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Friday, 06 October 2017

# OL PEJETA: KENYA'S LOVECHILD



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by

Jenny Carless

Friday, 06 October 2017



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**O**l Pejeta Conservancy is a gem that should be on every safari goer's bucket list. Against the backdrop of Mount Kenya – the tallest mountain in Kenya and second tallest in Africa – and straddling the equator, this little piece of heaven stands out, offering memorable safari experiences, striking natural beauty and large-scale conservation success.

In the global conservation community, **Ol Pejeta** has made a name for itself as an innovator. From pioneering funding efforts such as the adjacent **Mount Kenya Wildlife Estate**, to developing a **K-9 team** to support its armed rangers, Ol Pejeta constantly has its eye out for the best ways to meet its conservation goals.



*Expansive  
landscapes, wildlife  
and sunsets - this  
is what East Africa  
is all about © Ol  
Pejeta*

And then there's the safari experience. The conservancy is the closest place to Nairobi to see the Big 5, if that's your goal. But there's much, much more: driving across the open grasslands of Oryx Plain, you'll easily spot Grevy's zebras or reticulated giraffes in the distance. Although, you may have to look more closely to see a cheetah stalking its prey in the grass, or jackal pups peeking out of the pack's den.

*The safari  
experience at  
Ol Pejeta:  
crossing rivers  
in open-air  
safari vehicles  
© Ol Pejeta*





You can watch hippos lolling in the Ewaso Ng'iro River, or sit quietly near waterbuck, Jackson's hartebeest and other antelope at the tranquil marsh. In the bush, you may surprise a herd of elephants – or they may surprise you.

All this with Mount Kenya looming in the distance to the east – an omnipresent landmark that is also handy if you happen to go driving by yourself and get lost! But that's another story...

## CONSERVATION IN OL PEJETA





# NORTHERN WHITE RHINOS

The conservancy is home to the world's last three remaining northern white rhinos – Sudan and two females, Najin and Fatu.

Sudan, Ol Pejeta's most famous resident, enjoyed far more than 15 minutes of fame recently, as the centrepiece of an **awareness campaign** called “The Most Eligible Bachelor in the World”.

Ol Pejeta is  
home to some  
of the last  
remaining  
northern white  
rhinos on Earth  
© Jenny Carless



Sudan even had his own page on the dating app, Tinder. His bio reads, in part: “I’m one of a kind. No, seriously...” and “I don’t mean to be too forward, but the fate of my species literally depends on me”.

All joking aside, Ol Pejeta is trying to raise awareness – and money – to save this rhino subspecies. You can **donate to the cause here**.

Sudan and the females can't reproduce naturally for several reasons, including old age. Assisted reproductive technologies like in vitro fertilisation could enable Sudan's offspring to be carried by younger southern white rhino females (the northern and southern subspecies can interbreed).

Northern white  
rhinos are  
extinct in the  
wild, but find a  
home in their  
sanctuary at Ol  
Pejeta © Ol  
Pejeta Safari  
Cottages



Northern white rhinos are now extinct in the wild – victims of poaching and civil war. Rhino horn is highly prized in some Asian countries as a status symbol and for medicinal purposes (something that has no basis in fact, to be clear; rhino horn is made of keratin – the same material as our fingernails).

As a result of the demand for rhino horn, poaching has skyrocketed. And the price goes up with demand, of course. Earlier this year, The Guardian described rhino horn as “worth more than its weight in gold or cocaine”.

*To read about black rhinos in Ol Pejeta, continue reading below  
the advert*



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## BLACK RHINOS

While Ol Pejeta's northern white rhinos are taking the spotlight right now, its black rhinos are stars, too. This is the largest black rhino sanctuary in East Africa and represents a great conservation success for these critically endangered mammals – having increased the conservancy's population from 20 in 1993, to 113 in 2017! Good security and proper ecological monitoring are responsible for this accomplishment, according to Ol Pejeta.

