

Taking the high ground

Jochen Zeitz, director of the luxury goods group Kering, is opening his 50,000-acre Kenyan retreat to paying guests as part of a grand plan to rehabilitate the local area and develop a new type of tourism. By *Sophy Roberts*

On the Laikipia plateau, in Kenya's central highlands, the sky feels low, the horns of the giraffe at risk of puncturing the flat-bottomed clouds. The land here ranges between 1,700m and 2,550m above sea level, and as our helicopter flies across the plateau, we pass herds of wildlife, subsistence farms – and the occasional millionaire's retreat.

We hover above Ol Jogi, a 58,000-acre wilderness owned by the Wildensteins, the French art-dealing family. Then it's on to Segera, the 50,000-acre ranch – more than three times the size of Manhattan – belonging to the German entrepreneur Jochen Zeitz, 50. Appointed chief executive of Puma aged 30, Zeitz is now director of luxury goods group Kering (whose brands include Gucci, Stella McCartney and Balenciaga) and chairman of its sustainable development committee. A three-time winner of the FT's Strategist of the Year award, he also sits on the board of Harley-Davidson and with a Benedictine monk, wrote *The Manager and the Monk*, a discourse on responsible and sustainable business, which has so far been translated into 15 languages.

He bought Segera in 2006, and hopes to spend three to four months of the year there, but has just opened it to paying guests, too. There are eight guest cottages; rates are between \$880 and \$1,280 per person per night. I'm here to see if the place is up to scratch, not least because Zeitz is also the founder of The Long Run, an organisation that grades sustainable tourism projects in relation to conservation, community development, culture and commerce (what Zeitz calls "the 4Cs").

I want to find out if Segera lives up to its founder's values. While I'm told Zeitz has stopped all his operational corporate roles to fully focus on his sustainability initiatives, I'm only too aware of the greenwash that almost drowns the travel industry, and of the risk that I'm choppering into a rich man's playground. I'm concerned that Zeitz – the artful marketer, who put Puma on the feet of Usain Bolt – is offering up another example of the back-door colonialism that has become such a hot topic in Africa as foreigners buy up rights to wilderness areas.

From the air, Segera is conspicuous. From the relatively dry bush emerges a circle of brilliant green – about 10 acres – with a cobalt swimming pool at its centre. There are cacti and stilted cottages. The landscaping is a tapestry of colour, an almost aggressive rejection of the rustic clichés of African lodges. When we fly over some ground marked by standing stones, I assume they signify the help-pod. The pilot corrects me; it's a sculpture by the South African artist Strijdom van der Merwe. At first it seems strange to have a grand piece of conceptual art beside herds of grazing giraffe. But then, why not? Why does a Kenyan safari have to be all about Ralph Lauren styling, with guests waited on by local tribesmen trussed up with feathers in their hair? Zeitz, I am to discover, sees this continent differently. He collects 21st-century art from Africa, from video installations to pop art sculptures of golden crocodiles, which pepper Segera's gardens. He hired as his curator Mark



Jochen Zeitz in his light aircraft

Coezee, formerly with the Rubell Family Collection in Miami, to make Zeitz's the world's most representative collection of his kind, with select pieces on show at Segera – in a gallery, converted from stables, that would be more fitting for the Venice Biennale.

Yet Zeitz is down-to-earth. He prefers game walks to safari vehicles, encouraging guests to smell the same air as the elephants, to hear the breath of cape buffalo as they wind through the yellow fever trees. He talks like an engineer about the water recycling plant – tanks that hold 800,000 cubic metres of water, supporting some 200 people. He certainly doesn't live in some grand cocoon; his bungalow is no larger than it was in the 1920s. Still, old photographs of the estate bear no resemblance to Segera's new tropical gardens, which are both elegant and unlikely. In this little oasis of green, blue-eared starlings sing in the trees and I can walk barefoot on grass more manicured than many an English lawn.

