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News

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MERU NATIONAL PARK

An Untamed Paradise

A TURNAROUND
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to Rejoice?

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In Harmony

Coming Alive in Meru

The low-slung, dun-coloured building nestled in the midst of an indigenous forest gives no hint of what lies within... Turn the corner, and you are presented with a stunningly beautiful vista of sun-dappled towering raffia palms, leafy tamarind and fever trees lining the banks of a singing river. It's a breathtaking tapestry woven from golden sunlight and emerald green leaves, quivering palm fronds and rippling water. It's a dreamt of, but seldom realised, paradise in the wilderness.

The journey here has been filled with wildlife wonders en route – including rhinos in the KWS Meru rhino sanctuary, through which Joel, the camp's driver/guide, has driven to get here. He explains that the sanctuary had been relocated after several incidents of rhinos breaking loose from their original area adjacent to KWS Kinna headquarters, where they were kept safe from poachers.

After mopping away the heat and dust with a chilled flannel, I accept a fruity cocktail, and then hear a singsong 'Hello!' from amongst the trees – it's Ava, the warm and welcoming guardian angel of this idyllic hideaway. All set, I'm led into the heart of the untamed forest, along a narrow, winding pathway that ends, surprisingly, in a blond-wooded deck, on which stands a pristine khaki tent and separate sundeck – the Ngugi wa Thion'go suite (his books are thoughtfully provided; each cottage has a literary theme). It is almost suspended over the river, which roars softly over a natural waterfall by the pool. It's secluded and completely surrounded by thick foliage.

This is Rhino River Camp, a luxury retreat set within 80 acres of privately owned wilderness situated along the banks of the Kindani River, on the western border of Meru National Park. Everything here is about light, air and sunshine, and the camp reflects this in



Top: Pool deck on the banks of the Kindani River. Above: Room sundeck. Opposite page: Cottage tent on the river bank.

every way – from the local hardwood and canvas cottages, to the open-aired dining, bar and lounge area, as well as the blue swimming pool shimmering in the afternoon sunlight by the river.

A shower in the tent offers welcome relief – the cool water is reinvigorating as I gaze out into the dense forest, where cicadas chirrup gaily and the bushes rustle with small animals.

Back on the lounge deck and fortified with a glass of excellent wine provided by Elizaban while I'm perusing the wonderful array of books on display, I'm given options: have a massage, go for a nature walk or game drive, take a mountain bike to explore the area, visit a local village,





It's worth the effort. At the peak, the view is magnificent: the sprawling Nyambene Hills on my left and the distant Tharaka Hills on the right, hazy blue in the distance, their summits silhouetted against a dropping sun. Lazy tendrils of charcoal-scented smoke rise skyward from small homesteads scattered across the bushy flatlands of Meru below, and a rooster's strident crowing is carried upwards on the wind, which is pure, sharp and clean-smelling.

The crater rim is turning golden green as the sun floats towards the horizon. It's mesmerising, and Aisaya takes off to circumvent the crater alone; I've balked at the prospect of following his lead, feeling well-pleased that I got this far, thank you very much!

Joel offers a glass of wine, and some small 'bites', which I gratefully receive, sinking happily to the ground and soaking up the peace. It's a special moment: sitting on top of a crater in the middle of a beautiful wilderness, watching the sun sink slowly behind the hills...

Beautiful Babies

The two small and furry bush babies spring lightly from a tree, landing with a soft thud on the wooden deck. It's about 6.30pm, and I'm showered, ready for cocktails and a leisurely chat with Ava after my 'ordeal'. Entranced, I watch as they scamper across the floor and hesitantly approach the platter laid with banana pieces set on the floor by Jackson. One quickly grabs a piece, and prances away, comical on its hind legs, while the other approaches more slowly to sit on his haunches and savour the treat, his huge brown eyes alert to every movement around him.

This releases buried memories of my early childhood, when I had a bush baby as a pet, and setting the tone for a wonderful evening with Ava. The Thai Chicken curry is delicious,

or climb the crater... So-called city-slickers/couch potatoes/smokers like me are usually drawn to the easy options, where you just sit back and let others do the work, but Ava's enthusiasm is irresistible. She joins me for a quick buffet lunch laid out by Jackson; there is nothing haphazard about it: a mixed buffet of delectable salads (much of which comes from Ava's cherished kitchen garden), and a divine Banoffee pie (which I had never tried before) for dessert. This, I discover, is the usual standard of fare at Rhino River Camp, and just an introduction the culinary expertise practiced by Ruth and Joshua, the camp chefs...