One of the ways to tell black and white rhinos apart is the mouth: black rhinos have a pointy-shaped upper lip – perfect for nibbling at leaves in bushes. Whereas white rhinos have wide mouths that are more suitable for grazing along the ground.

Black rhinos are more solitary (and shy) than their white counterparts in general, so they are often harder to spot.



Black rhinos  
find sanctuary  
here at Ol Pejeta  
© Ol Pejeta



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But, you should  
have no problem  
seeing them in  
Ol Pejeta. I saw  
them regularly  
on my most  
recent trip.

## CHIMPANZEES

Someone you might not expect to see in Laikipia – or  
anywhere in Kenya for that matter – is Kisazose ('Kiza' for

short), a 23-year-old chimpanzee who was rescued from a vendor in Zaire when he was just a year old. It is unusual to find chimpanzees in this area as their natural home range extends from the west coast of Africa inland only as far as Uganda.

Kiza and 34 others at the **Sweetwaters Chimpanzee Sanctuary** are orphans, or have been rescued from the wildlife trade and/or other abusive situations. Now they're living out their lives at the sanctuary, a joint project with the **Jane Goodall Institute** and **Kenya Wildlife Service**.

Kiza the  
chimpanzee, at  
home in the  
Sweetwaters  
Sanctuary in  
Ol Pejeta ©  
Jenny Carless



The chimpanzees sleep in two large enclosures at night, but during the day you'll find them out and about – perhaps sitting in pairs, grooming, or shuffling along the trails. On one of the mornings I visited, Kiza had found a shady spot to sit and look across the Ewaso Ng'iro River.

Chimpanzees, which share 98.6% of their genetic DNA with humans, are endangered, **according to the IUCN**.

Recently, with support from **The Max Planck Institute**, the sanctuary has added to the chimpanzees' enrichment with the creation of an artificial termite mound where they can 'fish' for termites. They're loving it, and their keepers are reporting improved social interaction among individuals, too.

Read more about the sanctuary and **meet the individual chimpanzees here**.

*To read more about tracking dogs in Ol Pejeta, continue reading below the advert*



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## TRACKING DOGS

Ol Pejeta's **anti-poaching dog unit**, started in 2007, was one of the first on a private conservancy in Kenya – just another way the conservancy is demonstrating forward thinking when it comes to conservation.

“Dogs have certain capabilities that human beings do not – particularly speed and heightened sensory capabilities,” explains John Tekeles, head of the anti-



poaching unit. “Having the dogs is like having an extra set of eyes and ears; this makes a huge difference when it comes to protecting our wildlife.”

*A bloodhound  
and its handler  
at work in the  
field © Ol Pejeta*



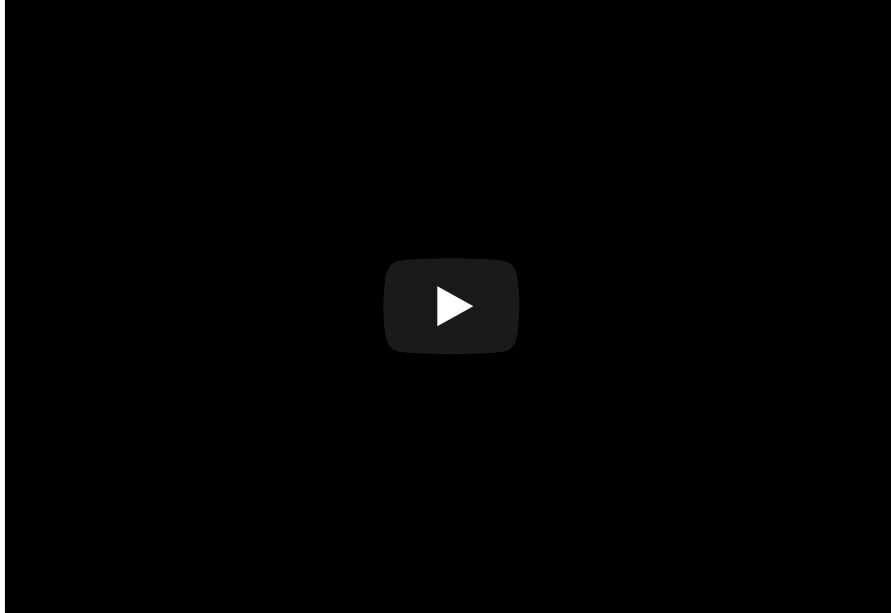
Today, the working team that supports the armed rangers consists of three Belgian malinois and two bloodhounds. Belgian malinois are known as ‘triple role’ dogs: they can track humans, search for weapons and ammunition, and attack when necessary. The bloodhounds are used only for tracking purposes due to their heightened sense of smell.

