

travel

LET A SENSE OF ADVENTURE GET THE BETTER OF YOU

Call of the WILD

CAMERAS HAVE THANKFULLY REPLACED GUNS ON KENYAN GAME SAFARIS BUT THE MORE GENTEEL RITUALS OF SUNDOWNERS AND LONG-TABLE DINING REMAIN.

PHOTOGRAPHER SHARYN CAIRNS
WRITER CARLI RATCLIFF



A giraffe is sighted during a sunrise game drive at Segera Retreat in central Kenya.



FROM LEFT: the lobby of Hemingways Nairobi hotel, named after author (and frequent Kenya visitor) Ernest Hemingway; a welcome respite from the sun awaits in the spa at Segera Retreat; Segera's chef Stephen Maina, once the private chef to Hollywood actress Stefanie Powers; he creates meals from locally grown vegetables with an emphasis on raw foods (below right).



There is something about safari life that makes you forget all your sorrows and feel as if you have drunk half a bottle of champagne — bubbling over with heartfelt gratitude for being alive," wrote Karen Blixen in *Out of Africa*.

What remains of the famous author's farm lies in the centre of Karen, the Nairobi suburb named after her, a bumpy 20-minute drive from the Kenyan capital's airport. Its humble stone homestead is still a place of pilgrimage for visitors captured by the romance of her story.

Two kilometres away is Hemingways Nairobi — a 45-room boutique hotel named after the likewise famous author, who once fished and hunted here. From its tropical gardens, guests can see the Ngong Hills, where lions and elephants once roamed and where Blixen and her lover Denys Finch Hatton (played by Meryl Streep and Robert Redford in the 1985 film based on her book) would picnic together.

Hemingways managing director and chairman Richard Markham grew up in Karen. "When I was a child this area was wild," he says. "There were lions and we'd hear the hyenas at night." The presence of the big cats is confirmed by a blackboard sign in a nearby street, announcing 'Lion Sighting' with a time and date.

More lions are to be found at Segera Retreat, a 20,000-hectare private conservancy on the Laikipia Plateau, a one-hour flight from Nairobi followed by a 20-minute hop by private plane.

From the air we see numerous prides, as well as hippopotamuses, rhinos, zebras, giraffes, elephants and ostriches.

Segera is owned by former Puma chairman and CEO Jochen Zeitz, who purchased the land in 2010 to conserve it and the wildlife that roam it. He has established impressive native gardens and an exclusive retreat, where guests can choose between six one-bedroom villas and the larger Segera House and Villa Segera.

Designed by Johannesburg-based John and Maira Koutsoudakis of Life Interiors + Architecture + Creative, the interiors are an eclectic mix of African furniture and collectables, interspersed with pieces sourced from around the globe. Selected works from the Zeitz Collection — one of the world's best collections of contemporary African art — are displayed.

Mount Kenya can be seen from the verandah of Paddock House, the retreat's largest public area and a popular spot for lunch. Today there is cold beetroot soup followed by a salad of watermelon, haloumi and mint; barbecued vegetables; cheese and a frittata. "Everything is organic and seasonal — most of it is grown by us or in nearby community gardens," says general manager Jens Kozany. As we finish, a family of giraffe saunter past just 20 metres away.

The afternoon is reserved for our first game drive. An open Land Rover is fitted with every amenity and our driver/guide David Lakilili, a local Samburu tribesman, is charming and knowledgeable. >

BELOW, FROM LEFT: the sitting room of Segera's Paddock House hosts high tea in the afternoon and cocktails in the evening. Original letters by Hemingway and fellow author Karen Blixen are dotted throughout the space; poolside at the Segera.



African antiques and collectables decorate the living room of Segera House, the retreat's largest guest residence.

A family of elephants
enjoy their breakfast
on the Laikipia Plateau.

“AS THE MIST DISAPPEARS,
THE COLOURS OF THE
LANDSCAPE CHANGE”



EXPANSIVE GUEST TENTS PROVIDE VIEWS ACROSS THE SAVANNAH

< Pointing out a lone giraffe, David explains that it has been ostracised following an altercation and adds, "He must stay alone until he finds another group that will let him join."

Arriving at a steep ridge with views across the plains to Tanzania, David invites us to jump out of the truck. "No simba," he says, using the Swahili term for 'lion' as he sets up the bar for sundowners. We watch the plains and skies change colour, freshly roasted cashews in one hand, gin and tonics or champagne in the other.

The sun gone, we return to Segera and our villas. My 'butler' Elsie has drawn a bath for me on the verandah, complete with bubbles, petals and candlelight. A group of zebra eat dinner in front of me.

Driving through the mist on our pre-dawn game drive the next day, David says we will see elephants, and we do: a family breakfasting as the sun rises. As the mist disappears, the colours of the landscape change — "Africa's 1000 shades of green," Blixen called them.