This outside-the-box aesthetic – combined with a tall "wine" tower, which looks like a windmill without vanes, and elegant suites with open-air sunken baths – will no doubt make Segera a favourite of design magazines. However, the luxury sheen shouldn't convince anyone that Zeitz has ambitions solely as a hotelier. Segera was originally conceived as a private home, he says he turned it over to paying guests to help create jobs,

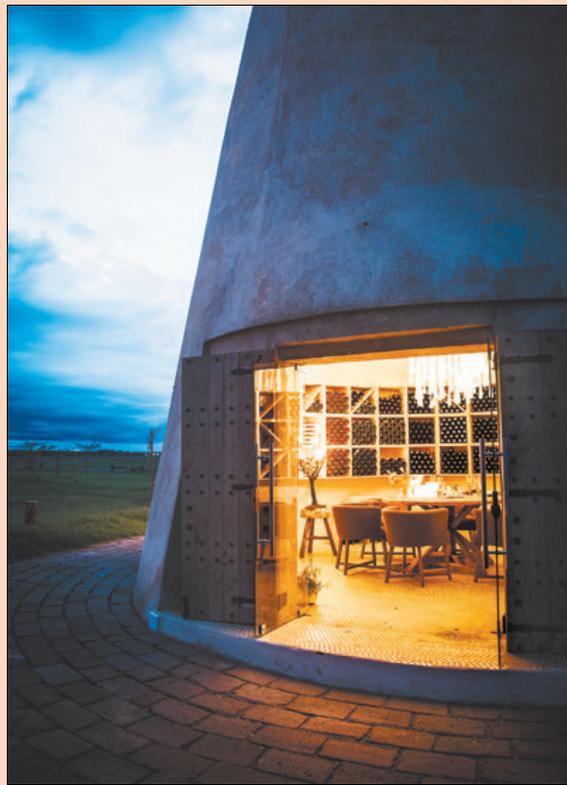


envisioning Segera as a model "Long Run" destination that could rehabilitate an overgrazed landscape. "In Africa you can make three acres sustainable relatively easily," says Zeitz, "but 50,000 acres? It's not about picking up towels or sleeping in a tent."

"I could have bought a pristine part of Tanzania," he says. "But I saw a beautiful mountain, game that could come back, and country that could be rich again." To begin this turnaround, the opposing demands of wildlife, communities and cattle needed to be turned into symbiotic relationships.

On arrival, Zeitz tore out 300 miles of fencing to let the wildlife move freely through this important corridor between Aberdare and Mount Kenya national parks. This year he gave communities – about 5,000 people living on Segera's flanks – rights to graze 2,000 head of cattle on his land in the dry season, while ensuring they subscribe to carefully controlled principles of rotational grazing (move stock on fast so grass recovers and becomes useable for wildlife). This approach isn't new; the difference is the level of implementation overseen by Mark Jenkins, one of Kenya's most respected conservationists, who works with the not-for-profit Zeitz Foundation to maintain on-the-ground contact with communities.

Just as with the grazing plan, Segera functions as a kind of test-kitchen for concepts that, when proved successful, can be replicated elsewhere, thus increasing the project's reach beyond Laikipia. This includes the Waterbank school, which the foundation opened last year. Built around a central courtyard, the roof drains rainwater into the courtyard's centre, thus increasing the project's reach beyond Laikipia. This includes the Waterbank school, which the foundation opened last year. Built around a central courtyard, the roof drains rainwater into the courtyard's centre, thus increasing the project's reach beyond Laikipia. This includes the Waterbank school, which the foundation opened last year. Built around a central courtyard, the roof drains rainwater into the courtyard's centre, thus increasing the project's reach beyond Laikipia.



tion is now building a second school – a serious piece of modern architecture – with the courtyard doubling up as a football pitch and the roof as stadium seating for 1,500; underneath are four classrooms and an environmental education centre.

"In the beginning we weren't popular," says Liz Rilhoj, director of the Zeitz Foundation. "We weren't doing the conventional thing of throwing sweets over the fence. Our approach is to provide the framework, but to action it, the communities have to step up." Segera's philosophy is to try to educate at both a local and a global level, by exposing high-profile, influential guests – many of whom are Zeitz's personal friends (two of whom are contributing towards that second school) – to what is going on in Africa. "I see Segera as a potential forum for two-way conversation," says Zeitz, "to affect the way people think about the continent."

