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'I am happy to be a role model for young Maasai girls'

Cecilia Rono has become the first female lodge manager in her own community, running the boutique Saruni Mara



In 2007, when Cecilia Rono began working as a housekeeper at Saruni Mara, the management knew they had a star in the making. And so it has proved. She now runs the boutique lodge, making her the first female general manager of a luxury safari property in the Masai Mara and possibly in Kenya.

That she runs Saruni Mara, nestled in a secluded valley in the heart of the Masai Mara, is extra-special, because Cecilia is a Maasai and calls

this beautiful preserved wilderness her home. She is very proud of her heritage; and its people play an important role in bringing the Mara to life for guests at the lodge. Guests are guided by Maasai warriors, who eagerly share their ancient customs and local knowledge of the landscape and wildlife.

Cecilia says: "So many guests come to the Mara to see the Big Five, but if they don't see the Big Six – including the Maasai and their rich culture – they don't feel complete. We are proud of our culture and for the guides to take guests out on our 'Warrior Academy' to show them the surviving skills in the bush, such as which plants can be used as medicine or deodorant. We always make our guests marvel at the passion we have for our culture."

Forging her own path

While Cecilia is keen to show off the traditions of her people to guests, she has had to take on the patriarchal elements of Maasai society to pursue her career dreams.

"Management in my culture was regarded to be a man's job," she says. "I have proved them wrong, that even women are smart and can manage anything and everything when given

the opportunity. I am happy to be a role model for young Maasai girls and also Kenyan girls, letting them know that their dreams are also valid."

Working for Saruni, which has a portfolio of deluxe, intimate safari lodges in Kenya's private conservancies, from Samburu to the Masai Mara, has shown Cecilia a route to the top. Saruni Mara is a founding member of the Mara North Conservancy, a breathtaking 74,000-acre private wilderness bordering the Masai Mara National Reserve and shared between 12 lodges and 788 Maasai landowners. It provides jobs, income, training and guidance for the local Maasai people. Her hard work, diligence, attention to detail and warm personality as a housekeeper meant that Cecilia was soon promoted to the Wellbeing Space, the Mara's luxury spa centre, and was trained at the esteemed Centro Benessere Stresa Spa, part of the Grand Hotel des Iles Borromées on Lake Maggiore in Italy. In 2013 she became the assistant manager of Saruni Samburu and just three years later got the top job at Saruni Mara.

Cecilia's ambitions remain keen in her management role and she has set an inspirational example among her workforce of the potential for

▲ **Lovely sight**
Sunset in the Mara
North Conservancy



professional development. Among her achievements since taking over have been keeping the lodge's environmental footprint as light as possible in the Mara-Serengeti ecosystem.

"I like being in charge," she says. "I have a fantastic team and owners that support my work. I have brought a lot of motivation to my staff, being one of their own, opening their minds to understand that at Saruni we have a lot of opportunity if you work hard. Under my management last year we moved from Silver to Gold [eco-rating], which is something that I am very proud of."

Green projects

Cecilia's love of the Mara North Conservancy is clear and her role at Saruni Mara, in the heart of the conservancy, gives her an exclusive opportunity to commit to its environment, wildlife and local communities. She is involved in Saruni projects to sustain the delicate ecosystem and to ensure future generations of Maasai understand their role as custodians of the land. "We organise the planting of trees in schools and take the kids on game drives to see the beauty of the

'Under my management last year we moved from Silver to Gold eco-rating'

Mara since they are our tomorrow," she says. "This is amazing to me."

The conservancy is one of the most populated wildlife areas in the Masai Mara. It is home to Leopard Gorge, a vital birthing and maternity ground for the big cats, as well as Lemek Hills, an important refuge for highly threatened African wild dogs. During the Loita Hills migration, from December to May, thousands of local wildebeest head here for grazing land.

The opportunities for wildlife viewing still amaze Cecilia. "At the moment along the valley we have a mini migration of topis together with hundreds of zebras and wildebeest, which is unbelievable," she says. "I also like the wild dogs – and where else can you see them apart from Olokirisiai Hills?"

After a day tracking magnificent creatures across the conservancy, guests have plenty of creature comforts in place for them at Saruni Mara. At the small, deluxe lodge there

are five elegant cottages, one family villa and one private villa. Each room is themed, with choices including the Love Shack, the Photographer's Studio and the Observatory. Cecilia ensures each guest is carefully looked after and has an experience tailored to his or her interests.

"Before arrival, I get to know my guests' personal favourites in terms of food, facilities and activity preferences," she says. "I am the face of Saruni Mara, so to spend time with my guests, hosting them and making sure their stay is amazing is one of my favourite parts of the job."

▲ **Wildlife**
Zebras to see



For more information on Saruni Mara and the other lodges in the Saruni portfolio, visit www.saruni.com

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