

Northern Kenya



Northern Kenya is more an experience than a series of destinations. There's constantly something catching your eye, whether it's Gabbra tribespeople walking the shattered lava fields, extinct volcanos rising from desert seas, or the road tracking across the plains. All who visit this wild, diverse region leave cherishing something different, that they'll never forget.

That said, some things will be ingrained in every visitor's psyche. The complete and utter beauty of the 'Jade Sea' (Lake Turkana), whose baking, barren shores stretch over the horizon to a distant Ethiopia some 250km away, can't be overstated.

The many tribes of northern Kenya are some of the most fascinating people on earth – a glimpse into their world is priceless. Unique wildlife, like the reticulated giraffe and endangered Grevy's zebra, also call northern Kenya home, mixing with lions, elephants and oxres in the varied landscapes of Samburu, Buffalo Springs and Shaba National Reserves.

For those with energy to burn, there's great hiking around Marich, Maralal, Marsabit and the Ndoto Mountains. If walking isn't your thing, it's also perfect for a camel safari.

Where there's reward, there's usually risk and northern Kenya is no exception (see opposite). Don't expect it to be easy – the roads will batter your arse and your 4WD. But you'll love every minute of it!

HIGHLIGHTS

- Thanking the heavens for the sight of **Lake Turkana** (p336) and thanking your lucky stars your tyres survived to get you there
- Witnessing the temperature dropping and volcanic cinder cones climbing on **Mt Marsabit** (p327), a forested island in a desert sea
- Sharing a smile and some shade with Kenya's most captivating tribes in **South Horr** (p335), **Loyangalani** (p336) or **Lodwar** (p340)
- Experiencing the spectacular scenery and wildlife while staying at the **Lewa Wildlife Conservancy** (p321), and learning about their community and conservation programs
- Realising zebras do change their stripes in **Samburu National Reserve** (p324), home to the rare Grevy's species
- Searching for words atop Mt Poi in the remote **Ndoto Mountains** (p327)
- Drooling uncontrollably at **Lesiolo** (p335)



Geography

Northern Kenya's diverse landscapes are truly amazing. Deserts range from large tracts of scrub, dissected by *luggas* (dry river beds that burst into violent life after heavy rains) and peppered with acacia trees, to Chalbi's inhospitable black stones and Karoli's soft sands.

Massive yet gently sloping, the dormant shield volcanos of Mt Kulal and Mt Marsabit climb from barren plains to provide forested havens for humans and animals, while countless steep, Martian-like stratovolcanos burst from lava fields and Lake Turkana's waters. In other areas, such as South Horr, craggy peaks shelter clear streams that flow through valley oases of lush vegetation.

Lake Turkana is the north's most renowned geographic feature and covers an amazing 6405 sq km, making it earth's largest permanent desert lake.

Climate

The climate here reflects the landscape's incredible contrasts. Temperatures on the

plains can reach 50°C, without a breath of wind, only for the desert's dead calm to be shattered by sudden violent thunderstorms that drench everything and disappear as quickly as they came. It's not uncommon to experience several weather systems during the day and still sleep under clear, star-studded skies.

The lone constant is the stifling heat and strong winds around Lake Turkana.

National Parks & Reserves

From the celebrated African animals of today, thriving along the Ewaso Ngiro River's lush banks in the Samburu, Shaba and Buffalo Springs National Reserves (p324), to the fossilised evidence of early humans and prehistoric animals sitting beneath the scorching soils of Sibiloi National Park (p338) on Lake Turkana's northern shore, northern Kenya's national parks and reserves cover a breadth of landscapes, wilderness and history unimaginable elsewhere.

Also intriguing is Marsabit National Park (p329), whose rich forest and shy Big

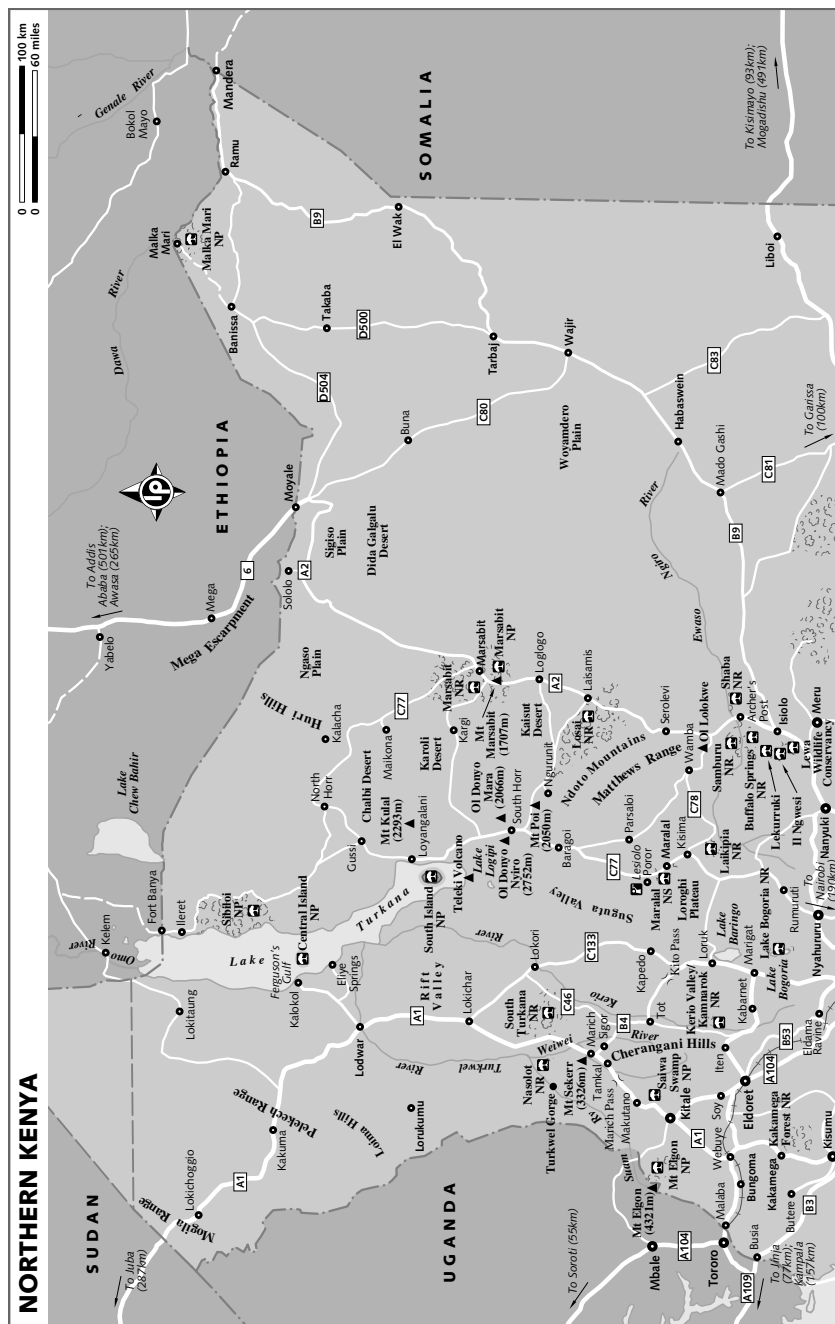
WARNING

Unfortunately, the strong warrior traditions of northern Kenya's nomadic peoples have led to security problems plaguing the region for years. Things were only exacerbated in the 1990s by a massive influx of cheap guns from many conflict zones just outside Kenya, which dramatically altered traditional balances of power. Minor conflicts stemming from grazing rights and cattle rustling, formerly settled by compensation rather than violence, quickly escalated into ongoing gun battles and authorities had trouble restoring order.

While travellers rarely witnessed intertribal conflict, the abundance of guns led to increases in banditry that posed a significant risk to anyone moving through the region. This led to convoys or armed escorts being required on most major roads. However, the recent government has clamped down on lawlessness, and security in the north has turned for the better. Convoys and armed guards are no longer used between Marich and Lodwar and between Isiolo and Moyale on the Ethiopian border. Although the notoriously dangerous conditions on the road between Lodwar and Lokichoggio, near the Sudanese border, have improved enough for local trucks and matatus to travel unguarded, the UN and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) still travel in large convoys.

Sadly, all isn't on the mend and sporadic bloody tribal conflicts still arise, like in July 2005 when 44 people (including 27 children) were killed in Marsabit district's remote Turbi region. The whole northeastern region around Garsen, Garissa, Wajir and Mandera is still *shifita* (bandit) country and you should avoid travelling here. Buses heading to Lamu and between Garissa and Thika have also been attacked. Intrepid travellers heading up the Suguta Valley should be aware that armed gangs roam these lands and have assaulted foreigners. Thanks to a 1999 conflict between the Ethiopian government and Oromo Liberation Front (fighting for independence in southern Ethiopia) spilling over into Kenya around Moyale, landmines have been reported – stick to well-marked paths outside of town.

Improvements or not, security in northern Kenya is a dynamic entity and travellers should seek local advice about the latest developments before travelling and never take unnecessary risks.



Five population rest on the cool slopes of a massive volcano rising gently out of the baking northern plains. Dramatic volcanic landscapes of an entirely different manifestation burst bleakly from Lake Turkana's waters and form South Island (p336) and Central Island (p343) National Parks, which, together with Sibiloi, comprise a Unesco World Heritage Site.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Daily **AirKenya** (☎ 020-605745; www.airkenya.com) and **Safarilink** (☎ 020-600777; www.safarilink.co.ke) services link Samburu National Reserve and Lewa Wildlife Conservancy with Nanyuki, Meru and Nairobi (Wilson Airport). See p326 and p322 for details.

BUS & MATATU

Countless bus and matatu services enter northern Kenya from the Central and Western Highlands. They are detailed on p261, p274, p277 and p312.

Getting Around

4WD

Having your own 4WD gives you flexibility, but comes with its own challenges thanks to wide-ranging road conditions. For starters you'll need a large 4WD (a Toyota RAV4 or Suzuki won't do) with high ground clearance and a skid plate to protect the undercarriage. You should have a high-rise jack, sand ladders, a shovel, a long, strong rope or chain (to hitch up to camels or other vehicles) plus enough fuel, water and spare tires (one is rarely enough). A compass and good map are also invaluable.

Road conditions between destinations are discussed in each town's Getting There & Away sections.

BUS & MATATU

There's now regular public transport as far north as Kalokol and Lokichoggio on Turkana's west side, but it's more limited up the lake's east side, only reaching Maralal via Nyahururu or Isiolo. With improved security, buses now run from Isiolo to Moyale on the Ethiopian border via Marsabit.

HITCHING

Hopping onto the top of a dusty transport truck with the locals has long been an un-

comfortable, dirty and somehow mildly enchanting way to travel around northern Kenya. However, improved bus services mean that Loyangalani is the only major destination that still requires hitching.

To enjoy the experience you must throw out your schedule and accept that you'll spend days waiting for rides. It's no free ride either, with most drivers charging between KSh2 and KSh5 per kilometre. Security is another issue, as bandits are more interested in cattle trucks than buses, and for this reason hitching can't be recommended unreservedly.

SAFARIS

A few organised safaris and overland trucks now go to Lake Turkana's west, but most still stick to the lake's east side. Average trips are seven- to 10-days long and they typically follow the same route. See p69 for a full rundown.

Other options include camel safaris, although treks down into the Suguta Valley should be approached with caution for security reasons. See p67 for more camel safari information.

ISILO TO ETHIOPIA

Besides being a gateway to Ethiopia's riches, this route offers northern Kenya's best wildlife viewing, along with some incredible culture and landscapes. New hiking possibilities in the Ndoto Mountains and several pioneering community wildlife-conservation projects only add to the region's appeal.

ISILO

☎ 064

Isiolo is a vital pit stop on the long road north, as it's the last place with decent facilities until Maralal or Marsabit.

How you interpret this frontier town depends on which direction you arrive from. Arrive from the south and you'll get your first taste of the remote northeast of the country— and hopefully not a mouthful of dirt blown up by late-afternoon squalls. Besides the arid conditions, you'll undoubtedly notice the large Somali population (descendants of WWI veterans who settled here) and the striking faces of Boran, Samburu and Turkana people walking the

streets. Pull in from the north and you'll notice little other than the verdant Central Highlands and omnipresent Mt Kenya towering in the distance. Your mind will wander to thoughts of crisp air and cool nights – heaven ahead indeed!

Besides buying some supplies for the trip north, you should also have a quick gander at the fine, and surprisingly cheap (post-haggling), brass, copper and aluminium bracelets that Isiolo's ubiquitous street sellers hawk. KSh100 will land you three simple bracelets, while KSh200 will score a more elaborate example.

In respect of Isiolo's strong Muslim community, women should avoid wearing shorts or short skirts.

Information

Consolidated Bank of Kenya (A2 Hwy) No ATM.

Changes cash and Amex travellers cheques (200KSh per leaf, plus 0.25% commission). Banks are scarce in the north, so plan ahead.

