

Western Kenya



Imagine western Kenya and you'll probably only think of Masai Mara's savanna and wildlife. After all, the Mara is astounding and the only part of this region most travellers ever see.

Those few of you who imagine 4000m peaks, rainforests crawling with birdlife and rare primates, rolling hills draped in tea plantations, and fishing boats dotting Lake Victoria's horizon – you're the lucky ones. You've probably already experienced this amazing region.

Western Kenya's highlands sit atop the Elgeyo and Mau Escarpments. The verdant north is a cultivated patchwork of farms and the south an abode to countless tea plantations. Kakamega Forest Reserve and Saiwa Swamp National Park are two bastions of pristine wilderness and wildlife amidst this agricultural heartland. With Mt Elgon and the Cherangani Hills rising skyward from its northern reaches, unique trekking possibilities also abound.

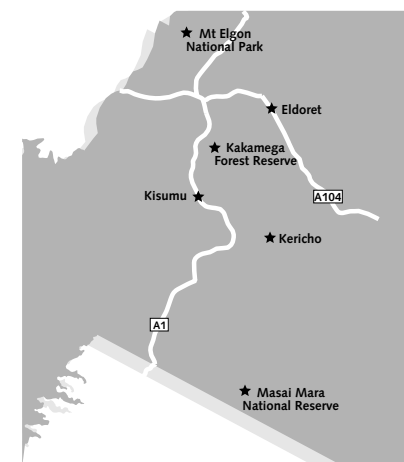
Sitting in the shadows of the highlands are Lake Victoria's captivating lowlands, home to the city of Kisumu, Ruma National Park, Mfangano Island and numerous fishing villages.

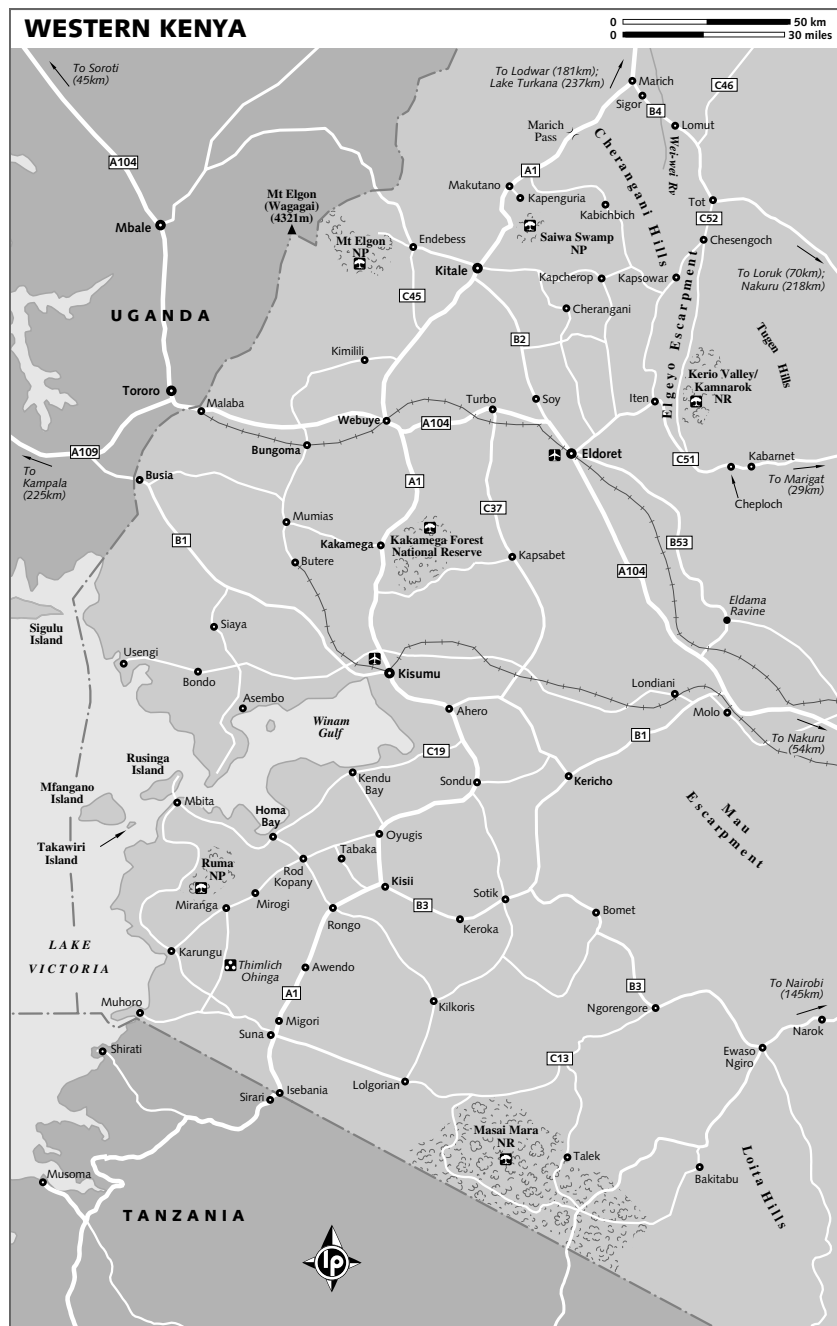
The Luo, the third-largest tribe in Kenya, live around Lake Victoria, while the Luyha, Gusii and Kalenjin live in the highlands (see p43). With the exception of the Maasai, who've been inundated with tourists, western Kenya is your best chance to get to know the locals.

Go on. Be one of the lucky ones. Delve a little deeper into western Kenya.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Witnessing the glorious spectacle of rush-hour, wildebeest style, during their annual migration at **Masai Mara National Reserve** (p286)
- Watching trees battle to the death while wandering the depths of **Kakamega Forest Reserve** (p304)
- Waking to clear skies and astounding views on the crater rim at **Mt Elgon National Park** (p312)
- Wasting an hour indulging in divine freshly made cheese at **Eldoret** (p306)
- Wading into the crowds and smoky surroundings on the shore of Lake Victoria for some fried tilapia in **Kisumu** (p290)
- Walking through the manicured tea fields that carpet the rolling hills of **Kericho** (p300)





Climate

Throughout the year the lowlands around Lake Victoria are fairly hot and humid, while the area around the Western Highlands are decidedly cooler. The heaviest rains fall between March and May, with almost 200mm falling in April. The lesser rains fall in November and December before things really dry out in January.

National Parks & Reserves

With the Big Five roaming the stunning savanna of Masai Mara National Reserve (right), prolific birdlife, primates and flying squirrels soaring through the dense rainforests of Kakamega Forest Reserve (p304) and 4000m peaks beckoning trekkers at Mt Elgon National Park (p312), it is clear western Kenya's parks have it all.

More wildlife and unique surrounds can be found at Ruma National Park (p297), home to Kenya's only roan antelope population, and at Saiwa Swamp National Park (p315), which hosts rare sitatunga antelopes and De Brazza's monkeys.

If you want to truly disown the beaten track, hit Lake Kannarok and Kerio Valley National Reserves (p309).

Getting There & Away

AIR

Kenya Airways (☎ 020-3274747; www.kenya-airways.com) connects Nairobi (Wilson Airport) with Kisumu and Eldoret, while both **Airkenya** (☎ 020-605745; www.airkenya.com) and **Safarilink** (☎ 020-600777; www.safarilink.co.ke) link Wilson Airport with Masai Mara National Reserve. See Getting There & Away under the relevant sections for more details.

BUS & MATATU

The road to western Kenya inevitably leads through Nakuru. From there countless buses and matatus (minibuses) run north to Kitale, via Eldoret or Marigat, west to Kisumu and south to Kericho and Kisii.

Masai Mara is the one exception, with most transportation coming via Narok.

Getting Around

Being the most densely populated part of the country, the road system is good and there is a multitude of matatus, buses and occasional Peugeots (shared taxis) plying the routes. Since the new government's

crackdown on speeding and overcrowding in matatus, accident rates have thankfully dropped dramatically.

MASAI MARA

Masai Mara is more than just the most popular wildlife park in Kenya; in many cases it's the reason people come to Kenya. Mara is the classic savanna you see in almost every African film and nature program that's ever been made, and its sheer density of wildlife is amazing. It is also the homeland of the Maasai, Kenya's most celebrated tribe. Their cattle herds largely displaced in favour of more profitable animals, many Maasai now rely on tourism (see p286).

NAROK

☎ 050

Two hours west of Nairobi, this ramshackle provincial town is the Masai Mara's main access point. It is not that great for independent travellers, as prices reflect the heavy tourist traffic the region sees and Narok is rife with souvenir sellers, transport touts and rip-off merchants – enjoy!

Information

Kenya Commercial Bank is the town's only bank and it has an unreliable ATM (Visa only). Card phones are found in front of the Spear Hotel and at the post office (which has Internet access).

Sleeping & Eating

Kim's Dishes Hotel (☎ 22001; s/d/tw KSh500/800/1000) With secure parking and recent renovations bestowing the comfy rooms with great bathrooms, 24-hour hot water and new mozzie nets, Kim's is Narok's best-value joint. But value doesn't equate to good taste – the frilly bedspreads will make grown men's toes curl. The restaurant (meals KSh80 to KSh200) downstairs serves tasty Kenyan dishes.

Spear Hotel (☎ 22035; s/tw with shared bathroom KSh250/500, s/tw KSh400/750) The rooms are spacious and have mosquito nets, but some mattresses are better than others – poke a few before deciding. Hot water only flows in the morning. Locals love the restaurant (meals KSh100–200) and you may see traditionally dressed Maasai gathered to watch Oprah! The food's almost as entertaining.

THE HARD SELL

A common complaint among travellers, particularly in the Mara, is that the Maasai can be incredibly hard-nosed in business, and 'cultural' visits to villages often become high-pressure sales ventures the moment you arrive.

While it would be unfair to generalise, it's certainly true that some Maasai, especially in high-density tourist areas, will treat you purely as a cash cow. Favourite techniques include dropping wares in your lap and refusing to take them back; coming into campsites to offer dances at non-negotiable rates; and charging for absolutely everything, from camping to crossing their land. While this behaviour isn't limited to Maasai, their aggressive and utterly unapologetic attitude upsets more travellers than day-to-day hassle elsewhere.

If you feel you're being taken for a ride, Maasai or otherwise, stand up for yourself. Or, ask yourself this: if your people had been consistently dispossessed for over a century and were now subjected to constant streams of gawping foreigners with seemingly bottomless pockets, wouldn't you do the same?

Chambai Hotel (☎ 22591; s KSh650, super s/tw KSh1000/1400) The standard rooms out the back are simple, spotless and sport mosquito nets. The new, sizeable super rooms in the main building have inviting beds, balconies, large TVs and huge bathrooms – sit on your throne and rule your porcelain kingdom. The bar and restaurant (meals KSh250, buffets KSh350) are civilised and worth trying.

Getting There & Away

Frequent matatus run between Narok and Nairobi (KSh250, 2½ hours) and less-frequent departures serve Naivasha (KSh200, three hours) and Kisii (KSh300, three hours). There is also usually daily transport to Sekenani and Talek gates for around KSh350.

Several petrol stations pump the elixir of vehicular life – fill up, it's much cheaper than in the reserve.

MASAI MARA NATIONAL RESERVE

Backed by the spectacular Esoit Oloololo (Siria) Escarpment, watered by the Mara River and littered with an astonishing amount of wildlife is this world-renowned national reserve. Its 1510 sq km of open rolling grasslands, the northern extension of the equally famous Serengeti Plains, are actually the agglomeration of the Narok (managed by Narok County Council) and Transmara National Reserves (managed by Mara Conservancy).

Although concentrations of wildlife are typically highest in the swampy area around the escarpment on the reserve's western edge, superior roads draw most visitors to the eastern side. Of the big cats, lions are

found in large prides everywhere, and it is not uncommon to see them hunting. Cheetahs and leopards are less visible, but still fairly common. Elephants, buffaloes, zebras and hippos also exist in large numbers.

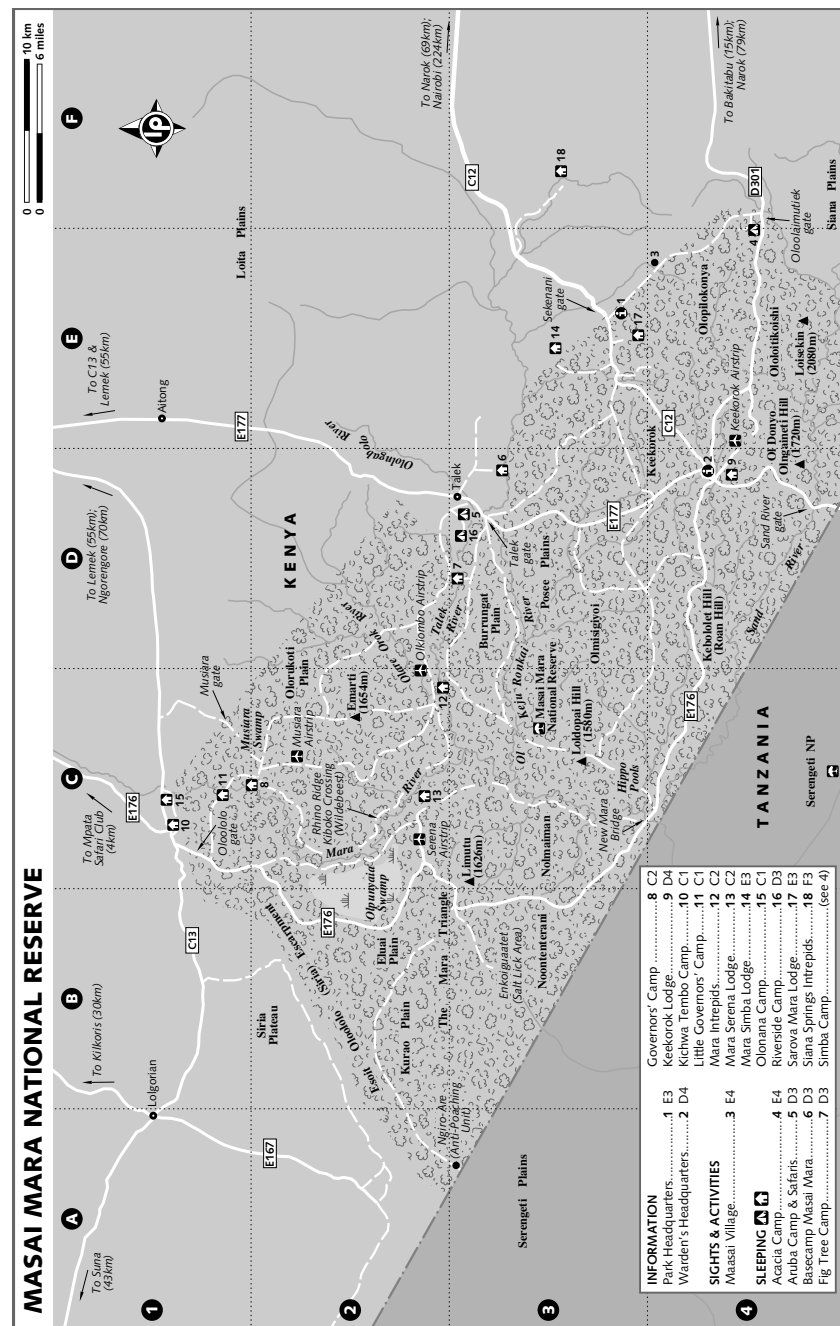
Of the antelopes, the black-striped Thomson's gazelle and larger Grant's gazelle are most prevalent, although the numbers of impalas, topis, Coke's hartebeests and wildebeests aren't too far behind. Other common animals include Masai giraffes, baboons, warthogs, jackals, bat-eared foxes and matriarchal clans of spotted hyenas. The few dozen black rhinos are rarely seen.

