

Living with the lions

Visitors to Kenyan retreat get up close and personal with the animals.

Published Sunday, March 23, 2014

By Becca Hensley - Special to the Austin American-Statesman

“You know you are truly alive when you’re living among lions.”
— Karen Blixen, *“Out of Africa”*

+



DAVID CROOKED

Giraffe and zebra hang out at Segera Retreat in northern Kenya.

Last night I didn't hear the lions.

That's because at Segera Retreat, an intimate enclave hewed into 50,000 red-dirt-carpeted, Acacia-mottled, wildlife-abundant acres of bush in northern Kenya, I was pulled into a deep sleep, instead, by frogs and crickets crooning a symphonic lullaby.

Everyone else woke to the roar of lions. That annoys me.

+



DAVID CROOKES

Elephants and other wildlife abound at Segera Retreat, a 50,000-acre reserve and hotel 13 miles north of the equator in Kenya.

“What do they sound like?” I query my Micato Safaris guide, Denis Simi, who has accompanied me to this Eden-like resort, 13 miles above the equator, a lesser stomped, more sophisticated alternative to Kenya’s safari heartbeat, the Masai Mara National Reserve.

“They mwumph,” he murmurs in timbre more purr than thunder. (Micato Safaris’ guides know these things.)

I’m disappointed. I want to have my dreams disturbed by a lion’s mwumph. But I don’t stay despondent for long at Segera. Nobody could.

+



DAVID CROOKES

At Segera Retreat in northern Kenya, visitors can sleep outside in a netted daybed to listen for lions.

This patchwork of fence-enclosed botanical gardens, an oasis amid the larger, rugged reserve, holds just six long-legged, timber and thatch villas (and two larger cottages), which eyeball a dynamic savanna. The vistas unfurl indefinitely to the surrounding horizons. Born from a cattle ranch bought by a German environmentalist, art aficionado and Africa enthusiast named Jochen Zeitz and managed by the Wilderness Collection of African Lodges, Segera Retreat pays tribute to a new Africa.

Here, a wine tower hoards 2,500 bottles of African wine, a salt-water pool twinkles cobalt in the sun, a former stable has been retrofitted as a gallery for modern African art — including installations, paintings and ongoing film work — and a

sun-dappled spa invites with indigenous treatments. A Karen Blixen-worthy library features rough-hewn furniture, artful fixtures and well-thumbed maps and books. There's even rattan boxes full of unpublished letters by Hemingway, Blixen and others, including a magnifying glass for sophisticated perusing.

Zeitz, the former CEO of Puma, bought the property in 2006, with plans to make it his home. He tore down more than 300 miles of fences, reopening a centuries-old wilderness highway, providing an opportunity for wildlife to roam freely between Mount Kenya and Aberdare national parks. He instituted organic gardens, monitored wildlife, added solar power and harvested rainwater. Hiring from nearby communities, Zeitz helped support the Samburu, Borana and Turkana tribes who live nearby. He established workshops and job training seminars, eventually aiding them in the profitable production of beaded accessories as well as an ingenious, fuel-free cooking device called the "wonderbag." (Made from recycled mattresses, it acts as an uber tea cozy or electric-free crockpot, continuing to cook food such as stews after it has been boiled on the stove.)

Developing just 10 acres of the 50,000 as a hotel, Zeitz encircled the residential area with an electric fence. Refurbishing the extant buildings, he added some new ones, then filled the expanse with whimsical, dream-inspired gardens, composed of both native and tropical plants. Fleshy cactuses, succulent yucca, fragrant bougainvillea and flowing vines line undulating pathways that lead to the villas and common buildings. They play backdrop to Zeitz's staggering sculpture collection — all the work of 21st century African artists.

Here, Zeitz reckoned to relax several months a year, to entertain friends and to delve into the soul of Africa — clearly his deepest passion. But in his efforts to render Segera sustainable, he soon recognized that paying guests meant a greater opportunity to rehabilitate an overgrazed landscape, create local jobs and infuse the nearby communities with opportunities such as better schools. He mused about a touristic Africa that went beyond a "big five" checklist — one that dabbled in the depths of a traveler's psyche, that coddled yet left the tiniest of footprints.