District Hospital (Hospital Rd; ☎ 24hr) Isiolo's best medical facility.

Isiolo Telephone Exchange (Hospital Rd) Calling cards and card phones.

Post office (Hospital Rd) With Internet.

Sleeping

Isiolo has happy homes for budget and midrange travellers (and their vehicles), but desperately lacks top-end options.

Mocharo Lodge (☎ 52385; s/tw KSh350/450; P) Sizeable clean rooms proffer mosquito nets, comfortable beds and hot water (in the mornings only). Some toilets are seatless, so if you don't want to be a porcelain jockey check out a few rooms. There's also secure parking, a decent restaurant and a TV room.

Range Land Hotel (☎ 0721-434353; A2 Hwy; camping KSh200, tw cottage per person KSh1000) About 6km south of town, this is a nice option for campers and families. Shade is rare, but there's now grass to plant your tent on and one of the stone cottages, with a nice bathroom, chairs and TV, is set aside for your use. Meals can be prepared with advance notice and there's a wee kids' playground – note: use is 'at owner's risk'!

Jamhuri Guest House (s KSh250, s/tw with shared bathroom KSh120/200; P) Popular with budget travellers in the past, it's simple, clean enough and has secure parking.

Jabal-Nur Plaza Lodge (☎ 0724-916670; s KSh 300, with shared bathroom KSh200) Their rooms are pleasant, but their bathrooms are weak: you'll either be straddling the toilet to shower in your room or plugging your nose in the shared toilets.

Transit Hotel (☎ 52083; s/tw KSh500/900) They've dropped their rates substantially, but their rooms are still just more expensive versions of Mocharo Lodge's. The exception is room 208 (single), which is blessed with a big bright window.

Bomen Hotel (☎ 52389; s/tw/stc KSh900/1500/2500; P) NGO's favourite home, the Bomen Hotel has the town's brightest (ask for one facing outward) and most comfortable rooms. Room prices are steep, especially since some toilets are seatless, but bonus options include TVs and shared terraces with views (single rooms 304–07). You'll be happy to know that your truck will sleep safely here too.

Eating & Drinking

You won't go hungry or have to walk far to fill your belly in Isiolo – most sleeping options serve up tasty, albeit uncreative eats.

Transit Hotel (☎ 52083; meals KSh120–250) A rare place serving more than the local usuals, with fried tilapia, pepper steak, vegetable cutlets and curries up for grabs.

Bomen Hotel (☎ 52389; meals KSh130–380) Think Transit Hotel with nicer seats and elevated prices.

Fremia Hotel (meals KSh50–100) Like most places, they'll have little left on the menu after 8pm. However, they'll actually run out and buy supplies to prepare your meal of choice – smile and be patient!

Silver Bells Hotel (meals KSh60–150) A good spot for grabbing yourself a cheap and greasy pre-departure breakfast.

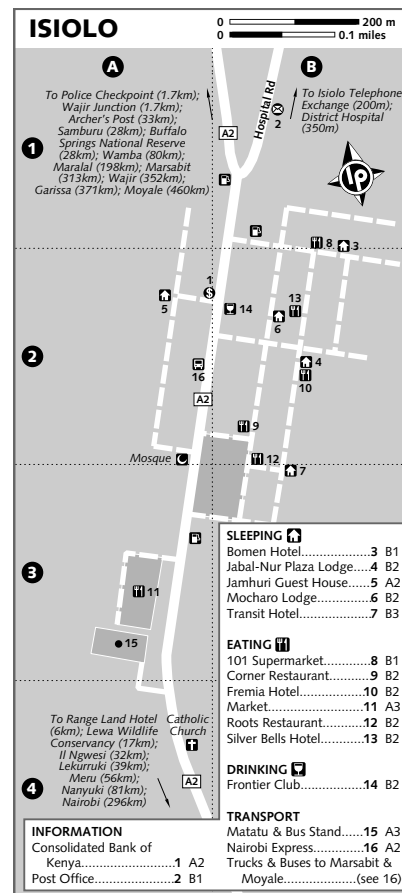
Other popular local eating establishments include the following:

Roots Restaurant (meals KSh50–120)

Corner Restaurant (meals KSh50–120)

Northbound self-caterers should head to 101 Supermarket and the market near the mosque to purchase food and drink as there's very little available beyond here.

Thanks to a strong Muslim influence, drinking venues are rare – check out **Frontier Club** (A2 Hwy), which occasionally has live bands.



Getting There & Away

Although convoys are no longer being used north to Marsabit, check the security situation thoroughly with locals and the police checkpoint north of town before leaving. This is especially critical if heading towards Garissa, Wajir or Mandera, which are currently considered unsafe for travellers.

4WD

Isiolo marks the tarmac's northern terminus and the start of the corrugated dirt and gravel, which will shake the guts out of you and your vehicle. There are several petrol stations, so top up as prices climb and supplies diminish northward. If you're heading south, Central Highlands petrol is cheaper.

BUS & MATATU

The best option to Nairobi is **Nairobi Express** (A2 Hwy), operating daily buses (KSh500, 4½ hours) at 6.45am. The bus north to Marsabit (KSh600, 8½ hours) and Moyale (KSh1200, 17 hours) picks up passengers at Nairobi Express between 11pm and midnight.

For Maralal take an early-morning matatu to Wamba (KSh300, 2½ hours), and then the midday Maralal matatu (KSh300, 2½ hours). Regular matatus leave from a chaotic stand around the market and also serve Archer's Post (KSh80, 45 minutes), Meru (KSh120, 1½ hours), Nanyuki (KSh150, two hours) and Nairobi (KSh450, five hours). Peugeot's (shared taxis) also service Meru (KSh150, 1¼ hours).

HITCHING

Trucks are filthy and uncomfortable but a viable option for the northbound adventurous. Although they pick up passengers at the police checkpoint north of town, better seats are available if you board when they stop near Nairobi Express. Drain your bladder, purchase enough food, water and sunscreen, and hop aboard.

LEWA WILDLIFE CONSERVANCY

While the massive 263-sq-km **Lewa Wildlife Conservancy** (LWC; ☎ 064-31405; www.lewa.org; admission incl in accommodation rates), just south of Isiolo, could boast about their luxury lodges, stunning scenery, astounding wildlife activities and having often hosted Prince William, they'd rather talk about their community and conservation projects. Founded in 1995, LWC now spends an amazing 30% of its budget on healthcare and education for surrounding villages, 40% towards community projects, with the remainder funding conservation and security. To help raise awareness and funds they host one of the world's most rewarding and exhausting marathons (see boxed text on p322).

The conservancy effort has been astounding and 20% of the world's Grevy's zebras, 8% of Kenya's black rhinos, a rare population of aquatic sitatunga antelopes and sizeable populations of white rhinos, elephants, buffaloes, leopards, lions and cheetahs now call this magical place home.

Wildlife drives in private vehicles aren't permitted and only guests of the LWC's lodges are allowed into the conservancy. A

RUNNING FOR YOUR LIFE AND THEN SOME

It's one thing to run a marathon to the encouraging screams of people, it's entirely another to run it sharing the course with elephants, rhinos and the odd antelope! Established in 2000 to raise funds for wildlife conservation and community development, the Safaricom Marathon, run within the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy in late June/early July, attracts world-record holders and is renowned worldwide as one of the planet's toughest marathons. Thanks to experienced rangers, helicopters and spotter planes, your only worry should be the heat and the 1700m average elevation.

Will you be slowed by repeatedly gazing into the bewildered eyes of nearby giraffes or will your legs speed on at the thought of cheetahs and lions lurking in the grass? Why not try it and find out? Visit www.tusk.org for registration details.

plethora of activities, ranging from drives (day and night) and walks to horse riding and camel rides, are available at most lodges. Guests are encouraged to take part in conservation activities, like tracking and tagging animals.

Sleeping & Eating

Lewa House (☎ 064-31405; c.moller@lewa.org; exclusive use per night incl wildlife drives US\$840; 📶) Six sublime thatched-roof African chalets, comfortably sleeping 12 people, form Lewa House. Privacy is guaranteed since it's rented only to one group at a time. For full board, add US\$120 per person per night.

Lewa Safari Camp (☎ 064-31405; www.lewasafari.com; full board s/d incl wildlife drives US\$285/570; 📶 closed Nov) Twelve luxurious octagonal tents hang beneath charming thatched roofs and offer up privacy and a slice of the African safari dream. The lounge, dining room, food and service are all top-notch.

Wilderness Trails (☎ 020-600457; www.bush-and-beyond.com; full board s/d incl activities US\$430/860; 📶 closed Apr, May & Nov; 📶) Although the thatched cottages and pool are as breathtaking as the views over the plains, none of Wilderness Trails' proceeds go towards LWC (unlike Lewa Safari Camp and Lewa House, which are non-profit and donate 100% of their proceeds), making it the least attractive accommodation option here.

There are some designated bush sites (no facilities) for **camping** (☎ 064-31405; info@lewa.org; US\$90), but after compiling the costs of camping, food, a guide and wildlife drives, you're better off staying at Lewa Safari Camp.

Getting There & Away

LWC is only 12km south of Isiolo and is well signposted on A2 Hwy. **Airkenya** (☎ 020-605745;

www.airkenya.com) and **Safarilink** (☎ 020-600777; www.safarilink.co.ke) have daily 'request stop' flights to LWC from Nairobi. Return fares from Airkenya/Safarilink are US\$199/222.

AROUND LEWA WILDLIFE CONSERVANCY Il Ngwesi

Il Ngwesi is a project linking wildlife conservation and community development. The Maasai of Il Ngwesi, with help from their neighbour LWC, have transformed this undeveloped land, previously used for subsistence pastoralism, into a prime wildlife conservation area hosting white and black rhinos, water bucks, giraffes and other plains animals. It's truly fitting that Il Ngwesi translates to 'people of wildlife'.

The community now supplements their herding income with tourist dollars gained from their award-winning ecolodge, **Il Ngwesi Group Ranch** (☎ 020-340331; info@letsgosafari.com; s/d incl all meals US\$209/418; 📶). Six open-fronted thatched cottages boast views from a dramatic escarpment that will have you smiling yourself to sleep and shaking your head when the sun rises (especially in cottages one and five, where the beds roll out beneath the stars). Natural materials are used throughout and you'll never be so in love with twisted, crooked wood – who likes straight lines anyway? The best part is that profits go straight to the Maasai community. Advance reservations are essential and getting here requires a serious 4WD.

Lekurruki

Home to descendants of the tiny Yaaku tribe, Lekurruki sits immediately north of Il Ngwesi. Although descendants of various Ethiopian, Somali and Rendille tribes, they've

been swallowed by surrounding Maasai communities and have now named themselves Laikipiak Maasai. With most now speaking Maa (a Maasai dialect), funds are being sought to study the remaining 10 traditional Seiku speakers so that the endangered language might live to speak another day.

This community has followed in the footsteps of Il Ngwesi by embracing wildlife conservation and ecotourism. In 2002 they opened **Tassia Lodge** (☎ 020-340331; www.tassiakenya.com; exclusive use per night US\$400; 📶), which is perched on the Mukogodo escarpment, overlooking the plains to the sacred mountain Ol Lolokwe and Samburu National Reserve. The six open-fronted cottages are virtually identical to those at Il Ngwesi Group Ranch and the view from each bed, lounge and loo is equally mind-blowing. There's an amazing six-bed children's bunk-house that's part Antoni Gaudí and part childhood dream. The entire lodge is rented exclusively – not a bad deal for six couples and six kids. Wildlife drives and meals are not included, but they can be arranged. All funds benefit the Laikipiak Maasai community.

Although close to Isiolo, getting here is a difficult and requires a sturdy 4WD – get directions and a map when booking.

ARCHER'S POST

This dusty, ramshackle town sits 33km north of Isiolo and is perfect for budget travellers visiting Samburu, Buffalo Springs and

Shaba National Reserves. At night there's definitely a Wild West feel about the place, with most vendors plying their goods by candlelight.

There's a small **market** (Map p325; off A2) but little else in the way of services.

Eight kilometres north of Archer's Post is the immense 384-sq-km **Kalama Community Wildlife Conservancy** (admission incl camping KSh1500), which opened in 2004 and hosts wildlife including Grevy's zebras, elephants and re-ticulated giraffes. The road network is still undeveloped, but guides (per day KSh500) lead walks and hikes up **Kalama Hill**. Camping in their three shady sites is free with admission. This community-run project supports hundreds of local families.

About 30km north of town and shrouded in Samburu folklore is the massive mesa of **Ol Lolokwe**. It's a great day hike and, at sunset, light radiating off its rusty bluffs is seen for miles around.

Don't want to camp with the lions and leopards in the national reserves? Want to save some moolah? Head to **Umoja Campsite** (Map p325; camping KSh200), which sits on the Ewaso Ng'iro's banks between town and Archer's Post gate. It's run by women who've fled abusive husbands (see p324).