One incident, in February 2016, showed the dogs’ worth: A rhino was killed using a poisoned dart – a situation that’s hard to resolve because darts are silent, unlike a rifle shot.

“We deployed our bloodhounds on site and they took the scent of the footprints,” John says. “The dogs were able to track the poachers – leading to the arrest of two of them and the recovery of both horns. The two suspects in turn

revealed another three poachers in their gang, who were promptly apprehended.”

*Watch a video about Ol Pejeta's tracking dogs below:*



## CHEETAHS

Several years ago, during a morning game drive from **Kicheche Laikipia Camp**, my guide Mohammed Billow spotted a cheetah cub known as Mrembo, and her mother, Spoonbill, romping together. We sat nearby for about an hour – no one else around and no other sounds but the breeze in the trees and the occasional click of our cameras. It's one of my favourite safari memories.

Because of the wildlife corridors that allow animals (except rhinos) to move freely in and out of Ol Pejeta, populations change from time to time. Today, there are about 30 cheetahs in the conservancy. Cheetahs are the fastest land mammals, clocking speeds of up to 64.8 mph (29 meters

A beautiful  
cheetah on the  
open plains of  
Ol Pejeta © Ol  
Pejeta Safari  
Cottages



per second).

You might not know it from watching cheetahs romp, but life isn't all fun and games for these sleek cats. Their numbers are falling. A **2016 study** estimated the worldwide wild population at just 7,100. Armed with this latest information, conservationists want the species' status to be raised from 'vulnerable' to 'endangered'. Habitat loss, from human expansion into previous wilderness areas, is a major challenge for cheetahs.

*To read more about lion tracking in Ol Pejeta, continue reading  
below the advert*





## LION TRACKING

Tracking lions isn't something you can do everywhere, so it's great to have the opportunity at Ol Pejeta Conservancy. And it's a win-win activity. Visitors have fun learning about lions, and the tracking provides vital data to the conservancy. That information, particularly about the lions' movements around livestock, helps protect the animals, because it can be used to develop strategies to avoid **human-lion conflict**.

Four lions on the conservancy have been fitted with the VHF (very high frequency) collars so far, with plans to collar three more this year.

To track the cats, one person stands up in the safari vehicle, holding a big antenna out of the open roof. Everyone listens for signals on the transmitter, and the driver then follows the beeps as they grow louder and louder the closer the vehicle gets to the big cats.

Tracking lions  
is a win-win  
activity for  
both visitors  
and the  
conservancy ©  
Ol Pejeta



On the afternoon I participated, we managed to find a sleepy pride resting in the shade, yawning from time to time. Although snoozing lions don't constitute high-octane viewing, we settled in to wait, betting that they would rouse themselves as the afternoon cooled to head out on their night hunt. That day, our patience was rewarded.

Out in the field  
in Ol Pejeta, off  
to track lions ©  
Ol Pejeta



While we sat next to the pride, our guide took notes on the animals – how many there were, physical appearance (if they looked healthy, for example) – all information that's useful to the conservancy.