The ultimate attraction is undoubtedly the annual wildebeest migration in July and August, when millions of the ungainly beasts move north from the Serengeti seeking lush grass before turning south again around October. While you're more likely to see endless columns grazing or trudging along rather than dramatic TV-style river fordings, it is nonetheless a staggering experience.

During the migration there seem to be as many minibuses as animals, and many tend to take off, making new tracks wherever they feel fit. This shouldn't be encouraged.

Information

Because most of the gates are located inside the reserve (adult/child US\$30/10) boundary it is easy to enter the Masai Mara unknowingly. Most confusion arises when people camping outside the gates are requested to pay park fees – cue confrontation. For the record, campsites outside Oloolaimutiek gate are inside the reserve, while Talek gate's sites north of the Talek River are outside it.



Wherever you enter, make sure you ask for a receipt: it is crucial for passage between the reserve's Narok and Transmara sections and your eventual exit. It also ensures your money ends up in the reserve's hands, not elsewhere. Gates also seem to charge KSh500 for all vehicles instead of KSh250 for ones with less than six seats – be insistent but polite and all will be well.

Sights & Activities

WILDLIFE DRIVES & WALKS

Whether you're bouncing over the plains in pursuit of elusive elephant silhouettes or parked next to a pride of lions and listening to their bellowed breaths, wildlife drives are the highlight of a trip to the Mara.

All top-end places offer wildlife drives, which can be negotiated into the rate while booking – it's usually cheaper than arranging them on arrival. However, guided walks and activities such as **horse riding** and **bush dinners** are booked during your stay.

If you've arrived by matatu, you can organise drives with most lodges, as they're fairly friendly towards independent travellers. **Basecamp Masai Mara** (☎ 020-577490; www.basecampexplorer.com) is easiest because it is outside the park and only a 1.5km walk from Talek. Two-hour drives (day or night) typically cost US\$35 per person, plus park fees. Doing a safari this way isn't recommended, though, as it is seldom cheaper than organised safaris. Alternatively, walk with a Maasai *moran* (warrior) outside the park, where there is still a large amount of wildlife. This can be a wonderful experience, but be aware that local Maasai groups may charge you for crossing their land. Talek is a good base for walking.

BALLOONING

If you can afford US\$390, balloon safaris are superb and worlds away from the minibus circuit. Trips can be arranged through top-end lodges. See p348 for more details.

MAASAI VILLAGE

The Maasai village between Oloolaimutiek and Sekenani gates welcomes tourists, though negotiating admission can be fraught – prices start as high as US\$20 per person. If you're willing to drop this kind of cash for free rein with the camera, go ahead, but don't expect a genuine cultural experience.

Sleeping

Masai Mara is heaving with top-end lodges and luxury tented camps – with plenty of cash the plains are your oyster. Budget and midrange travellers, however, are limited to a few campsites around the Oloolaimutiek and Talek gates.

OLOOLAIMUTIEK & SEKANANI GATES Budget & Midrange

While outside the Oloolaimutiek gate, these camps are within the reserve and sleeping here will incur park fees (even if the camps state otherwise).

Acacia Camp (☎ 020-210024; camping US\$5, s/tw with shared bathroom US\$35/40) Thatched roofs shelter closely spaced, spartan semi-permanent tents in this quaint camp. They're slightly cheaper (s/tw US\$30) without bedding. There are numerous cooking areas, a bar and a campfire pit, but no restaurant. Bathrooms are clean and hot water flows in the evening. The only downside for campers is the lack of shade.

Simba Camp (camping per tent KSh800) Next to Acacia Camp, this dishevelled campsite has tin-shack toilets and no running water. Dog-eared tents (some with beds, some without) are for rent at KSh900. Prices include a 'security' fee (not that you get much).

Top End

Siana Springs Intrepids (☎ 020-4446651; siana@africaonline.co.ke; low season full board s/d US\$150/210, high season US\$260/350; 📍) This tented camp offers comfort without letting luxury intrude on the African bush experience. The best tents dot the edge of a beautiful clearing (bamboo group) or nestle in the forest (palm group) – the spacing is generous, so privacy is guaranteed. The lovely log beds and massive shower heads are definite standouts. Siana is 16km outside Sekenani gate.

Keekorok Lodge (bookings ☎ 020-4447151; low season full board s/d US\$140/180, high season US\$200/250; 📍) This has always been a great option, with bungalows, cabins and cottages on offer. After major renovations were completed in mid-2005, it's now better than ever. It has the usual top-end facilities, with the added attraction of a hippo pool.

Sarova Mara Lodge (☎ 020-2713333; reservations@sarova.co.ke; low season full board s/d US\$80/140, high season US\$160/210; 📍) The polar opposite of Siana Springs, Sarova's semi-permanent tents reek of luxury and lack bush charm.

Mara Simba Lodge (☎ 020-4343961; enquiries@marasimba.com; low season full board s/d US\$100/150, high season US\$180/250; 📍) Large log-sided cabins house comfortable rooms with plank floors, balconies and fans – ask for upstairs rooms as they boast better views.

TALEK GATE

Budget & Midrange

Aruba Camp & Safaris (☎ 0723-997524; gerdi.simon@web.de; camping KSh300) Just outside the reserve, on the Talek River's scenic north bank, is this up-and-coming option. Joining the bare-bones campsite will soon be Masai Mara's first midrange tented safari camp. For less than US\$100 per person, you will get full board accommodation and wildlife drives. Currently campers must also pay KSh300 per group for security.

Riverside Camp (☎ 0720-218319; camping KSh350, bandas per person KSh2000) Run by Maasai, this campsite has good facilities, like running water, hot showers and a kitchen area, complete with utensils. Trees provide shade for campers, while simple bandas provide shelter for the tentless. There is a bar, and if you call ahead, meals are available. Groups must pay KSh300 for security.

Top End

Basecamp Masai Mara (☎ 020-577490; www.basecampexplorer.com; low season full board s/d US\$90/140, Nov-Mar US\$120/190, Jul-Oct US\$140/200) Masai Mara's only ecolodge is an incredibly friendly place. Solar panels provide power, organic waste is composted and dirty water is reused to water the grounds. One of the superb observation towers has a small exhibition space where local conservationists give informal lectures. The 16 individually designed permanent tents have thatched roofs, beautiful outdoor showers and large verandas with day-beds. Although equally gorgeous, tents seven to 11 lack the lovely riverside locations and views afforded to others. Basecamp run the Bush Buck Forestation program and have already planted 15,000 trees in the hope of regenerating native woodland – a US\$20 donation enables you to plant five trees.

Fig Tree Camp (☎ 020-605328; sales@madahotels.com; Jan-Jun full board s/d US\$80/120, Jul-Dec US\$165/220; 📍) Vegetate on your tent's veranda, watching the Talek's waters gently flow by. Cabins with equally basic interiors cost the same but lack the river views. To round things off,

there is a small but scenic pool and a trendy treetop bar.

Mara Intrepids (☎ 020-4446651; maraintrepids@heritagehotels.co.ke; low season full board incl wildlife drives s/d US\$245/370, high season US\$450/615; 📍) The 30 permanent tents offer comfort, four-poster canopy beds and stone bathrooms. A lovely pool, complete with diving board, sits riverside. Recent renovations make tents 12, 26, 27 and 30 the brightest of the bunch. If you want wonderful river views, avoid 24 and 25. A heap of activities are available, including flying day-safaris to Rusinga Island (p297) on Lake Victoria (per person US\$425).

MUSIARA & OLOOLOLO GATES

Sadly, there are no secure budget or mid-range options here.

Mara Serena Lodge (☎ 020-22059; mara@serena.co.ke; low season full board s/d US\$80/160, high season US\$210/260; 📍) Built to resemble a futuristic Maasai village, Serena is the most colourful lodge in the reserve. Hip rooms, with vibrant curved walls and Juliet balconies, line a ridge and overlook the grassy plains below. Blending beautifully with its surroundings and offering 1st-class service, it's justifiably popular.

Kichwa Tembo Camp (☎ 020-3740920; alice@cons corp.co.ke; low season full board s/d US\$120/240, Mar & Nov–mid-Dec US\$155/310, rest of year US\$185/370; 📍) Just outside the northern boundary, Kichwa has permanent tents with grass-mat floors, stone bathrooms and tasteful furnishings. Hop in a hammock and take in spectacular savanna views. The food has an excellent reputation.

Olonana Camp (☎ 020-6950244; kenya@sanctuarylodges.com; low season full board per person US\$225, Oct–mid-Dec US\$340, rest of year US\$450; 📍) Twelve tents, with thatched shelters, large decks, wooden floors and beautiful stone bathrooms, call this camp home. Watch hippos swim in the Mara River from your grand bed or the bar's deck.

Governors' Camp (☎ 020-2734000; www.governorscamp.com; low season full board s/d US\$165/330, high season US\$370/550; 📍) This camp, and Little Governors' Camp (low season full board s/d US\$180/360, high season US\$405/600, with a swimming pool) both have tents similar to those at Kichwa and offer great service, pleasing riverside locations and activities aplenty. The hefty rates include three wildlife

drives. Feel like some humidity? Take a flying day-safari (per person US\$425) to Mfangano Island (p298) on Lake Victoria.

Mpata Safari Club (☎ 020-310867; mpata4@africaonline.co.ke; Mar-May s/d US\$240/380, Jun-Feb US\$340/480; 📍) Almost 10km north of Oloololo gate and sitting up the Esoit Oloololo Escarpment, Mpata offers the Mara's grandest views and most luxurious accommodation. With brave contemporary styling, spiralling roofs, circular skylights, glass walls and quirky furniture, you will be talking about more than just animals.

Eating & Drinking

If you can't afford the lodges' accommodation, drop in for drinks or a meal. Lovely lunches/dinners will set you back US\$15/25, but the views and ambience are free.

There's a tiny shop, eatery and lively Maasai market in Talek village.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Airkenya (☎ 020-605745; www.airkenya.com) and **Safarilink** (☎ 020-600777; www.safarilink.co.ke) each have daily flights to Masai Mara. Return flights on Airkenya are US\$191, while Safarilink will get you there and back for US\$201.

You must state which Mara airstrip you require, and make sure you get to the airport early, because the aeroplane doesn't wait for late comers.

MATATU, CAR & 4WD

Although it's possible to arrange wildlife drives independently, keep in mind that there are few savings in coming here without transport. That said, it is possible to access Talek and Sekenani gates from Narok by matatu. From Kisii a matatu will get you as far as Kilkoris or Suna on the main A1 Hwy, but you will have problems after this.

For those who drive, the first 52km west of Narok on the B3 and C12 are smooth enough, but after the bitumen runs out you'll find that it gets pretty bumpy. The C13, which connects Oloololo gate with Lolgorian out in the west, is very rough and rocky, and it's poorly signposted – a highway it's not.

Petrol is available (although expensive) at Mara Sarova, Mara Serena and Keekorok Lodges.

LAKE VICTORIA

Spread across 70,000 sq km and gracing the shores of Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda, Lake Victoria is East Africa's most important geographical feature. Despite its massive girth, the lake is never more than 80m deep. This stands in amazing contrast to the smaller Rift Valley lakes such as Lake Tanganyika, whose depths can reach 1500m.

The lake's 'evolving' ecosystem has proved to be both a boon and a bane for those living along its shores. For starters, its waters are a haven for mosquitos and snails, making malaria and bilharzia too common here. Then there are Nile perch (introduced 50 years ago to combat mosquitos), which eventually thrived, growing to over 200kg in size and becoming every small fishing boat's dream. Sadly, now it's only large commercial fishing vessels thriving. Horrifyingly, the ravenous perch have wiped out over 300 species of smaller tropical fish unique to the lake.

Last but not least is the ornamental water hyacinth. First reported in 1986, this 'exotic' pond plant had no natural predators here and quickly reached plague proportions; the Winam Gulf area by Kisumu was worst affected and the fishing industry 'suffocated', confining many large ships to port. Millions of dollars (much from the World Bank) have been ploughed into solving the problem, with controversial programs including mechanical removal and the introduction of weed-eating weevils. The investment seems to be paying off, with the most recent satellite photos showing hyacinth covering 384 hectares, compared with the 17,230 hectares it covered at its zenith.

Despite the ecological and economic turmoil, the lives of Kenyans living along the shore go on, whether in tiny fishing villages or in Kisumu, and a peek into their world is as fascinating as ever.

KISUMU

☎ 057

Set on the sloping shore of Lake Victoria's Winam Gulf, the town of Kisumu is the third-largest in Kenya. Declared a city during its centenary celebrations in 2001, it still doesn't feel like one; its relaxed atmosphere is a world away from that of places like Nairobi and Mombasa. Amazingly, like

much of western Kenya, Kisumu receives relatively few travellers.

Despite the lake being its lifeblood from inception, geographically Kisumu has always had its back to the water, something that now echoes the sentiment and economy of the city today. Until 1977 the port was one of the busiest in Kenya, but decline set in with the demise of the East African Community (Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda), and it sat virtually idle for two decades. Although increasing cooperation between these countries (now known collectively as Comesa) has established Kisumu as an international shipment point for petroleum products, surprisingly the lake plays no part – raw fuel for processing is piped in from Mombasa and the end products are shipped out by truck. With Kisumu's fortunes again rising, and the water hyacinth's impact reduced, it is hoped Lake Victoria will once more start contributing to the local economy.

If you've arrived from the higher country east, you will immediately notice the humidity. Kisumu is a few degrees hotter than the highland cities, and the steamy conditions add to the generally languid air.

Despite its relative isolation, Kisumu has excellent travel connections to the east of Kenya, and there are enough attractions to make it an interesting place to stop for a few days.

Orientation

Kisumu is a fairly sprawling town, but everything you will need is within walking distance. Most shops, banks, cheap hotels and other facilities can be found around Oginga Odinga Rd, while the train station and ferry jetty are short walks from the end of New Station Rd.

Jomo Kenyatta Hwy is the major thoroughfare, connecting the town with the main market and the noisy bus and matatu station, both a 10-minute walk northwest from Oginga Odinga Rd.

The most pleasant access to the lake itself is at Dunga, a small village about 3km south of town along Nzola Rd.

Information

EMERGENCY

Police station (Uhuru Rd) The police force wasn't happy giving out its phone number – hopefully it'll be happier to help those in need.

WARNING

Although you're at far greater risk of contracting malaria here than bilharzia, it is still not wise to swim in the water or walk in the grass along its shores – this is the hide-out of the snails that host the damaging parasites that invade your body (see p385).

INTERNET ACCESS

Abacus Cyber Cafe (Al-Imran Plaza, Oginga Odinga Rd; per hr KSh60; ☎ 8am-8pm) Speedy surfing.

Crystal Communications (Mega Plaza, Oginga Odinga Rd; per hr KSh60; ☎ 8am-6pm) Fast Internet connections and soon to be able to burn CDs from cameras using USB connections.

Sanhedrin Cyber Joint (Swan Centre, Accra St; per hr KSh60; ☎ 8am-10pm) Super friendly and offering cheap international Internet calls.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Aga Khan Hospital (☎ 2020005; Otiena Oyoo St) A large hospital with modern facilities and 24hr emergency room.

Clinipath Laboratory (☎ 2022363; Mega Plaza, Oginga Odinga Rd; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-1pm Sat, 10am-noon Sun) A satellite laboratory of the Aga Khan Hospital that does blood work. Malaria tests cost KSh160.

