

REAL ESTATE

Mara housing market booming as tourist season reaches peak

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It is a Wednesday, a market day in Talek Trading Centre in the heart of the Maasai Mara Game Reserve. People selling clothes and other merchandise display their wares on stalls or on canvas sheets spread on the ground. Maasai beadwork and the *Khargas* worn by the women create a sea of orange, white and brown in the afternoon sun. Occasionally, tourists walk by to admire and buy the elaborate ornaments and souvenirs.

Business is brisk, since it is the middle of the annual high tourist season at the Maasai Mara Game Reserve, which starts in June and ends in October. And while the many luxury tented camps and lodges scattered across the Mara house the millions of domestic and international tourists who come to enjoy the spectacular annual wildebeest migration, the mushrooming urban centres accommodate the migrant labour force attracted by the temporary jobs created in the camps and conservancies during this period.

Mr Gilbert Wandera, who owns three residential



PHOTO | JOEL KAPANTE REVIA
Investors are building simple houses like this one for the migrant labour force in the Mara.

apartments at the Mara Rianta Centre, says the number of bookings has peaked since the high season began, although they are relatively lower compared with the previous years'. Nevertheless, he expects the numbers to reach the previous years' highs this month.

The high season sees the creation of jobs for both locals and non-locals as staff, tour guides, chefs, waiters and guards.

Developers are tapping into this group's need for accommodation by investing in simple houses in neighbouring centres.

And the scramble for plots has seen the price of land shoot up.

"I have lived here for many years and I have seen the price of land rise rapidly over the years as developers buy to build residential and commercial property to bridge the housing gap," said Mr Wandera, adding that the asking prices for an acre is now around Sh250,000, up from Sh100,000 a few years ago.

He estimates that there are some 700, 250 and 120 occupied housing units in Talek, Mara Rianta and Aitong trading centres respectively, with many under construction.

"The numbers should be higher, but people put up only a few houses at a time while carefully studying the seasonal demand trends," he observed. As developers continue to put up new structures, Talek and neighbouring urban centres are set for a major facelift.

A few years ago, the centre had only one posho mill, and few mud-daubed hotels and a few shops. Now it has grown, complete with big guesthouses, petrol stations, entertainment spots, banks and several schools," said Partum ole Tome, an elder from Talek.

Early this year, the Rural Electrification Authority connected the area to the national grid, giving house owners an alternative to solar energy and kerosene for lighting and cooking.

Things are set to improve even further after Transport and Infrastructure Cabinet Secretary James Macharia recently announced a Sh2bn upgrade of the Narok-Sekenani Road, which cuts through the area, after the Kenya Tour Drivers' Association staged a demo protesting the poor state of the road.

When completed, the road is expected to open up the region and bring in more visitors.