Those wanting a roof can crash at **Accacia Inns Lkimairr Lodge** (Map p325; ☎ 0721-659717; off A2 Hwy; s with shared bathroom KSh200). The mozzie net-clad rooms are simple and clean. Showers come in buckets and the toilets are

THE START OF A BEAUTIFUL FRIENDSHIP?

While other countries have been fighting a losing battle to preserve wildlife by separating animals and humans, local communities in parts of northern Kenya, like the Maasai of Il Ngwesi, Laikipiak Maasai of Lekurruki and the Samburu within the Matthews Range, are actually increasing animal populations (and their own standard of living) by embracing peaceful cohabitation.

These communities treat wildlife as a natural resource and take serious action to protect its wellbeing, whether by combating poaching with increased security or by modifying their herding activities to minimise human-animal conflict and environmental damage. With financial and logistical support from many sources, including LWC, **Laikipia Wildlife Forum** (LWF; www.laikipia.org) and the Northern Ranchlands Trust (NRT), these communities have built the magical ecolodges whose income now provides much-needed funds for their education, health and humanitarian projects.

The pioneering doesn't stop there. The LWF and NRT also coordinate wildlife conservancy on large private ranches and small farms (in northern Kenya and on the Laikipia Plateau), hoping to spark more sustainable development projects and further improve local standards of living. If these brave projects continue to prove that humans and wildlife can not only live in the same environment, but actually thrive from the mutual relationship, an amazing precedent will be set for the rest of sub-Saharan Africa.

GOODBYE MEN – HELLO HAPPINESS?

In 1990, 15 women who'd suffered too long from violent husbands abandoned their homes and started the village of Umoja (meaning 'unity' in Swahili), just outside Archer's Post. They hoped to survive together by producing and selling traditional Samburu jewellery to tourists. It all proved rather successful and Umoja thrived, even opening a campsite a few years later. Boosted by its success, 33 more women left unhappy situations and now call the women-only village home.

Local men were fairly tolerant initially, but apathy became jealousy and they even set up rival trinket stalls nearby. After their stalls' utter failure and the women's continued success, there have been reports of angry men warning tourist vehicles not to visit Umoja. Worse still are the recent raids of Umoja by men threatening these peaceful women with violence, something they had hoped to have left behind for good.

While these women still need your support, it would be wise to ask them about the security situation before dropping your tent.

crude, but they're clean enough. There's also a small thatched-roof cooking shelter for self-caterers. It's en route to Archer's Post gate and Umoja Campsite.

While **Uaso Cafe** (Map p325; A2 Hwy; meals KSh60-150) isn't the only restaurant in town, it's the only place to eat – enough said.

Getting There & Away

Matatus from Isiolo stop here en route to Wamba (KSh250, 1¼ hours) and those coming from Wamba also pick up for Isiolo (KSh80, 45 minutes).

SAMBURU, BUFFALO SPRINGS & SHABA NATIONAL RESERVES

These national reserves, comprising some 300 sq km, straddle the **Ewaso Ngiro River** and boast a breadth of wildlife, vegetation and landscapes. Shaba, with its great rocky *kopjes* (isolated hills), natural springs and doum palms, is the most physically beautiful, while open savannahs, scrub desert and verdant river foliage in Samburu and Buffalo Springs virtually guarantee close encounters with elephants, reticulated giraffes, Grevy's zebras, Somali ostriches, Beisa oryxes and the elegant giraffe-necked gerenuks. Chances of spotting a massive crocodile or leopard are substantially increased (albeit artificially) if you're staying at the posh lodges, as most unscrupulously leave bait out each evening.

After lodge hold-ups in Samburu several years ago, security has considerably improved. Ranger and Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) lookouts are placed throughout the reserve. Poachers killed 25 elephants in early 2002, but things have been quiet since, and visitors are steadily returning.

Information

Conveniently, admission for Buffalo Springs, Shaba and Samburu (adult/child US\$30/10) are interchangeable, so you only pay once, even if you're visiting all three in one day.

If you're driving, Survey of Kenya's map *Samburu & Buffalo Springs Game Reserves* (KSh85) is helpful, but hard to find. Getting around isn't difficult, but some minor roads are for 4WDs only. Signage has improved in Samburu but the maze of wayward minibus tracks can be confusing.

Petrol is available at Sarova Shaba Lodge and Samburu Game Lodge.

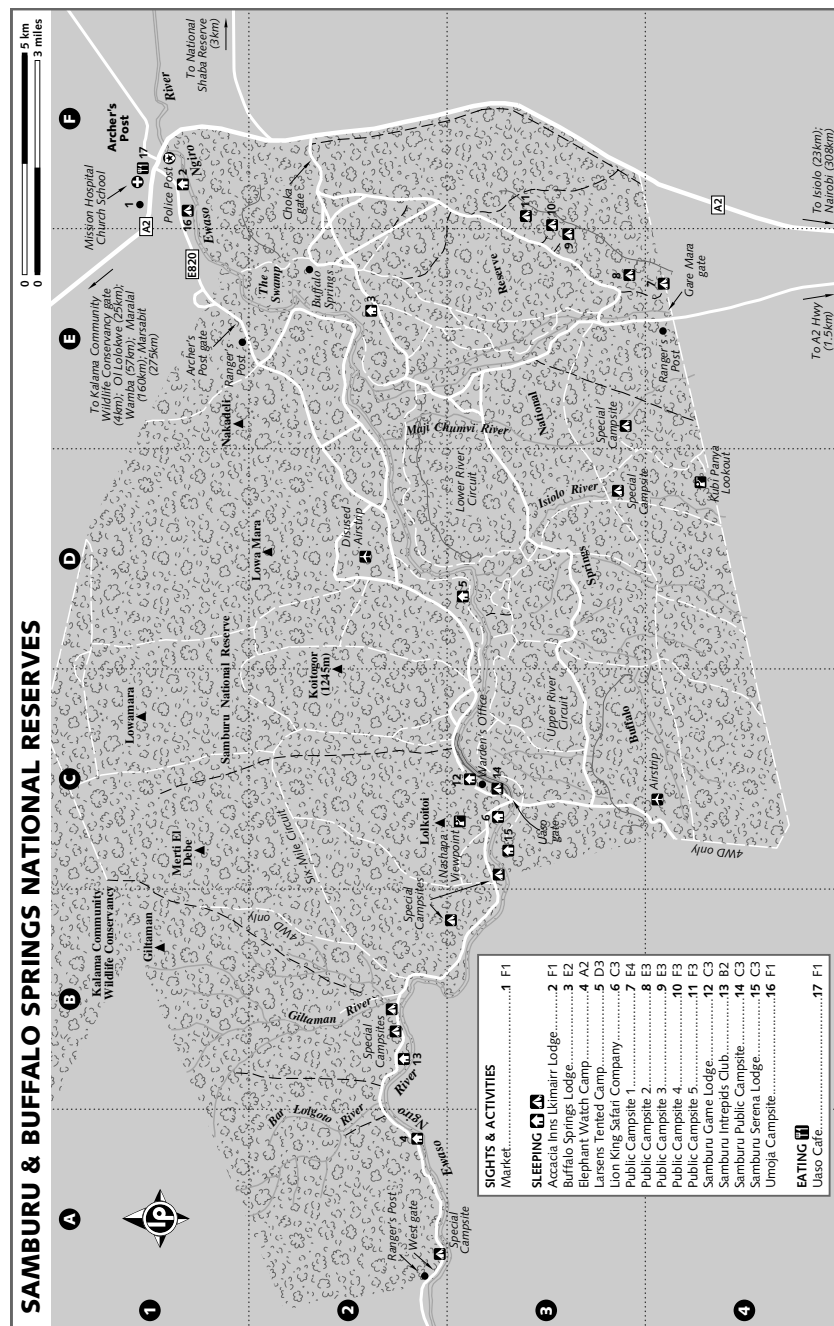
Sleeping & Eating

Each reserve is blessed with at least one luxury lodge and several campsites. For campers and day visitors, all the luxury lodges have buffet meals (around KSh1825).

BUFFALO SPRINGS NATIONAL RESERVE

Samburu Serena Lodge (☎ 064-30800, Nairobi 020-2710511; cro@serena.co.ke; full board low season s/d US\$80/160, high season US\$200/260; 🍴) Though not as extravagant as Shaba Sarova Lodge, it's still lovely and offers plenty of activities, like slide shows, bird walks, hikes up L'Olgotoi Hill and camel rides. Comfy cottages, with breezy verandas, reed-lined ceilings and canopy beds, line the riverbank.

Buffalo Springs Lodge (Box 71, Isiolo; s/tw KSh1000/2000) The state of the pool speaks volumes – it's half-empty. On the positive side, the wood, reed-lined cottages are rather charming and the best value around. On the negative side, there's no food, the thatched cement cottages are dreary and have lumpy beds, and...let's not forget the pool!



THE CALL OF THE WILD

Just when you thought that everyone and their dog already had a mobile phone, **Save the Elephants** (☎ 020-891673; www.savetheelephants.com) in Samburu National Reserve has given them to elephants! Each hour, without the mighty pachyderms having to bat an ear, SIM-card collars send text messages to each scientist's phone with their current location. This allows Save the Elephants to track elephants in real time, something never possible before.

By studying elephants' movements, scientists can discover important migration corridors between reserves and work to protect them. If these routes became denuded and migration ceased, the sheer magnitude of elephants' appetites would destroy their immediate environment and threaten their survival.

Interested visitors are welcome, but you must call in advance.

Special campsites (camping KSh825) While scenically located by freshwater springs along the Isiolo and Maji ya Chumvi Rivers, there are no facilities.

Public campsites (camping KSh440) The five public sites close to Gare Mara gate are overgrown, hard to find and have absolutely no facilities or water. For toilets, showers and less solitude, camp in Samburu.

SAMBURU NATIONAL RESERVE

Elephant Watch Camp (☎ 020-891112; www.elephantwatchsafaris.com; full board incl guided walks s/d Apr & Nov US\$320/640, rest of year US\$360/720) Undoubtedly the most unique and memorable place to stay in the reserves. Massive thatched roofs cling to crooked acacia branches and tower over cosy, palatial, eight-sided tents and large grass mat-clad terraces. Natural materials pervade and the bathrooms are stunning.

Samburu Game Lodge (☎ 020-559529; wilderness@mitsuminet.com; full board s/tw low season US\$130/165, high season US\$200/250; 📍) Several thatched log cottages and one large apartment-like block sit riverside in this perennial favourite. The bright cottages are much better value, offering more privacy, tasteful decor, modern bathrooms and larger verandas.

Larsens Tented Camp (☎ 020-559529; wilderness@mitsuminet.com; full board low season s/tw US\$169/226,

high season US\$251/320) Sitting beneath acacias and spread along the riverbank are spacious and oh so very comfortable semipermanent tents. Each boasts scenic verandas, rugs, modern bathrooms and king-size beds, complete with headboards resembling colonial-style leather chests. Two of the tents are wheelchair accessible.

Samburu Intrepids Club (☎ 064-30453, Nairobi 020-446651; www.heritage-eastaficas.com; full board s/d US\$300/450; 📍) Grab a G&T, sink into the bar's teak lounges and gaze over the Ewaso Ngiro. While thatched roofs and canopy beds in the luxurious tents scream Africa, the refined furniture unfortunately shrieks Fortune 500. Their friendly service is unmatched.

Lion King Safari Company (lionking@africaonline.co.ke; exclusive use per night US\$300) This simple tented camp sleeps eight, has a lovely thatched chill area boasting comfy cushions, is right on the river and can be rented exclusively.

Samburu Public Campsite (camping KSh440) Spread along the Ewaso Ngiro River's northern bank, this site is blessed with new bathroom blocks and some secluded spots for tents.

Special campsites (camping KSh825) Special they're not – bush sites with no facilities or water, they're further west and tricky to find.

SHABA NATIONAL RESERVE

Shaba Sarova Lodge (☎ 020-713333; reservations@sarova.co.ke; full board s/d Mar-Jun US\$87/135, Jul-Feb US\$130/185; 📍) This spectacular, almost-over-the-top (yet strangely underpriced) place nestles on the Ewaso Ngiro River. Next to the magnificent pool, natural springs flow through the gorgeous open-air bar and beneath the lofty 200-seat restaurant. The rooms? They're pretty lavish too!

Special campsites (camping KSh825) Of the several special sites (no facilities) here, Funan, set in Shaba's core, takes the cake. Shaded by acacias, it's next to a semipermanent spring, which provides water for visitors and wildlife alike. A ranger must accompany you to these sites; the cost is included in the fee but a tip is appropriate.

Getting There & Away

The vehicle-less can probably wrangle a 4WD and driver in Archer's Post for about KSh6000 per day. **Airkenya** (☎ 020-605745; www.airkenya.com) and **Safarilink** (☎ 020-600777; www.safarilink.co.ke) have daily flights from Nairobi to Samburu. Return fares on Airkenya/

Safarilink are US\$199/222. Early-morning Safarilink flights are about US\$15 less.

