

Ndendege

News

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MERU NATIONAL PARK

An Untamed Paradise

A TURNAROUND
Is It Time for East Africans
to Rejoice?

INSIDE BOMAS WALLS
A Centre of Cultural Learning

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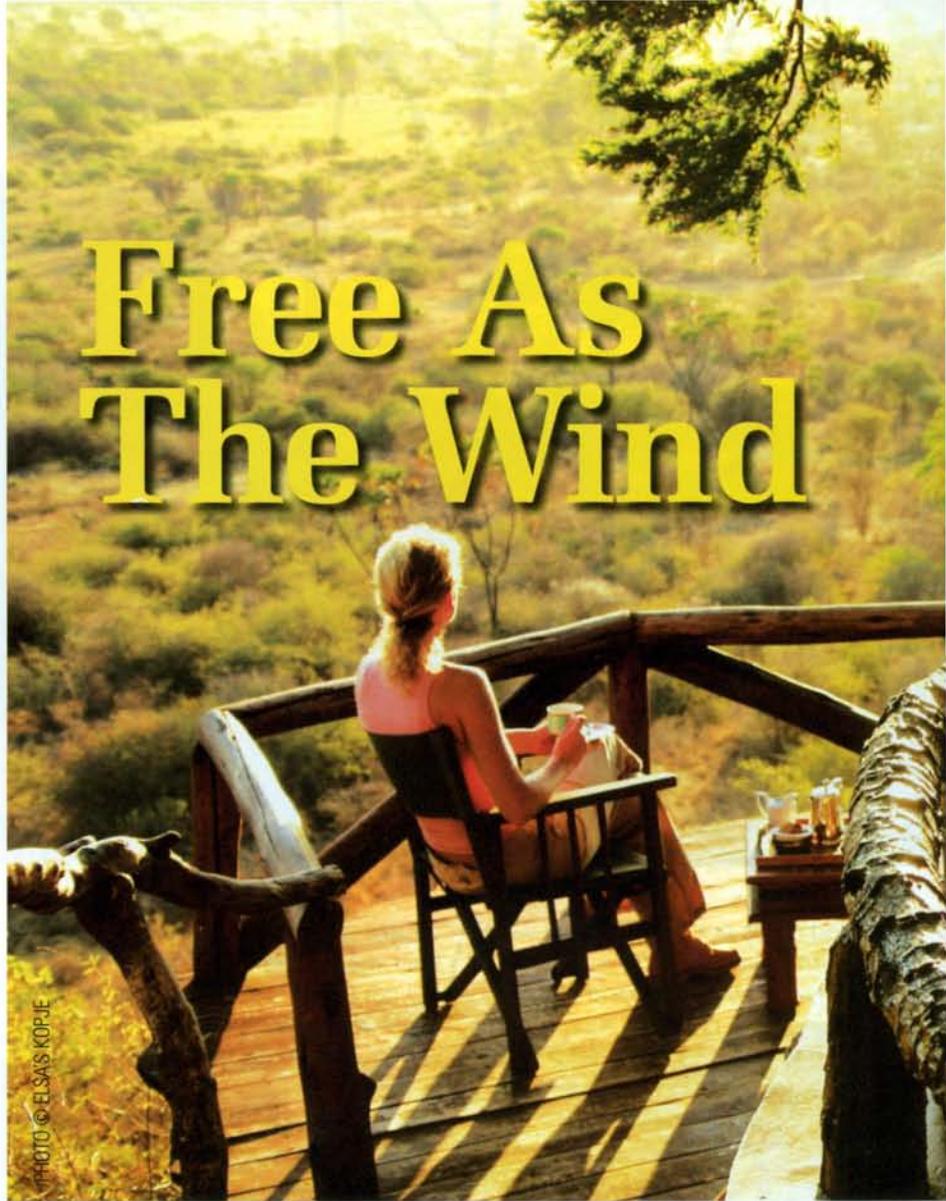
Silvery- and golden-winged butterflies quivered on the mosquito netting surrounding the luxurious four-poster bed as the sun slowly climbed, smudging the dawn sky with peach and lemon yellow hues and throwing a gentle light into the room.

