

72 HOURS IN

KENYA

Culture, safari and beach paradise. Annemarie Luck discovers how to get all three on a weekend getaway to Kenya, and what it is about this country that makes its visitors want to linger longer

I had a farm in Africa, at the foot of the Ngong Hills... Up in this high air you breathed easily, drawing in a vital assurance and lightness of heart... you woke up in the morning and thought: Here I am, where I ought to be.' It's been 75 years since Karen Blixen wrote these words in her memoir *Out of Africa* and yet, as I stand on the doorstep of her home, looking out at the view she must've seen every morning and breathing in that same vital air, her sentiments are as relevant as ever - my heart, indeed, feels light. I try to imagine what it must've been like for a woman to move from Denmark to rural Kenya in 1914 to manage a coffee plantation, as Blixen did, and I'm struck by the courage (or perhaps it was more a vivid sense of adventure) that move alone must have taken, let alone the strength she showed in the years to come.

OUT OF AFRICA

Blixen's home has been preserved as The Karen Blixen Museum in Nairobi, and it's here that I land on my first morning in Kenya's capital city. Were it not for the Oscar-winning 1985 movie based on her book and starring Meryl Streep and Robert Redford, I might never have heard of Blixen. But whether you know her

ADVENTURELAND

Above We visited Mombasa's Old Town on our last morning in Kenya. If you're in the market for a sarong (known in Kenya as a *kanga*) or hand-crafted wooden furniture, you're bound to find a bargain. **Right** Tsavo National Park's white morning glories made the game drives utterly fantastical. **Far right** Outside Karen Blixen's home in Nairobi.





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story or not, a trip to Kenya is not complete without a visit to Blixen's home and a glimpse into her extraordinary life.

Although much of the surrounding area has been sold and is now occupied by the city's wealthiest inhabitants, their vast estates surrounded by high walls and lush gardens, when you enter Blixen's home you are transported back to a far more modest way of life.

Inside there are pieces of furniture and artworks (she was clearly a budding artist) that belonged to Blixen mixed with artefacts from the *Out of Africa* movie set (including a pair of jodhpurs worn by Robert Redford, which drew particularly admiring glances from the women in our tour group). We move outside to view one of the old coffee-making machines, situated at the bottom of a short garden path, along which dassies peek curiously at us from behind leaves and, we're told, a wild cheetah had been found roaming a few weeks ago.

Blixen had it all for a time and Kenya brought much to her life - independence and a career as a woman in the early 1900s, Africa's spirit of freedom, adventure, passionate romance (albeit not with her husband, but rather a ravishing Englishman she met and had an affair with in Kenya) and subject matter for a successful memoir. As I leave the museum, I wonder what the next three days in Kenya will bring to *my* life...

FANTASY SAFARI

It's 7.30am the following morning and I'm boarding a small 10-seater Safari Link plane that's transporting us to Kilaguni Serena Safari Lodge in the Tsavo National Park. A few of the others in my group are nervous about flying in such a small plane and hang near the back, but I'm determined to get a seat right behind the pilot. I want to feel like I'm flying the plane myself. The sky is a perfect blue and soon the pilot points out the snow-capped peaks of Kilimanjaro. Everyone starts talking about people they know who've climbed to the top and I consider whether I'd ever embark on that particular voyage. Then someone mentions frostbite and, looking at the white peaks, I decide to put that answer on ice for the time being.

Half an hour later we're descending to land. From my VIP seat I have a clear view of the remarkably tiny landing strip and I'm horrified to see we're headed straight for an oblivious group of springboks milling about on the tar. Just as I think the pilot is either going to swerve to avoid them or ride right over them, they twig and spring gracefully out the way. What a rush!