MONEY

Barclays Bank (Kampala St) Exchanges cash and travellers cheques (KSh30 per leaf commission). With ATM.

Kenya Commercial Bank (Jomo Kenyatta Hwy) Exchanges cash and travellers cheques (KSh50 per leaf commission). With ATM (Visa only).

Standard Chartered Bank (Oginga Odinga Rd) Offers the best exchange rate for travellers cheques, but only accepts Amex (KSh50 per leaf commission). With ATM (Visa only).

PHOTOGRAPHY

Ken's Photo Imaging (Al-Imran Plaza, Oginga Odinga Rd; ☎ closed Sun) Decent development and currently the only place that burns digital images to CD.

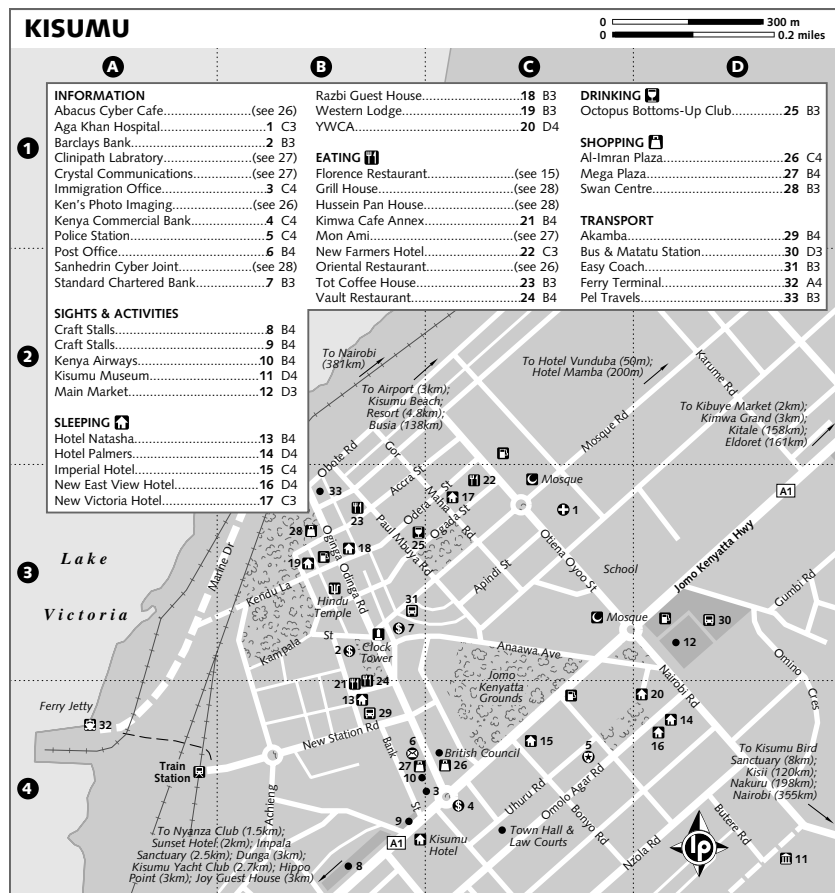
POST

Post office (Oginga Odinga Rd) With Internet.

TELEPHONE

There are card phones on Oginga Odinga Rd across from the post office. Others are scattered around town.

Sanhedrin Cyber Joint (Swan Centre, Accra St; ☎ 8am-10pm) Cheap long distance calls over the Internet – quality can vary from good to bad.



TRAVEL AGENCIES

Pel Travels (☎ 2022780; travels@pel.co.ke; Oginga Odinga Rd) The most helpful and skilled travel agent in town. Vehicle hire is also available.

VISA EXTENSIONS

Immigration office (1st fl Reinsurance Plaza, cnr Oginga Odinga Rd & Jomo Kenyatta Hwy) Visa extensions are available at this office, behind the Format Supermarket.

Dangers & Annoyances

While open storm drains and steep curbs are probably your biggest worry when walking around at night, it's still best not to do it too often (robberies do occur). Kisumu, like most large Kenyan towns, has its share of glue-sniffing children and some travellers

find their persistence here troubling – if you want to help, donate some time or a kind word, but never give money.

Sights & Activities

KISUMU MUSEUM

Unlike many local museums, **Kisumu Museum** (Nairobi Rd; admission KSh200; ☎ 8am–6pm) is an interesting and often informative place.

The displays are wide ranging and most are well presented, though some could use some light. There is a very good collection of the region's various peoples, including agricultural implements, bird and insect traps, food utensils, clothing, furniture, weapons and musical instruments. There

is also a fairly motley collection of stuffed birds and animals, including an amazing airborne lion mauling a wildebeest.

Outside, a traditional Luo homestead has been constructed, consisting of the husband's thatched mud-house and separate houses for wife one, two and three!

There are also the usual crocodile and tortoise enclosures, which are small and a tad depressing.

HIPPO POINT & BOAT TRIPS

Grassy and palm-laden Hippo Point sticks into Lake Victoria at Dunga, about 3km south of town, and is a pleasant spot to head for, though you're not guaranteed to see any hippos. There also used to be a cool restaurant here, but it burnt down years ago. If reconstruction maintains its current pace, it will reopen March 18, 2073.

If you want virtually guaranteed hippo sightings, you will have to venture onto the lake. As you might imagine, plenty of people offer just such a boat trip. Since locals pay KSh150 per hour for a paddle boat, you'd be insane to pay their KSh1000 asking price – serious negotiations are in serious order! Power boats that can take you further afield can be found at nearby **Dunga fish market** (usual asking price KSh2500 – cue negotiations).

MARKETS

Kisumu's **main market** (off Jomo Kenyatta Hwy) is one of Kenya's most animated, and certainly one of its largest, now spilling out onto the surrounding roads. If you're curious or just looking for essentials like suits or wigs, it's worth a stroll around.

The **Kibuye Market** (Jomo Kenyatta Hwy) is a huge outdoor affair that draws people from all around the district each Sunday. Everything from second-hand clothes to furniture and food can be found spread out along the road, a couple of kilometres north of the main market.

The various **craft stalls** near Kisumu Hotel are some of the best places in Kenya for soapstone carvings. Quality varies but there are some gems to be found.

IMPALA SANCTUARY

On the road to Dunga is Kenya Wildlife Service's 1-sq-km **Impala Sanctuary** (adult/child US\$5/2; ☎ 6am–6pm). Besides being home to a small

impala herd, it also provides important grazing grounds for local hippos. You will find a pleasant nature trail and a not so pleasant animal orphanage.

KISUMU BIRD SANCTUARY

This **sanctuary** (off A1 Hwy; ☎ 6am–6pm), 8km southeast of town, covers a large area of swampland and is an important breeding ground for herons, storks, cormorants and egrets. The best time to visit is April or May. Transport is easy along the A1, but it's then a 3km walk from the turn-off. Visitor fees may be implemented soon.

NDERE ISLAND NATIONAL PARK

Gazetted as a **national park** (adult/child US\$15/5) back in 1986, tourism to this small 4.2-sq-km island has never taken off. It is forested and very beautiful, housing a variety of bird species, plus hippos, impalas (introduced) and spotted crocodiles, a lesser-known cousin of the larger Nile crocodile. Tsetse flies can be problematic after the rains.

Unfortunately there is nowhere to stay and chartered boats are your only option to get there. Kisumu Beach Resort (p294) charters 20 passenger boats for KSh3000 per hour, with typical return trips taking five hours (including three hours on shore) – keep an eye out for hippos en route.

OTHER ACTIVITIES

Join the **Nyanza Club** (☎ 2022433; off Jomo Kenyatta Hwy; temporary membership KSh100) for the day, which entitles you to belly flop in their huge **swimming pool**, vegetate on the lounge chairs and play pool and billiards to your heart's content. Tennis and Squash are also options, but you will need your own racquets.

Sleeping BUDGET

After weeding out Kisumu's plethora of dives, we were left with the following options.

Western Lodge (☎ 2023707; Kendu Lane; s or d KSh500) This lodge has a number of smallish singles (or cosy doubles) with mozzie nets and bathrooms. There is a nice common balcony with plants, tables and a slice of lake view.

Razbi Guest House (☎ 2025488; Kendu Lane; s/tw with shared bathroom KSh400/500, s KSh600) A secure place with small, mosquito net-clad rooms, some decidedly brighter than others. The

shared toilets pass the nostril test and there is a private TV lounge/restaurant upstairs.

YWCA (☎ 0733-992982; Anaawa Ave; dm KSh300, full board KSh500) Bare-bones bunks in airy rooms for bottom dollar. The shared bathrooms look clean, but are rather pungent.

Hotel Natasha (☎ 2020189; off Oginga Odinga Rd; s/tw KSh600/800) A simple place with bright rooms featuring fans (but no mozzie nets), hot water and old but clean bathrooms.

Kisumu Beach Resort (☎ 0733-749327; camping KSh300, s/tw KSh1250/1500) This scruffy lakeside 'resort' is set across the bay from town. With loads of space, wicker lounges, a pool table, volley ball net, decent restaurant (meals KSh160 to KSh500) and a well-stocked bar (large Tusker KSh80), it's easy to see why it's popular with overlanders and campers. The cottages are a bit grotty and aren't worth the price. To get here, take a Pipeline matatu (KSh20) from the main station to the airport, from where you can hire a *boda-boda* (KSh10), or walk the remaining 1.8km.

MIDRANGE

All prices below include breakfast unless stated otherwise.

Hotel Palmers (☎ 2024867; Omolo Agar Rd; s/tw KSh1000/1400) An understated place with a perceptible warmth to its atmosphere. The rooms are on the small side, but they see some sun, have decent bathrooms and are home to breezy fans. The hotel also has a comfortable lounge, an outdoor restaurant and secure parking.

New Victoria Hotel (☎ 2021067; Gor Mahia Rd; s with shared bathroom KSh600, s/tw/tr KSh850/1050/1550) Bright on the outside and gleaming green on the inside, this hotel has some good options. Rooms have fans, mozzie nets and comfy foam mattresses, and a few boast balconies with lake views. The hotel also has a good café and TV lounge.

Hotel Vunduba (☎ 2020043; Mosque Rd; s/tw/stc KSh800/1300/2500) Rooms here surround a sunny courtyard and offer good value. The singles are small but squeaky clean, while the twins are more sizeable and comfy. The suites are perfect for families and the courtyard is an ideal spot for weary vehicles to snooze.

New East View Hotel (☎ 0722-556721; Omolo Agar Rd; s/tw KSh1200/1600) Although it's less atmospheric than its neighbour, Hotel Palmers, this hotel's rooms offer more character. The bathrooms are rather aged.

Hotel Mamba (☎ 2020043; Off Mosque Rd; s/tw KSh800/1300) While rundown, this is a very friendly place to stay. The rooms are small and have TVs (only a bonus if you speak Swahili).

Joy Guest House (☎ 0720-272037; Dunga; tw KSh1000, with shared bathroom KSh800) Located 3km south of town near Hippo Point's turn-off, this welcoming place has a homey feel. Cooking facilities, solid-rock sofas (sit slowly or risk a broken arse) and cramped rug-clad rooms, with fans and the odd balcony, call Joy's home. Sadly, prices don't include breakfast.

TOP END

Imperial Hotel (☎ 2022211; www.imperialkisumu.com; Jomo Kenyatta Hwy; s/d incl breakfast from US\$75/85; ste US\$175; ♿ ♿ ♿) Offering friendly 1st-class service, this old dame is Kisumu's most luxurious hotel. The full-length windows afford grand views and, if opened, heavenly breezes – turn off that air-conditioning! All rooms are well appointed, with 'deluxe' options offering better views and a fridge. The top-floor suites are simply swank. Weekend rates are a bargain.

Nyanza Club (☎ 2022433; off Jomo Kenyatta Hwy; s/tw incl breakfast KSh2500/3000; ♿) While this blindingly white option is slightly past its prime, its leafy and sporty surrounds make for an entertaining stay. The rooms are huge and those upstairs have lovely shaded balconies with lake views. There is a plethora of activities available (see p293), but since they're strictly for members, you will have to become a temporary member (per day KSh100).

Sunset Hotel (☎ 2022174; Jomo Kenyatta Hwy; s/tw KSh3600/4000; ♿ ♿) This modern hotel, 2.5km south of town, climbs numerous storeys above the trees to offer unmatched vistas over Lake Victoria. Although simple, all rooms are very comfortable and boast breezy balconies with astounding views.

Eating

The fact that Kisumu sits on Lake Victoria isn't lost on restaurants here and seafood is abundant.

If you want an authentic local fish fry, there is no better place than the dozen tin-shack restaurants sitting on the lake's shore at the end of Oginga Odinga Rd. Open flames, a whole lot of smoke and boisterous locals

all add to the experience. Dive in between 11am and 6pm; a 1½kg fish should set you back Ksh150.

Florence Restaurant (☎ 2022211; Jomo Kenyatta Hwy; mains KSh200-450) Housed within the glam Imperial Hotel, Florence is renowned as Kisumu's best restaurant. Their poached Nile perch is lovely, as are the chicken Kiev and mutton masala.

Kisumu Yacht Club (☎ 2022050; Dunga; meals KSh200-300) On the lake's edge, just past the Impala Sanctuary on the Dunga road, with a lovely patio and teak furnishings. The menu ranges from delicately stuffed fish to Indian selections such as chicken biryani and *palak paneer*. A temporary membership (KSh200) is necessary to indulge.

Grill House (Swan Centre, Accra St; meals KSh100-450; ☎ Tue-Sun) Wicker furniture and shady umbrellas sit street-side at this German-owned eatery. The menu is a bit of a cultural hotch-potch – the spring rolls are quite nice.

Hussein Pan House (Swan Centre, Accra St; meals KSh150-300; ☎ 6-11pm) Smoky stoves grace the sidewalk here each evening and pump out amazing Asian selections like chicken tikka and mutton pilau. The boneless chicken *mushkati* is divine.

Mon Ami (Mega Plaza, Oginga Odinga Rd; meals KSh150-350) A favourite expat pit-stop, with Western standards such as hamburgers, pastas and pizza.

Vault Restaurant (off Oginga Odinga Rd; meals KSh300-600) Pizza (with real cheese), pasta and even veal grace this Italian restaurant's menu. Housed in a former bank, the massive vault still lurks in the shadows.

New Victoria Hotel (Gor Mahia Rd; meals KSh150-300) Follow the local crowds and descend into the subdued interior of this brightly coloured hotel for a filling feed in the morning.

Oriental Restaurant (Al-Imran Plaza, Oginga Odinga Rd; meals KSh260-400) The dishes read like your Chinese favourites, and they almost look like your Thai favourites, but sadly none of them taste like your tongue's favourites. On the bright side, it still gives your palate some needed diversity.

Some of the better Kenyan restaurants serving cheap local dishes such as *matoke* (mashed plantains) and stew:

Kimwa Cafe Annex (off Oginga Odinga Rd; meals KSh60-250)

New Farmers Hotel (Odera St; meals KSh60-160)

Tot Coffee House (Accra St; meals KSh65-180)

Drinking & Entertainment

Kisumu's nightlife has a reputation for being even livelier than Nairobi's, but thanks to many of the best parties and live Congolese bands cropping up at various venues such as the **Kimwa Grand** (Jomo Kenyatta Hwy) along the roads out of town, it's harder to find. Check flyers and ask locals who are plugged into the scene.

Mon Ami (Mega Plaza, Oginga Odinga Rd) Easy to find and always good for having a drink, this is a lively bar with a pool table, welcoming expat crowd and satellite TV, which blasts European footy in the evenings.

