

Kenyan Tourism Company Recognised for Excellence

By Mary Mwendwa

Basecamp Explorer Kenya, has been selected as one of the three finalists for the 2014, Tourism For Tomorrow Awards, in the Community Awards category. Basecamp Explorer, operates a collection of destinations across the globe in a responsible and enlightened way.

Costas Christ, Chairman of Judges said: "Each year, the Tourism for Tomorrow Awards recognise sustainable tourism best practices in action, helping to transform the travel and tourism industry based upon the principles of environmentally friendly operations, support for the protection of cultural and natural heritage, and direct benefits to the social and economic well-being of local people in travel destinations around the world. This year's finalists continue to demonstrate that when carefully managed, tourism can be a powerful force for improving livelihoods and protecting our planet for future generations."

Winners and finalists will be recognised during a Gala evening at WTTC's annual Global Summit, to be held in Hainan, China, on 24 April 2014.

Basecamp Explorer runs a number of lodges at the Maasai Mara National Reserve. "We began our Basecamp ambitions at the cradle of mankind: the Rift Valley and open savannah of Maasai Mara in Kenya. This place has, by far, the highest density of wildlife in the world. A safari with our Maasai guides, sharing generations of knowledge and understanding, is an adventure you will not forget. We have three Safari Camps in Maasai Mara and the Naboisho Conservancy: "Basecamp Maasai Mara," "Eagle View, Naboisho Conservancy," "Dorobo Bush Camp, Naboisho Conservancy" says Petronilla Gichimu, Marketing Manager, Basecamp Explorer.

For example, in Kenya's famous Maasai Mara, Mara Naboisho exists as a result of community land that has been leased to Base Camp Explorers who manages the Mara Naboisho conservancy and in return pay the community for the land on a monthly basis. Naboisho means – coming together in Maasai language. The Maasai community has signed a 15 year lease of land, a 25,000 acre piece which offers them income and at the same time conserving their wildlife. About 500 landowners were part of this project. Kenya earns most of its foreign exchange earnings from the tourism sector, therefore responsible tourism geared towards sustainable development has remained on its top agenda.

At Eagle View Mara Naboisho Lodge, neighbouring Maasai Mara National Reserve, guests get to experience one of the most adventurous encounters that satisfies them. No one misses the opportunity to learn the Maasai greeting “*supaa*” a simple word that everyone learns on first arrival. Through camp walks and game drives they are able to view the savannah landscapes, nature trails and an array of different species of wildlife which are among the wonders of nature here. On a game drive, gazelles, impalas, ostriches, zebras, giraffes, big cats and the big five (rhino, elephant, lion, buffalo and leopard) cannot miss one’s attention. Eagle View Mara Naboisho can be accessed from Nairobi by air (30-45 min) and by road (3-5 hours drive). Olseki Airstrip serves those who wish to fly into the conservancy. The nature trails with indigenous tree species leads one to the tented lodges where all staff are dressed in traditional Maasai regalia of beaded bracelets, necklaces and earrings, bright colored *shukas* (*pieces of clothes worn by Maasai*) with shades of red are part of the staff’s uniform. I get curious about the red shade of color on every outfit and am told by one of the driver guides, Mpandi Siyal, that red color scares away wild animals who may be on a mission to attack. “Here in the villages we believe it’s the best way to scare lions” he says. The conservancy boasts of having the largest lion population in the Mara ecosystem. People and wildlife interact freely. Maasai people have lived with

animals without fences, apart from the fences for the livestock enclosures to keep lions away from attacking livestock. Every structure is tented and decorated with relaxing chairs and facilities which offer any guest comfort. Nine tents all furnished with wooden and leather materials all beaded in Maasai style dot the spacious rooms. The tents are well shielded with indigenous trees to allow privacy at all times.

Though Basecamp Maasai Brand, a project of Basecamp Explorer, several women in the group share the same sentiments about their economic growth in the tough cultured Maasai Community. It was very challenging when the project was initiated; men could not allow their women to join. A strategy was used to bring the men on board to do the beading. Jemimah Sairowua, Project Manager, Basecamp Maasai Brand, confirms. She says the men came on board and it didn't take long before they gave up on it. They were not patient as beading needs a lot of patience. They left and allowed their women to start working on the beading. The project was started in 2003 with the aim of empowering disadvantaged women's groups in the Talek Region of Maasai Mara. They maintain and enhance handicraft skills, knowledge and designs of the Maasa's famous bead and leather work. The group works with over 100 women drawn from Ntipilikwani, Kolong, Kimunyak, Eleleru and Olekosoe

villages. These women belong to six women groups, the highest having 36 and lowest 18 members. The groups are divided to come once per week at the Basecamp Maasai Brand centre. They also have a day set for the group to go to the local market to sell their products. Products made range from laptop bags, wallets, beaded bracelets, belts, pencils cases, necklaces among others. They use strings from old wires, recycled tins of insecticides and strings from food bags. According to Jemimah Sairowua, Manager, 80% of their sales are made online.

Basecamp Explorer was recognised by the, The World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC) which has unveiled the 18 finalists for its 2014 Tourism for Tomorrow Awards. The Awards are one of the highest accolades in the global Travel & Tourism industry, recognising sustainable tourism best practices in businesses and destinations worldwide.

Award applications were received this year from 56 countries, representing all continents. Finalists in six categories were selected, ranging from local destinations to global hotel groups, international airlines, luxury tour operators and small eco-lodges.

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