

Hemingway's Naughty Nairobi

By Devanshi Mody



I'm in snug rolls of blankets, gently rolling into slumber, when gently my breakfast order is requested. It looks as if Naomi Campbell is speaking to me. Am I dreaming? But I'm not on Kenya Airways' just-launched new Dreamliner, I'm in their more down-to-earth aircraft. Though I'm in their world-class Business Class, I haven't quite expected its multi-award-winning amenities to include Naomi Campbell as hostess.

Attending me is Victoria, about whose uncanny resemblance to the super model I remark. Victoria smiles that she did indeed model but hasn't the "X-factor." She has, however, the "I" factor, intelligence — demonstrated in our discussions on Kenya's ethnic composition. Victoria is subtle. Nevertheless, I soon envision ranch-owning, rich "Kenyan Cowboys," around whose heads power wreaths like lassos. White hegemony, it would seem, dominate a black majority. Just then, I spy a mountain, its dusky amplitude wreathed atop in white snow. A metaphor for Kenya's shaded power dynamics?

We land. I'm offered an abundant bouquet, almost bigger than I am, of





fragrant Kenyan roses in fuchsia. Is this yet another Kenya Airways Business Class feature, I wonder? The red carpet doesn't roll out, but a sleek pick-up rolls up, and I'm escorted through immigration, the forms filled, formalities fulfilled. Curious.

Only when seated in a waiting vehicle does my escort explain that she is the Hemingways Hotel's airport representative, and I have experienced but one of those little courtesies extended their VIPs. I wasn't aware I was "VIP," but I think I could get used to it.

I (along with my newfound VIP status) are soon conveyed to the calm, cool suburbs of Karen, to the hotel.

Why recreate a grand colonial-style all-suite place, the sort Ernest Hemingway lived in, on Karen Blixen's erstwhile farm, not far from where Lord Erroll was mysteriously murdered and with views over the fabled Ngong Hills, where Finch Hatton was buried? Well, it's all rather dramatic. And whilst Ernest Hemingway wasn't given to drama, he expressed style. So too does Nairobi's new Hemingways Hotel.

There's no lobby, only a colonnaded reception embraced in winding staircases. Check-in happens in-suite, mine the Hemingway suite, which happens to be the Presidential Suite. It has a splendid dinner table, upon which my butler places that overwhelming bouquet of fuchsia roses that he has trailed along. The flowers fall on delicate homemade confections and vibrant fruit. I leave them to explore my suite, with its smart trappings and colonial elegance, its living rooms that open onto terraces trimmed in plush lawns and the bedroom with four-poster beds swaddled in choice linen. As for the white marble bathroom stocked with chic Parisian Anne Semonin toiletries, that's a story apart.

I'd linger in my suite, but Simon Penfold, then the sales manager, "cruelly" gives me gorgeous suites and then lures me away with breakfast. This could be had on terraces overlooking flying lawns, across which the misty Ngong Hills waver or indoors, where walls bear quotes on Kenya by famous people. I can't decide where to sit, keep changing tables (my every whim patiently entertained) and finally settle on terraces bedecked with Nairobi's beautiful people and businessmen, who strike deals over cappuccinos and espressos. Over outstanding sourdough toast and



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granola, I people-watch. The racial melange distinguishes Nairobi from Cape Town or Johannesburg, where you wouldn't see blacks or coloureds in luxury establishments except as waiters, cleaners or worker.

Simon knows everyone who's anyone in Kenya and quite possibly the world (if not the universe); he knows everything about everything (almost). With wit and charisma, Simon stretches breakfast until lunch and then to supper — but not before we partake of drinks at the balconied bar, where locals who look

as if they belong on an English country estate gather to chit-chat about their horses over Nairobi's finest cocktails and canapés.

Supper. There's super pumpkin soup, cashew and feta salad and homemade pasta. However, Nairobi's elite come for steak tartare, prepared by an Algerian chef who worked on the French Riviera. Chef also excels at traditional English afternoon tea, served in the quaint colonial salons and library. Incidentally, Kenyan tea is a revelation.