Octopus Bottoms-Up Club (Ogada St) A short stroll from Oginga Odinga Rd, this popular bar has two pool tables, a foosball table, its own disco (admission KSh100) and more Michael Jackson posters than we're comfortable with. With a largely male crowd and lots of beer flowing, single females may not find it the most appealing of places.

The Imperial Hotel and Kisumu Yacht Club are good spots for a cold beverage and a taste of the high life, while the Kisumu Beach Resort can either be a great place to chill quietly with other backpackers or to rip it up, depending whether an overland truck and its boisterous crowd are on site. The only problem with the yacht club and beach resort is getting home!

Getting There & Away

AIR

Kenya Airways (☎ 2020081; Alpha House, Oginga Odinga Rd) has daily morning flights to Nairobi (KSh7500, one hour) and an evening flight on Friday and Sunday. Hopefully the fact that their model Kenya Airways plane has lost its starboard engine won't put you off!

BOAT

Despite the reduced hyacinth in the Winam Gulf, ferry services to Tanzania and Uganda haven't restarted. The only route active during research was a 9am sailing to Homa Bay (KSh250, four hours) each Monday. Check the port's booking office for the latest information.

BUS & MATATU

Most buses, matatus and Peugeot taxis to destinations within Kenya leave from the large bus and matatu station just north of the main market.

Matatus offer the only direct services to Kakamega (KSh120, one hour) and Eldoret (KSh250, 2½ hours). Plenty of other matatus serve Busia (KSh250, two hours), Kericho (KSh200, two hours), Kisii (KSh200, two hours), Homa Bay (KSh250, three hours), Nakuru (KSh300, 3½ hours), Nairobi (KSh550, 5½ hours) and Isebania (KSh350, four hours), on the Tanzanian border. Peugeot taxis still serve some destinations, but they cost about 25% more than matatus.

There are very few direct services to Kitale (KSh300, four hours); it is best to take a vehicle to Kakamega or Eldoret and change there.

Akamba (off New Station Rd) has its own depot in the town's centre. Besides four daily buses to Nairobi (KSh500, seven hours) via Nakuru (KSh300, 4½ hours), Akamba also has daily services to Busia (KSh200, three hours) and Kampala (KSh750, seven hours). **Easy Coach** (off Mosque Rd) serves similar destinations, as well as Kakamega (KSh150, one hour), with some added comfort and cost.

TRAIN

After being shut down for years, the train service to Nairobi (1st-/2nd-class KSh1415/720, 13 hours) is once again on the roll. Trains are scheduled to depart on Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday at 6.30pm, though they usually leave late.

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

A taxi is probably the easiest way to get to town from the airport (around KSh500). Pipeline matatus (KSh20) pick up and drop off passengers outside the airport gate.

BODA-BODA

Bicycle-taxis have proliferated and they are a great way to get around Kisumu. No journey in town should be more than 20 bob.

CAR

Pel Travels (☎ 2022780; travels@pel.co.ke; Oginga Odinga Rd) is your only option for a rental car here. It charges KSh4000 per day including insurance. Excess is set at KSh35,000.

There are no rental 4WDs in Kisumu.

MATATU

The No 7 and No 9 matatus (KSh20), which run north along Oginga Odinga Rd before

turning up Anaawa Ave and continuing east down Jomo Kenyatta Hwy, are handy to reach the main matatu station, main market and Kibuye Market – just wave an arm and hop on anywhere you see one.

TAXI

A taxi around town costs between KSh100 and KSh200, while trips to Dunga or Kisumu Beach Resort range from KSh200 to KSh300.

LAKE VICTORIA'S SOUTH SHORE

Kendu Bay

This small lakeside village, two hours from Kisumu on the potholed road to Homa Bay, has little to offer apart from the strange volcanic **Simbi Lake** a couple of kilometres from town. The circular lake, sunk into the earth like a bomb crater, has a footpath around it and is quite popular with bird-watchers.

There is no real reason to stay, but if the need arises **Big Five Hotel & Bar** (☎ 059-22416; route C19; s/tw with shared bathroom KSh300/400) is your best option.

Homa Bay

☎ 059

This area, blanketed with green and dotted with conical volcanic plugs (the plumbing of ancient volcanos exposed through erosion) makes for an interesting visit and a great base to visit Ruma National Park (opposite) and Thimlich Ohinga (opposite).

Climb nearby Mt Homa (one hour) for a panoramic vista, take in the bustling harbour or just wander the dusty streets to the Caribbean beats radiating from various *dukas*. It is also a great place to find tapes of traditional Luo music.

INFORMATION

The Co-operative Bank of Kenya exchanges US dollars, while Postbank offers Western Union. The new Kenya Commercial Bank, with an ATM (Visa only), should be open by the time you read this. The post office has Internet and telephone services. The **warden's office** (☎ 22544) for Ruma National Park is found up the hill in the District Commissioner's compound.

SLEEPING & EATING

Bay Lodge (☎ 22568; s with shared bathroom KSh250, s/tw KSh300/450) An aquamarine sanctuary of

simplicity nestled between the bus station and the post office. It is tidy, quiet, has secure parking and the staff are lovely and helpful.

Little Nile Guest House (☎ 0720-997718; s/tw incl breakfast KSh800/1200) On the hill leading into town, this shiny new option is bright, comfortable and houses colourful murals.

Ruma Tourist Lodge (☎ 0734-590868; s/d KSh600/900) Lurking behind a messy entrance, Ruma's bungalows offer comfy rooms and great bathrooms. Unfortunately the town's best bar – which has cold beers, decent tunes, a pool table and a restaurant (meals KSh150 to KSh230) – also lives here, so noise can be problematic. It is signposted behind the Total station.

Hippo Buck Hotel (☎ 22032; s/d/tr KSh1000/1400/2000) About 1.5km out of town towards Mbita, Hippo Buck's spotless, simple rooms are surrounded by colourful flowering gardens. The restaurant (meals KSh150 to KSh230) is highly recommended.

Self-caterers can visit the well-stocked Shiviling Supermarket near the post office.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Akamba's office is just down the hill from the bus station and its buses serve Nairobi (KSh550, 8½ hours, 7am and 7.30pm) via Kericho (KSh300, four hours) and Nakuru (KSh450, six hours). Several other companies and matatus (operating from the bus station) also ply these routes, as well as Mbita (KSh150, 1½ hours) and Kisumu (KSh250, three hours).

RUMA NATIONAL PARK

Bordered by the dramatic **Kanyamaa Escarpment**, and home to Kenya's only population of roans (one of Africa's rarest and largest antelopes), is the surprisingly seldom-visited **Ruma National Park** (adult/child US\$15/5). While hot and often wet, it is beautiful and comprises 120 sq km of verdant riverine woodland and savanna grassland within the Lambwe Valley.

Besides roan, other rarities like Bohor's reedbeek, Rothschild's giraffe, Jackson's hartebeest and the tiny oribi antelope can be seen. Birdlife is prolific, with 145 different bird species present, including the mighty fish eagle and white egret.

The park is set up for those with vehicles, but contact the **warden** (☎ 059-22544; PO Box 420,

Homa Bay) in Homa Bay and you may be able to organise a hike, though you will have to pay a ranger to accompany you (KSh500/1000 per half-/full-day).

There are two simple **campsites** (adult/child US\$8/5) near the main gate and the guest-house will soon be rebuilt.

Tsetse flies can be a problem after the rains.

Getting There & Away

Head a couple of kilometres south from Homa Bay and turn right onto the Mbita road. About 12km west is the main access road, and from there it's another 11km. The park's roads are in decent shape, but require a 4WD in the rainy season.

If you don't have transport but have contacted the warden, hop on a Homa Bay–Mbita matatu and jump off at the access road.

THIMLICH OHINGA

East of Ruma National Park, this **archaeological site** (KSh250) is one of East Africa's most important sites. The remains of a dry-stone enclosure, 150m in diameter and containing another five smaller enclosures, was discovered here. Stylistically, the structure resembles traditional Luo buildings, but may date back as far as the 15th century. Those who have stood within the walls of Zimbabwe's ancient stone fortress, Great Zimbabwe, will note the similarities. The name is essentially a description of the site, which means 'stone enclosure in frightening dense forest'.

Getting to Thimlich is a problem without your own transport, although not completely impossible with patience. Head down the Homa Bay–Rongo road for 12km, then turn right at Rod Kopany village, heading southwest through Mirogi to the village of Miranga. The site is signposted from there.

MBITA & RUSINGA ISLAND

Set on the shoreline of Lake Victoria and marking Winam Gulf's entrance is Mbita is this lonely village with a warm frontier feel. While often treated as an access point for Rusinga and Mfangano Islands, Mbita is a great place to experience a traditional fishing village. The fact that there are some beaches in the area only adds to its appeal.

A short causeway connects Mbita to Rusinga Island, which is a great place for a day's

wander – the craggy hill makes an attractive viewpoint. On the island's north side is **Tom Mboya's mausoleum**. A child of Rusinga and former sanitary inspector in Nairobi, Mboya was one of the few Luos ever to achieve any kind of political success in the government of Kenya. He held a huge amount of influence as Jomo Kenyatta's right-hand man and was widely tipped to become Kenya's second president before he was assassinated in 1969. He's still well remembered today.

Sleeping & Eating

Mbita Campsite (☎ 0722-617953; camping per tent KSh100) This grassy camp 2.5km south of Mbita is set on a small section of beach and is a perfect place to laze away a day or two. Nice two-/four-person (KSh200/400) tents with beds are available for rent, and meals can be prepared if you call ahead. Look for the small camping sign en route to Lake Victoria's Safari Village.

Elk Guest House (tw KSh600, s/tw with shared toilet KSh300/400) Backing the bus stand in Mbita, this place will do perfectly for a night's kip. Besides being clean, it has mosquito nets and private showers.

Lake Victoria's Safari Village (☎ 0721-912120; www.safarikkenya.net; s/d incl breakfast US\$35/55) A Lake Victoria beachfront haven if there ever was one. Lovely traditionally thatched roofs tower over comfy beds and impressive bathrooms in each of the pretty cottages. The grassy garden is grand and the food looks good too. It is well signposted from town.

Rusinga Island Club (bookings ☎ 020-340331; info@letsgosafari.com; full board incl all activities s/d US\$410/700) This is an exclusive place on the northern side of Rusinga Island. Fishing is the dominant activity, but if you're not a keen worm-dangler there are various water sports available and the birdlife is prolific. The flash rooms are in individual thatched huts, each with fine lake views.

Viking Hotel (meals KSh70-100) Popular with locals, this wee restaurant is next to the Elk Guest House.

Getting There & Away

There are four buses to Kisumu (KSh200, five hours) each morning between 6am and 11am. Matatus to Homa Bay are far more frequent (KSh100, 1½ hours). The odd matatu heads to Rusinga Island and past the mausoleum (KSh50).

MFANGANO ISLAND

Home to many a monitor lizard, curious locals, intriguing **rock paintings** and the imposing but assailable **Mt Kwitutu** (1694m), Mfangano Island is well worth a day or two. Thanks to the refreshing absence of vehicles, only footpaths crisscross the island. A guide is invaluable (KSh500 per day is fair).

It is about a 1½- to two-hour climb from the Sena village jetty to the sublime vista atop Kwitutu, on the southeastern side of the island. The rock paintings, both revered and feared by locals (which has hindered vandalism), are found northwest of Kwitutu towards the village of Ukula.

Sena village has little more than the post office and the chief's camp (housing the administrator of the island).

Sleeping & Eating

There are no guesthouses, but it may be possible to arrange home stays with the local residents. Campers might also stay on the grounds of St Linus' Church (check out the mural inside).

If you have a bunch of Benjamin Franklins burning a hole in your pocket, there is the **Mfangano Island Camp** (bookings ☎ 020-2734000; governors@reservation.com; full board s/d US\$370/550; ☎ Jun-Mar) on the north side of the island. Built in traditional Luo style (albeit with a few modern amenities), this is primarily a fishing resort.

Getting There & Away

Until the ferries get their act together, sporadic 10m canoes are the only transport to Mfangano Island from Mbita (per person KSh150). If you don't want to wait for passengers, you will have to fork out KSh4000 for the entire boat. Market day in Mbita (Thursday) is a good day to travel because there are plenty of boats coming and going from its causeway.

WESTERN HIGHLANDS

Benefiting from reliable rainfall and fertile soil, the Western Highlands make up the agricultural heartland of Kenya, separating Kisumu and Lake Victoria from the rest of the country. The south is cash-crop country, with vast patchworks of tea plantations covering the region around Kisii and Kericho,

while further north, near Kitale and Eldoret, insanely dense cultivation takes over.

The settlements here are predominantly agricultural service towns, with little of interest unless you need a chainsaw or water barrel. For visitors, the real attractions lie outside these places – the rolling tea fields around Kericho, the tropical beauty of Kakamega Forest, trekking on Mt Elgon, the prolific birdlife in Saiwa Swamp National Park and exploring the dramatic Cherangani Hills.

KISII

☎ 058

Whether inspired by nearby soils (some of the most fertile in Kenya) or by the growing non-Bantu-speaking tribes surrounding them (Maasai to the south, Luo to the west and north and Kipsigis to the east), the Bantu-speaking Gsui people of this region (see p43) are producing offspring at one of the world's fastest rates. An amazing 50% of the 1.5 million Gsui are below the age of 15. With all those new mouths to feed and house, the rapidly expanding town of Kisii is bursting with activity.

Besides being the region's transportation hub and hosting a variety of facilities, this hilly city (resembling a miniature Kigali in Rwanda) has little to offer travellers besides muddy, trash-laden streets, a lot of noise and an entertaining nightlife (its saving grace).

While the fêted Kisii soapstone obviously comes from this area, it's not on sale here.

Quarrying and carving go on in the village of **Tabaka**, 23km northwest of Kisii, where you can usually visit the workshops. Since most carvings are sold to dealers and shops in Nairobi at rock-bottom prices, they'll happily accept a fair price from you.

Information

Barclays Bank (Moi Hwy) Exchange cash and travellers cheques (KSh34 per leaf commission). With ATM.

Cyber Cafe (Hospital Rd; per hr KSh90) Reasonable Internet connections.

National Bank of Kenya (cnr Hospital Rd & Sansora Rd) With ATM (Cirrus and Plus cards only).

Postbank (Hospital Rd) Western Union services.

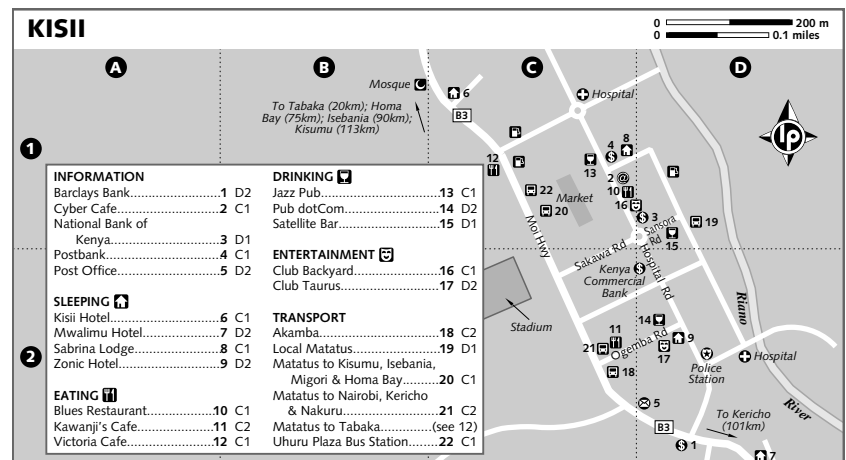
Post office (Moi Hwy) With card phones and Internet.