MATTHEWS RANGE

West of the remarkable flat-topped mountain Ol Lolokwe and north of Wamba is the Matthews Range. Its thick evergreen forests support elephants, lions, buffaloes and Kenya's most important wild dog population. These dramatic mountains (highest peak 2285m) offer great opportunities to explore the depths of Kenya's wilds. With few roads, only those willing to go the extra mile on foot will be rewarded with the spoils.

In 1995 the local Samburu communities collectively formed the **Namunyak Wildlife Conservation Trust**, now one of Kenya's most successful community conservation programs. The trust is unique because it's run by a democratically elected board, each community having one trustee. Now endorsed by KWS, it oversees 750 sq km and has substantially increased animal populations by successfully combating poaching.

To capitalise on their wildlife resources and fund community projects, the trust built **Sarara Tented Camp** (☎ 020-600457; info@bush-and-beyond.com; full board s/d incl conservancy fee US\$490/780; 📍 closed May & Nov; 📍). With its grand open-fronted thatched lounge, enveloping comfort, private verandas, sublime surrounds and natural rock pool, guests benefit as much as the cause.

For budgeteers, the basic **El-Moran** (s KSh250, with shared bathroom KSh150) in Wamba is the only option besides bush camping. If it's full you could try the local mission (which incidentally has northern Kenya's best hospital, a fact worth remembering while in the bush).

Getting There & Away

While matatus from Isiolo (p321) and Maralal (p334) do reach Wamba, there's no point in coming without a vehicle. Getting to Sarara Camp isn't easy, even with a 4WD – it's probably best to arrange a transfer or get detailed directions when booking.

NDOTO MOUNTAINS

Climbing from the Korante Plain's sands are the magnificent rusty bluffs and ridges of the Ndotu Mountains. Kept a virtual secret from the travelling world by their remote location, the Ndotos abound with hiking, climbing and bouldering potential. **Mt Poi**

(2050m), which resembles the world's largest bread loaf from some angles, is a technical climber's dream, its sheer 800m north face begging to be bagged. If you're fit and have a whole day to spare, it's a great hike to the summit and the views are extraordinary.

The tiny village of **Ngurunit** is the best base for your adventures and is interesting in its own right, with captivating, traditionally dressed Samburu people living in simple, yet elegantly woven grass huts.

Salato Women's Group Campsite (☎ 0721-565383; lemnyete@wananchi.com; PO Box 352, Maralal; camping KSh100, s/tw KSh150/300) is about 3km west of Ngurunit and has decent facilities, fresh water and a small cooking area. There are also six cement Samburu-style bandas, complete with kerosene lamps and mosquito nets. Local guides (per day KSh500) can be arranged for hiking and camel treks (per 3km KSh200) are also on offer.

Getting There & Away

Ngurunit is best accessed from Loglogo, 47km south of Marsabit and 233km north of Archer's Post. From Loglogo it's a tricky 79km (1¼-hour) drive, with many forks, through the Kaisut Desert. Contact Salato for directions or offer a lift to someone in Loglogo looking for a ride to Ngurunit – they are cheap (free!) and helpful guides.

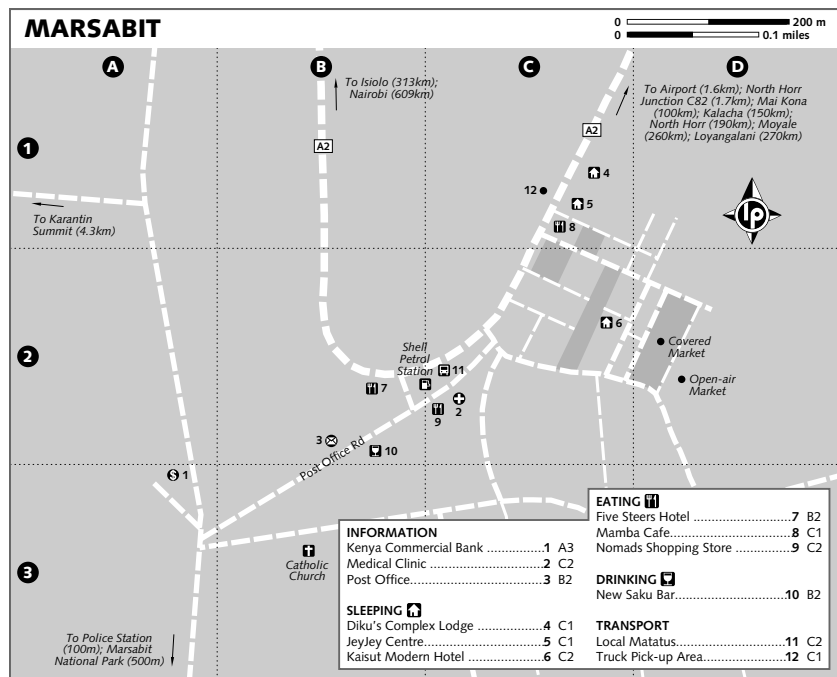
To access Ngurunit from Baragoi, head about 40km north towards South Horr and, after descending the first steep paved section and crossing the following *lugga* (dry river bed), look out for Lmerim Nursery School. Found it? The Ngurunit turn-off is 200m behind you!

MARSABIT

☎ 069

Approach Marsabit in fading light and you'll undoubtedly rub your weary eyes in disbelief. Scattered across the plains, surrounded by desert and strangely reminiscent of Egyptian pyramids (we did say weary eyes!), are fields of dramatic cinder cones (volcanic vents). Climbing towards town, the bleached yellows and browns turn to rich shades of green and the mercury takes a heavenly dip downward, adding pleasure to your continued feeling of astonishment.

The entire area surrounding Marsabit is actually a behemoth 6300-sq-km shield volcano, whose surface is peppered with no less



than 180 amazing cinder cones and 22 volcanic craters (*gofs* or *maars*), many housing lakes. Mt Marsabit's highest peak, **Karantin** (1707m), is a rewarding 5km hike from town through lush vegetation and moss-covered trees. The view from Karantin is astounding and if you play your cards right (and aren't scared of heights), 50 bob may have you wavering in the wind atop the communications tower.

While the town is less attractive than its lush surrounds, which comprise the enormous 1500-sq-km **Marsabit National Reserve**, it's fairly interesting due to an intriguing migrant population. The best place to take in the cornucopia of culture is the lively **market**. Unfortunately, the cultural mix has been volatile at times (see opposite).

Information

Kenya Commercial Bank (off Post Office Rd) No ATM. Changes cash and travellers cheques (KSh50 per leaf commission).

Medical clinic (Post Office Rd; ☎ 8am-7pm Mon-Sat, noon-7pm Sun) Clinic with laboratory services.

Post office (Post Office Rd) With Internet and card phones.

Sleeping

Since we were here last, several accommodation options have taken a turn for the worse – don't frown, this only makes your decision easier!

JeyJey Centre (☎ 2296; A2 Hwy; s KSh400, s/tw/tr with shared bathroom KSh250/400/600) Owned by government MP JJ Falana, this is the best lodge in town. Clean rooms with mozzie nets surround a colourful courtyard and bathrooms (even shared ones) sport on-demand hot water. There's also a TV room, a decent restaurant and an unattractive campsite (per person KSh150). Spot the guard 50 bob and your vehicle will sleep safely.

Diku's Complex Lodge (☎ 2465; A2 Hwy; s/tw with shared bathroom KSh300/600) North of JeyJey and tucked behind a wholesale store is this simple and slightly overpriced place. The spartan rooms (four walls and a bed) are spacious, but lack mosquito nets. The shared showers are clean, while the cement-block squat toilets could use a wee wash.

Kaisut Modern Hotel (s/tw with shared bathroom KSh150/200) Like the odd Smartie, this place is pretty purple on the outside and chocolate

brown on the inside. However, that's where the Smartie similarity ends – once you've had your first taste of this place you won't be coming back for more. The rooms are passable, some being decidedly less dark than others, but the toilets are truly grim.

Eating & Drinking

While not offering much culinary diversity, Marsabit has a few places that should leave you full as an egg.

Five Steers Hotel (A2 Hwy; meals KSh70-130) Easily the best local eatery. The ½ Federation meal (a bulging pile of rice, spaghetti, beef, vegetables and chapati) is filling and surprisingly tasty.

JeyJey Centre (☎ 2296; A2 Hwy; meals KSh120-200) Inside the popular lodge, JeyJey serves local favourites as well as the odd curry. Elevated prices don't necessarily reflect a higher standard of food.

Mamba Cafe (A2 Hwy; meals KSh50-100) This small shack next to JeyJey Centre is perfect for breakfast and their chai is spot on.

If you're short of food or supplies check out the market and **Nomads Shopping Store** (Post Office Rd; ☎ Mon-Sat).

Thanks to a strong Muslim influence, beer can be hard to find. The best spot for a cold one is **New Saku Bar** (Post Office Rd), which has a lively interior and a relaxed outdoor section.

Getting There & Away

Although improved security meant convoys and armed guards weren't being used to Moyale or Isiolo during our research, it's still wise to get the latest security and Ethiopian border information from locals and the police station before leaving town.

4WD

The Moyale road is less corrugated than the one to Isiolo, but its sharp stones will devour your tyres and the deep ruts will scrub your undercarriage. The only fuel north is in Moyale, so stock up here. As a rule, if buses and trucks travel in a convoy or take armed soldiers on board, you should too! For advice on travel to Loyangalani, see p337.

BUS

With security on the mend, a bus now connects Marsabit to Moyale (KSh600, 8½ hours). There's no designated stop – simply

MARSABIT TRIBESPEOPLE

As one of the safer northern frontier towns, Marsabit has acquired a large immigrant population from Kenya's less-stable neighbours. As well as the increasing number of Ethiopians, there's a well-established Somali population, whose influence on business and customs is immediately perceptible.

Most noticeable of the local tribes are the nomadic Rendille, occasionally dressed in skins and sporting elaborate braided hairstyles and beaded accessories. Like the Samburu and Maasai, they have shown little interest in adopting a more sedentary lifestyle, and remain defiantly non-Muslim people in a largely Muslim area.

Unsurprisingly, religious and cultural differences can cause friction between the communities, and violent outbreaks occur (see p317), though tourists are unlikely to encounter problems.

flag it down on the A2 Hwy as it comes through town around 5pm each day (en route from Nairobi!). The same service heads south to Isiolo (KSh600, 8½ hours) at 9am.

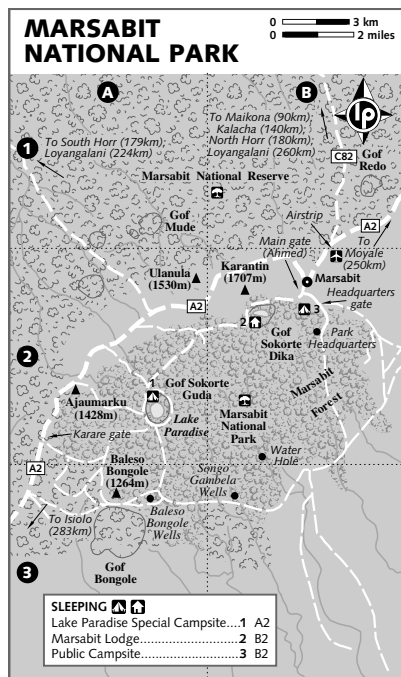
HITCHING

Trucks regularly ply the bus routes for about KSh100 less, but balancing your malnourished and bony arse on a metal bar above discontented cows for eight hours, while simultaneously battling the sun, wind and dust, is one tricky, tiring act. On the flip side, you'll have a lifetime of memories. There are also one or two trucks a week that leave Marsabit for Loyangalani (KSh700, seven hours) via Kargi. Most trucks pick up opposite JeyJey Centre.

MARSABIT NATIONAL PARK

This small **park** (adult/child US\$15/5), nestled on Mt Marsabit's upper slopes, hosts thick forests and a variety of wildlife, including lions, leopards, elephants and rhinos. During our visit we were lucky enough to see a large cobra at close range, with its neck spread into the infamous 'hood'. We say lucky because we were in our truck at the time!

You won't see much big wildlife on a quick drive-through of the park, so stick around and camp at **Lake Paradise**. This small



Getting There & Away

Despite it being a short walk to the park gate from town, you need your own 4WD to explore. In the wet season, you may find some park roads closed.

MOYALE

Let's be honest, nobody comes to Moyale to see Moyale; people come because it's the gateway to one of the world's most fascinating countries, Ethiopia. The drive from Marsabit is long and hard (on you and your 4WD), but it can be rewarding, with nomadic stone graves eerily rising out of the grassy plains, Dida Galgalu Desert's almost endless black shattered lava fields stretching out before you and the imposing Mega Escarpment seemingly climbing ever higher as you approach near Sololo. At times, as the journey rises in elevation, you'd be forgiven for thinking that an ocean, not a desert, sits in your path – it's simply that flat.