I label Zeitz's efforts "organic opulence." The villas, individually cloistered, stand on stilts, have decks that hover above the bush, outdoor bathtubs and a plethora of lounging options meant to lure one to repose. Equipped with African-made furniture and adorned with African art, each villa has a swinging daybed below and a star-gazing sleeping area on the commodious balcony. The room coaxes me to linger one afternoon. I need to work, so I turn the deck into an office. I wish I were out searching for animals. Suddenly, I look up, jolted to life by a dazzle of zebras

gallivanting by — a parade of flirty stripes so near me I can hear them snort and snuffle and examine the velvety texture of their noses from my lounge chair. Such sightings aren't unusual at Segera. Another day, giraffes stand nearby, their necks seemingly stretching to the sky. You don't need to go on a game drive at Segera — though you'll want to. (Guests can also visit the local community and school, help with reforestation efforts, proctor populations of endangered Grevy's zebras and Patas monkeys or simply walk the bushland, slow motion, with an alert and knowledgeable guide.) What moves me most, however, are my late afternoon outings with Micato guide Dennis and Segera scout and driver Frances. We bump along miles of deep-rutted trails to peep at birds and beasts. Each venture varies: We see cheetah atop a boulder, scores of colorful birds, parades of giraffe, thundering herds of elephants, sneaky jackals and furious baboons who seem to flap through the air like the flying monkeys in "The Wizard of Oz." Once, we teeter on the edge of a rushing waterfall. Another time, we roll out a blanket, then sit atop a tall mound with a 360-degree view of Zeitz's storied reserve. One day, we end up in a field with grass so short it seems mowed, though Frances claims it was stomped by Cape buffalo — perhaps the orneriest creature in the bush. Always, we open a bottle of wine and nibble something chef-made for a snack. As the sun falls from the sky, a fusillade of hues discharged, we fall silent. Even Frances, a local who glimpses this vision daily, is awestruck. When darkness comes, we stay a bit too long, then make a rollicking drive back to the retreat, where a pier lined with lanterns and a roaring fire await, linking vibrant nature with a man-made homage to spirited living. It's the last night after dinner when I return to my villa to discover my attendant, James, has laid out a surprise. He's made up the swinging garden daybed with mosquito netting, put out a multitude of lanterns and left a sprinkling of rose petals. His note says he hopes I'll hear the lions tonight, and that I shouldn't fear sleeping outside, surrounded by the electric fence and a legion of unseen guards. Only slightly tremulous, I do it. I get into bed outside in my garden amid the far-flung bush. It's cozy and romantic. I listen — until at last I fall deeply asleep. I dream of lions — and they mwumph.

IF YOU GO

Stay: Segera Retreat, segeraretreat.com, \$900 per person per night.

Safari: For five decades, Nairobi-based Micato Safaris, micato.com, has offered luxury safari adventures. Travel & Leisure has honored them nine times as World's Best Safari Outfitter.

Fly: Have a cuppa on British Airways' new Dreamliner, which began direct flights from Austin to Heathrow this month. Fuel-efficient, with bigger windows made from 50 percent composite materials, this environmentally friendly plane takes you to London in style. From there, continue to Nairobi to connect with Segera Retreat and/or your Kenyan safari. britishairways.com

See: If you can, drive from Nairobi to Segera Retreat, a glorious route that takes you out of urban traffic, then passes coffee plantations, mango groves, banana orchards, hamlets, flame trees — a lush adventure all the way to the Mount Kenya area.

Buy: Beaded adornments, carved wooden creations and the “wonderbag” — currently made by the communities Segera supports in cooperation with the company's founder. nb-wonderbag.com

advertisement

requires premium/js/sticky.js

In this Section



[Alaska Airlines kicks woman with cancer off flight from Hawaii to California](#)

[Passenger rights group calls for a cap on airline change fees](#)

[Travelers to U.S. spent record \\$222 billion in 2014](#)

[What to know before your child vacations with another family](#)

[Travel to 'Planet Cuba' to see a nation in flux](#)

[Exploring the hidden delights of Florida's Flagler Beach](#)

[It's wonderful to do nothing in luxurious Anguilla](#)

[Los Cabos still entices, despite hurricane damage](#)

[Eat, view, save](#)

[Berlin, through good times and bad](#)

PREVIOUS:TRAVEL

[Las Vegas hotel's new 24-hour checkout experience](#)

By Kristin Finan - American-Statesman Staff

NEXT:TRAVEL