Sleeping & Eating

There are few decent accommodation options, and the budget places are particularly poor. There is a lot of noise at night wherever you stay, not of the baby-making variety! Eating options are also slim.

Sabrina Lodge (s/tw with shared bathroom KSh300/500) Just up from Postbank, Sabrina has clean, concrete Santa specials, with rooms boasting red floors and bright green walls. The toilets (missing seats) are clean enough, but there is no running water. Hot bucket showers are available in the morning. The beds aren't great, but they do have mosquito nets.

Kisii Hotel (☎ 30254; off Moi Hwy; s/tw incl breakfast KSh750/950) Double the price, but triple the pleasure. This is a relaxed place boasting large gardens and sizeable rooms, each with



decent bathrooms. The restaurant (meals KSh150 to KSh300) is deservedly popular, but the performing turkey and ducks are still missing in action.

Mwalimu Hotel (Moi Hwy; d/stc KSh800/1500) Set in its own compound opposite the Mobile station at the southeastern end of town, this hotel isn't atmospheric but provides good value and secure parking. The rooms are bright and average-sized, and they also have mosquito nets. The hotel has a popular bar and terrace as well as a restaurant (meals KSh80 to KSh230) that serves a mix of Kenyan, Western and Indian dishes.

Zonic Hotel (☎ 30298; Hospital Rd; s/d US\$25/40, ste from US\$65; 📺) The 'Cement, Lacquer & Plywood 101' architecture professor would be beaming with pride. Although bizarre, Zonic is home to town's most comfortable rooms, each large, clean and sporting a balcony. There is a rooftop swimming pool and a cavernous restaurant (meals KSh250 to KSh350), which produces some tasty Asian curries and a good beef tenderloin in pepper sauce.

Blues Restaurant (Hospital Rd; meals KSh150-250) With a feel more like a modern pub, this friendly restaurant cooks up some great Chinese stir-fries, complete with fresh ginger. The chicken stew isn't bad either.

Kawanji's Cafe (Ogemba Rd; meals KSh120-180) Lurking behind a wall of foliage, this pleasant restaurant serves the best Kenyan dishes in Kisii.

Victoria Cafe (Moi Hwy; meals KSh60-160) A popular local place serving up cheap Kenyan meals.

Drinking & Entertainment

To compensate for its other shortcomings, Kisii has plenty of evening venues and some of the cheapest beer around (KSh60 for a large Tusker).

Blues Restaurant (Hospital Rd) A good spot for a beer, with a balcony overlooking the market and proper cable TV to catch up on the world outside.

Jazz Pub (Hospital Rd) A similar crowd (Kenyan yuppies) to Blues, this place has a warm vibe and an odd absence of jazz music.

Pub dotCom (Ogemba Rd) Reggae cuts radiate through this tiny, welcoming bar.

Zonic Hotel (Hospital Rd) Comfortable surroundings, but a bit of an old man's bar – not that there's anything wrong with that!

Satellite Bar (Sansora Rd) Even rain doesn't seem to dampen the late night spirits at this rooftop bar. Thankfully there is a shelter over the pool table.

Club Backyard (Hospital Rd; 🍷 weekends) The best nightclub in town, this place gets packed on Friday and Saturday nights. They usually host well-known DJs – look for posters throughout town.

Club Taurus (Ogemba Rd; 🍷 weekends) A decent second-place finisher in the nightclub department.

Getting There & Away

Matatus line the length of Moi Hwy – look for the destination placards on their roofs. Regular departures serve Homa Bay (KSh100, one hour), Kisumu (KSh200, two hours), Kericho (KSh180, two hours) and Isebania (KSh150, 1½ hours) on the Tanzanian border.

Tabaka matatus leave from the Victoria Cafe, while local matatus (and additional Kericho services) leave from the stand at the end of Sansora Rd.

Akamba (Moi Hwy) has a daily bus to Nairobi (KSh550, eight hours) via Nakuru (KSh290, 5½ hours) departing at 7.30am – it's wise to book a day in advance. International bus departures for Mwanza in Tanzania also leave from here (see p375).

Various other bus companies have offices along Moi Hwy.

KERICHO

☎ 052

In comparison to Kisii, Kericho is a haven of tranquillity. Its surrounds are blanketed by an undulating patchwork of manicured tea plantations, each seemingly hemmed in by distant stands of evergreens. While there is little to actually do in Kericho, it's a pleasant place to wander among the shade cast by leafy trees.

There is little doubt why Kericho is the tea capital of western Kenya: the soil is perfect, the climate consistent and afternoon rain falls almost every day.

Luckily these downpours are generally too brief to be a nuisance, and the atmosphere is cool enough to keep it fresh instead of humid.

Settlers attribute the town's name to John Kerich, a herbalist and early tea planter who lived here at the turn of the 20th century, while locals believe it's derived from the

ANYONE FOR TEA?

Kenya is the world's third-largest tea exporter after India and Sri Lanka, with tea accounting for between 20% and 30% of the country's export income. Tea picking is a great source of employment around Kericho, with mature bushes picked every 17 days and the same worker continually picking the same patch. Good pickers collect almost double their own body weight in tea each day!

The Kenyan tea industry is unique in that its small landholders produce the bulk (60%) of the country's tea. All the leaves used to be sold to the Kenya Tea Development Authority (KTDA), which did the processing and supposedly guaranteed farmers 70% of the sale price.

Corrupt and inefficient, the KTDA was replaced in 2000 by the Kenya Tea Development Agency (spot the difference!), which is run as a private company. However, smallholders continue to take a bigger role in the management of Kenya's most important cash crop, and the problems which have beset the coffee industry aren't quite so prevalent here.

Despite Kericho producing some of the planet's best black tea, you will have trouble finding a cup of the finest blends here – most of it's exported.

Maasai chief Ole Kericho, killed here by the Gusii during an 18th-century territorial battle. Who's right is anyone's guess.

Eventually the Maasai and Gusii settled elsewhere and the Kipsigis people, part of the greater Kalenjin group of Nandi-speaking tribes that also includes the Pokot, the Nandi and the Marakwet (see p43), now call this rich region home.

Information

Aga Khan Satellite Laboratory (Moi Hwy) Malaria and other blood tests.

Barclays Bank (Moi Hwy) Exchange cash and travellers cheques (KSh34 per leaf commission). With ATM.

Kenya Commercial Bank (Moi Hwy) With ATM (Visa only).

Medicare Centre (☎ 21733; Moi Rd) Clinic, pharmacy and X-ray.

Post office (Moi Hwy) With card phones, Internet and Western Union.

Standard Chartered Bank (Moi Hwy) Exchange cash and Amex travellers cheques (KSh50 per leaf). With ATM (Visa only).

Tea Hotel (Moi Hwy; per hr KSh1200) The only other Internet option besides the post office.

Telecare Centre (Temple Rd) Calling cards and card phones.

Sights & Activities

Organised **tea plantation tours** are surprisingly uncommon in Kericho, but Kimugu River Lodge they can usually set something up for you. The Tea Hotel can do the same, although you will pay through the nose.

If you're only interested in seeing the fields up close, it's an easy walk to the nearest

plantation, which sits behind the Tea Hotel. Head through the hotel grounds and follow the path out the back gate through the tea bushes to the hotel workers' huts. If you're lucky, picking may be in progress.

You can also arrange **hikes** through tea estates and **guided river walks** at Kimugu River Lodge.

Africa's largest **Gurudwara** (Sikh place of worship) is found on Hospital Rd.

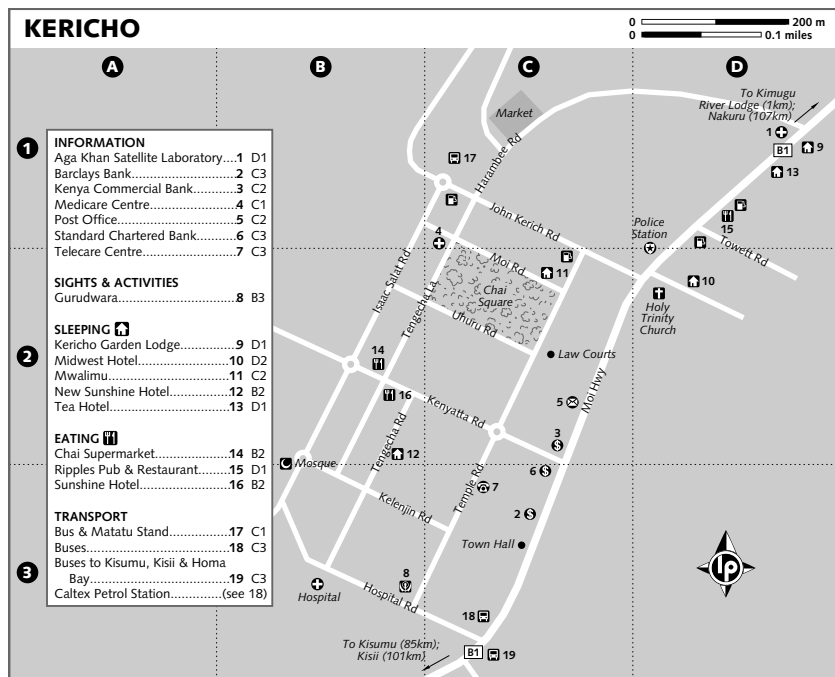
Sleeping & Eating

It is easier filling your grumbling tummy than finding a satisfactory room in this tea garden town.

Kericho Garden Lodge (☎ 32021; Moi Hwy; camping KSh275, s/tw KSh660/990) There is plenty of room for tents on this lodge's pleasant grounds. The simple rooms, with lumpy mattresses and sporadic hot water, are less of a bargain. It also houses a homey bar and lounge.

Mwalimu (☎ 30656; Moi Rd; s/tw KSh400/550) A secure place for a night's kip. The rooms are much brighter than the gloomy corridors and host soft foam mattresses. The bathrooms are dark and dreary, but hot water flows in the morning and evening.

New Sunshine Hotel (☎ 30037; Tengacha Rd; s/tw/d KSh600/900/1000) Boasting faux-wood paintwork that's almost funny enough to be charming, this place is worth a look. The rooms are clean, though they're a little dark. Hot water is available around the clock and there is secure parking. A bamboo roof and cheesy artificial waterfall grace the restaurant (meals KSh80 to KSh190), which serves Western snacks, sandwiches and burgers.



Kimugu River Lodge (☎ 0733-504942; off Moi Hwy; camping KSh150; s/d/tr from KSh1000/1500/2000) Set on the scenic bank of the Kimugi River, which runs behind the Tea Hotel, this lodge is a good option for campers (if you can handle cold showers). Unfortunately, the bandas are unreasonably expensive. Enjoy the bar and devour a spicy south Asian meal at the **restaurant** (meals KSh160-300). Its access road is signposted opposite the BP station.

Midwest Hotel (☎ 30196; Off Moi Hwy; s/d KSh1500/2000, ste KSh2950-3550) Garden views and sunshine save these rather basic rooms from being laughably overpriced. The buffet dinners at the popular restaurant (meals KSh200 to KSh450) are another redeeming quality.

Tea Hotel (☎ 30004; teahotel@africaonline.co.ke; Moi Hwy; camping KSh300, s/d US\$60/84, ste US\$102-108; ☎) Glorious gardens envelop this grand property, built in the 1950s by the Brooke Bond company. The rooms in the stone cottages have aged more gracefully than the hotel rooms and cost the same. All rooms have TVs, fireplaces and dated bathrooms.

Ripples Pub & Restaurant (Moi Hwy; meals KSh130-350; ☎ Tue-Sun) Despite being part of

the Kobil petrol station, this is definitely Kericho's most colourful restaurant. There is a good range of pizzas and sandwiches, as well as tasty Indian dishes such as spicy chicken tikka.

Sunshine Hotel (Kenyatta Rd; meals KSh60-160) Locals pile in to devour fried tilapia (their speciality) and other Kenyan selections.

Chai Supermarket (Kenyatta Rd) Perfect for self-caterers to stock up.

Getting There & Away

While most buses and matatus stop at the main stand in the town's northwest corner, many also pick up passengers on the Moi Hwy near the Caltex petrol station. If you simply state your destination to anyone in town, they'll be happy to point you in the right direction.

Buses to Nairobi (KSh450, 4½ hours) are quite frequent, as are matatus to Kisumu (KSh150, two hours), Kisii (KSh180, two hours), Eldoret (KSh250, 3½ hours) and Nakuru (KSh200, two hours). The odd Peugeot also serves these destinations, but costs about 25% more.

KAKAMEGA

☎ 056

This small but busy town is spread out along the A1 Hwy north of Kisumu. There is no real reason to stay here, but if you arrive late in the day it can be convenient to sleep over and stock up with supplies before heading to nearby Kakamega Forest Reserve, one of western Kenya's star attractions.

The Kakamega region is part of the traditional Bungoma district (see below) and home to the Luyha people (see p43), who are quite Westernised and unobtrusive as a community.

Information

Barclays Bank (A1 Hwy) Exchange cash and travellers cheques (KSh34 per leaf commission). With ATM.

Kenya Commercial Bank (Kenyatta Ave) With ATM (Visa only).

KWS Area Headquarters (☎ 30603; PO Box 88, Kakamega) Kakamega Forest information.

Post office (A1 Hwy) With Internet.

Telkom Kenya (A1 Hwy) Calling cards and card phones.

Sights & Activities

Perched on a ridge south of town is the **Crying Stone of Ilesi**, a local curiosity that has become a regional emblem. The formation, looking like a solemn head resting on weary shoulders, consists of a large boulder balanced atop an 8m column of rock. While legend has it that tears never stop flowing down its length, it was dry during our visit – perhaps it was just happy to see us! Still, stains from years of eerie weeping are evident and it's

worth a look. Maybe it won't be so happy to see you...

Those wishing to beat the heat can take a dip in the Golf Hotel's **swimming pool** (KSh150).

Sleeping & Eating

There are slim pickings in the sleeping and eating departments, though try to taste *ugali wimbi* (made from sorghum) while here. Word on the street is that eating this reddish local specialty will slow the aging process.

Bandera Hotel (Sudi Rd; d KSh350) Consistently the best budget hotel in town. It was closed for renovations during our visit, so it should be better than ever when you arrive.

Salama Hotel (Cannon Awori Rd; s/tw with shared bathroom KSh200/300) Can you spell evid backwards? Rooms are very dark and the stinky squat toilets will inspire your bladder to new feats of endurance.

Golf Hotel (☎ 30150; Khasakhala Rd; s/d incl breakfast US\$60/75; ☎) While the large rooms, each with a balcony and garden view (some even glimpse Mt Elgon), are bright and pleasant, this hotel is seriously overpriced. On a positive note, readers rave about the swimming pool and fish dishes in the restaurant (meals KSh180 to KSh350).

Snack Stop Cafe (Cannon Awori Rd; meals KSh65-130) The restaurant of choice for locals. Simple Kenyan standards, including *ugali wimbi*.

Pizza Hut Cafe (Cannon Awori Rd; meals KSh60-180) Don't count on pizza! Basic local dishes and slow service are the name of the game.

There are several supermarkets for self-caterers.

THE KINDEST CUT

The Bungoma/Trans-Nzoia district goes wild in August with the sights and sounds of the Bukusu Circumcision Festival, an annual jamboree dedicated to the initiation of young boys into manhood.

The tradition was apparently passed to the Bukusu by the Saboot tribe in the 1800s, when a young hunter cut the head off a troublesome serpent to earn the coveted operation (too symbolic to be true?).

The evening before the ceremony is devoted to substance abuse and sex; in the morning the fortunate youngsters are trimmed with a traditional knife in front of their entire village.

