

Chic INDOLENCE

A visit to Rhino River Camp in Meru National Park is a great opportunity to kick back and indulge in elegant relaxation

By **Storm Stanley**

I lie on my back. It's night and a rain shower patters gently on the canvas marquee of my tented room. Before I drift back to sleep I hear something scampering across the roof, and then a piercing shriek as a bushbaby leaps onto a nearby branch. A whole range of sounds fills the night.

In the morning, Rhino River Camp, situated on the western boundary of Meru National Park, is laminated gold by the slanting rays of the dawn sunlight. A cloudless sky conceals last night's downpour. We head off on an early morning game drive to the rhino sanctuary located just ten minutes away.

Black and White

In the late eighties, the remaining five white rhinos brought from South Africa were brutally slaughtered by Somali Shifta (poachers). The park lost its popularity as

a safari destination and sadly went into decline. Since then however, there has been a Meru Park revival, with generous funding from the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW) and the Agence Française de Developpment (AFD). Between 2002 and 2006, thirty-five black and white rhino have been re-introduced into Meru National Park. The translocated rhinos are reproducing successfully with nineteen recorded births since 2006; a sure sign that the KWS are taking their role as guardians of one of Africa's most endangered species seriously.

Rare Species

We stop at Mururi Swamp, swollen from the expanded rainy season and teeming with birdlife. A grey heron lands with a perfect glissade on a pool of water and in slow motion fossicks for frogspawn in the reeds. A flock of green pigeons chatter raucously in the Raphia palms, one of Kenya's only

indigenous palm species, which grow in abundance around Meru's marshes and rivers.

Our game drive tally this morning comes to thirteen rhino, twelve white and one black, a small herd of Grevy's zebra, and a much larger herd of reticulated giraffe – all rare species. Other guests saw two lionesses. After a hot cup of tea provided by our driver and guide, Joel, we return to camp for breakfast.

Culinary Trappings

There are four recognised meals here, five if you count the sumptuous tapas bitings served with your sundowner, and I make an unspoken vow (Bridget Jones like) to do a few extra lengths in the pool. Lunch has to be my favourite meal with an array of Mediterranean salads, pastas, Ciabbata bread or fresh rolls and Banoffi Pie.

Back at my tent for a siesta, a troop of

Sykes monkeys scamper up and down tree-trunks and swing from canopy to canopy on convolvulus vines, as bashful as Indian brides.

At eye-level a little furry arm extends from the leafy foliage in which a young monkey is hiding and clasps a tamarind pod, a pair of amber eyes peep out at me and then the little monkey disappears into the tree-top and out of sight.

Tented Retreat

I'm staying with my family in the 'Hemingway' tent, (really a canvas chalet), four more are named after other illustrious authors whose identities evoke the East African experience over the last century: 'Blixen', 'Wa Thiong'o', 'Beard' and 'Rice Burroughs'. Like the chalets, the rest of the lodge is spacious, minimalist, and complimented effortlessly with chic Italian décor. Four colours: off-white, pewter, mustard, and dark coral bring

it thematically together and unify the whole.

An expansive wooden platform surrounds the chalets and extends high above the Kindani River, giving me the feeling that I am in a tree-house. However this is no IKEA flat pack assembled by Dad over the weekend, but a full-fledge adult retreat, more Courts of Rohan than Robinson Crusoe. Each chalet comes complete with its own separate Zen room, for yoga and pilates, intimate conversation, or curling up with a good book. In fact this is just the place to take your favourite novel and re-savour every moment – with the backdrop sound of the river gently percolating through the camp.

As one expects these days, the camp is eco-friendly, water and lighting is powered by solar, even the pump for the pool is solar operated. No trees were felled during the construction of the lodge, and all the timber used is from sustainable eucalyptus. Guests are encouraged to refill their glasses from

the ubiquitous supply of fresh drinking water rather than create more landfill with endless plastic bottles.

The camp is situated on the park's perimeter - outside the park - allowing both easy access and a pristine environment with 130 different species of hardwood and 180 recognised bird species. (Rhino River Camp formerly Kindani Camp has long been a birder's haven, with several rare species including black and white flycatcher, grey-olive Greenbul and yellow-bellied Greenbul. Moreover, a range of other pursuits not possible in most of Kenya's national parks – prohibited or restricted due to the presence of wild game – are on offer.

There are no large predators in the 60 enclosed acres, nor buffalo and hippo, but numerous smaller wildlife reside here: monkeys, Kirk's dik-dik, porcupines and the occasional bush buck.



Ample Things to Do

The road network in the park is well-signposted and maintained. The Tana River and Adamson's Falls make a worthwhile day trip. Pack a picnic lunch to eat on the banks of the River under shady tortilis. Wildlife is usually plentiful around the Bwatherongi, Mughwango and Mururi Swamps where you'll be able to see everything from elephants to dung beetles.

Mountain bikes are available and cycle trails are being opened up around the property for track enthusiasts or simply the active. For those who wish to stretch their legs, Kilimakiero, a dormant volcano is close by. In fact this is what our family and a Canadian couple (also staying at the lodge) plan to do that afternoon.

Up the Mount

Awoken from my reverie by my two daughters and husband - who had been lounging by the pool - and warning that "we are leaving in five minutes", I languorously slip on shoes and grab a fleece. Half an hour of bumpy driving through little villages, maize plantations, mirraa fields - and we are there. I am nearly awake and take up the rear position for the stroll. Elephant grass the colour and texture of Rapunzel's hair brushes our calves, the sky above an expanse of cerulean blue, and the going easy.

At the summit we stop for a sundowner, a plaid blanket is gently unfurled on the crater rim by Elisaban, our charming and capable steward-cum-guide. The pleasing sound of ice chinks as glasses are filled permeates the air, and we gaze eastwards across the park and Mughwango Hill (made famous by George Adamson and the release of Elsa the lioness), and behind us to the West, the Nyambeni Hills. The evening is infused with honey-coloured light and barred with long olive green shadows. High above an eagle's extended wings are gilded gold by the setting sun.

An hour later we have circumnavigated the rim and are back at the lodge; with time for a steamy shower (and divine complimentary toiletries) before another gourmet meal. Spend a little time here and gradually, almost imperceptibly, you will begin to feel the soul slowing effect of being immersed in nature. **D**



Useful Info

Distance from Nairobi: 348 km

Getting There

There is a newly completed tarmac road all the way to the Meru National Park Gate; it takes approximately 5 hours to drive from Nairobi. Take either the Embu or Nanyuki roads which circle Mt Kenya, comparable in time/distance. Meru National Park is on the north east of Mt Kenya. From Meru town drive 30km towards Maua, just before the township take the signposted, left turning to the park gates.

Accommodation

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Photographs: Andrea Maggi, Storm Stanely