Trading in binoculars and notebooks in favour of this high-tech monitoring solution can be fun for visitors while being useful for the conservancy as well.

*To read more about community projects in Ol Pejeta, continue reading below the advert*

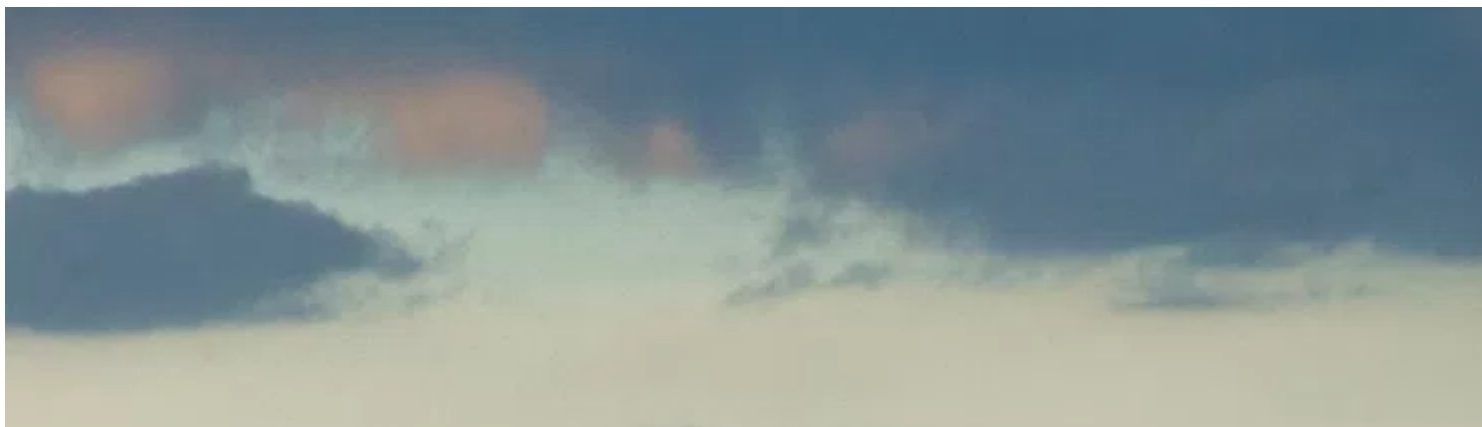


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## COMMUNITY PROJECTS

Contributing to the economic growth and improved livelihoods of rural communities is part of Ol Pejeta's vision. Its efforts are wide-ranging. For example:

- In education, the conservancy helps students prepare for the future by supporting computer skills training; it awards full or partial student bursaries and has recently built two new school libraries.
- In healthcare, it helps provide medical supplies and diagnostic capabilities to six health centres and supports a mobile clinic.
- It has also provided hundreds of local families with cost-effective and energy-efficient stoves – making their lives easier and helping to preserve the local forests. The stoves reduce firewood usage in the region by up to 55%.

While much of this community work is transparent to visitors, some is quite obvious. A herd of cattle accompanied by an armed ranger as well as their herder isn't something you see everywhere, for example.



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Ol Pejeta's  
 Community  
 Livestock  
 Programme is a  
 great success ©  
 Ol Pejeta



Through the conservancy's **Community Livestock Programme**, Ol Pejeta purchases steers for fattening and sale from livestock owners living around its borders. Instead of selling the animals outright, however, the locals loan their steers to Ol Pejeta (who provide full husbandry), in return for a guaranteed interest rate. Effectively, they're using their cattle as collateral – like depositing money with a bank. This initiative helps assist the locals with the effective and sustainable management of their cattle, as well as helping to alleviate the growing problem of unsustainable stock numbers and the resultant rangeland degradation.

Dr. James Danoff-Burg of **Helping Rhinos**, a charity that supports the conservancy, sees Ol Pejeta as a great example of innovative, leading-edge conservation – one that integrates the people living nearby into the solution.