Unsurprisingly, this practice has attracted a certain amount of controversy in recent years. Health concerns are prevalent, as the same knife can be used for up to 10 boys, posing a risk of AIDS and other infections. The associated debauchery also brings a seasonal rush of underage pregnancies and family rifts that seriously affect local communities.

Education and experience now mean that fewer boys undergo the old method, preferring to take the safe option at local hospitals. However, those wielding the knife are less likely to let go of their heritage. To quote one prominent circumciser: 'Every year at this time it's like a fever grips me, and I can't rest until I've cut a boy'. It seems that in Bukusuland some traditions die hard.

Getting There & Around

Easy Coach (off Kenyatta Ave) serves Kisumu (KSh150, one hour) and has early morning and evening buses to Nairobi (KSh650, 7½ hours) via Nakuru (KSh450, five hours). Nearby, **Akamba** (off Kenyatta Ave) has an 8pm bus to Nairobi (KSh600).

Behind the Total station on the northern edge of the town, matatus leave for Kisumu (KSh120, one hour), Kitale (KSh190, 2½ hours) and Eldoret (KSh180, 2½ hours).

Boda-bodas (bicycle taxis) are everywhere and crossing town costs about KSh15.

KAKAMEGA FOREST RESERVE

☎ 056

This superb small slab of virgin tropical rainforest is the only Kenyan vestige of the unique and once mighty Guineo-Congolian forest ecosystem. It is so wild here trees actually kill each other – really! Parasitic fig trees grow on top of unsuspecting trees and strangle their hosts to death. Potential victims include the lovely Elgon teak.

Less murderous and more exciting is the forest's array of wildlife. An astounding 330 species of birds, including casqued hornbill, Ross's turaco and great blue turaco, have been spotted here. During darkness, hammer-headed fruit bats and flying squirrels take to the air. The best viewing months are June, August and October, when many migrant species arrive. The wildflowers are also wonderful in October, supporting around 400 species of butterfly.

Dancing in the canopy are no less than seven different primate species, one being the exceedingly rare De Brazza's monkey. Others here include the red-tailed monkey, blue monkey and the thumbless black and white colobus.

The northern section of the forest around Buyangu is more accessible and comprises the **Kakamega Forest National Reserve**. Maintained by the KWS, this area has a variety of habitats but is generally very dense, with considerable areas of primary forest and regenerating secondary forest; there is a total ban on grazing, wood collection and cultivation in this zone. Isolated a few kilometres north, but still part of this reserve, is the small **Kisere Forest Reserve**.

The southern section, centred around Isecheno, forms the **Kakamega Forest Reserve** and is looked after by the Forest Depart-

ment. Predominantly forested, this region supports several communities and is under considerable pressure from both farming and illegal logging.

Tribal practices in the forest persist: *mugumu* trees are considered sacred, circumcisions are sometimes performed in the forest and bullfights are still held on Sunday in Khayega and Shinyalu. Intervillage wrestling also used to be common, but was eventually banned, as the prize (the victor's pick of the young women present) tended to provoke more fights than the match itself.

Information

KWS currently only charges admission to the **Kakamega Forest National Reserve** (adult/child US\$10/5, vehicle KSh300). An excellent guide to the forest, published by Kenya Indigenous Forest Conservation Programme, is available at the KWS office (KSh300) and Rondo Retreat (KSh500).

Sights & Activities

WALKING TRAILS

The best way to appreciate the forest is to walk, and trails radiate from Buyangu and Isecheno areas. It is possible to drive, but the roads are pretty tough going, and the engine noise will scare off any wildlife nearby as well as annoying everyone else present.

Official **guides** (per person for short/long walk KSh200/600), trained by the Kakamega Biodiversity Conservation and Tour Operators Association, are well worth the money. Not only do they prevent you from getting lost (many of the trail signs are missing), but most are excellent naturalists who can recognise birds by call alone and provide information about numerous animals.

Rangers state that trails vary in length from 1km to 7km, but the enjoyable **Isiukhu Trail**, which connects Isecheno to **Isiukhu Falls**, seems much longer. Short walks to **Buyangu Hill** in the north or **Lirhandu Hill** in the south for sunrise or sunset are highly recommended. River walks are also rewarding. As ever, the early morning and late afternoon are the best times to view birds, but night walks can also be a fantastic experience.

KAKAMEGA ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION PROGRAMME

A visit to the diminutive resource centre and library of the **Kakamega Environmental**

Education Programme (KEEP; keeporg@yahoo.com) is quite rewarding. Its mission is to educate the local communities on the importance of maintaining the fragile environment, and to create sustainable income for locals through ecotourism, honey production and butterfly farming.

Sleeping & Eating

BUYANGU AREA

Udo's Bandas & Campsite (☎ 30603; PO Box 879, Kakamega; camping adult/child US\$8/5, bandas per person US\$10) Named after Udo Savalli, a well-known ornithologist, this place is run by KWS. It is a tidy, well-maintained campsite with seven simple thatched bandas; nets are provided, but you will need your own sleeping bag and other supplies. There are long-drop toilets, bucket showers and a communal cooking and dining shelter.

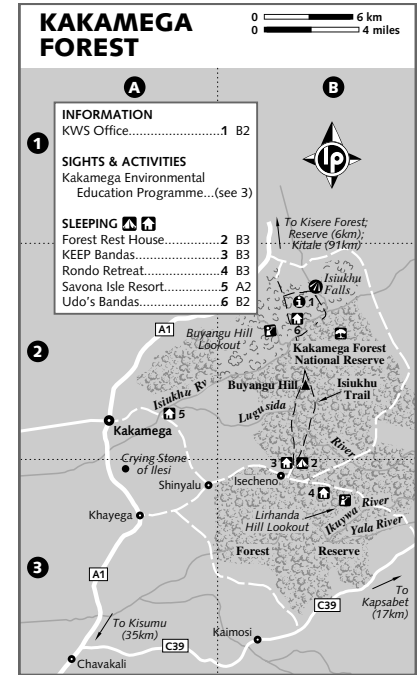
ISECHENO AREA

Forest Rest House (☎ 30603; PO Box 88, Kakamega; camping KSh150, s/tw KSh350/700) Beds are housed in four rudimentary twin rooms, while bare-bones bathrooms (no hot water) are in a rickety stilted wooden building that looks directly out over the forest. You will need your own sleeping bag, food and preferably something to cook on, although fires are allowed and the small canteen here can cook for you. You can get basic supplies from the *dukas* (shops) about 2km back towards Shinyalu.

KEEP Bandas (keeporg@yahoo.com; s/tw KSh500/1000) Opened in May 2005, these bandas are a more comfortable option than the rest house and have more facilities, including a nice dining area.

Savona Isle Resort (☎ 31095; d/tw/tr KSh1500/1500/5000; 🍷) This resort is too far from the forest to make it a walking base, but it is a fine option if you have a car. Rooms are in slightly aged thatched bandas, each with a balcony backing onto the bamboo-lined river. Extortionate 'family' triple rooms are merely created by opening the door between a regular single and double room – keep the door closed and save KSh2000! Meals are available in the atmospheric restaurant (meals KSh200 to KSh400).

Rondo Retreat (☎ 30268; tfrondo@multitechweb.com; full board s/tw KSh9000/11,600) Originally built as a sawmill's residence in the 1920s, this charming choice is about 3km east of Isecheno. Seven cottages, each with striking



traditional fittings and large verandas, sit in gorgeous gardens through which plenty of wildlife passes. The main house oozes atmosphere (ask for Bob & Betty's room), though some of its rooms share a bathroom. The meals are excellent, although they prefer advance warning. Transfers from Kakamega, guides and forest tours can be arranged.

Getting There & Away

BUYANGU AREA

Matatus heading north towards Kitale can drop you at the access road about 18km north of Kakamega town (KSh50). It is a well signposted 2km walk from there to the park office and Udo's.

ISECHENO AREA

Regular matatus link Kakamega with Shinyalu (KSh60), but few go on to Isecheno. Shinyalu is accessed by a rare matatu service from Khayega. Odd vehicles run between Shinyalu and Isecheno (KSh30 to KSh60).

The improved roads are still treacherous after rain and you may prefer to walk once you've seen the trouble vehicles have. To

Shinyalu it's about 7km from Khayega and 10km from Kakamega. From Shinyalu it is 5km to Isecheno.

The dirt road from the rest house continues east to Kapsabet, but transport is rare.

ELDORET

☎ 053

Mmmmm...cheese! While the pull of a fine Gouda, Gruyere, Stilton, Brie or Cheddar can vary depending on how long you've been on your African safari, a stop in Eldoret is a must for all cheese lovers.

For you cheese haters, there is little else to draw you to this large service town besides the need of a bank or a good night's sleep before venturing into the nearby Kerio Valley and Kamnarok National Reserves.

Former president Moi hails from around this area, and during his presidency the city controversially received many beneficial developments such as Moi University and the international airport. Simultaneous construction of a munitions factory next to the airport also raised many eyebrows at the time – critics wondered just what sort of exports were intended.

Information

Barclays Bank (Uganda Rd) Exchange cash and travellers cheques (per leaf commission KSh34). With ATM.

Cyber Hawk Internet Café (Nandi Arcade, Nandi Rd; per hr KSh60) Fast connections and friendly service.

Eldoret Hospital (off Uganda Rd) One of Kenya's best hospitals. With 24hr Emergency.

Kenya Commercial Bank (Kenyatta St) With ATM (Visa only).

Nomecy Cyber Café (Nandi Arcade, Nandi Rd; per hr KSh60) Burn images to CD using USB connection (KSh200).

Post office (Uganda Rd) With Internet.

Safari Forex Bureau (KVDA Plaza, Oloo Rd) Exchange cash and travellers cheques (no commission). Western Union services.

Standard Chartered Bank (Uganda Rd) With ATM (Visa only).

Telkom Kenya (cnr Kenyatta St & Elijaa Cheruhota St) Calling cards and card phones.

Sights & Activities

Cheese cheese cheese, get me some cheese – please! An odd but tasty attraction, the **Dorinyo Lessos Creameries Cheese Factory** (Kenyatta St; ☎ 8am-6pm) produces over 30 different types of cheese. You can taste most for free and the average price is KSh500 per kg, with a minimum purchase of 250g. The company also makes yummy ice cream (KSh23 for 100ml).

An afternoon of lounging and underwater activities can be had at Sirikwa Hotel's **swimming pool** (Elgeyo Rd; adult/child KSh150/200).

Sleeping BUDGET

Mountain View Hotel (☎ 0720-486613; Uganda Rd; s/tw KSh450/550) While a little noisy and small, these bright clean rooms have mozzie nets, reasonable bathrooms and balconies complete with potted plants. Taking a cell-like inside-facing single without a balcony only saves 50 bob. Security is distinctly prison-like (you have to be let out as well as in). It also has a respectable terrace bar and restaurant.

EDUCATION FOR ALL!

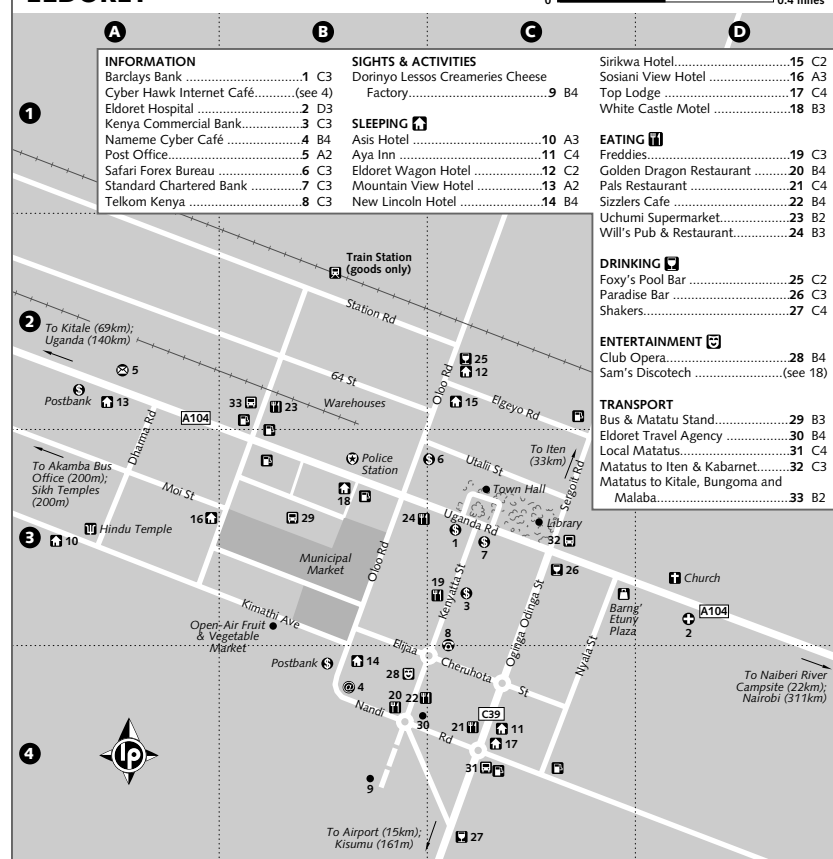
After the 2002 elections the new government created a long-awaited provision guaranteeing free primary education for all Kenyans, a move applauded by parents across the nation. One great grandfather by the name of Kimani Nganga Maruge clapped a little louder than most.

What the teacher thought on the first day of class when she saw this cane-wielding knobby-kneed 84-year-old, dressed in school uniform – shorts and all, with striped knee-socks pulled high – sitting in the front row (he was hard of hearing, after all) is anyone's guess!

Mr Maruge was there to start collecting his long-overdue education and wouldn't let anyone say otherwise. Besides basic maths, he was keen on learning how to read. This would allow him to study the bible and see if his suspicions that his local preacher wasn't actually following it were true!

Not only does he continue to attend classes in the Eldoret area, but he's also been made prefect and his teacher is said to rave about his influence over the students. Mr Maruge is also a quick pupil and has scored some of the top marks in his class. Perhaps he's being tutored by his two grandchildren, who attend the same school.

ELDORET



New Lincoln Hotel (☎ 0723-676699; Oloo Rd; s/d KSh600/800) The most comfortable of the budget options, this pleasant place has decent rooms spread around its courtyard. The bathrooms and hot water plumbing are slightly disfigured but seem to do the job.

Aya Inn (Oginga Odinga St; s/tw incl breakfast KSh500/1000) With clean rooms, large (somewhat saggy) beds, hot water showers and a courtyard for vehicles, this place is a reasonable option. There are some cheaper singles (KSh400) with shared bathrooms.

Sosiani View Hotel (☎ 0723-112157; off Moi St; s/tw with shared bathroom KSh360/500) At the western end of the main matatu stand, this slightly grotty hotel has bare-bones rooms with some very firm mattresses.

Top Lodge (Oginga Odinga St; s/tw with shared bathroom KSh200/300) If money is tight, some of the rooms facing the street are bright and tolerable. The shared bathrooms are grim.

Naiberi River Campsite (☎ 2063047; campsite@ africaonline.co.ke; camping KSh250, dm KSh500, cabins KSh1200; ☎) This place, 22km southeast of town on the C54 to Kaptagat, is your best option for camping, as it has tonnes of facilities. It is, however, very popular with overland companies. Contact the campsite for directions.

MIDRANGE & TOP END

Eldoret Wagon Hotel (☎ 2062270; Oloo Rd; s/d incl breakfast KSh1550/2250) This option has a certain amount of colonial charm. It is overpriced,

but retains some suitably eccentric memorabilia, and there is a casino to make you feel like a high roller.

White Castle Motel (☎ 2033095; Uganda Rd; s/d KSh850/1550) Lonely beds sit strangely away from all the walls in these sizeable austere rooms. Some rooms have decent views and all have aged but clean bathrooms. The expensive special singles are not worth the money.