In stark contrast to the solitary journey here, Moyale's small, sandy streets burst with activity. The town's Ethiopian half is more developed, complete with sealed roads, and there's a palpable difference in its atmosphere.

Information

It's possible to enter Ethiopia for the day without a visa, but Ethiopian officials will hold your passport until you return. The border closes at 6pm – don't be late! For more information on crossing this border see p373. The Commercial Bank of Ethiopia, 2km from the border, changes travellers cheques (0.5% commission) as well as US dollars and euros. While it doesn't exchange Kenyan shillings, the Tourist Hotel will swap them for Ethiopian Birr (KSh8.4 to Birr1).

Holale Medical Clinic (A2 Hwy) Clinic with laboratory services.

Kenya Commercial Bank (A2 Hwy) No ATM. Changes cash and travellers cheques (KSh50 charge per leaf, plus KSh300 commission).

Post office (A2 Hwy) With Internet and card phones.

Sleeping & Eating

There are a few simple places to stay and eat on both sides of the border.

KENYA

Tawakal Hotel & Lodging (s/tw with shared bathroom KSh150/200) This place, with a lovely, relaxing

TV lounge, has comfortable beds in large, although slightly dark, rooms. Unfortunately the toilets are a cockroach committee room during the evenings, so go during daylight hours if you can! If that last bit didn't turn you off, the restaurant (meals KSh80 to KSh150) serves decent local meals.

Sherif Guest House (s/tw with shared bathroom KSh150/200) Sitting above the bank, this guest house has reasonably bright, clean rooms. Some rooms have mozzie nets, while others have mattresses too soft for their slat bases, so check out a few before choosing one. The communal toilet isn't pretty, but it's the best you'll find.

Medina Hotel (s/tw with shared bathroom KSh100/200) The cheapest rooms going, but they're dark and dirty.

Baghdad Hotel II (meals KSh80-150) This is the most popular local restaurant – sit down, swipe some flies and get stuffed.

Prison Canteen (meals KSh70-150) This kitsch place, complete with zebra motifs and thatched pavilions, is the canteen used by prison workers and it makes an atmospheric place for a meal (particularly *nyama choma* – barbecued meat, often goat) and a cold beer. You must be over 18 to enter the canteen.

ETHIOPIA

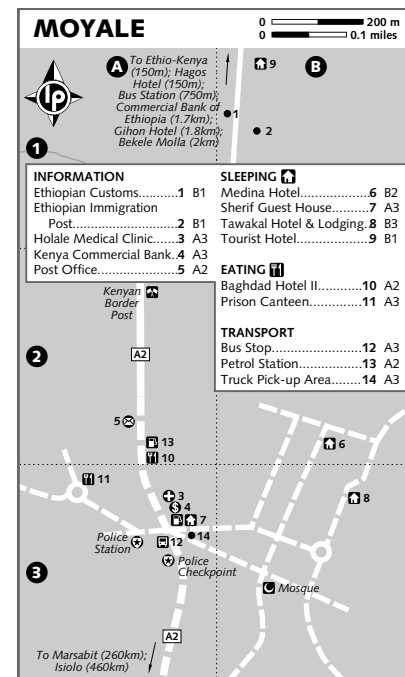
Since prices in the area are quoted in Ethiopian Birr, we've done the same here. For convenience the exchange rate is about KSh8.4 to Birr1.

Gihon Hotel (☎ 046-444 0065; d Birr20, with shared bathroom Birr15) This place is cheap, clean and has one of Moyale's best restaurants. The bathrooms (shared and private) or on the weak side but are passable.

Bekele Molla Hotel (☎ 046-4440030; camping Birr20, d Birr40) Located 2.3km from the border, this dog-eared hotel has large rooms with private bathrooms and mosquito nets. Sadly, there's no running water, so showers come in buckets.

Tourist Hotel (s with shared toilet Birr15) Sheltered behind its cool Rasta-inspired bar, this sleeping option has decent rooms that include private showers. The shared toilets are nothing to sing about, but thankfully they're nothing to scream about either.

Hagos Hotel (meals Birr8-12) Dig into some *injera* (Ethiopian bread-like staple) or some spice-laden roasted meat. There's a terrace



out back and some shady seating below a flowering tree. It's just up from the border and the Tourist Hotel.

Ethio-Kenya (breakfast Birr3-6) Across from the Hagos Hotel, Ethio-Kenya's leaf-laden terrace is a great place to eat breakfast and an animated location for having a few drinks later in the day.

Getting There & Away

A bus leaves town daily for Marsabit (KSh600, 8½ hours) and Isiolo (KSh1200, 17 hours) at 9.30am. Trucks servicing the same destinations pick up passengers near the main intersection in town. More details about hitching and driving between Moyale and Marsabit are found on p329. Drivers should note that petrol on the Ethiopian side of Moyale is half the cost of that in Kenya, handy to know if your budget is tight.

On the Ethiopian side, a bus leaves for Addis Ababa (Birr78.6) each morning at around 5.30am. The two-day journey is broken with a night's sleep at either Awasa or Shashemene.

MARALAL TO TURKANA'S EASTERN SHORE

With vibrant Samburu and Turkana tribes, treks along lush cliffs dropping from the Loroghi Plateau, desert camel safaris, mesmerising barren volcanic landscapes and the north's jade jewel, Lake Turkana, this region of northern Kenya has it all.

NORTH TO MARALAL

The 130km drive from Nyahururu to Maralal along the C77 is bumpy but straightforward, despite the tarmac running out at Rumuruti (we do hope you said goodbye, because you won't see it again any time soon!). Punctures on this route are common and the scenery is ummm...well let's just say that once you've set eyes on the Jade Sea, you'll have forgotten all about it.

If you're not in a hurry, there are two places to make the journey more memorable. Eighteen kilometres north of Rumuruti is **Bobong Camp** (☎ 062-32718; olmaisor@africaonline.co.ke; PO Box 5, Rumuruti; camping KSh250, 4-person bandas KSh3000), which offers some of Kenya's cheapest self-catered **camel safaris** (per camel per day KSh1000) and **cultural visits** (per group KSh5000) to Turkana and Samburu communities. They have plans to open a **Cheetah Education Centre**, and if you're lucky you may spot Claudia, a cheetah that roams nearby. Thanks to its hilltop location, the camp offers grand views over the Laikipia plains to a distant Mt Kenya. Nyahururu–Maralal matatus (KSh60, 45 minutes) can drop you here, but may charge full fare (KSh300).

Forty-five kilometres further north is **Mugie Ranch** (☎ 062-31045; www.mugieranch.com; half-day adult/child US\$15/7.50), a 200-sq-km working ranch that plays home to the Big Five, Grevy's zebras, endangered Jackson's hartebeest and Kenya's newest rhino sanctuary (21 black rhinos and two white). Part of the Laikipia Predator Project, they study the relationships between humans, livestock and predators to identify techniques for coexistence. Besides self-drive wildlife safaris, they offer exclusive top-end accommodation in the magnificent **Mutamaiyu House** (full board per person US\$306; 🍷). Comfort is guaranteed and full board includes almost everything except champagne and clay-pigeon shooting!

MARALAL

☎ 065

Tin roofs poke from the forested Loroghi Hills overlooking Maralal's wide tree-lined boulevards below. Sounds pretty, but it's not. Where Maralal's charm lies is in its frontier rough 'n' ready atmosphere, with colourful Samburu people wandering the dusty streets and weathered characters sitting beneath shabby street-side verandas. It seems eerily reminiscent of the classic Wild West.

Maralal has gained an international reputation for its fantastically frenetic **International Camel Derby** (see boxed text p334) and a visit over its duration is truly unforgettable. Less crazy but almost as memorable are the year-round camel safaris and treks that are offered here.

Sadly, most visitors don't delve into Maralal, stopping only for a night en route to Lake Turkana. The opposite is true for independent travellers, who often end up spending more time here than planned, simply because transportation north is erratic at best. Let's face it though, there are worse places to get stuck.

People here are generally friendly, but you'll quickly encounter Maralal's professional tout posse. You'll be offered everything from bangles to guiding services, friendly 'advice' and Samburu weddings, and their persistence can be truly astounding – use your best judgment and keep your wits about you.

In the colonial era, white settlers coveted Maralal and the surrounding undulating grasslands and coniferous forests, but colonial authorities quashed their ambitions due to anticipated violent opposition from the Samburu, for whom the area holds special significance.

Information

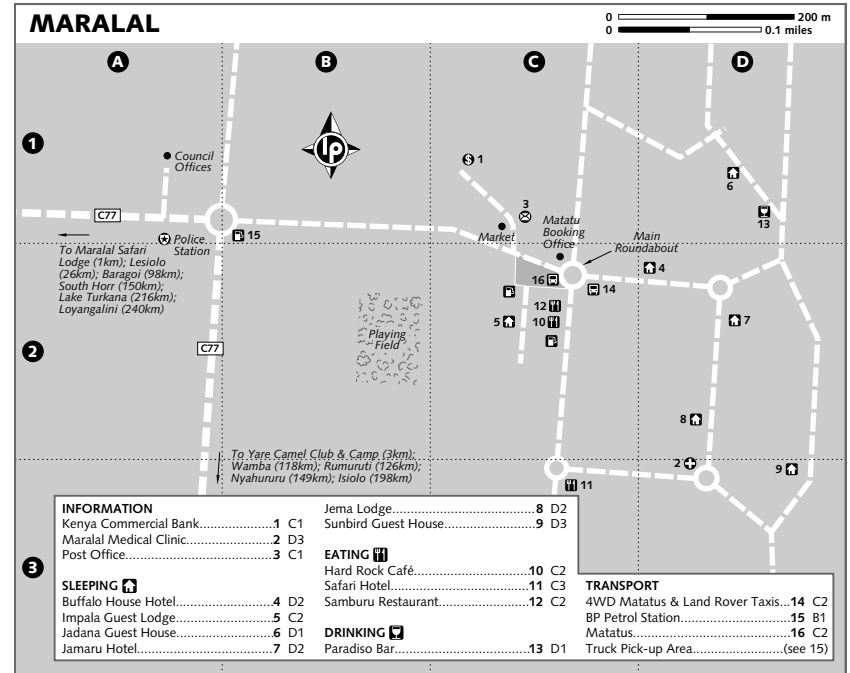
Kenya Commercial Bank (behind market) No ATM. Changes cash and travellers cheques (KSh50 commission per leaf).

Maralal Medical Clinic (🏥 Mon–Sat) With laboratory services. If your truck is feeling better than you are, stop here.

Maralal Safari Lodge (☎ 62220) Change travellers cheques outside banking hours. Poor rates.

Post office (next to market) With Internet and card phones.

Yare Camel Club & Camp (☎ 62295) Can exchange travellers cheques, but has low rates.



Sights & Activities

Trekking the Loroghi Hills Circuit, which takes in one of Kenya's most astounding vistas, Lesiolo (p335), is a rewarding five days and 78km. This trek is detailed in Lonely Planet's *Trekking in East Africa*.

Yare Camel Club & Camp (☎ 62295) organises guides and camels for independent camel safaris in the region. Self-catered day/overnight trips cost US\$20/35 per person. Fully catered overnight trips are US\$95.

Surrounding the town is the **Maralal National Sanctuary**, home to zebras, impalas, hyenas, elephants, elands, buffaloes and other varieties of plains wildlife, which you can see for free from the road leading into Maralal from the south. One of the best ways to take in the animals is with a cold beverage in hand at Maralal Safari Lodge's bar.

Sleeping

Advance booking is absolutely essential in Maralal during the derby.

Sunbird Guest House (☎ 62015; PO Box 74, Maralal; s/tw/d KSh350/450/600; 📍) Easily the best budget option in town, this shiny and friendly new

place has quiet, clean and comfortable rooms with nice linen, mosquito nets, sparkling bathrooms, 24-hour hot water and sockets to charge your mobile phone. You won't even have to search your pack for toilet paper – it hangs on a dispenser in the loo – go figure! Oh, add secure parking to its lengthy list of attributes.

Yare Camel Club & Camp (☎ 62295; yare@africaonline.co.ke; camping KSh200, s/tw/tr US\$20/28/35) This place is justifiably popular with campers and sits 3km south of town on the Isiolo–Nyahururu road. You can camp here or stay in cosy, expensive wooden bandas, which boast bathrooms, towels and free hot-water buckets for bathing. The campsite has its own cold showers and toilets. Thoughtfully constructed, Yare's facilities include a well-stocked bar and lounge, a restaurant, *nyama choma* on Wednesdays and Saturdays and a games room.

Jamaru Hotel (☎ 62093; s/tw/tr KSh300/600/1000, s/tw with shared bathroom KSh200/350) Behind its fancy façade lurk simple rooms with interesting but functional plumbing, as well as some cheaper options with less-pleasant

MARALAL INTERNATIONAL CAMEL DERBY

Inaugurated by Yare Safaris in 1990, the annual Maralal International Camel Derby held in early August is one of the biggest events in Kenya, attracting riders and spectators from the world's four distant corners. The races are open to anyone and the extended after-parties at Yare Camel Club & Camp are notorious – you're likely to bump into some genuine characters here.

