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Sera Conservancy Trust Signs a Groundbreaking Tourism Deal for Communities of Northern Kenya



Late last year, members of the Sera Conservancy Trust signed a groundbreaking tourism deal with Insiders Africa. The 30-year exclusive agreement, which will return all the facilities developed back to 100% community ownership at the end of the lease, is a first in Kenya and lays the foundation for other community conservancies to follow this example. In this edition of our monthly news, we talked to some of the people involved in brokering this deal. Below are their thoughts.

From Alex and Diana Hunter of Insiders Africa:

“When we first visited the Sera Conservancy in 2008, Alex and I were immediately captivated by the area. It was very dry at the time; not a blade of green grass, or a leaf or flower in sight. However, we were struck by the stark beauty of the spectacular scenery; the red sand, white quartz rocks, kopjes, and occasional glimpse of gerenuk, elephant, jackal, giraffe... When we visited after the December rains, the phenomenal range of grasses and vegetation are equally striking, making a complete and beautiful contrast.

"We want our company, Insiders Africa, to grow by working together with grass-roots conservation initiatives, in order for tourism to support conservation at a very real and progressive level. We want to choose conservation specifically as a context for tourism to be built around, and give visitors a deeper level of connection with, and understanding of, what they are paying for; plus, provide a variety of experiences at a variety of price points so that a much broader client market can be involved. The plans are for bandas to suit the local and international visitor; a research camp which will also be used for special interest groups and potentially as a guide school, special sites for private mobile operators, and fantastic potential across the entire area for walking safaris with camels. We have long admired the work of NRT; they are the obvious partner to do this with as the most visionary conservation pioneer in Kenya, and we are very excited to be working with them in this unique, special, and pristine wildlife area of Sera.

"Sera could not be a better combination with, in a tourism sense, OI Pejeta Bush Camp on the similarly pioneering OI Pejeta Conservancy which has the highest game-to-area ratio of any park or reserve in Kenya, and is only 2-3 hours drive from Sera. We jumped at the chance to become involved in developing the tourism in this fascinating and evolving area, and so on October 5th we signed a 30-year exclusive tourism agreement with the Sera community, which will return all the facilities we develop back to 100% community ownership at the end of the lease. This is not only an enormous leap forward for our company, but also for us personally, and we look forward to a long, committed and productive working partnership with NRT and the Sera communities.

"The "Kisima Hamsini" wells already see a wonderful variety of wildlife visiting in a 12-24 hour period; a night sleeping on the rocks above and you will hear herds of elephant and eland coming in, plus giraffe, hyaena and leopard. A walk down the wide, sandy luggas will show you a lot of wildlife activity, from aardvark to elephant, oryx to mongoose. There must be 40,000-plus sand grouse which come into the springs every day – a sight you will never forget. There are at least 2 prides of lions around, and cheetahs are frequently sighted. An exciting project nearing fruition is that an area within the conservancy has been ear-marked as rhino sanctuary; one of the main reasons being that there is exceptionally good security across the whole area. Security, backed by an intelligent community approach and combined with the extraordinarily rich and varied habitat, will encourage a rapid increase in the wildlife populations; all of which will make what we believe will be an exceptional wildlife and wilderness experience for any visitor – in the not-too-distant future."



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What NRT Had to Say:

"This is not just a first for NRT. It's a first for Kenya," explains Ian Craig. "The transition of such a remote area as Sera over a mere 7 years to a point to be able to host international guests is a fantastic reflection of the support shown by many innovative and crucial partners, specifically, the local community KWS, USAID, FFI and TUSK Trust

"Plans are in an advanced stage to reintroduce black rhino into Sera with the environmental impact assessment having been recently submitted to the Kenya government. It is an exciting time."

Neil Birnie of Conservation Capital adds, "Sera is a unique conservancy in many ways; it's long been an ambition of NRT to develop a tourism partnership there because of its potential. However, it is a remote and (as yet) relatively unheard of area and therefore this process has required a long-term vision from a tourism partner and also from the community. We have all been tremendously impressed by attitude of the community, and the NRT community development team have worked hard to enable the community to understand the long-term commitment needed in order to make this work."

"Insiders Africa have committed to a 30-year operating lease for the entire Sera Conservancy which allows them the flexibility and long-term security to develop some very imaginative tourism products there. NRT has been trying to develop tourism for the last 7 years; in this process, we have learned what has not worked, but also what has worked in similar situations, so a relationship of mutual trust like this means that there can be

investment in something much longer term. This will help to build up Sera as a destination in it's own right. NRT is now looking to strengthen all of its tourism partnerships to conclude a similar kind of long-term agreement in most other conservancies; in this way, it is rewarding the investments made by our existing tour operator partners, which reward the community in return. This process for Sera has allowed NRT and the community to negotiate a fee structure which ensures that the maximum can go back to the community – the fee structure is linked to the performance of the business, which is intended to ensure a relationship of mutual understanding and benefit between the tourism partner and the community.

“The importance of this landmark agreement for NRT is that having gone through this process, we now have the platform to begin similar negotiations elsewhere in other NRT conservancies where tourism already exists or where we see similar potential. We hope to provide you with news of our other valued partnerships in the next few months.”

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