Asis Hotel (☎ 2061807; Kimathi Ave; s/tw incl breakfast KSh750/1250) Alone on the west side of town, this conference-class place is very clean and comfortable. From some rooms farsighted guests will enjoy countryside views, while nearsighted guests will glare at the litter outside.

Sirikwa Hotel (☎ 2063614; hotelsirikwa@multitech web.com; Elgeyo Rd; s/tw incl breakfast KSh4000/5000, ste from KSh8500; 📶) This is Eldoret's only top-end hotel and it boasts a long list of facilities, including a lovely swimming pool and beautiful terrace. The rooms are comfortable but a bit dated, though renovations are planned for 2006. Hopefully they won't touch the suites, which feature velvet and scream 70s chic.

Eating

Sirikwa Hotel (Elgeyo Rd; meals KSh250-400) Slide onto their grand terrace and sink your teeth into some sumptuous selections. Local well-to-do's rave about the marinated lamb and chicken curry.

Will's Pub & Restaurant (Uganda Rd; meals KSh200-450) The burgers and shoestring fries here will leave you smiling. Thanks to the fried fish and lamb stew also being justifiably popular, tables come at a premium.

Golden Dragon Restaurant (Kenyatta St; meals KSh300-400; 🍷 Wed-Mon) A tad pricey, but Chinese food will give your taste buds something new to sing about.

Freddies (Kenyatta St; meals KSh60-270) A fast food feel with Western snacks. Not a bad spot for breakfast.

Sizzlers Cafe (Kenyatta St; meals KSh100-235) Grab a curry and get stuffed for minimal coinage at this undeniable favourite.

Pals Restaurant (Oginga Odinga St; meals KSh50-100) Serving up stews and other Kenyan fare. It is oddly popular with Eldoret's elderly – perhaps the food is the secret of longevity?

Uchumi supermarket (off Uganda Rd) Well stocked and perfect for self-caterers.

Drinking & Entertainment

Shakers (Oginga Odinga Rd) An atmospheric, albeit isolated (take a taxi) place just waiting for introductions: arse meet wicker. Eyes meet European foxy. Beer meet lips.

Will's Pub (Uganda St) A tame but lively place for a cold drink or three. It is a friendly spot for female travellers.

Foxy's Pool Bar (Oloo Rd) A quiet place to shoot some stick and savour a beer.

Paradise Bar (Oginga Odinga Rd) A rough and tumble place. Is it a good or bad sign that the bar is behind bars?

Sam's Discotech (Uganda Rd; 🍷 weekends) Eldoret's energetic dance club.

Club Opera (Kenyatta St) Day-Glo paint, black lights and occasional live bands grace this raucous nightclub.

Getting There & Away

AIR

There are daily flights between Eldoret and Nairobi (KSh5700, one hour) with the little-known Aero Kenya. Bookings are handled by **Eldoret Travel Agency** (☎ 2062707; Kenyatta St).

BUS & MATATU

The main bus and matatu stand is in the centre of town, by the market.

Regular matatus/Peugeots serve Kitale (KSh150/200, 1¼ hours), Kisumu (KSh250/300, 2½ hours), Kericho (KSh250/300, 3½ hours), Nakuru (KSh200/400, 2¾ hours) and Nairobi (KSh400/700, six hours). Buses duplicate these routes.

Local matatus and more Kericho services leave from Nandi Rd. Irregular matatus to Iten and Kabarnet leave opposite Paradise Bar on Uganda Rd. Further west on Uganda Rd, matatus leave for Malaba (KSh300, 2½ hours) on the Uganda border.

Akamba (Moi St) buses to Nairobi (KSh500, 10.30am and 9pm) via Nakuru (KSh250) leave from their depot. There is also a noon (KSh1000) and midnight (KSh1150) service to Kampala (six hours).

Getting Around

A matatu to or from the airport costs KSh50, and a taxi will cost around KSh1000. *Bodabodas* (bicycle taxis) are rare here, though some linger near the bus stand.

Parking is tricky in town, and most streets have a KSh30 charge, collected by yellow-jacketed wardens.

WEST TO UGANDA

Malaba

☎ 055

This dusty town sits on the main border crossing to Uganda and you may get stuck here for one reason or another. The **Kenya Commercial Bank** (☎ 54204; A104 Hwy) can exchange small amounts of currency – you'll have to call ahead for larger sums. The **post office** (A104 Hwy) has the only Internet access.

Emael Tourist Hotel (☎ 54022; off A104 Hwy; s/d incl breakfast KSh750/950) has the town's nicest rooms – the toilets even have seats. It is just north, off the A104 past Jaki Guest House. The restaurant (meals KSh150 to KSh300) is an equally good option.

A cheaper option is **Jaki Guest House** (☎ 54484; A104 Hwy; s KSh300-500, tw KSh500-1000), which has basic rooms with mozzie nets in their old wing and more comfortable, though tacky (a Martha Stewart paint 'effect' gone horribly wrong), options in the new wing. The restaurant (meals KSh150 to KSh300) out the back is suitably simple.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Akamba (A104 Hwy) has daily buses to Nairobi (KSh550, eight hours, 11am and 8pm) and Kampala (KSh450, 4½ hours, 2.30pm). Sporadic matatus serve Eldoret (KSh300, 2½ hours) and Kitale (KSh300, 2½ hours).

Busia

☎ 055

This tiny town links Kisumu with Uganda and was primarily used by transport trucks, though matatus and Nairobi–Kampala buses now use this route too. There is a Kenya Commercial Bank, but they seem rather unhelpful – you will usually find locals on the buses offering decent rates to exchange Kenyan and Ugandan currency.

The **Lian Guest House** (off Moi Ave; s KSh250) is a basic but clean place to sleep. To get here, follow the signs for the Blue York Hotel.

Further up the road is the **Blue York Hotel** (☎ 22081; off Moi Ave; s/tw incl breakfast KSh700/1100), which boasts comfortable, spotless rooms.

The best place to eat is **Royal Cafe** (B1 Hwy; meals KSh80-150), which is just northeast of the bus stand.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Akamba (B1 Hwy) has daily bus services to Nairobi (KSh600, eight hours, 8am and 10pm),

Kisumu (KSh200, three hours, noon) and Kampala (KSh500, four hours, 5am, 7am and 3pm).

KABARNET

☎ 053

With a spectacular location on the eastern edge of the Kerio Valley, Kabarnet is one of many little towns nestled in the Tugen Hills. The road here is excellent, and the journey from Marigat is absolutely stunning, with views right across the arid but tree-covered ridges and the region's valleys. Kabarnet is also the best launching point for treks into the Kerio Valley.

Information

Kenya Commercial Bank (town centre) Exchange cash and travellers cheques (KSh50 per leaf). With ATM (Visa only).

Post office (town centre) With Internet and card phones.
Standard Chartered Bank (town centre) With ATM (Visa only).

Sleeping & Eating

Sinkoro Hotel (☎ 22245; town centre; s/tw KSh400/612) The spacious rooms are airy, and the even-numbered rooms upstairs have views. It also has a nice restaurant (meals KSh90 to KSh160) and bar.

Sportsline Hotel (☎ 21430; town centre; s KSh300) This is a bargain for basic and bright singles. The restaurant (meals KSh50 to KSh185), which serves the usual Kenyan suspects, and its terrace are local favourites.

Kabarnet Hotel (☎ 22094; town centre; s/d incl breakfast KSh1500/2000; 📶) Just outside town, this is a solid midrange option. Comfortable rooms, with sloped wooden ceilings and slightly dog-eared bathrooms, look onto gorgeous gardens.

The supermarket behind Postbank is well-stocked.

Getting There & Away

Matatus/Peugeots serve Eldoret (KSh200/250, two hours), Nakuru (KSh200/250, 2½ hours) and Marigat (KSh140, 1¼ hours).

LAKE KAMNAROK & KERIO VALLEY NATIONAL RESERVES

These two little-visited national reserves lie in the heart of the beautiful Kerio Valley, sandwiched between the **Cherangani Hills** and the **Tugen Hills**, and are divided by the Kerio

River. Prolific birdlife, crocodiles, wonderful landscapes and the chance to get totally off the beaten track are the main attractions.

Lake Kamnarok, on the river's eastern side, is the most accessible of the two reserves, although there are absolutely no facilities. Bush camping is possible by the lake and no park fees are currently charged by the KWS. At present you can walk anywhere on foot, but it is best to ask rangers and locals if there have been any recent wild dog attacks in the area.

It is possible to cross into Kerio Valley National Reserve from Kamnarok during dry season, but you will have to wade across the river north of the lake. To the south of the reserve is the beautiful **Cheploch Gorge**.

The rest of the Kerio Valley begs to be explored and there is still talk of two other national reserves being created: one around Kapkut (2799m), a beautiful mountain close to Eldama Ravine, and another in the Tugen Hills.

To reach Lake Kamnarok, go 25km north up the rough dirt track from the village of Cheploch, which sits just east of the Kerio River on the Kabarnet-Iten road. A 4WD is required in dry season – don't even think about it during the rains.

KITALE

☎ 054

Kitale is considerably smaller than its nearest neighbour Eldoret and has more of an agricultural feel, although there are more street kids than in most normal service towns. Although it has an interesting museum, Kitale's main function for travellers is as a base for explorations further afield – Mt Elgon and Saiwa Swamp National Parks – and as a take-off point for a trip up to the western side of Lake Turkana. As such, Kitale is a pleasant enough town and can be an enjoyable place to pass through.

Information

Barclays Bank (Bank St) Exchange cash and travellers cheques (KSh34 per leaf commission). With ATM.

Mt Elgon Northwest Ecotourism (Menowecto; ☎ 30996; Kitale Museum, A1 Hwy) Nonprofit organisation providing tourist information. Paying the museum fee isn't necessary to reach the office.

MultiTech (Askari Rd; per hr KSh60) The town's most reliable Internet connections.

Post office (Post Office Rd) With Internet.

Standard Chartered Bank (Bank St) With ATM (Visa only).

Telkom Kenya (Post Office Rd) Calling cards and card phones.

Western Union (Askari Rd) Money transfer services.

Sights & Activities

KITALE MUSEUM

The **museum** (☎ 30996; A1 Hwy; adult/child KSh200/20; ☎ 8am-6pm) was founded on the collection of butterflies, birds and ethnographic memorabilia left to the nation in 1967 by the late Lieutenant Colonel Stoneham. The more recent ethnographic displays of the Pokot, Akamba, Marakwet and Turkana peoples are a bit more interesting than the rows of dead things (although the stuffed cheetah is comical). The outdoor exhibits include some traditional tribal homesteads as well as the inevitable snakes, crocodiles and tortoises, plus an interesting 'Hutchinson Biogas Unit'.

The best thing here is the small **nature trail** that leads through some virgin rainforest at the back of the museum and links with the arboretum of the Olaf Palme Agroforestry Centre. The forest is teeming with birdlife, insects and the odd colobus monkey.

The craft shop here is worth a look, stocking some nice stuff at good, nominally fixed prices.

OLAF PALME AGROFORESTRY CENTRE

Next to the museum along the highway is the **Olaf Palme Agroforestry Centre** (A1 Hwy; admission free; ☎ 8am-5pm). This is a Swedish-funded program aimed at educating local people about protection and rehabilitation of the environment by integrating trees into farming systems. The project includes a small demonstration farm and agroforestry plot, an information centre and an arboretum containing 46 rare species of indigenous trees; it's well worth a visit.

Sleeping

Kitale lacks any top-end options and decent budget options are few and far between.

BUDGET

Bongo Lodge (☎ 30972; Moi Ave; s/tw KSh500/600) Good-value rooms offering hot showers surround a bright courtyard. Similar to the pricier Alakara, but a little more aged.

Executive Lodge (☎ 0720-536359; Kenyatta St; s/tw with shared bathroom KSh300/700, tw KSh800) The

cheap small singles are a slight step up from those at Mamboleo, but a distant drop from all others we've mentioned. The twins aren't worth the money.

Hotel Mamboleo (☎ 30850; Moi Ave; s/tw with shared bathroom KSh200/300) This is the least revolting of Kitale's true cheapies. The rooms upstairs are a little brighter than the cell-like options below.

MIDRANGE

Alakara Hotel (☎ 31554; Kenyatta St; s with shared bathroom KSh500, s/tw/d KSh700/1000/1500) This is the best value in town. The comfortable rooms have phones, the staff are friendly and prices include breakfast. It has a good bar, restaurant, TV room and parking facilities.

Sunrise Motel (☎ 31841; Kenyatta St; s KSh700-850, tw KSh900-1000) Rooms have a little more flair than Alakara's, with hardwood floors, rugs and splashes of colour. The slightly more expensive options are size large and include bright balconies.

Vision Gate Hotel (☎ 0734-894177; Askari Rd; s/d incl breakfast from KSh1000/1250) While these spotless rooms are smaller and less decorated than those at Sunrise, they have slightly more comfortable beds. They also offer discounted rates for children.

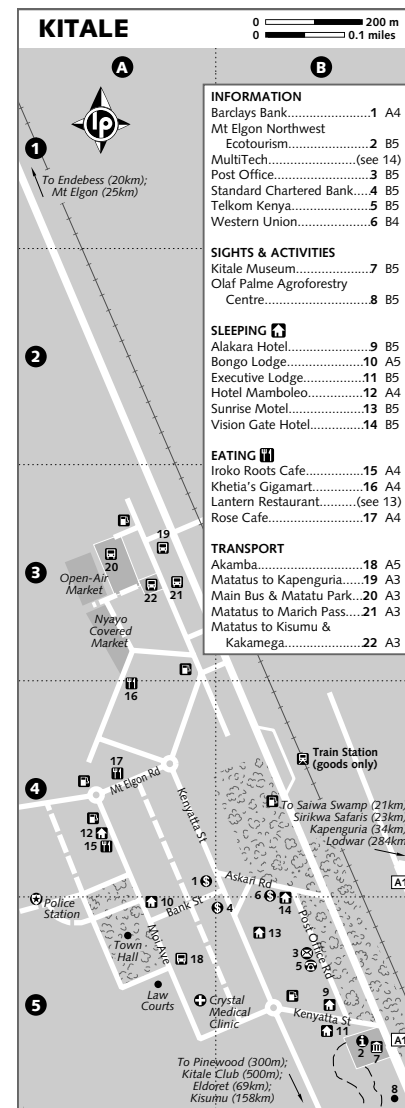
Kitale Club (☎ 31330; A1 Hwy; s KSh1200-2700, tw KSh2000-3700; ☎) The 'standard' rooms are rather bland and overpriced, while the 'executive' options are brighter and more comfortable. The large cottages are perfect for families and offer a TV lounge, fireplace and baby cot. You will need to pay (KSh500 per person) for temporary membership, which also gives you access to the pool, sauna, tennis and squash courts, and darts and snooker rooms.

Pinewood (☎ 30011; A1 Hwy; r KSh800-1500) At the time of research this place, between town and the Kitale Club, had started building accommodation out the back. If it's half as nice as the restaurant, it'll be a great option.

Eating & Drinking

Despite its few options Kitale packs a tasty culinary punch – whammo!

Lantern Restaurant (Kenyatta St; meals KSh190-300; ☎ 6pm-midnight) With starters like tasty French onion soup and meals ranging from English fish and chips to Indian specialties, this is the place to eat. Aubergine masala is one of several delicious vegetarian selections. The



cocktail bar only adds to the fantastic atmosphere. It's found upstairs in the Sunrise Motel.