Among the greens are giraffes — they cross in front of us, a group of 16, including babies. Nearby, a lion and its cub wander the plains slowly and methodically, camouflaged by the tall grass.

Giraffes also welcome us to the Maasai Mara. An hour's flight south-west of Nairobi, Mara Plains is an exclusive eco-camp owned by *National Geographic* film-makers Beverly and Dereck Joubert. The 30-minute journey from the airstrip takes us close to giraffes, zebras and hippos. "I think I can see a restaurant," says our Maasai driver and guide Kevin Siayalel, detouring towards a cluster of trees. In the undergrowth, a pride of lions, with cubs, lie resting. "They've just eaten an impala so they are sleepy," Kevin explains.

At Mara Plains Camp, a suspended bridge leads to the combined reception/dining area/bar. It is a voluminous, open-sided tent with railway-sleeper floors, Persian rugs and deep chesterfields. General managers Sean Mousley and Amy Rostance welcome us, handing everyone a Canon EOS7 camera, a 400mm zoom lens and a pair of binoculars. "On safari these days, we only shoot with cameras," says Sean. "Sadly this wasn't always the case."

Hosting a maximum of 14 guests at a time, the camp runs on solar power and all the water is recycled. Floor-to-ceiling fly screens on the expansive guest tents provide views across the savannah from the beds, the copper baths and the private balconies.

As Mara Plains is not fenced, each guest is assigned a 24-hour, spear-carrying Maasai watchman to deliver them unscathed to the safari truck or the breakfast table. He will also accompany you on a jog if you are brave. Amy reveals that she regularly takes a run. "It is flat — the lions can see me coming — so I don't worry."

Our final safari again begins in the pre-dawn mist. We see a cheetah lying in the grass and watch lion cubs wrestle. The drive ends under an acacia tree, at a long table complete with white linen and glasses of champagne. Breakfasting as we overlook the Maasai Mara, we are, as Blixen described, bubbling over with heartfelt gratitude for being alive. **VL**

CLOCKWISE, FROM LEFT: accommodation at the Mara Plains Camp is spacious and doesn't give up comfort for the sake of eco-consciousness; Maasai driver and guide Kevin Siayalel searches for 'simba'; writing desks, an essential furnishing in safari bush camps, take their place in every room at Mara Plains Camp.



CLOCKWISE, FROM ABOVE: each tent at Mara Plains Camp boasts a deep copper bath; 'simba' keeps a watchful eye on events; a selection of ephemera collected on the plains is displayed in the camp's library; Maasai women in everyday dress.



The reception area of Mara Plains Camp doubles as its dining area and bar. This is the hub of the exclusive property, which is accessed via a suspended bridge on a secluded bend of the Ntiakatek River. As with the accommodation tents, it is raised on decking and delivers spectacular views.



KENYA *STAT*

Hemingways Nairobi, a 45-room boutique property in the heart of serene Karen, is close to Nairobi's main attractions and an ideal base on arrival in Kenya. From US\$310 (AU\$335) per night. hemingways-nairobi.com.

EXPLORE

Karen Blixen Museum, where the author's home is presented as it was when she lived here. Most of her original Danish furniture has been found and restored, as has the 19th-century Louis Vuitton trunk she used for the ship voyage from Denmark. Karen Road, Langata, Nairobi; museums.or.ke.

The David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust Elephant Orphanage rehabilitates baby elephants that have lost their mothers, mostly through poaching. You can see the elephants up close, hear about their plight — even 'adopt' one. Magadi Road, Nairobi National Park; sheldrickwildlifetrust.org.

SAFARI

Segera Retreat, owned and managed by the Zeitz Foundation, features eight villas. Each is attended by a private butler. From US\$970 (AU\$1050) per person per night. segera.com.

Mara Plains Camp is in the heart of the Maasai Mara. Tariffs include guided game drives, walks, a visit to a Maasai village, use of professional camera equipment (snaps will be downloaded onto a USB or CD), all meals and drinks. From US\$956 (AU\$1030) per person per night. greatplainsconservation.com/mara_plains.

SHOP

Segera Retreat and Mara Plains Camp both have a boutique filled with jewellery and accessories by east Africa's leading designers, including Sally Dudmesh. They stock local, handcrafted collectables and colourful, intricately beaded Maasai jewellery, with the proceeds going to the communities who made them.

GETTING THERE

For more about Kenya's fascinating history, tribal cultures, wildlife safaris and many other attractions, visit the Kenya Tourism Board's website, magicalkenya.com. Tourist visas can be obtained prior to departure from a Kenyan Embassy/High Commission or on arrival in Kenya. Vaccination against yellow fever is recommended before travel to many African countries, including Kenya. For details, see health.gov.au/yellowfever.