A Daunting Prospect

Kitted out in long trousers and what pass for hiking boots, with some trepidation and lots of appeals for mercy to Joel and Aisaya, the ranger, I climb aboard the Land Cruiser for our expedition to 'the crater'.

We wend our way along narrow, bush-lined roadways in the heart of the bush, past small villages and 'centres' where men sit on fallen tree trunks chewing miraa – the green bark of twigs that are the near equivalent (in my mind, from what I've heard about its effects) to amphetamine, and much appreciated by long-haul truck drivers. The fronds of banana trees hang across the winding roads (grown because they are used to wrap miraa and keep it fresh for the booming export trade), and the world's best miraa bushes and maize grow strong and in abundance in the small homesteads we pass.

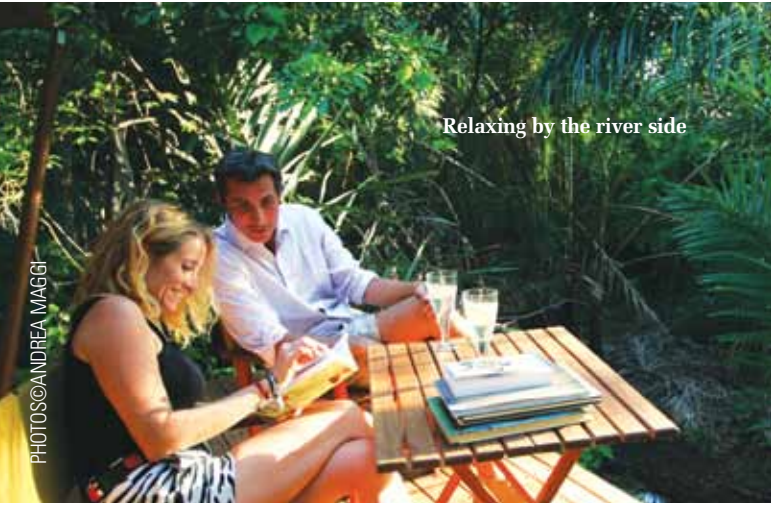
This pastoral environment is full of scents: sap-filled trees growing, cow dung steaming in the sun, the sensual aroma of Morning Glory, and smoke on the wind. Sunflowers nod sleepily by the roadway, and school children wave and smile as we pass.

We eventually come out into open land, where hills tower above us. Joel points to one of them, and says this is it... the 'place of white ash', or what I hear as "Kirima Kieru" crater, an eons-long dormant volcano.

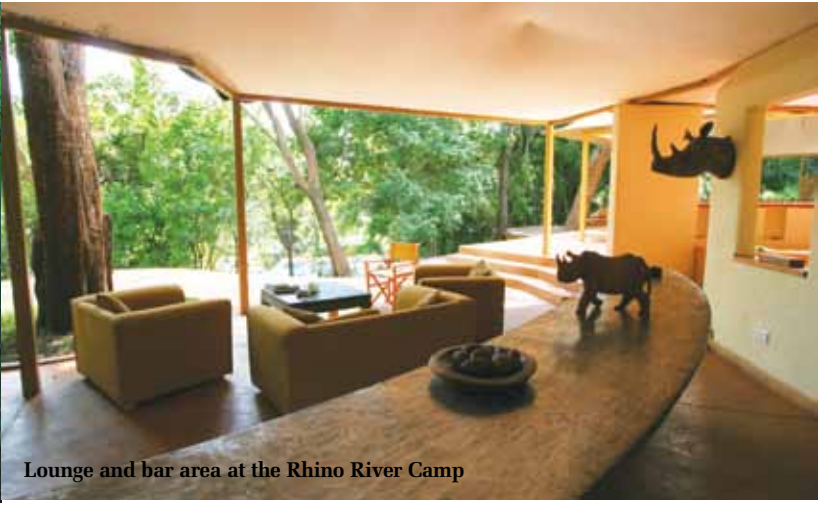
"Can you see the pathway?" he asks, grinning at my discomfort; it looks really steep, and soooo very high!