“Too often, conservation projects have excluded the local people from the project, and often the land itself. This breeds animosity among the nearby communities and antipathy towards conservation,” he says. “Ol Pejeta changes this, to ensure that local people receive benefits by their work.”







## OL PEJETA INFORMATION

Ol Pejeta sits in Laikipia County in central Kenya, to the northwest of Nairobi. Laikipia is the gateway to Kenya's northern frontier. Its most renowned landmark is the 5,199 metre (17,057 ft) high Mount Kenya.

The county's wildlife density is second only to the Maasai Mara ecosystem. According to the **Laikipia Wildlife Forum**, it holds half of Kenya's black rhinos; the second largest population of elephants in Kenya; and large percentages of the remaining populations of animals such as Grevy's zebras, reticulated giraffes and African wild dogs.

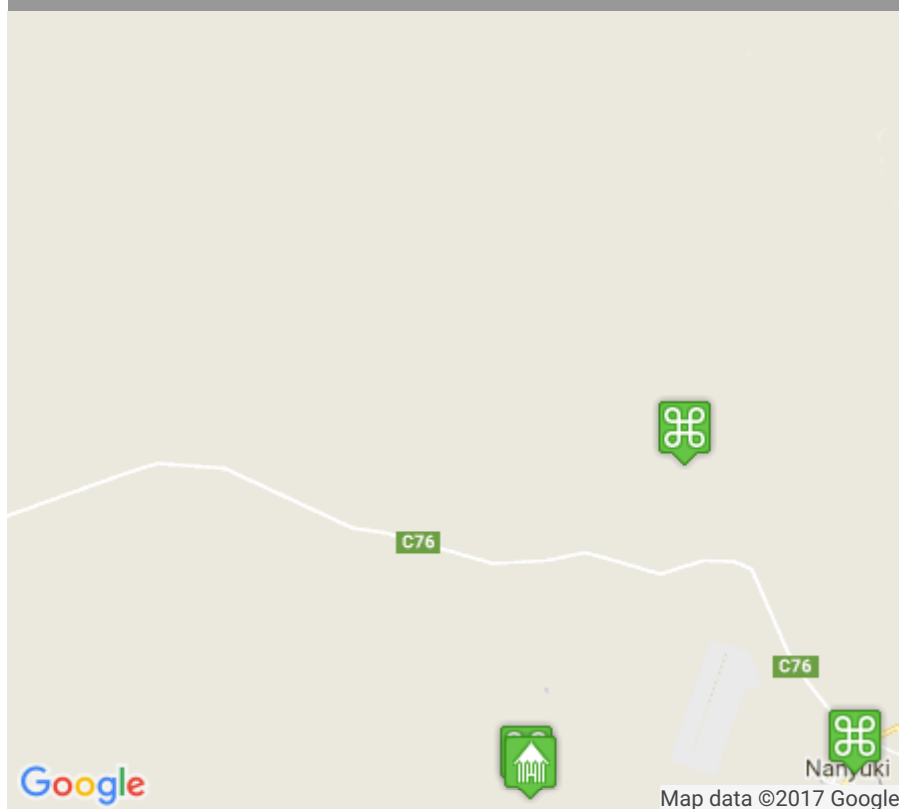


The Laikipia Wildlife Forum, of which Ol Pejeta is a member, works with local stakeholders in wildlife conservation to help build their capacity to undertake conservation activities throughout the region.