Not interested in parties and just want some fast-moving camel action? Then the derby's first race has your name written all over it – it's for amateur camel riders. Ante up KSh1500 for your entry and another KSh2000 for your slobbering steed and get racing! It's a butt-jarring 11km journey. Don't even start feeling sorry for your arse – the professional riders cover 42km.

For further information contact **Yare Safaris** (☎ 065-62295; yare@africaonline.co.ke; PO Box 63006, Nairobi) or Yare Camel Club & Camp in Maralal.

shared facilities. All rooms have mosquito nets and sporadic hot water.

Jadana Guest House (s/tw KSh250/400; 📍) A rare option with secured parking, Jadana is unfortunately a bit run-down, with shabby sheets that you can almost see through. The rooms are a bit dark but do have mozzie nets and their own bathrooms.

Maralal Safari Lodge (☎ 62220, Nairobi 020-211124; full board s/d Oct-Jun US\$120/185, Jul-Sep & Christmas US\$150/225; 📍) This has large wooden chalets with vaulted ceilings, private balconies and a loft for children to snooze. It's very cosy, but we'd expect more for the price. The best feature of the lodge is the wildlife water hole at the bar, which nearly justifies paying KSh125 for a beer. The gate is 1km west of the BP station along the road to Baragoi.

Other sleeping options:

Jema Lodge (☎ 0723-868721; s KSh300)

Buffalo House Hotel (s/tw with shared bathroom KSh150/300)

Impala Guest Lodge (☎ 62292; s/tw with shared bathroom KSh150/300)

Eating

Unless you've got the *ugali* (maize meal set hard and served in brick-shaped pieces) or *nyama choma* (roast beef), few of your tastebuds will be scratched here. That said, a few places hammer out quality local eats.

Hard Rock Café (meals KSh60-170) While the Hard Rock Café chain would cringe at their name's use, this Somali-run restaurant is the town's best restaurant. Enjoy their chapati (spiced beef with chapati and side plate of diced tomatoes, onions and beans) while listening to Rick Astley and being peered over by mugs of Michael Jackson, the Spice Girls and 2Pac.

Samburu Restaurant (meals KSh80-200) A popular place, with the menu sporting the usual suspects and decent curries.

Safari Hotel (meals KSh80-150) If the lighting and wallpaper don't ruin your appetite, you'll get a good Kenyan meal here.

Jadana Guest House (meals KSh80-170) Reputedly one of the best places in Maralal for *nyama choma*.

Drinking

Some years ago, the District Commissioner ordered Maralal's discos closed due to the region's insecurity. Apparently no-one here has thought to fight for their right to party, as this order is still in place.

Buffalo House Hotel, with a pool table, is probably the most popular boozier in town. Another place to shoot some stick and down a Tusker is Paradiso Bar. The bars at Yare Camel Club & Camp and Maralal Safari Lodge are nicer, but if you're staying in town transport back may pose a problem.

Getting There & Away

Matatus serve Nyahururu (KSh300, three hours), Rumuruti (KSh250, 2½ hours) and Wamba (KSh350, 3½ hours) on a daily basis, usually in the mornings and early afternoons. Reaching Isiolo involves overnighting in Wamba to catch the early-morning south-bound matatu. There are no direct services to Nairobi – take a matatu or bus (KSh300, three hours) to Nyahururu and transfer there.

During the dry season a few 4WD matatus and Land Rover taxis head north each week to Baragoi (KSh300, three hours). If you're intending to head to Lake Turkana, you'll have to wait a few days to a week for a truck (KSh800 to KSh1000, nine to 12 hours). To shorten your wait, inquire around the town's

petrol stations and its transportation hub (the main roundabout) when you arrive instead of waiting until you want to leave. While breaking the truck journey in Baragoi or South Horr may seem like a good idea, remember that you may have to wait there for week before another truck trundles through.

Most transport leaves from the main roundabout, while trucks usually pick up passengers at the BP station.

The **BP petrol station** (C77 Hwy) is the town's most reliable. Petrol is KSh10 more per litre here than in Nyahururu, but cheaper than you'll find it north.

AROUND MARALAL

There are views and then there are views. **Lesiolo** (or 'World's View'), which perches atop an escarpment marking the Loroghi Plateau's dramatic end, offers an outrageous 120km panoramic view over the Rift Valley and serrated Tiati Hills. Lesiolo is part of the Malasso Eco-tourism Project and a viewing fee (adult/child US\$5/3) is now charged – pricey, but worth every penny.

The **Lesiolo Loop** (detailed in Lonely Planet's *Trekking in East Africa*) is a spectacular and gruelling 12km trek (eight to 10 hours) that takes you down the escarpment to the Rift Valley floor and then slowly brings you back up again. A local guide (Malasso Eco-tourism Project guides cost KSh1000 per day) is essential for this trek.

It's possible to **camp** (adult/child US\$10/5) at Lesiolo and the viewing fee is waived if you do so. There's water (collected rain), crude toilets and a whole lot of cow patties to go with the astounding view.

Getting There & Away

To get here, head north from the town, towards Baragoi; the Malasso Eco-tourism Project sign marks the turn-off about 17km from Maralal. Several more signs and helpful locals will point you the rest of the way. Patience and erratic transport can get you to the village of Poror, an easy 9km (two to three hour) walk from Lesiolo. You'll need a 4WD if driving in the wet season.

BARAGOI

The long descent off the Loroghi Plateau towards Baragoi serves up some sweet vistas, but none can compare with the sheer

magnitude of Lesiolo (left) – make sure you stop there en route. When you reach the bottom, the road ahead is laid out before you; it meanders across the acacia-dotted plains before disappearing into jagged hills that seemingly erupt from the horizon. Reaching Baragoi is a bit of an anticlimax as the dusty, diminutive town is clearly outdone by its surroundings.

Treks through the Suguta Valley to Lake Turkana are possible from Baragoi, and there are several English-speaking guides here to remind you! Make sure you get a good appraisal of the security situation before attempting this trek.

Be careful not to take photos in town as it's supposedly forbidden and police are keen to enforce the rule.

The **Mt Ngiri General Shop** (C77 Hwy) sells pricey petrol from the barrel and the **Morning Star Guest House** (C77 Hwy; s/tw with shared bathroom KSh200/400) provides a decent place for a night's kip. It's just south of the post office (no Internet) and offers secure parking, decent rooms and mozzie nets. Fine dining (spot blatant overstatement) is found at **Al-Mukaram Hotel** (C77 Hwy; meals KSh60).

Those with bulging pockets of Benjamin Frankins can stay at **Desert Rose** (☎ 0722-638774; www.desertrosekenya.com; full board incl activities low season US\$400/600, high season US\$450/700; 📍), a stunning ecolodge nestled on the southern slopes of Ol Donyo Nyiro. Each cottage is truly unique and blends into the natural surrounds. Whether sitting on the deck, bobbing in the pool or vegetating in your outdoor bathtub, the scenery will leave you gobsmacked. The Desert Rose turn-off is 18km north of Baragoi and is marked by a gas canister.

Getting There & Away

The dirt track from Maralal to Baragoi is much improved but still very rocky in places. The drive takes between 2½ and four hours. See opposite for details about riding trucks between Maralal, Baragoi and Loyangalani.

SOUTH HORR

South Horr is the next village north of Baragoi and sits in an acacia-paved valley beneath the towering peaks of **Ol Donyo Nyiro** (2752m) and **Ol Donyo Mara** (2066m). Despite the delightful craggy scenery high above, your eyes will rarely look up from the

colourful and enchanting Samburu herders who gather in the wavering trees' shadows.

Easy hikes are possible on the valley's forested lower slopes, while more motivated souls can try to bag Ol Donyo Nyiro's peak.

Your only accommodation option here (besides staying with locals) is the **Forest Camping Site** (camping KSh150), signposted on the left just south of town. Eucalyptus and acacias provide the shade, a local stream provides the water and a tin shack provides the long-drop loo at this simple site. **Winana House** (meals KSh40-80) and **Green Olive Hotel** (meals KSh40-80) offer limited local meals.

The road between Baragoi and South Horr is in reasonable shape and consists of compacted sand and bumpy rocky sections (glistening metamorphic gneisses for you rock hounds).

NORTH TO LAKE TURKANA

Almost 23km north of South Horr, when the valley opens to the northern plains, you'll see massive Mt Kulal in the distance and Devil's Hand, a large rock outcrop resembling a fist attempting to punch its way out of the earth's surface, to your immediate right. Just north is the eastern turn-off to Marsabit via Kargi, so if you're heading for Turkana keep left. If you get mixed up, just remember that Mt Kulal on your right is good and that Mt Kulal on your left is very, very bad (unless of course you're heading to Marsabit).

Further north, the scrub desert suddenly scatters and you'll be greeted by vast volcanic armies of shimmering bowling ball-sized boulders, cinder cones and reddish-purple

DID YOU KNOW?

- Lake Turkana's shoreline is longer than Kenya's entire Indian Ocean coast.
- The lake's water level was over 100m higher some 10,000 years ago and used to feed the mighty Nile.
- The first Europeans to reach the lake were Austrian explorers Teleki and von Höhnel in 1888. They proudly named it Lake Rudolf, after the Austrian Crown Prince at the time. It wasn't until the 1970s that the Swahili name Turkana was adopted.

hues – if they could talk they'd welcome you to Mt Kulal's shattered lava fields. If this arresting and barren Martian landscape doesn't take your breath away, the first sight of the sparkling Jade Sea a few kilometres north certainly will.

As you descend to the lake, South Island stands proudly before you, while Teleki Volcano's geometrically perfect cone lurks on Turkana's southern shore. Since most of you are probably pulled over at the moment, looking for your swimming kit, we thought we'd warn you about Turkana's escalating crocodile population.

LOYANGALANI

An oasis of doum palms, natural springs and vivid Turkana tribespeople, Loyangalani is one of northern Kenya's most fascinating places. It overlooks Lake Turkana and is surrounded by small ridges of pillow lava (evidence that this area used to be underwater) peppered with Turkana families' traditional stick and palm dwellings.

The El-Molo tribe (see p44), which is one of Africa's smallest, lives on the lakeshore just north of here in the villages of **Layeni** and **Komote**. Although outwardly similar to the Turkana, the El-Molo are linguistically linked to the Somali and Rendille people. Unfortunately the last speaker of their traditional language died before the turn of the millennium.

As with the Maasai, tourism has wrought inevitable changes in the El-Molo and Turkana peoples' lifestyles, and many travellers feel that the tribal issue has been overly commercialised. You'll certainly pay handsomely for taking any photographs.

Information

Other than the post office (no Internet) and the Catholic mission occasionally selling petrol out of the barrel at exorbitant prices, there's little in the way of services.

Sights & Activities

SOUTH ISLAND NATIONAL PARK

Opened as a public reserve in 1983 and made a World Heritage Site by Unesco in 1997, this tiny 39-sq-km purplish volcanic island and **park** (adult/child US\$15/5) is completely barren and uninhabited apart from large populations of crocodiles, poisonous snakes and feral goats. Spending the night at a **special**

campsite (adult/child US\$8/5) makes for an even more eerie trip. All the sites lack water, firewood (there are no trees on the island) and toilets. The southern site is the most sheltered from the wind, so your tent is less likely to take flight here.

In calm weather a speedboat can reach the island in 30 minutes and circumnavigate it in another hour. If winds crop up, trip times can easily double. You can hire a boat from Oasis Lodge (per hour KSh2500) or from a local, but always check the vessel's seaworthiness and the impending weather.

MT KULAL

Mt Kulal dominates Lake Turkana's eastern horizon, and its forested volcanic flanks offer up some serious hiking possibilities. No matter what the local guides tell you, trekking up to the summit (2293m) from Loyangalani in a day isn't feasible. Plan on several days for a return trip, or part with substantial sums of cash (KSh8000 to KSh12,000) for a lift up Mt Kulal to the villages of Arapal or Gatab. From there you can head for the summit and spend a long day (eight to 10 hours) hiking back down to Loyangalani. The volcano's view over Lake Turkana and Chalbi Desert are sublime.

OTHER ACTIVITIES

Swimming is a perfect way to battle the heat and a dip in Oasis Lodge's two peaceful spring-fed pools will set you back KSh300. Swimming in the saline lake is free but you'll have to deal with crocodiles in the depths and with scorpions and vipers on shore – good luck! If you'd rather battle a large Nile perch, Oasis Lodge sells **fishing** licences for KSh400 and rents fishing boats for KSh2500 per hour.

Sleeping & Eating

Let's face it, you came north for adventure, not comfort. If you're camping remember to tie down your tent as early evening winds pick up tremendously and can be blowing at 60km/h by 8pm.

