lodge delivers front-row seats to Africa's beloved animal kingdom. It's a not-to-be-missed show.

BY HILARY NANGLE



AFRICAN PERCH: Clockwise from top, Angama Mara's deck, the guest area, a tented suite, a wildebeest, and the camp's unique locale

Guests enter each 1,076-square-foot suite through a butler's vestibule, where staffers discreetly deliver tea or coffee and biscuits as a morning wake-up call. Inside, the decor takes a backseat to a wall of glass and those forever views. I take in the canvas walls and ceiling, wood parquet floors, and John Vogel furnishings. Maasai-inspired colors, textures, and patterns — red chenille bed covering, luscious plaid woolen blankets, hand-beaded door handles — add zing. The whole is handsome and inviting, sleek and contemporary, yet rooted in local culture and brilliantly designed to maximize the 180-degree views. I can't think of anything I might possibly need. From intriguing books to the Sony Xperia preloaded with info, nibbles to sips; it's all here.

"There's something about this property that makes people want to sit and be. They watch the clouds, elephants, rainbows, snooze, open one eye, watch more," Nicky says. "I love that."

I agree, but tempting as it is to cocoon in my suite, I've made my late-July visit here to experience the Great Migration, that period from July into October each year when more than 2 million wildebeest and zebras migrate northward from Tanzania's Serengeti in search of fresh grasslands. The major obstacle impeding their progress: the Mara River. Crossing it requires descending steep banks, navigating rocky-bottomed waters, and avoiding 12- to 18-foot crocodiles anticipating easy feasts. "A guest had an amazing sighting yesterday," Nicky teases. "The wildebeest were using the crocs as stepping stones in the river."

I'm eager to see the same, and over the next five days, I head out on half- and full-day safaris with guide Sammy Mumbi and even take to the skies in a hot-air balloon. One of the Mara's pluses is that the abundance of wildlife negates the necessity of crack-of-dawn game drives. Mornings are leisure, with time for massages, walks with Maasai naturalists, working out, swimming laps, visiting a local Maasai village, and simply relaxing. The Fitzgeralds have applied their accumulated knowledge to the resort's operation, making it far less rigid than most safari lodges. Meal times are flexible, menus are a la carte, and dining venues vary. During my stay, I enjoy breakfast and lunch on the deck of the main lodge as well as on



safari picnics and, most memorably, on the *Out of Africa* kopje. Dinner venues vary even more: the cozy brick-walled library, the dining room, my deck, poolside, and a magical barbecue buffet in the bush. On one evening, local Maasai dance and sing in a sunset party overlooking the kopje.

During previous African safaris, I've seen the Big Five — lion, leopard, black rhino, elephant, and buffalo — but not in such abundance. With Sammy, I sight lions and leopards in trees and with kills, elephants parading across grasslands, buffalo enjoying mud baths, and twice spy the rare black rhino. We see elusive cheetahs, jackals, and hyenas. Crocs and hippos eyeball us from the river, baboons frolic on hillsides, and zebras, giraffes, and ostriches graze amid various antelope species as birds of prey soar overhead.

On the morning of the balloon flight, we depart the lodge, descending to the grasslands in the star-spangled predawn quietude. "This is the best launch site in the whole of Africa, and these are the best flying conditions in the world," says pilot David Chipping, whose 28-year ballooning career has taken him around the globe. We launch in the predawn grayness, and with

only the *whoosh* of flame as background music, rise above the Mara River. Watching a baby hippo disappear in a thrash of crocodile-stirred water below, I rethink my desire to see wildebeest suffer the same fate.

When the migration is in full swing, Nicky says the plains below Angama Mara will appear black with wildebeest, but they have yet to arrive en masse. Sammy takes me to a crossing point near the Tanzanian border. Herds numbering in the hundreds if not thousands approach the river or mill on the other side, but lacking a leader, they worry to and fro, approaching and receding. "All it takes is one to start, and they'll all follow," Sammy promises. "Look at them; they're made with God's leftover parts. They have the slanted body of a hyena, the horns of a buffalo, the tail of a horse, the thin legs of a gazelle, and the face of a hartebeest."

Silently, I will them to cross. We're abandoning hope when a dust cloud signals movement. They stampede across in a frenzied panic, scrambling up the steep bank, then regrouping. Witnessing it is everything I imagined, if not more.

Back in my suite, wine in hand, I settle into a rocker on my deck and absorb the panorama. As the heat of day relents to the evening's coolness and golden light cedes to smoky rose-hued blues, I listen to a wildlife symphony broken only by snippets of conversation riding on the breeze and a distant rumble of thunder. A lion roars; an elephant trumpets in reply. I float in a state of Angama Zen, simply sitting and being and wanting never to depart. From \$750. 615-524-6198; angama.com

HILARY NANGLE (DECK); STEVIE MANN (INTERIORS); GIRAFFES, DREAMTIME (WILDEBEEST)