He finds me a sturdy stick to help me upwards, and I begin a reluctant ascent with Aisaya in front, Joel behind – both careful, I realise, to ensure that the mama (older lady) has no accidents. Wounded pride spurs me on, and pulling on my cap I set off with single-minded determination, bent on proving to them that I can do this...!

The first part is indeed steep, but levels off a little after a few minutes. Not willing to admit that I'm already winded, I continue on under the watchful guardianship of the two caring escorts. The incline then gets steeper, and within a minute or two I stop, pretending to admire the view, but already panting. It's made more difficult by the stones and small boulders that must have been thrown out millennia ago by the volcano, and every 50m or so I stop again, blaming the shattered lungs of a smoker that make me wheeze, but claiming that "the legs are OK"!



Relaxing by the river side



Lounge and bar area at the Rhino River Camp

followed by a lemon meringue pie – just like my mother used to make.

I feel very much at home...

Elizaban, the chief 'steward', is attentive; he continuously tops up my glass as Ava and I chat like old friends. For years now, she's found her true calling in the hospitality industry after a false start in marketing. We have lots to talk about and time flies, but tomorrow she must work, while I can lie-in; forced breakfasts at given hours are not part of the homely ambience at Rhino River Camp!

The following day begins leisurely: sipping morning coffee brought by Wilphas and reading Caroline Cass' incredible book, *Behind the Mask* about Joy Adamson, which has been kindly lent to me to take home if I don't finish it. Then a hot shower, and an hour or two spent on the sundeck listening to the river and the whisper of the wind in the raffia palms as I work on my laptop.

The late afternoon is spent in the park, where Joel doggedly searches for rhino in the swamp. We cross several of Meru Park's thirteen rivers and spot grumpy buffalo lurking in the bush, giraffe browsing the trees, numberless birds, and a troop of baboons crossing the dusty red road. Waterbuck, kudu and zebra... A bull elephant poses by the roadside so that we can take his picture, then trundles closer, moving broadside to the cruiser, his ears flapping and his trunk lifted. Time to move on...

Just about to give up, Joel lifts binoculars to his eyes and points

out four white rhinos grazing in the distance, camouflaged by high grass and a tall candelabra cactus. He manoeuvres the Land Cruiser forward to get a better perspective; his efforts pay off and we watch them meander through the grass. Further on, we spot two separate black rhino browsing on shrubs. Joel explains that he'd spotted fresh droppings – smooth and grassy patches of the white, twig-filled ones of the black rhinos. They use the same dumps repeatedly in order to mark their territory.

Happily, we return to Camp.

The bush babies visit again, leaping from tree to tree before jumping to the deck and snatching some banana chunks before disappearing into the overhanging branches.

Later, more babies arrive – of a different kind...

A Founder's Dream

Girly laughter rings from the parking area, and a bevy of elated young girls rounds the corner and into Ava's arms. It's a birthday girl, brought here by her mother and father: Storm Stanley, a fervent conservationist and journalist, and her engineer husband, Eric Goss, son of the camp's founder before it was branded as Rhino River Camp, Ted Goss.

Goss senior was Meru's first Game Warden who, when testing a new tranquiliser dart on an elephant, was tossed and trampled, shattering his thigh. The local Meru people appreciated and respected the work he had done in the area, and

gave him this tranquil riverside site in perpetuity; to date, the camp has never had a problem with the local community, with whom they live in perfect symbiosis and harmony.

The birthday girl and her friends go back to their tents, giggles carrying on the gossamer breeze as they leave. Tomorrow, they will disdain the uninteresting safety of the pool, and venture into the river itself (watched-over closely by the anxious parents and Ava, but splashing fearlessly in the sun-lit rushing waters).

The evening unwinds with dinner and desultory conversation, followed by an evening of anecdotes and laughter at a campfire on the riverbank deck. Eric's love and oneness with this place shines through every word, and I have the sense of Ted senior's ghost hovering... He would be proud of his son and daughter-in-law, happy that his granddaughter is here.

That night a guard escorts me to my luxury tent, and I wonder if it's true that a leopard has been lurking in the vicinity... I snuggle warmly under the pristine duvet, listening to serenading frogs and the hypnotic sound of the river before falling into a dreamless sleep.

This is what it means to feel part of the living, breathing environment of a riverine Meru forest. ■

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