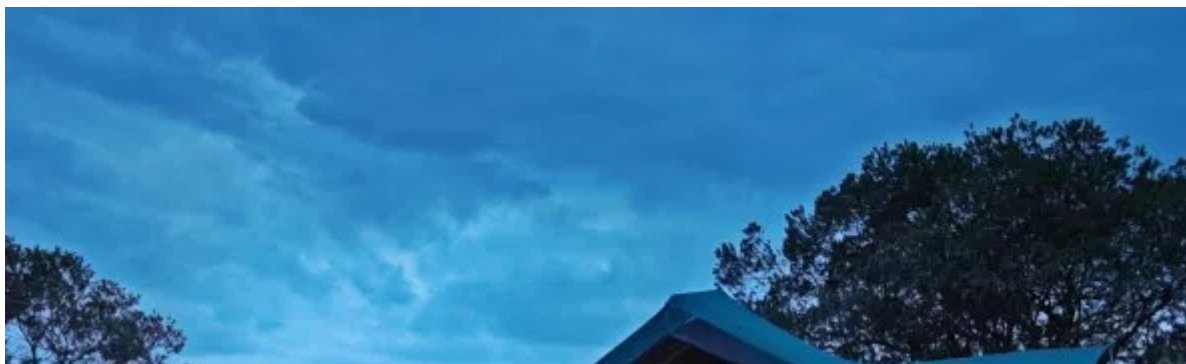
Nanyuki, the closest town to Ol Pejeta, is easy to get to, whether you fly or drive. It's a quick 35-minute flight from Nairobi's Wilson Airport, or a three-and-a-half-hour drive (about 225 kilometres) on good roads through beautiful countryside. The conservancy is just 15 kilometres outside Nanyuki.



The equator runs through Ol Pejeta. Given that, the climate isn't as hot as you might expect – in part because of the conservancy's high altitude (1,826 metres). In fact, the temperature is pleasant year round. It will be chilly when you set out on your early morning game drive (so bring warm clothes), then it warms up, but not unbearably so, in the afternoons. The 'long rains' typically come in April and May, with the 'short rains' (less intense) in November.



## PLACES TO STAY IN OL PEJETA



## Kicheche Laikipia Camp

At **Kicheche Laikipia Camp**, six luxurious tents look out onto a large waterhole where you'll see waterbuck families come to the edge to cautiously drink, while elephants frolic in the water. The tents' verandas are a great place to spend a couple of hours watching 'Africa TV'.

"Our vision in establishing Kicheche Laikipia in Ol Pejeta Conservancy was not only to support the sustainability of this rhino haven but also to allow our guests to experience a working conservancy and the varied activities available," says Greg Monson, co-owner. "We share the conservancy's vision on making conservation as self-sustainable as possible."

Morning game drives at Kicheche Laikipia have been known to extend until lunchtime, because guides are more focused on great wildlife sightings than adhering to a rigid schedule. It's that kind of dedication to providing guests an amazing experience that makes the days here so special.





## Ol Pejeta Safari Cottages

“We spent ten years searching for the perfect place, until we found it – amongst Ol Pejeta Conservancy’s rolling plains and luxurious woodlands right in the shadow of Mount Kenya,” say Andy and Sonja Webb, owners of **Ol Pejeta Safari Cottages**.

The cottages are tucked into a quiet river valley in the conservancy’s southern wilderness area. Each self-contained bungalow has its own guide and vehicle, chef, housekeeper and security guard.

Keep to yourself, or join other guests for drinks or meals on a special platform that overlooks the camp’s waterhole and salt lick. Either way, you’re guaranteed that magical experience.

*To read about the author, continue reading below the advert*



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Jenny Carless is a writer and novelist, safari addict, traveller and amateur wildlife photographer. Connect with her on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).

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An excellent article! A favorite objective of mine is learning new things and this article was a pure delight. Jenny's written words made Ol Pejeta come to life in a thoughtful and beautiful way. Not only did Jenny describe the beauty of Ol Pejeta; she also captured the conservation efforts and activities that will help protect this amazing place.

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I'm really glad to know that you enjoyed the article, MavaMarie!

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Excellent overview of this amazing place. I was there in 2014 for 3 days while on a 3 week safari tour through Kenya.

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It is wonderful, Stephen--isn't it?

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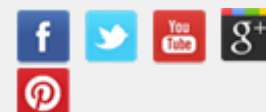


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