Iroko Roots Cafe (Moi Ave; meals KSh50-110) Feeling more like a coffee shop in the Rocky Mountains, this spotless, unique place serves up the best Kenyan dishes in town and is perfect for breakfast.

Pinewood (A1 Hwy; meals KSh180-480) A great new place for Indian or Chinese fare (complete with fresh ginger). Sit outside with views of Mt Elgon or head inside to the plethora of pine. The pub here is also great.

Alakara Hotel (Kenyatta St; meals KSh140-200) Lacks Lantern's vibe, but it has quality meals and is the best place for chicken and chips.

Kitale Club (A1 Hwy; set meals KSh390-600) What it lacks in cheapness it makes up for in taste. It is also a lovely place to have a drink (the Sports Bar is excellent).

Rose Cafe (Mt Elgon Rd; meals KSh50-130; ☎ 24hr) Simple Kenyan eats at all hours.

Khetia's Gigamart (☎ 7.30am-7pm) Stock up for trips to Elgon or the north at this massive supermarket.

Getting There & Away

Matatus, buses and Peugeots are grouped by destination, and spread in and around the main bus and matatu park. It is fairly chaotic, but if you state your destination you will be pointed in the right direction.

Regular matatus run to Endebess (KSh70, 45 minutes), Kapenguria (KSh80, 45 minutes), Eldoret (KSh 150, 1¼ hours) and Kakamega (KSh180, two hours). Less regular services reach Mt Elgon National Park (KSh80, one hour), Nakuru (KSh350, 3½ hours) and Kisumu (KSh300, four hours).

Most bus companies have offices around the bus station and serve Eldoret (KSh150, one hour), Nakuru (KSh350, 3½ hours) and Nairobi (KSh500, six hours).

Several buses now run up to Lodwar (KSh700, 8½ hours) each day.

Akamba (Moi Ave) run buses from outside their office to Nairobi at 9am (KSh550) and 9pm (KSh600).

MT ELGON NATIONAL PARK

With its deep volcanic crater straddling the Kenya/Uganda border and its forested flanks extending well into both countries, massive Mt Elgon is a sight indeed. With the dramatic 7km-wide caldera dotted with several peaks – including the basalt column of Koitoboss (4187m), Kenya's second highest, and Wagagai (4321m) in Uganda – this extinct volcano offers some of the best treks in Kenya. The national park boundaries extend from the lower slopes right up to the border.

Despite its lower altitude making conditions less extreme than Mt Kenya, Elgon

sees a fraction of its bigger cousin's visitors, partly due to its greater distance from Nairobi, its wetter weather and the fact that most visitors are more interested in claiming they've climbed Kenya's tallest mountain. While this is sad, it means those unconcerned about bragging will have far fewer people to share the mountain with.

The extinct shield volcano's distinct shape landed it a Maasai name literally meaning 'mountain shaped like human breast'. Thankfully for your lungs and legs, Mt Elgon is more of a pre- than post-silicone Pam Anderson shape.

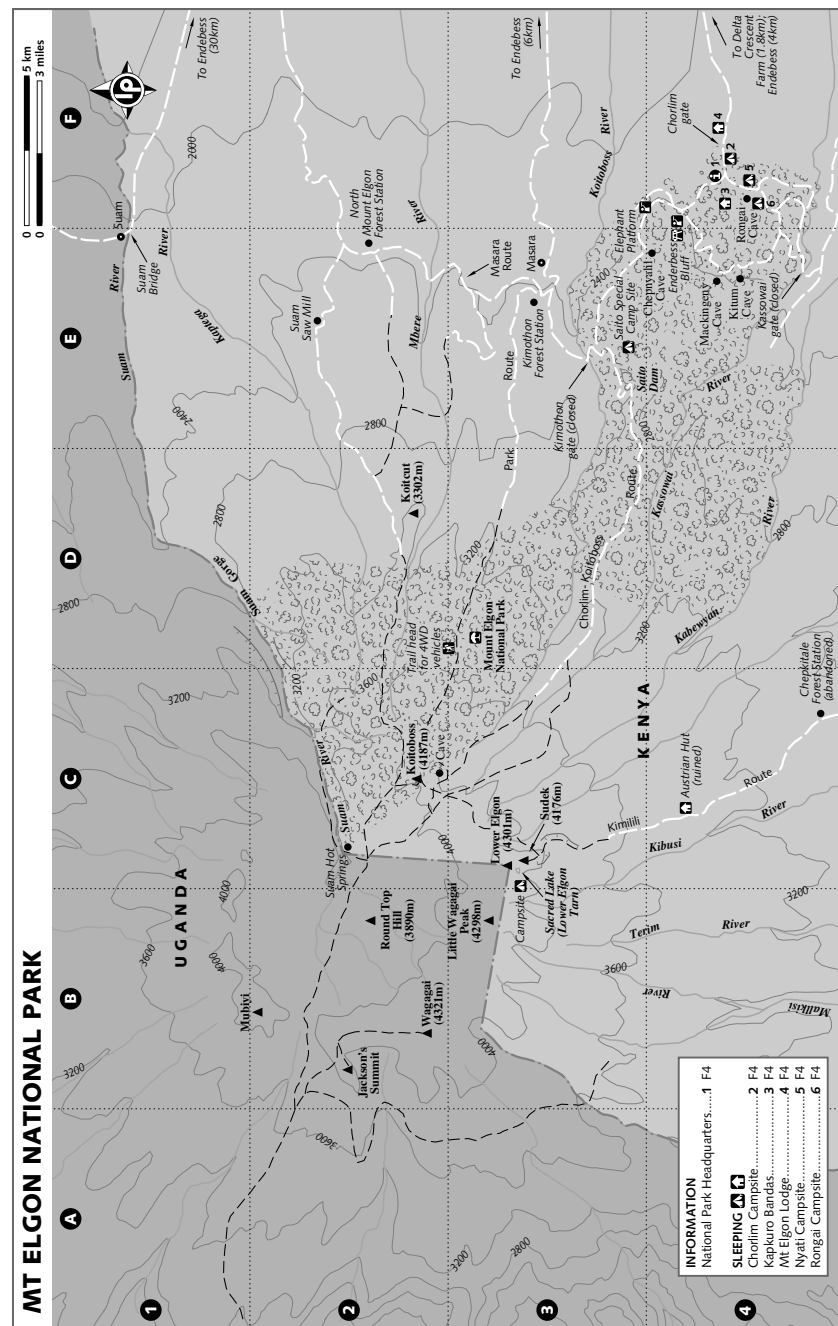
While rarely seen, the mountain's most famous attractions are the elephants known for their predilection for digging salt out of the lower eastern slopes' caves. The elephants are such keen excavators that some people have been fooled into believing they are totally responsible for the caves. Sadly, the number of these saline-loving creatures has declined over the years, mainly due to incursions by Ugandan poachers.

Four main lava tubes (caves) are open to visitors: **Kitum**, **Chepyalil**, **Mackingeny** and **Rongai**. Kitum holds your best hope for glimpsing elephants (especially before dawn), while Mackingeny, with a waterfall cascading across the entrance, is the most spectacular. A good flashlight is essential and you should be wary of rock falls – the bones of a crushed elephant stand as evidence of this.

The mountain's fauna and flora are also great attractions. With rainforest at the base, the vegetation changes as you ascend, to bamboo jungle and finally alpine moorland featuring the giant groundsel and giant lobelia plants. Common animals include buffaloes, bushbucks, olive baboons, giant forest hogs and duikers, while Defassa waterbucks are also present. The lower forests are the habitat of the black and white colobus, and the blue and De Brazza's monkeys (most likely seen near waterways).

There are more than 240 species of birds here, including red-fronted parrots, Ross's turacos and casqued hornbills. On the peaks you may even see a lammergeyer raptor gliding through the thin air. The Elephant Platform and Endebess Bluff viewpoints are good places to survey the scene on the way up.

The streams that run off the mountain are filled with trout; fishing permits are available from the park headquarters for KSh100.



Information

The **park** (adult/child US\$15/5) is wet much of the year, but driest between December and February. As well as bringing waterproof gear, you will need warm clothes, as it gets cold up here at night. Altitude may also be a problem for some people.

Access to the 169-sq-km national park is now permitted without a vehicle. Even if you have a 4WD, walking is the best way to get around as the roads are treacherous.

Due to the odd elephant, a **ranger** (per half/full day KSh500/1000) must escort you on walks on the lower slopes, such as to the caves.

For trekking the higher slopes you will need a tent and all your own camping gear. A **guide** (per day KSh1000) is also essential (see p265 for general advice).

Lonely Planet's *Trekking in East Africa* has more juicy details on the various trekking and walking routes, and Andy Wielochowski's *Mt Elgon Map & Guide* is an essential purchase, available in Nairobi for around US\$5. *Kitum Cave Guide Book* is also a good buy.

Trekking

Trekkers are encouraged to stay within the park boundaries, as security has previously been a problem. Check out the situation with **KWS headquarters** (☎ 020-600800; kws@kws.org; PO Box 40241, Nairobi) in Nairobi or **Mt Elgon National Park** (☎ 054-31456; PO Box 753, Kitale) before you plan anything. Crossing into Uganda isn't currently permitted, but ask for the latest at the gate.

Allow at least four days for any round trip and two or three days for any direct ascent of **Koitoboss** if you're walking from the Chorlim gate. Arrange guide requirements at the park headquarters in advance.

The **Park Route** offers some interesting possibilities and there is a well-worn route from Chorlim gate up to Koitoboss Peak that requires one or two overnight camps. If you have a vehicle, you can drive up to 3500m, but the current state of the road means the 32km drive can take half a day, and then it's a two- to three-hour walk up to the peak.

Descending, you have a number of options. You can descend northwest into the crater to **Suam Hot Springs**. Alternatively, if the security situation improves, you could go east around the crater rim and descend the **Masara Route**, which leads to the small village of Masara on the eastern slopes of the mountain (about

25km) and then returns to Endebess. Or you can head southwest around the rim of the crater (some very hard walking) to **Lower Elgon Tam**, where you can camp before ascending **Lower Elgon Peak** (4301m).

To return, head back the way you came. The alternative is the **Kimilili Route**, via the ruined Austrian Hut and the abandoned Chepkitale Forest Station, down to the KWS post at Kaberua Forest Station. Then it's a 5km walk down to **Kapsakwany**, with matatus to Kimilili and basic accommodation. You must check the safety of the Kimilili Route with KWS before attempting it.

Sleeping

If you're trekking your only option is to **camp** (adult/child US\$8/5). This fee is the same whether you drop tent in the official campsites or on any old flat spot during your trek. For non-campers sticking to the lower slopes, there is one roofed option inside the park and two outside.

Chorlim Campsite (next to Chorlim gate) This new campsite has the park's best facilities but is less scenic than the other two public sites, Nyati and Rongai.

Kapkuro Bandas (US\$30) These excellent stone bandas can sleep three people in two beds and have simple bathrooms and small kitchen areas. Hot water is provided by a wood stove, while solar panels provide electricity. Bring food, as there is only one small shop that sells beer and a few basics for the park staff and their families.

Delta Crescent Farm (☎ 0722-2489317; camping KSh200, tw with shared bathroom incl breakfast KSh2000) Conveniently located between Endebess and Chorlim gate, this farm has three huge areas for campers and three basic, clean thatched bandas. Four-person and 12-person rental tents are also available for KSh800 and KSh2000 respectively (plus camping fees). The communal bathrooms have gargantuan shower heads and decent toilets. The owners keep horses (riding per hour KSh600) and there is even a small 'wildlife sanctuary' (admission KSh100) with imported giraffes and zebras. Transfers to Chorlim gate and Kitale are available (KSh1500 per vehicle) as are 4WD tours of the park.

Mt Elgon Lodge (☎ 0722-866480, PO Box 7, Endebess; s/tw incl breakfast KSh3500/5000) Despite being perched next to Chorlim gate and offering mountain views, huge fire places and some

colonial charm, this tattered lodge is severely overpriced, although after a few days of trekking, a meal in their restaurant (meals KSh350 to KSh450) is a godsend.

Getting There & Away

Sporadic matatus and Peugeot's now reach the Chorlim gate from Kitale (KSh80, one hour). More regular services reach Endebess (KSh70, 45 minutes), a 9km walk from the gate. If you want to break up the walk, make for Delta Crescent Farm, spend the night there, and then walk the remaining 5.5km to the gate the next morning (you'll need time to organise guides in any case). Locals will happily point you in the right direction.

If you're driving, the road up to the park is OK, but once inside a 4WD is essential; the dirt roads haven't been graded in years, so it's slow going even in good weather.

SAIWA SWAMP NATIONAL PARK

This small **park** (adult/child US\$15/5) north of Kitale is a real delight. Originally set up to preserve the habitat of the *nzohe* or sitatunga antelope, the 3-sq-km reserve is also home to blue, vervet and De Brazza's monkeys and some 370 species of birds. The fluffy black and white colobus and the impressive crowned crane are both present, and you may see the Cape clawless and spot-throated otters.

The best part is that this tiny park is only accessible on foot. Walking trails skirt the swamp, duckboards go right across it, and there are some extremely rickety observation towers (number four is the best). For an eyeful, come first thing in the morning.

Thanks to a new and energetic warden Saiwa Swamp is seeing better days. A new perimeter fence is protecting the sought after trees, and rangers are working to protect wild sage (sitatunga's typical food) from the suffocating growth of tall grasses that have blossomed thanks to fertilizers from nearby fields. Education programs are also having success in encouraging local people to get involved in the protection of the park.

Sleeping

Public Campsite (adult/child US\$8/5) There is a beautiful site by the river here. Facilities include flush toilets, showers and two covered cooking bandas with barbecues and picnic tables.

Sirikwa Safaris (☎ 0733-793524; camping KSh415, tents s/d KSh1240/1650, farmhouse with shared bathroom

s/d KSh2750/3850) Owned and run by the family that started Saiwa, this is a treasure trove of information and activities, but an expensive place to stay. Camping costs are typical, but basic furnished tents and two cosy farmhouse rooms are pretty steep for what you get. You may also have to pay a 10% service charge. Sirikwa whip up tasty meals, but at a cost – a dinner main is KSh550! Excursions can be arranged from here, including ornithological tours of the Cherangani Hills and Saiwa Swamp (bird guides KSh825 per half day). See p71 for more details.

Getting There & Away

The park is 18km northeast of Kitale; take a matatu towards Kapenguria (KSh60, 30 minutes) and get out at the signposted turn-off, from which it is a 5km walk.

CHERANGANI HILLS

Northeast of Kitale and forming the western wall of the spectacular **Elgeyo Escarpment** are the Cherangani Hills. This high plateau has a distinctly pastoral feel, with thatched huts, patchwork *shambas* (plots of land) and wide rolling meadows cut by babbling brooks. You could easily spend weeks exploring here and never come across a single tourist.

You won't be alone though, as the plateau is home to the interesting Marakwet or Markweta people (part of the greater Kalenjin grouping), who migrated here from the north. They settled here because the area was secure and the consistent rainfall and streams were ideal for agriculture.

There are a couple of great five-day **treks**, namely from Kabichbich to Chesengoch and Kapcherop to Sigor. These two treks are detailed in Lonely Planet's *Trekking in East Africa*; information on some of the shorter hikes in the northern reaches of the Cherangani Hills is found on p339.

Sirikwa Safaris (left) and Marich Pass Field Studies Centre (p339) can both arrange rewarding day and multi-day treks in the region.

Getting There & Away

Kabichbich is best reached from Kapenguria by matatu (KSh100, 1¼ hours), and Kapcherop is accessible from Kitale with patience and a matatu change in Cherangani. You can walk to the northern part of the hills from Marich Pass Field Studies Centre (p339).

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