

## Kenya

In the 30th anniversary year of the release of *Out of Africa*, the impact of the Academy Award winning film on Kenya's economy and film industry can still be seen...

# The "Out of Africa" Effect



Nearly 80 years ago, a woman called Karen Blixen penned a novel from her family estate in Denmark. The name was *Out of Africa*, and it tells the tale of Blixen's romantic and adventure-filled years living "at the foot of the Ngong Hills" near Nairobi, in Kenya. The novel was translated into over 60 languages and eventually came to the attention of Hollywood.

The ensuing film by director Sydney Pollack, with its beautiful cinematography, heart-wrenching musical score and A-list celebrity cast, made millions of people around the globe fall in love with Kenya.

Released in 1985, the film went on to win seven Academy Awards. The impact on Kenya was huge. The world wanted the *Out of Africa* experience – golden savannah sunsets, close

encounters with wild beasts and to sleep under canvas in the middle of the wilderness. "Tourism to Kenya doubled in the year after the *Out of Africa* movie was released," says Chris Foot, chairman of the Kenya Film Commission.

The *Out of Africa* brand was everywhere, from newly built tented camps like Finch Hattons, which was named after Blixen's lover and designed to hark back to the golden age of safari, to coffee cups emblazoned with the logo. Individuals scabbled around to buy up props from the film: the owners of Segera, a lodge in northern Kenya, managed to get hold of the yellow 1929-model Gipsy Moth biplane which soars through the skies in the movie.

In the aftermath of the film's release, a report by the Kenyan Wildlife Service and Kenya Tourism Board found that 70% of respondents based their first trip to Kenya on what they'd seen on film, and, when asked to specify which particular film inspired them, most listed *Out of Africa*.

### Generating revenue

The *Out of Africa* effect continues to be seen even now, in the film's 30th anniversary year. "People still want to walk in the footsteps of Karen," says



Damaris Rotich, curator of the Karen Blixen Museum – the bungalow-style house where Blixen lived in Kenya, which features in the movie. She said, "We receive up to 56,000 tourists per year, employ 25 staff and generate around KSh40m [approximately \$395,000] each year in revenue." Local attractions also benefit – they're often tagged-on after tourists have visited Blixen's house. Rotich explains, "Tourists come to visit the Karen Blixen Museum, but then go to the local bead factory, the Giraffe Centre, the elephant orphanage, and end up seeing a lot more of what Nairobi has to offer."

Tour operators have also continued to use the *Out of Africa* brand to sell Kenya to potential visitors. A spokesperson from luxury tour operator Abercrombie & Kent explained how they are using the 30th an-

niversary year, and continued nostalgia for the film and story, to sell *Out of Africa* tours. "The tour starts in Nairobi where visitors are picked up in a vintage vehicle – we try to get the one driven by Robert Redford in the film when it's available – to visit Denys Finch Hatton's grave. From here, they're taken on to Angama Mara."

### Taken by surprise

Nicky Fitzgerald, owner of Angama Mara – a luxury lodge opened in 2015 at the site where actors Meryl Streep and Robert Redford are seen picnicking in the film poster – admits she hadn't realised just how big an impact the movie still had.

She says, "*Out of Africa* touches [from chairs used in the film to vintage editions of the novel] are everywhere throughout the lodge ... but if I am honest the *Out of Africa*



effect on Angama Mara and our guests has taken us completely by surprise!"

The lodge opened at the height of Kenya's tourism slump (visitors to Kenya fell by 25% in the first five months of 2015 according to the tourism board) but still managed to attract tourists with its film links.

Top: Visitors enjoy a picnic in the bush at Karen Blixen Camp. Bottom: Blixen's former home at the foot of the Ngong Hills is now a museum.



People still want to walk in the footsteps of Karen Blixen.

This is proof that the *Out of Africa* effect continues to benefit Kenya. "The *Out of Africa* story tells of Kenya having the best wildlife in Africa and this is still true," explains Chris Foot. "The wildlife and cultural experiences on offer remain relatively unchanged since the film came out."

#### A boost for the film industry

Perhaps most interesting, however, is the impact that *Out of Africa* continues to have on Kenya as a film destination. A report from the 2013 Berlin Annual African Film & Media Festival says: "The internationally renowned film *Out of Africa* (1985) ... demonstrates the vast potential of the Kenyan film industry." *Out of Africa* brought Kenya fame not just in the form of tourists wanting to visit, but also of international film bodies looking to make their movies here.

Following its success, further Hollywood blockbusters have been filmed in Kenya, including *The Constant Gardener*, which brought in significant money for Kenya's economy: "The spend [on *The Constant Gardener* movie] was close to KSh700m on hotels, vehicle usage, aircraft usage and catering," a presentation from BlueSky Films, a Kenyan company that facilitates and produces films and TV shows in East Africa, explains.

Clearly, film as an economic contributor to Kenya is not to be underestimated: a 2013 report from the Kenya Film Commission states that the film industry is currently generating over KSh3bn a year.

Aware of its potential for creating jobs, increasing revenues and attracting tourists, Kenya has created a number of initiatives to help drive the film industry forward. In 2006, the Kenyan Film Commission was established.

The aim of the Commission is to "raise international awareness about its developing industry with the aim of attracting potential investors," says Brand Kenya, an initiative to promote Kenya's key attributes to the world. Work is underway to build local expertise in the film industry, invest in training and market Kenya as "a centre of excellence in film production," according to the 2013 Kenya Film Commission report.

Further, in an attempt to rival South Africa's thriving film industry, Kenya is now providing financial incentives to film makers. "We're offering a tax rebate which is integral to making the decision to film in Kenya. Up to 30% of the whole film spend will be eligible for a rebate from the Kenyan government," says Chris Foot.

The hope is that these initiatives will catapult Kenya into the limelight once again, and encourage future films to pick East Africa's hub as their chosen location.

Until then, *Out of Africa* remains Hollywood's greatest tribute to Kenya, and from the Masai tribesmen who have made work selling trinkets at Denys Finch Hatton's grave, to the café selling teas on Karen Blixen's old farmland, the impact of the legendary romance lives on.

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