After freshening up in our chalets and a quick cup of rich, delicious Kenyan coffee, we hop into a minibus with open

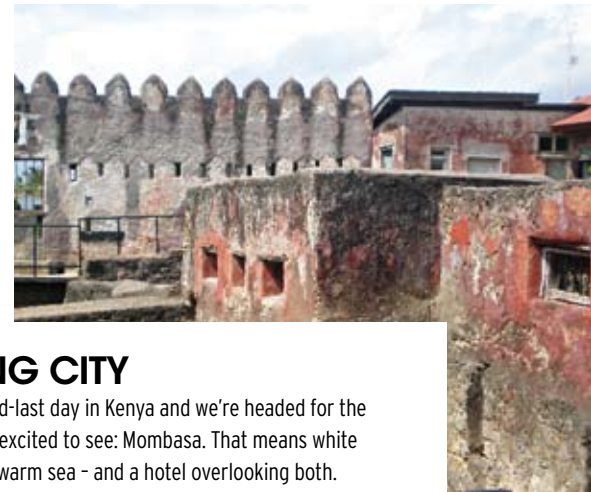




top and set out for a game drive. A few hundred metres down the red gravel road and I feel like I've fallen into the fantasy world of *Avatar*. We're surrounded by a rainbow of dipping and diving butterflies, and white morning glories cover every surface like freshly fallen snow. It's magnificent.

Throughout the drive our eyes are peeled for sightings of the Big Five. We're all very pleased (and, for some reason, proud of ourselves) when we spot a leopard in the distance, draped over a branch of a tree. He's blissfully unaware of the excitement he's caused as we all clamber for a better view and fight over the binoculars. A little further down the road we catch sight of three lions, also up a tree and shoving each other out of the way to try and secure the best part of the branch. Seems good tree space is hard to find in Kilaguni.

Later that evening, after slathering myself in Tabard (malaria tablets are also recommended in Kenya), I settle down for dinner overlooking the waterhole outside the lodge's restaurant. I find it fascinating that the animals choose to gather here since they are bathed in a bright spotlight (for the benefit of the humans, of course) and they must surely feel vulnerable. But gather they do, and I see giraffes, hyenas and plenty of springboks. It's like a nightclub for the wild and I amuse myself by giving the animals personalities and thinking how cool it would be if *Madagascar's* King Julien and his minions arrived to liven up the party. I'm definitely revelling in Africa's spirit of freedom (if only freedom of imagination) right now.



SIZZLING CITY

It's our second-last day in Kenya and we're headed for the city I'm most excited to see: Mombasa. That means white beaches and warm sea - and a hotel overlooking both. This is honeymoon material. It's a five-hour drive and on the way we stop to photograph the bridge where construction workers were killed by the infamous man-eating lions of Tsavo in 1898 (remember the 1996 movie *The Ghost and the Darkness* starring Val Kilmer and his bad South African accent?).

Mombasa is hot. We're talking hotter-than-Durban-in-summer hot. I'm dreaming of that ocean (and very happy to have escaped Cape Town's winter for a few days). We drive past myriad shack-like stores, salons, 'hotels' and bars dotted along the main road - all of which have delightfully creative names such as Mars Bar, The Endless Salon, Silent Joy Bar and Love Station Store - until we finally turn off and arrive at the Mombasa Serena Beach Hotel. Despite the heat, the staff are in good spirits and smartly dressed in light suits, welcoming us with the instantly cheering '*Jambo*' ('Hello' in Swahili).

It doesn't take me long to whip on my costume and dive into the hotel's pool, where I'm seduced by the bar on the deep-end side, which juts into the pool and has barstools in the water. It's all very Hollywood and I can't resist having a G'n'T right then and there with fellow traveller and newfound friend Sofia.



WILD AT HEART

Clockwise from top left Feeding a giraffe at The Giraffe Centre in Nairobi; Fort Jesus in Mombasa; Mombasa's Old Town. Opposite, top to bottom The 10-seater Safari Link plane that took us from Nairobi to Kilaguni Serena Safari Lodge; The Karen Blixen Museum in Nairobi; a balcony in Mombasa; near the bridge where man-eating lions killed construction workers in 1898.