Palm Shade Camp (camping KSh350, s/tw rondavel with shared bathroom KSh500/1000) Drop your tent on some grass beneath acacias and doum palms or crash in their simple domed rondavels (round huts). The huts have simple wood beds with foam mattresses and unique walls with meshed cut-outs that let light and

heavenly evening breezes in. Throw in the town's best toilets and showers, a cooking shelter and electricity until 10pm, and your decision is an easy one.

Oasis Lodge (☎ 020-503267; willtravel@swiftkenya.com; full board s/tw US\$150/200; 📶) This overpriced lodge offers simple cement-floor bungalows with dated bathrooms. The food, spring-fed swimming pools (KSh300 for nonguests) and view from the open air bar are its best assets.

Mosaretu Women's Group Campsite (camping KSh350, grass huts with shared bathroom s/tw KSh350/700) Next to Palm Shade and outside the gates of the Oasis Lodge, this place offers camping and crude beds in traditional Turkana grass huts. The toilets are a bit dire and even though there's no electricity, you still have to listen to Oasis Lodge's noisy generator.

New Saalama Hotel (meals KSh50-110) Although it lacks any signage (ask a local to point it out), this little shack with wood benches, crooked tables and candlelight is the best place for a local meal. They're usually out of food soon after sunset.

Cold Drink Hotel (meals KSh50-110) Run by a local Somali family, they serve up Kenyan dishes and a version of Ethiopian *injera* (a thin, cold, rubbery pancake). Their smoky chai is worth skipping.

If you ask around, you may find a villager who'll cook up a meal of Nile perch for you in their home.

Getting There & Away

There are one or two trucks a week that stop in Loyangalani en route to Maralal (KSh1000, 10 to 12 hours) from Marsabit. Trucks heading in any other direction are even more rare.

If you're travelling in your own vehicle, you have two options to reach Marsabit: continue northeast from Loyangalani across the dark stones of the Chalbi Desert towards North Horr, or head 67km south towards South Horr and take the eastern turn-off near Devil's Hand (see opposite). The 270km Chalbi route (seven to eight hours) is OK in the dry season but can be treacherous after rain. We met a UN convoy that spent three days stuck in mud out here, so make sure you're carrying adequate food and water with your spare tyres, compass and fuel when you set out. It's also wise to ask for directions every chance you get,

otherwise it's possible to take the wrong track and not realise until hours later. The 241km southern route (six to seven hours) via Devil's Hand, the Karoli Desert and Kargi is composed of compacted sands and is less difficult in the rainy season.

For those with money to burn, Oasis Lodge arranges light-plane transport to the local airstrip and rents vehicles for KSh5000 per day plus KSh100 per km.

SIBILOI NATIONAL PARK

A Unesco World Heritage Site and probably Kenya's most remote **national park** (www.sibiloil.com; adult/child US\$15/5), Sibiloi is located up the eastern shore of Lake Turkana and covers 1570 sq km. It was here that Dr Richard Leakey discovered the skull of a *Homo habilis* believed to be 2½ million years old, and where others have unearthed evidence of *Homo erectus*. Despite the area's fascinating prehistory, fossil sites and wonderful arid ecosystem, the difficulties involved in getting this far north tend to discourage visitors, which is a real shame. It seems slightly ironic that the so-called 'Cradle of Mankind' is now almost entirely unpopulated.

Today it's possible to see fossils of a giant tortoise that lived three million years ago, an ancient species of crocodile (*Euthecodon brumpti*) that grew up to 15m long, and a big-tusked behemoth (*Elephas recki*), a predecessor of today's elephant. The petrified forest south of these sites is evidence that the area was lush and forested seven million years ago. Every year rains and wind expose more fossils, so many that the most impressive are simply ringed with stones. Never remove any fossils from these sites as future research may be compromised.

The National Museums of Kenya (NMK) maintain a small museum and **Koobi Fora** (www.kfrp.com), a research base that is often home to permanent researchers, visiting scientists and students. It's usually possible to sleep in one of the base's **bandas** (per person KSh1000) or to pitch a tent in KWS' **campsites** (adult/child US\$8/5).

It's best to come in July and August, when the ferocious temperatures break slightly and when activity increases at Koobi Fora. Contact both **KWS** (kws@kws.org; PO Box 219, Lodwar) and **NMK** ([020-3742131](tel); www.museums.or.ke; PO Box 40658, Nairobi) before venturing in this direction.

Getting There & Away

In the dry season it's a tricky seven-hour drive north from Loyangalani to Sibiloi. Make sure you get precise directions from locals in Loyangalani as well as from the KWS and NMK before heading north. In the wet season your only real option is to fly, which means dropping some dough and chartering a plane.

KALACHA

Huddled around a permanent watery oasis in the middle of the Chalbi Desert, the village of Kalacha is home to the fascinating Gabbra people and many a doum palm. Take shelter in the shade and watch the Gabbra at work or check out the biblical murals in the church, a prelude for those of you heading northward to Ethiopia. The changing colours in the desert at sunset are reason enough alone to stop here.

The Kalacha Women's Group are soon to open **Kalacha Oasis Lodge & Camping** ([069-2296](tel); PO Box 298, Marsabit), which will have basic accommodation and camping facilities. Funds raised flow back to the Gabbra community. You'll have to bring your own food, though.

Funded by the EU and Farm Africa, **Kalacha Camp** ([062-32890](tel); PO Box 161, Nanyuki; s/tw US\$110/220, full board US\$165/330) comprises four simple bandas made from doum palm trunks and leaves, each with their own toilet and cold-water showers. The camp is owned by the Gabbra community (managed by Tropic Air) and provides much-needed income for their continued survival.

Kalacha sits north of the road connecting North Horr and Maikona, which puts it 120km northeast of Loyangalani, 150km northwest of Marsabit and 65km from the Ethiopian border. **Tropic Air** ([062-32890](tel); www.tropicair-kenya.com) charter flights from Nanyuki are your only option in the wet season.

MARICH TO TURKANA'S WESTERN SHORE

Despite boasting some of northern Kenya's greatest attributes, like copious kilometres of Jate Sea shoreline, striking volcanic landscapes and vivid Turkana tribes, this remote corner of the country has seen relatively few visitors. With security on the mend there's

now a unique opportunity for independent travellers to explore here, thanks to regular public transport currently covering the breadth of the region. The only downside for those of you in your own vehicle is the fact that you can't get your vehicle across the lake or into Sudan, which makes for a lot of backtracking.

MARICH TO LOKICHAR

The spectacular descent from Marich Pass through the lush, cultivated Cherangani Hills leads to arid surroundings, with saisol plants, cactus trees and acacias lining both the road and the chocolate-brown Morun River. Just north, the minuscule village of Marich, near the A1's junction with the B4 Kerio Valley road, marks your entrance into northern Kenya.

Sights & Activities

Although the northern plains may beckon, it's worth leaving the 4WD and heading into the hills for some eye-popping and leg-loving trekking action. **Mt Sekerr** (3326m) is a few kilometres northwest of Marich and can be climbed comfortably in a three-day round trip via the agricultural plots of the Pokot tribe, passing through forest and open moors. The views from the top are magnificent in clear weather.

The **Cherangani Hills**, which sit immediately south, are also ripe with trekking options. Reaching the dome of **Mt Koh** (3211m), which soars some 1524m above the adjacent plains, is a hard but rewarding one-day slog. A more horizontally endowed (13km one way) and vertically challenged (only 300m elevation gain) trek is possible up the **Weimei Valley** from **Sigor to Tamkal**. See p315 for more Cherangani Hills trekking options.

The **Marich Pass Field Studies Centre** (right) offers English-speaking Pokot and Turkana guides are for half-day (KSh450), full-day (KSh550) and overnight (KSh1000) treks. The guides can also help you explore the numerous small **caves** dotted around the hills, most of which have special significance for the local Pokot.

If you'd rather explore with your vehicle, you can head southeast from Marich past Sigor and check out the **Elgeyo Escarpment**, which rises above the Kerio Valley to more than 1830m in places and offers spectacular views and waterfalls. At the foot of the

escarpment (and accessible by matatu) is **Lomut** and its fascinating Saturday market, which brings together the pastoral Pokot from the northern plains and the farming Pokot from the southern hills. Much of the Pokot culture remains intact and tourists are usually blissfully ignored.

About 15km north of Marich along the A1 Hwy to Lokichar is the turn-off for **Nasolot National Reserve** (adult/child US\$15/5) and **Turkwell Gorge** (admission incl with Nasolot NR). Although the reserve is home to elephants, lesser kudus, lions and leopards, you'll probably only spot the diminutive dik-diks bounding by the roadside. The main attraction is the gorge itself, with towering rock walls and plenty of pretty precipices. The imposing hydroelectric dam sits about 23km from the reserve gate, which is 6km off the A1. Those without vehicles are allowed to hike in the park with an escort (free with reserve admission). With security back under control, the KWS is hoping to soon reopen the campsites.

In the dry, rugged hills further north along the A1 is the **South Turkana National Reserve**. The reserve has yet to be developed and, like Nasolot, it's not possible to spend the night. The roads are in brutal shape (4WD only) and if you want to explore, you must take a ranger with you. Entry is free but you'll have to negotiate a fee for the ranger.

Just when you're getting to like the feel of the scrub desert en route to Lokichar, a sudden and all-too-brief burst of green and heavenly cool envelop the road and remind you of the lushness you've left behind.

Sleeping & Eating

The only reasonable accommodation between Marich and Lokichar is at **Marich Pass Field Studies Centre** (www.gg.rhul.ac.uk/MarichPass; PO Box 564, Kapenguria; camping KSh300, dm KSh350, s/tw/tr/q KSh1100/1500/2250/3000, with shared bathroom KSh700/950/1425/1900), which is well signposted just north of Marich and the A1's junction with the B4. Essentially a residential facility for visiting student groups, it's also a great place for independent travellers to base their adventures. The centre occupies a beautiful site alongside the Morun River and is surrounded by dense bush and woodland. The birdlife is prolific, monkeys and baboons have the run of the place, and warthogs, buffaloes, antelopes and elephants are occasional visitors. Facilities include a secure

campsite with drinking water, toilets, showers and firewood, as well as dorm beds and simple, comfortable bandas. There's a **restaurant** (meals KSh220-350) with vegetarian options, but all meals should be ordered in advance. They also offer self-catering facilities, though there are few supplies in the area. Besides guides for trekking, they offer guided walks discussing ethnobotany (KSh500) and birds (KSh600) for groups of up to five.

Getting There & Away

The easiest way to reach Marich is from Kitale via Makutano and Marich Pass on the oh-so-scenic A1 Hwy, which is often described as 'Kenya's most spectacular tarmac road'. The buses plying the A1 between Kitale and Lodwar can drop you anywhere along the route, whether at Marich, the field studies centre or at the turn-off to Nasolot National Reserve. You may be asked to pay the full fare to Lodwar (KSh700), but a smile and some patient negotiating should reduce the cost.

The other route is extremely rough (4WD only) and approaches Marich along the B4 from Lake Baringo through the Kito Pass and across the Kerio Valley to Tot; it's tough going, with little in the way of signs, but it does allow you to visit the hot waterfalls at Kapedo. From Tot, the track skirts the northern face of the Cherangani Hills and may be impassable after heavy rain.

Between Marich and Lokichar the A1 is a bumpy mess of corrugated dirt and lonely islands of tarmac. The first 40km north of Lokichar is better but you'll still spend more time on the shoulder than on the road. The opposite is true for the remaining 60km to Lodwar, where patches of outnumber potholes and driving is straightforward.

If security takes a turn for the worse the police checkpoint just north of Marich may again start requiring vehicles to travel in convoy to Lodwar. Another thing to keep an eye for on this stretch are the flash floods that periodically fill the odd dry river bed with churning chocolate milk – be patient and remember that the water can drop as quickly as it rose.

LODWAR

☎ 054

Besides Lokichoggio near the Sudan border, Lodwar is the only town of any size in the northwest (although that's not saying

much). Barren volcanic hills skirted by traditional Turkana dwellings sit north of town and make for impressive early morning sunrise spots. Lodwar has outgrown its days as just an isolated administrative outpost of the Northern Frontier District, and has now become the major service centre and tourist hub for the region. If you're visiting Lake Turkana, you'll find it convenient to stay here for at least one night.

Information

The Kenya Commercial Bank (it has no ATM) changes cash and charges 1% commission (minimum KSh250) for travellers cheques. The post office has Lodwar's only Internet connection.

Sights & Activities

There's little to do in the town itself, but the atmosphere is not altogether unpleasant if you can stand the heat, and just listening to the garrulous locals is entertainment in itself. The small market is a good place to watch women weaving baskets, and there's an endless stream of Turkana hawkers who wander around town selling the usual souvenirs.