But is this why people come on holiday to Africa? To talk conservation? Twenty-first century Ghanaian art? In



Clockwise from main picture: a dining area in the "wine tower" at Segera; giraffe graze on the 50,000-acre ranch; sculptures by South African artist Nandipha Mtambo

David Crookes

the Maasai Mara National Park, the crowd of vehicles around a lion sighting would imply African tourism is still all about the "big five". But then the right guest for Segera will be more sophisticated than the safari first-timer. They will be people who have had their fix of essay game, who want to mix it up. They may well want to do a couple of game drives, walking out into the bush with a local tracker, which will deliver a reasonable enough show including some big herds of giraffe. But they'll also feel at ease spending days around the pool, dabbling at the spa and eating Segera's healthy cuisine. They may just walk into the little exhibition centre, to learn about Segera's "4Cs" ethic. They may not. They may start to ask questions. They may, as I do, loathe the modern art installation implying the violence of Mugabe's Zimbabwe, which flickers on a screen near a table laid for two for dinner. But that's personal taste; at least it's making me think about something other than a tick-list of animals.

It's not that Segera is without the romance of the old country. Even cool, urban-sharp Zeitz, dressed in Puma and Tretorn, can be seduced by a classic. He flies me down the green-

'I saw a beautiful mountain, game that could come back, and country that could be rich again'

rimmed line of the Segera River in his yellow Super Cub, and points out the pool where Lord Delamere used to take his bath. He owns unpublished Hemingway letters, and others by David Livingstone and Henry Stanley, which are kept in one of Segera's sitting rooms. The raw, romantic spirit of the savannah the writers describe is, after all, what brought Zeitz here in the first place: "Walking out into the bush still feels the same as when I first came to Kenya, in 1989, on the day the Berlin Wall came down."

The difference is Zeitz recognises there is also a new Africa emerging, which is less about famine and war than education and technology. "I'm building Segera to promote a different way of doing tourism," he says.

Details

Sophy Roberts travelled as a guest of Journeys by Design (www.journeysbydesign.com). A five-night private safari at Segera costs from £4,245 per person full board, including internal scheduled flights and transfers. Return international flights from London to Nairobi with Kenya Airways cost from £550

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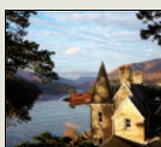


Short cuts

Scotland The Eden Rock, the luxury hotel on the French Caribbean island of Saint Barthélemy, has launched an outpost in the Scottish Highlands. Glen Affric, a Victorian manor on the shores of Loch Affric, was a private home of the Matthews family, the owners of Eden Rock, but after five years of restoration is now being offered to paying guests. The main house has eight bedrooms, a dining room for 16, a cinema and a billiards room. Activities include pony-riding, trout and salmon fishing, hiking, grouse shooting and stalking.

Bhutan The Himalayan kingdom's development as an upmarket tourist destination continues next month with the opening of Gangtey Goenpa Lodge, a luxurious new hotel in the less-visited central part of the country. It will have 12 rooms and a dining room with floor-to-ceiling windows looking out over the valley below, but the main draw will be hot-air balloon rides

over the mountains, something not currently available anywhere else in Bhutan. The lodge is a joint venture between a Bhutanese company and Eastern Safaris, which runs the successful "Balloons over Bagan" hot-air ballooning operation in Myanmar. Double rooms cost from \$650, or tour operator Natural High Safaris offers a week's trip to Bhutan, including flights from Kathmandu, guiding, two nights at Gangtey and a balloon flight, from £2,650. www.easternsafaris.com; www.naturalhighsafaris.com



Glen Affric, Scotland

"sleeping pods". The Finnish-designed pods resemble reclining chairs with a sliding shutter that encloses them, isolating the user from the light and noise of the terminal. Ten of the

phones. They cost AED45 (£8) per hour. www.adac.ae

Ireland A mapping website that allows users to explore 17th-century Ireland will be launched on Monday. Historians from Trinity College Dublin scoured libraries and archives in Britain, Ireland and France to track down more than 2,000 maps from the Down Survey of Ireland, undertaken between 1656 and 1658. The maps have been brought together and overlaid on to Ordnance Survey and Google maps, and made available as a free