Doves, weaver birds and birds warbled, trilled, and chirped in the trees nearby as I sat in the deck and sipped the early morning coffee brought cheerily by Gabriel, the room steward. The view is spectacular, overlooking the vast Meru plains, almost shimmering as they bask in the early morning light. Sheer bliss! Elsa's Kopje was turning out to be a lot more than I had expected.

I am one of those sceptics who are wary of hype, but Elsa's lives up to its sterling reputation as being an exclusive hideaway for the world-weary. Perched in a spectacular setting atop Mughwango Hill, it blends into the rocky crags of the "kopje" (rocky outcrop) above George Adamson's original campsite, and is almost invisible as you approach along one of the few well-travelled roads in Meru National Park.

Paul, the amiable driver/guide from Elsa's Kopje, has picked up a small group of us from the Kinna airstrip, and we wind through a magical landscape of indigenous trees, savannah and plains, and across concrete drifts over flowing rivers. Paul is knowledgeable and points out things we city-dwellers would not have noticed. First of these is trio of hippos turning a corner in the Rojewero River as they lumber away from our approach. They are huge, their pink ears and snouts peeping above the water line as they submerge. A Fish Eagle flaps away overhead, and Guinea fowl shriek as they take awkward flight as we pass by.

Free As The Wind



Less than an hour later, the 4WD Land Cruiser climbs upwards in the heat past scrub and thorn bushes that rustle with hidden wildlife, and then comes to a stop at Reception, where Charlie and Philip, the charming hosts, await arriving guests.

Hyrax skitter across the polished granite floor and up onto the hardwood roof beams.

"They like being at the lodge because they feel safe from vultures," explains Charlie, referring to the predators that unexpectedly plummet from the sky.

A hornbill unabashedly stands at the two steps to a chic curio boutique off reception, its head cocked and full of beady-eyed curiosity. A welcome fruit

cocktail is proffered as Phil explains the ropes and history of this elegant lodge.

Elsa's Kopje is named after Elsa the lioness, made famous by George and Joy Adamson's biographical book and film "Born Free". Phil is passionate about the lodge, admitting that even he was pleasantly surprised when he took over after many years in the business.

"Perhaps I was getting jaded, but this place has everything – contrasting eco-systems, the sheer diversity of the trees, the wildlife..." he says. "And Elsa's Kopje is very different from anywhere else I've been. The finish is impeccable, the design unusual... But see for yourself."

Nature's Own

So saying, we are invited to our rooms, up a shady winding pathway hewn from granite through a forest of towering trees and scrub. Along the way, one couple is led off to the left, towards the magnificent Honeymoon Suite nestled amongst the trees – a triple-level cottage with a sitting room, double bedroom and en suite bathroom carved around polished natural granite outcrops, each room open to breathtaking views down through the forested kopje slopes and out across the plains.

Further up, the path opens onto surprisingly green, manicured lawns, which front the stylish open bar, lounge and dining areas to one side, and a glittering aquamarine infinity pool that seems to drop off into the plains on the other. Yet somehow, the feeling of being in the wild has been cleverly retained...

Crossing the sun-kissed lawns and under trees riddled with exotic birds singing along with a supporting cast of chirping cicada, I'm led across a gently swinging suspension bridge over a scrub-filled ravine. Hesitantly, warily, with a lot of trepidation, I trustingly follow Gabriel to the end and into yet another stunning cottage.

The cottages, moulded around and incorporating the natural rock, are well camouflaged and invisible to each other amongst the trees, offering a welcome privacy and soul-healing solitude. Open, airy and spacious, the en-suite cottage is elegantly appointed with locally inspired objets d'art, a 4-poster bed, granite-floored bathroom with shower, bidet and herbal toiletries, a private deck overlooking the plains, and – wow! – an outdoor bath that fills like a waterfall from open ducts carved into the rock, from which one can gaze upon the spectacular view.

Having ensured that I'm happily



Elsa's Kopje this year won The Good Safari Guide awards for Best Safari Property in East Africa as well as Best Safari Property in Africa at this year's Indaba. We congratulate you!

Charlie & Phil, the sociable hosts



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