

outandabout

Adventure in Aberdare's 'open wilderness'

Aberdare Country Club is home to raw natural beauty, but as **CLAY MUGANDA** discovered on a recent visit, the establishment offers a lot more that warm visitors' hearts

As we covered the 800 metres to the reception, we saw different types of animals lazily browsing on the expansive grounds, half of which is a nine-hole golf course.

On disembarking from the vehicle, we walked to the reception area where we learnt that our first port of call would be the dining area. On hand to receive us was the general manager, Rodgers Hodgson, a soft-spoken veteran of East Africa's hospitality industry who has his facts and figures on his fingertips.

I am a foodie, and from the luxurious meal, I safely concluded that the chef was a culinary god, a titan of tastes, and not the type who can choke in the smoke. After the meal, which we washed down with a cup of freshly brewed coffee, Hodgson decided to show us around.

Aberdare Country Club is an old establishment. The buildings are Victorian, but they have mod-cons such as air conditioners, thanks to the current owners. Marasa Group, which did so much to make the place habitable, but did not interfere with history, or ambience, and thus left intact the brick fireplaces and their ornate mantle pieces.

The main building was put up in the 1920s — the King of England gave the property to a lord, who put up a family house, which now houses the lounge bar, the expansive dining room area and a TV room.

Aberdare Country Club sits on 1,300 acres of raw natural beauty: hills, animals and the Aberdare Forest. There is a private game sanctuary, baboons, zebras, gazelles and impalas. Some of these animals consider the club's grounds their home, and stroll on the grounds with little care.

"We are used to the animals," Hodgson reminds us. "They love being with us just as much as we love having them in the compound."



1



2



1. The Ark inside Aberdare National Park.
2. An artistic chandelier in the club's main building.
3. A bushbuck on the grounds of Aberdare Country Club.
4. The main building at Aberdare Country Club. [PHOTOS: ELVIS OGINA/STANDARD]

There is more to the club than just the wildlife — the cottages and the suites, which have been upgraded and have new en-suite bathrooms and furnishings. All of them have spectacular views of the plains, the Aberdare Mountains and Mount Kenya, to the West and East, respectively.

There are 20 twin cottages, 20 double rooms, two triplets, three deluxe and one VIP Suite. All of them have fireplaces, which are lit on request but you do not have to request for hot water bottles and coffee- and tea-making facilities.

The VIP Suite has satellite TV, Internet connection, air conditioning, a kitchenette and a mini-bar. But the icing on the accommodation cake is the Honeyuckle Suite. With two bedrooms, a living room-cum-seating area, en-suite bathrooms, a kitchenette and a private garden compound, it is ideal for couples or honeymooners considering that it is also exclusively set apart from the other cottages.

The establishment has a heated swimming pool and health club and spa where visitors get pampered after a day out on the greens, after mountain biking, after horse riding, after playing tennis or after a nature walk. The health club has a fully-equipped gym with all the modern machines

who was ferrying us said, and I tried to listen even though the view of the rolling hills was distracting me. I was lost in my thoughts and did not realise that we had reached the club's gate, until the sentry walked over to the vehicle, to ask if we had reservations.

Upon confirming our details from his list of visitors, he waved us in — and there began our sojourn in a place that can only be described as an open wilderness. We had not gone 20 metres past the gate when my photographer, Elvis, spotted a bushbuck, a deer, an eland, a monkey, a herd of wild animals and started clicking away.



3

Nyeri is cold. That is what my colleague in Nyeri said when I told him I would be in his town towards the end of July. I was not going to Nyeri Town per se, but to Aberdare Country Club - 17 kilometres from the town - on the slope of Mweiga Hills in the Aberdare Highlands, and to The Ark, right inside the Aberdare National Park.

It was a three-day two-night affair, which started at the country club, with a late lunch, three hours after we left Nairobi.

Mweiga Hills or the Aberdare Ranges are warmer in January, Tim,



4

It has four viewing areas so that you do not miss any animal sightings. And even if you had retired to your room, a night guard will buzz you when a special animal comes to the watering hole.

As we were being driven back in a shuttle bus to the country club after a night at The Ark, Elvis became happy again. He had gone for a walk the previous evening and taken enough photographs of elephants, giant forest hogs, bushbucks, waterbucks, Cape buffaloes, elands and birds whose names he did not know.

"Did you like the dessert last night," I asked. He did not answer.

"It was pure decadence," I offered. "It was so nice you could not realise that what was spelt as Mousse was meant to be Mousse."

He let out a hearty laugh of a visitor satisfied in more ways than one.

Yeah, Nyeri was cold in July. But the Aberdare Country Club and The Ark — which should be in your itinerary this holiday season — are warm places and the hearts of Hodgson and his staff are even warmer.