BEFORE SUNSET

Afterwards we run down to the beach, which is littered with dreadlocked Kenyan locals and tourists preparing to snorkel. One of the locals introduces me to his camel, Bob, who is chilling on the sand looking sleepy and like he hopes I'm not about to ask if I can go for a ride. It's not Bob's lucky day - I've always wanted to go for a camel ride and here's my chance. Despite an initial reluctance to stand up, Bob does his job well and the view from the saddle is amazing. For a moment I can't quite believe I'm riding a camel on a beach in Mombasa. What more could you ask for from a holiday?

That evening we go on a dhow cruise up the Mtape Creek. As the sun sets we board the boat and are welcomed and then entertained by a host of bare-chested acrobats wearing red cotton trousers and broad smiles. Sofia and I giggle as we agree that there's something alluring about Kenyan men. After the impressive show, Safari, one of the acrobats, says, 'Now we'll have a fashion show!'

Just as I'm thinking, 'Oh, this will be interesting', Safari grabs my hand, pulls me into the centre of the dhow and starts deftly wrapping a red *kanga* (like a sarong) around my body. It dawns on me: 'I am the fashion show!' Before I can protest, Safari is twisting, turning and tying the material until he's satisfied. He points at my attire and exclaims, 'This is Swahili style.' By now I'm laughing along with everyone else. A series of different styles follow - I even end up wearing a burka as a tribute to Kenya's Muslim culture. Afterwards Safari asks me, with a flirtatious grin, what I'm doing the next day. 'Oh, we're leaving to go home tomorrow,' I say, and he looks disappointed.

Karen Blixen springs to mind again and I think about how Kenya brought passion into her life and how she too was enchanted by the Kenyan locals. As Safari and I say goodbye and I skip off the dhow feeling light and heady, I chuckle to myself as I think that, if I was single and staying in Kenya for longer, romance could be on the cards as well. And how I can't wait to write about this beautiful country. **mc**

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HERE COMES THE SUN

The Serena Hotel in Mombasa. Above Bob the camel makes a fabulous tour guide. Above left A baby elephant feeding at The Elephant Orphanage.

WHAT TO DO IN NAIROBI

■ Get up close and personal with the giraffes at The Giraffe Centre (a.k.a. the African Fund For Endangered Wildlife).

+254 (0)20 807-0804, Giraffecenter.org

■ Watch baby elephants interacting and feeding and learn more about the organization at The Elephant Orphanage. +254 (0)20 230-1396, Sheldrickwildlifetrust.org

■ Take a tour through Karen Blixen's home at The Karen Blixen Museum. +254 (0)20 882-779, Museums.or.ke

IN THE TSAVO NATIONAL PARK

■ Go on game drives and visit Mzima Springs: you'll see crocodiles and fish via a special submerged viewing tank.

IN MOMBASA

■ Visit Fort Jesus in the Old Town: it's the city's most popular tourist attraction and was built by the Portuguese in 1593.

■ Take a sunset cruise and sample local cuisine on the Tamarind Dhow. Tamarinddhow.com

■ Discover some of the best beaches in the world. If you're staying at the Serena Hotel, you don't have to go far. But for the more adventurous, take a guided mountain bike tour of the coast with Bikethecoast.com.

NEED TO KNOW

South Africans don't need a visa to visit Kenya, but you do need a yellow fever vaccination and malaria tablets are recommended.

GETTING THERE

Contact Kenya Airways on 011-881-9795, fax 011-881-9691, e-mail tracey.king@kenya-airways.co.za or visit Kenya-airways.com.

MARIE CLAIRE READER OFFER

Heyneke Tours is offering *MC* readers a seven-night stay in a village room at Mombasa Serena Beach Hotel and Spa from August to November 2010 for R12 244* per adult sharing (excludes airport taxes of R1 500 per person - subject to change on the day tickets are issued - travel insurance and medical cover). The package includes return economy flights ex-Jo'burg on Kenya Airways, return airport-hotel transfers, breakfast and dinner. Call 011-764-2783 or visit Heyneketours.com.