

ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST

THE INTERNATIONAL MAGAZINE OF DESIGN

APRIL 2007

Kenya's Ngong House

Not Far from Isak Dinesen's Farm, an East African Lodge Takes to the Trees

Text by Judith Thurman/Photography by Andrew Twort

Kenya's Ngong House

Not Far from Isak Dinesen's Farm, an East African Lodge Takes to the Trees

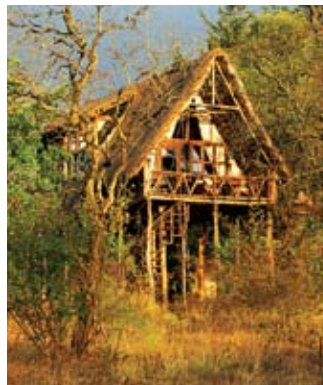
Text by Judith Thurman/Photography by Andrew Twort



Isak Dinesen's out of africa opens with a sentence as pure as the air at 6,000 feet in Kenya's highlands: "I had a farm in Africa, at the foot of the Ngong Hills." The words themselves resemble the landscape they invite you to imagine—a plain of monosyllables with the incantatory place-names rising above them—and they generate an emotion that you can't at first define. But

by the end of her memoir, you recognize it as the calm of finality: In every sense, it's the past perfect.

Dinesen left for Kenya in 1913 to marry her cousin Bror Blixen. Her family had staked them to a plantation of some 5,000 acres, and for the next 17 years, she tried but failed at growing coffee. Her passion for a settler's life was such that droughts, deluges,



On the border of Nairobi National Park, former diplomat Paul Verleysen built a cluster of "tree houses" on stilts for guests. LEFT: One of the five structures. ABOVE: The sitting room in Tree House South "has a rustic, richly colored environment," he says. The carved low table and the chest are from Lamu.

RIGHT: Chairs and a sofa made of woven water hyacinth decorate Log House's terrace. A tribal cloth from Congo covers a sofa pillow. **BELOW:** Recycled wood—from a dhow—was used for the canopy bed in the master bedroom. The metal rocking chair was welded by a local artisan.



divorce, frosts, plagues, illness and a world war probably wouldn't have defeated her. But the farm was—and had always been—too high for its crop. In 1931, the year that her lover, Denys Finch Hatton, died in a plane crash, the investors forced a bankruptcy sale, and she quit Kenya forever.

As Nairobi burgeoned, Karen Coffee, as the property was called, became Karen, a civilized constellation of villas and estates (occasionally

“I imagined it as a soulful alternative to the hotels in town, which are luxurious but all more or less in the same high-rise, air-conditioned modern mold,” says Verleysen.



still visited, however, by some of Dinesen's old familiars—giraffes, cheetahs, monkeys, warthogs, hyenas and even the odd lion—from the adjacent national park).

In 1994 Paul Verleysen, a Belgian construction engineer and former diplomat who had spent most of his career in Africa, bought 10 acres of land near the Karen/Langata border and opened a lodge that he called Ngong House. “I imagined it as a soulful alternative to the hotels in town,” he says, “which are luxurious but all more or less in the same high-rise, air-conditioned modern mold.” With his son, Christof (who died tragically in a plane crash last year), and a local crew, Verleysen built five beguilingly rustic, two-story stilt

Hotels



ABOVE: A Swahili canoe forms the base of the bed in Boat Room. The graphic tribal batik is from Ivory Coast. Antique kilims are on the floor. **RIGHT:** A canoe, lined with fiberglass, serves as a tub in the bath. A wrought iron chandelier that was forged on-site hangs above.

houses of indigenous materials and design. They nestle almost invisibly in a landscape of thorn trees, cactus and acacia, screened from one another and from the main lodge. Thirty minutes from the airport, a new arrival experiences something of the revelation that Dinesen described as “coming from a rushed and noisy world into a still country.”

The main lodge is a vine-covered stone bungalow with a well-shaded veranda that dates from the colonial period. Its lounge is a library decorated



with art and furnishings by African artisans, including a monumental table of polished dhow wood and baby giraffe bones by the late artist Tonio Trzebinski (whose mother, Errol, is Finch Hatton’s biographer). Each of the idiosyncratic stilt houses has a private balcony with an unspoiled view of the hills—blue-green peaks that Dinesen compared to “immovable waves.” One is a thatched rondavel known as the Boat Room. A helical staircase leads, through a trapdoor, to an aerie where guests sleep under romantic netting on a bed fashioned from a seagoing canoe that Verleysen bought from a Swahili fisherman. The balcony wing chairs were woven of water hyacinth from Lake Victoria by a collective of local craftswomen. The



BELOW: Karen Blixen's farmhouse. **LEFT:** Heavy velvet draperies hang on the canvas dining tent. "It's a cozy and intimate space for bush meals," Verleysen says. Wrought iron candelabra and glass-beaded candleholders made by Masai women top the table. **BOTTOM:** Safari chairs and red-cedar tables surround the pool terrace.



adjoining bath, reached by a walkway, has porthole windows made from recycled wine bottles, and the tub is a smaller hand-hewn canoe whose graceful prow once sliced through the breakers on the Indian Ocean.

Verleysen's wife, Penny Winter, a fashion designer,

helped him choose the pan-African artifacts, fabrics and accessories—a mosaic of stained Kitengela glass by Anselm Croze; wildlife bronzes and paintings by Michael Gha-ui; tribal batiks from Ivory Coast; pillows of vintage Kuba cloth from Congo; and throws or bolsters of cow-

rie-beaded raffia—that lend a graphic vibrance to the interiors. Linen daybeds in the sitting room of the south "tree house" are draped with coverlets trimmed in Belgian lace, and its sleeping mezzanine is furnished with a chest, a writing table and a canopy bed made by the legen-

dary wood-carvers of Lamu.

Many travelers set off from Ngong House for rougher adventures, and the rituals of the lodge offer them a foretaste of bush life. There are sundowners by a campfire; candlelit banquets in the voluptuous dining tent; and drivers on call for excursions to Nairobi's museums, markets and wildlife sanctuaries. The kitchen's widely reputed haute cuisine is prepared by Kenyan chefs who have studied with Belgian masters. In that respect, they are the rightful heirs of Dinesen's Kamante, whose *pièce de résistance*, "clear soup," was an exquisitely refined consommé that was always waiting for Finch Hatton when he returned from safari. From elemental ingredients—the marrow of Africa—Kamante distilled something pure. And so has Verleysen. □



Ngong House

P.O. Box 24963
Nairobi 00502, Kenya
254-722-434-965
www.ngonghouse.com