Kenyan Coffee is also special; when you're mummified in it during the oriental spa's signature Coffee Scrub Ritual designed for honeymooners. Gents, if you succumb to the tender touch of pretty young therapist, Margaret, whose soft hands are craftily implemented to out-massage Thai and Balinese counterparts, prepare for another honeymoon.

After overly indulging in the spa, I realise coffee is best had in a cup at the Brasserie. I do little else other than return to this exceptional spa, for an Anne Semonin Deep Marine Purifying Facial. Over applications of seaweed, algae, sea salts and personalised blends of essential oils and trace elements, spa manageress Katy imparts terrific Kenyan tales of passion.

I then learn that Lord Erroll was the 22nd Earl of Erroll, who was part of the "Happy Valley Set," colonials notoriously devoted to debauchery and decadence. The rakish young aristocrat, an overly accomplished lover, famously got murdered on the Nairobi-Ngong Highway — but not before infamously seducing heiress Idina Sackville, scandalously wrecking her marriage. I next learn that Karen Blixen was a Dane, best-known for writing *Out of Africa*, and lesser known for dissipating aristocratic husband

Baron von Blixen's inheritance on coffee plantations she didn't know how to cultivate. She became famous for her raging romance with aristocratic big game hunter Denys Finch Hatton, who perished in his private plane.

Kenya certainly inspires wild passions. I'm yet to meet the irresistible Masai, for whom European princesses forsook their palaces. Despite its historic location, I witness no untamed occurrences at Hemingways. Sigh.

Indeed, decorum is maintained by an impeccable butler service headed by David who customises my itinerary and sends me to neighbouring celebrity haunt Talisman. At this enchanted Aladdin's Cave-like under-the-stars restaurant, you could be eating spinach-feta samosas and seaweed salad, served by legendary waiter Alfonso. Simultaneously, the enigmatic manager, Stephen, refuses to acknowledge it's Brad Pitt sitting in a corner, dipping into chocolate fondant.

Travel Tips: Kenya Airways(www.kenya-airways.com) just launched Boeing 787 Dream Liner out of Paris and New Delhi. It provides award-winning in-flight service and food, in addition to air hostesses resembling super models.





Guests of Casa Gangotena are treated to complimentary high tea



Spacious, light filled rooms at Casa Gangotena have luxe beds and, in some cases, original frescoes



Inside Casa Gangotena, The Best Hotel in Ecuador

Guests checking into Casa Gangotena in Quito, Ecuador are welcomed with a glass of jugo de vida, the juice of life. It's made with 20 different herbs and even after an international flight and the rigors of landing in a city at more than 9,000 feet, the juice is refreshing enough to bring you back to life.

Opened in 2011, the hotel is the result of a five-year renovation which transformed the Art Nouveau and Art Deco home of the Gangotena family into the best hotel in Ecuador, full of original details including pressed tin ceilings, frescoes in some rooms and a jaw-dropping marble spiral staircase.

The 31 rooms at Casa Gangotena (20 luxury rooms, eight plaza view rooms, two junior suites and one full suite) follow three color schemes—turquoise, red and blue and brown—and average 377 square feet (35 square meters) in size. Rooms 102 and 212 have original restored

frescoes. Plaza view rooms are also coveted for their views of the picturesque and storied Plaza San Francisco on which the hotel sits.

Legend has it that an indigenous man named Cantuña sold his soul to the devil (then ingeniously cheated him out of it) in order to get the large and elaborate stone niches built beneath the San Francisco church that anchors the plaza. As Quito grew, the San Francisco plaza became the site of a crowded and sketchy marketplace before being rejuvenated as part of an overall reclamation of Quito's historic center which resulted in the area being named a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1978.

Travel Tip: The San Francisco church is only open to visitors during early morning mass on Tuesdays from 7 a.m. to 8 a.m. And you definitely want to get a look inside this amazing church. Completed by the Spanish in 1680 after more than 150 years of construction, the San Francisco church saves all its