You're bound to be approached by several sharp young businessmen calling themselves the Lodwar Tour Guides Association. Each will proudly unfold their photocopied piece of paper stating they are an official guide and most will also humorously claim to be the chairman. They'll offer to escort you to Lake Turkana, into the hills and local communities, or even to Central Island National Park. They try hard to please and are a useful source of information, although their prices are a bit steep for the services provided – KSh1500 just for a guide to the lake!

Sleeping

Unless you're both cold-blooded and thick-skinned, it's worth spending more for a room with a fan and mosquito net. The cheaper places are hellishly hot and the mosquitoes can be something fierce.

Nawoitrong Guest House (☎ 21208; camping KSh200, s/tw with shared bathroom KSh400/600, s/tw cottages from KSh700/900) Built entirely out of local materials and run by a local women's group, Nawoitrong is an excellent option, and the only one for campers. Thatched roofs alleviate the need for fans and all rooms have mozzie nets. There's a pleasant restaurant

HARAMBEE

The women's group guesthouse in Lodwar is just one example of the very Kenyan concept of *harambee*, a cornerstone of independence ideology drummed into the national consciousness by the first president, Jomo Kenyatta. Essentially it encapsulates the idea of a common goal, encouraging community self-help, and today few towns in Kenya are without their own local initiatives.

In practice, this can take on many forms. Numerous highly respected enterprises have sprung up around the country, from the Green Towns Partnership to the Youth Awareness and Resource Initiative (YARI), founding projects promoting everything from women's rights and community health to street kids and drug awareness, with considerable success. However, there are also plenty of organisations whose fund-raising activities are limited to fleecing tourists, and probably an equal number whose profits somehow never quite make it back to the community.

In politics, too, *harambee* has proved to be a double-edged sword. The idea of togetherness preoccupied Kenyatta to such an extent that any opposition came to resemble a dangerous strain of dissent, renewing his determination to run a one-party state. Despite increasing democratisation, this situation largely prevailed under Daniel arap Moi, and the rallying cry of 'national unity' can still overrule any number of objections. It seems that the new government, elected in 2002, is keen to put the darker side of *harambee* to rest.

and the shared-bathroom prices include breakfast. The one-bedroom Ekaato cottages are cheap but not nearly as charming as the two-bedroom Nadoua cottage, which also has a cooking area. The Napekitoi cottage is perfect for families.

Hotel Splash (☎ 21099; PO Box 297, Lodwar; s KSh450) Well signposted and west of the main crossroads, Hotel Splash has great, smallish singles with fans, mozzie nets, sitting chairs, reading lamps and decent bathrooms. The foam mattresses are pleasantly firm and there's secure parking to boot.

Turkwel Lodge (☎ 21099; s/tw KSh350/700, cottages s/d KSh800/1350; 📍) Turkwel offers spacious rooms containing fans and nets, but lacks the crisp, clean feel of its neighbour, Hotel Splash. Some beds are a bit of an Ikea slat experiment gone horribly wrong – not so comfy. There's secure parking and quiet, more roomy cottages at the rear.

Africana Silent Lodge (☎ 21254; s/tw with shared toilets KSh150/300; 📍) Small and cell-like, these rooms aren't what you'd call pleasant, but they are cheap. The shared squat toilets are equally displeasing. On the upside, there's fans throughout and safe parking inside.

Eating

Despite some impressive menus, most eateries only have one or two dishes on the go at once. If you want something specific on the menu you'll have to order a few hours in advance.

Turkwel Hotel (meals KSh60-210) Their green lentil curry is particularly good, but you have to get your order in about three hours prior! Oh, and don't forget to order the chapattis at the same time. Their local dishes require less waiting and are some of the best in town.

Nawoitrong Guest House (meals KSh160-225) Burgers and toasted sandwiches join local curries and various meaty fries on their menu.

Africana Silent Lodge (meals KSh40-110) A popular eatery with locals for cheap Kenyan fare and fried fish.

New Salama Hotel (meals KSh40-110) The best place for pre-departure breakfasts of eggs, chai and *mandazis* (Kenya's triangular version of a doughnut).

If you're self-catering, there's a well-stocked Naipa Supermarket next to the Kobil petrol station.

Drinking & Entertainment

Locals, young and old alike, love the video rooms scattered around town, where a kung fu flick or Hollywood blockbuster will cost you about KSh10. Some are more deafening than others and power failures seem painfully tied to crucial scenes – can you tell us what the heck happened in *The Crying Game*?

The large outdoor bar at the Nature Hotel is probably the best place to have a drink, although the Turkwel Hotel is still the more popular of the two.

Getting There & Away

Several companies, including Kenya Witness, have daily buses to Kitale (KSh500, 8½ hours) each night at 7.30pm (most services pick up passengers near the New Salama Hotel), while erratic matatus serve Kalokol (KSh150, one hour) and Lokichoggio (KSh500, three hours).

While UN vehicles were still travelling in armed convoys along the sublimely sealed 210km stretch of tarmac to Lokichoggio at the time of research, the security situation had improved enough that local trucks and matatus weren't travelling in convoy or taking armed escorts. Always check with locals and police to ascertain the latest security situation before travelling on this road.

Drivers will find several petrol stations here, though it's almost KSh20 more per litre than in Kitale.

ELIYE SPRINGS

Spring water percolates out of crumbling bluffs and brings life to this remote sandy shore of Lake Turkana, some 66km north-east of Lodwar by road. Growing from the moist sloping sands are oodles of doum palms, which give this usually barren environment a pronounced, albeit incongruous, tropical feel. Down on the slippery shore children play in the lake's warm waters while Central Island lurks magically on the distant horizon. These lake views are almost as spellbinding as the stars that occupy the dark night sky.

On arrival you'll encounter an instant small crowd of colourful Turkana women selling trinkets, ranging from bracelets and fish-backbone necklaces to fossilised hippo teeth. As only a few vehicles visit each week, it's a real buyer's market and prices are absurdly low. It's worth a look because the same items in Lodwar cost much more, despite most of them being made here.

Beneath the bluff, the skeleton of an old beach resort sits half eaten by its surroundings and makes for an interesting place to drop your tent. Locals now manage the leftovers and charge KSh200 for camping and KSh250 for sleeping beneath one of the remaining thatched roofs. Besides the spring water there are no facilities, so you'll have to be entirely self-sufficient. Note that more than the odd scorpion and carpet viper also call this place home, so shoes are a good idea.

Getting There & Away

The turn-off for Eliye Springs is signposted about halfway along the Lodwar–Kalokol road. The gravels are easy to follow until they suddenly peter out and you're faced with a fork in the road – stay left. The rest of the way is a mix of gravel, deep sand and dirt tracks (4WD only), which can turn into a muddy nightmare in the wet season.

If you don't have your own vehicle, you can usually arrange a 4WD in Lodwar to drop you off and pick you up at a predetermined time later for about KSh4500.

FERGUSON'S GULF

While a more accessible part of Lake Turkana than Eliye Springs, Ferguson's Gulf has none of its southern neighbour's tropical charm. Fishing boats in various states of disrepair litter its grubby western beach and a definite feeling of bleakness pervades. The gulf's eastern shore (accessible by boat only) is just as desolate, but has an inexplicably attractive air about it.

Birdlife is prolific, particularly in March and April, when thousands of European migratory birds stop here on their way north. There are also hippos and crocodiles (and bilharzia), so seek local advice before diving in.

If you're planning on visiting Central Island National Park (opposite) or Sibilo National Park (p338), this is the best place to arrange a boat.

Set on the eastern shore, **Lake Turkana Lodge** (☎ 0722-703666; turkana@hillbarrett.com; camping US\$10, s/tw US\$25/40) is the only official accommodation in the area. Sixteen large timber cabins, each with their own bathroom and scenic veranda, provide sleeping quarters, but lighting is limited at best – bring a torch. The skeleton staff can provide meals (with advance warning) or for a small fee you can use the kitchen. The bar is an excellent place to absorb the scenery and is usually well stocked with beer, water and soft drink. Boat transfers across the gulf are an additional US\$10.

There's no longer any accommodation in the nearby village of **Kalokol**.

Getting There & Away

Ferguson's Gulf is accessed from Kalokol, which is reachable by matatu from Lodwar along a good 75km stretch of tarmac. From Kalokol, follow the tarmac north for a few

kilometres before turning left onto the dirt road next to the fading Italian fishing project sign. This leads towards a substantial building before veering to the right and dropping you in the middle of the gulf's fishing fleet. For those walking from Kalokol, you can shorten your trek from 6km to 4km by hiring a local to guide you through the sea of dead acacias.

CENTRAL ISLAND NATIONAL PARK

Rising from the depths of Lake Turkana and climbing 170m above its surface is the Central Island Volcano, which was last seen belching molten sulphur and steam just over three decades ago. Today the island is quiet, but its stormy volcanic history is told by the numerous craters scarring its weathered facade. Several craters have coalesced to form two sizeable lakes that are almost 1km wide and 80m deep.

Both a **national park** (adult/child US\$15/5) and Unesco World Heritage Site, Central Island is an intriguing place to visit and the view atop the cinder cones is well worth the short scramble. But no matter how tempting, stay clear of the lakes as the island is famous for its 14,000 or so Nile crocodiles, some of which are massive in proportion. Like Ferguson's Gulf, the island boasts countless numbers of migratory birds in March and April.

Camping (adult/child US\$8/5) is possible and, unlike South Island NP, there are trees to tie your tent to. However, there's no water or any other facilities, so come prepared.

Hiring a boat from Ferguson's Gulf is the only real option to get here. Depending on what you drive up in, locals can ask anywhere from KSh10,000 to KSh50,000 for the trip. A fair price is KSh6000 for a motorboat – don't ever think about being cheap and taking a sailboat. The 10km trip and sudden squalls that terrorize the lake's waters aren't to be taken lightly, so ensure the craft is sound before boarding.

NORTH TO LOKICHOGGIO

Although the A1 Hwy from Lodwar to Lokichoggio via the UN refugee camps at Kakuma has been off limits to everyone but armed aid convoys for the last several years, improved security means that the odd intrepid traveller is now able to taste this remote northwest corner of Kenya. Remember that it's imperative to check with

locals, NGOs and police in Lodwar before heading off.

The perfect tarmac between Lodwar and Lokichoggio is a sight in itself – simply transcendent! As you head northwest from Lodwar, you'll wind through some rocky bluffs before dropping into a vast valley resembling a lush lawn in wet season and a white sea during drier periods. After passing through the Pelekech Range's stratified slopes, which mark the valley's western side, you'll see a dramatic and seemingly fictitious horizon of sharp mountainous peaks beyond the numerous refugee camps at Kakuma. In reality your eyes are making mountains out of mole hills, as the seemingly large peaks are only 100m- to 200m-high volcanic cinder cones.

Along the entire route you'll encounter rather marvellous Turkana people in striking tribal attire, either walking the roadside, selling sacks of charcoal or resting in the shade of lonely trees. Your steady gaze at these colourful souls will only be broken by the odd termite mound mystifyingly giving you the middle finger.

Despite being backed by the Mogila Range, Lokichoggio is rather unattractive. However, what it lacks in looks it makes up for in aid activity, with the World Food Program (WFP), UN and other NGOs basing their Sudanese operations here. Twenty WFP aircraft and six UN Hercules were based here when we were in town.

Information

There's a post office with Internet access, but no banks. High-speed Internet is available in Trackmark Camp and Africa Expeditions for KSh10 per minute.

Sleeping & Eating

The need to house NGO workers in Lokichoggio has resulted in some pretty plush accommodation options being added to the mix.

Makuti Bar (☎ 0722-257262; A1 Hwy; d with shared bathroom KSh400-500) This is the only reasonable budget option in town, with small but clean rooms. All have mozzie nets and the cheaper rooms near the bar (which is a bit loud) also have fans.

Trackmark Camp (☎ 054-32245; lokicamp@yahoo.com; full board tents s US\$50, bandas s/d US\$55/80; ♿ ♿ ♿) An absolute haven of peace with

a gorgeous pool, sun deck and open-air TV room laden with comfy cushions. Choose between very comfortable, tastefully decorated air-conditioned *toculs* (bandas) or well-appointed semipermanent tents. You'll save US\$5 if you opt for a shared bathroom. The restaurant (breakfast KSh350, buffets KSh750) offers great Western fare and the menu differs daily. Nonguests can swim and eat lunch for KSh1000.

Africa Expeditions (☎ 0721-262440; full board tents US\$45, bungalows s US\$50-55; 🏠 🚗 🚚) Similar in scope to Trackmark Camp, but offers none of their friendliness or laid-back vibe – it's all business here.

The town's most popular **restaurant** (meals KSh60-250) is out front of the Makuti Bar and serves *nyama choma*, roast chicken and fried fish.

Getting There & Away

The border with Sudan was closed at the time of writing – check for updates at Lodwar's military post.

Petrol in Lokichoggio is readily available and costs KSh10 less per litre than it does in Lodwar. For more information on the road conditions in the area and the transport options available between Lokichoggio and Lodwar, go to p342.