

TheNational

ultratravel

YOUR GUIDE TO HEAVEN ON EARTH

MIDDLE EAST EDITION SPRING 2011

FLIGHT OF FANCY

LEARN THE ART OF FALCONRY IN
RAS AL KHAIMAH AND WIN A STAY
AT A NEW LUXURY BEACH RESORT

**KENYA ON
SAFARI AT EAST
AFRICA'S MOST
EXCLUSIVE
NEW LODGE**

**PARIS INSIDE
SOME OF THE
WORLD'S MOST
ANTICIPATED
LUXURY HOTELS**

AHEAD OF THE GAME

A new retreat in the foothills of Mount Kenya boasts just six rooms and incomparable opportunities for game viewing, all with a generous dose of luxury and good company. **Rosemary Behan** reports

Hmm. Not sure about that company – think it might be a budget outfit.” Mark Barrah, who has been helping to finish build Solio Lodge, Kenya’s newest luxury safari lodge, is right. I’ve chosen the no-frills route up and down Mount Kenya, complete with a dodgy guide, overloaded porter and transfers by 1970s Land Rovers. Yet, with a choice of either tents or freezing bunkhouses, 3am starts, blisters, and no electricity, heating or showers, there is no luxury way of climbing Africa’s second-highest mountain. Ava Paton, the newly appointed South African manager of Solio Lodge, can only shudder when she drops me off in Nanyuki before the climb. “You wouldn’t catch me dead doing that,” she says. “Rather you than me.”

When I emerge back in Nanyuki three days later, I’ve a world of stories to tell, of mice in the dormitories, backpackers with altitude sickness, sleepless nights in sleeping bags, snowstorms at the summit and a seven-hour soaking on the way down. And, of my guide’s deadly body odour, which Ava gets a whiff of when he hitches a ride to nearby Nyeri. There are also my feet, the heels of which have been literally rubbed raw by the wet hike down. Ava cringes when she sees them.

Yet none of this matters, because I’ve climbed the mountain, dodged death and am now on my way back to Solio, sandwiched between Mount Kenya and the Aberdares mountain range on the Laikipia Plateau. There is, of course, an easier way of getting here: daily scheduled flights from Nairobi to Nanyuki, or, for private charters, Solio has its very own airstrip.

My distinctly unluxury-minded guide’s shared taxi system having made us late, it’s 5pm by the time we reach Nanyuki again, but Ava is waiting, faithfully, in one of the lodge’s top-of-the-range Toyota Land Cruisers. The cloudy skies mark the beginning of the November rains and water sluices against the side of the vehicle. “We need to go now as they don’t like us being on that road after dark,” Ava says.

Big beasts Rhino graze in relative safety in the shadow of Mount Kenya. The 68-square kilometre Solio Reserve, situated near Nyeri between Mount Kenya and the Aberdares National Park, is one of the world’s most important breeding centres for white and black rhino. The recently-opened Solio Lodge means that visitors can now stay overnight in the reserve, and assist in the animals’ conservation.

Exceptional settings, luxuriant tropical gardens, immaculate beaches ... our resorts offer you all that and more : perfect service, the most consummate sense of hospitality, a feast of the world's flavours and not least, the richest palette of sports and festive activities you can dream of.

Savour the stylish luxury of **Le Touessrok**; the brand new trendy vibes of **Long Beach**; the relaxed colonial elegance of **Sugar Beach** and the delights of tropical palm-grove at **La Pirogue** in Mauritius and barefoot luxury in true Maldivian style, at **Kanuhura**.

Five magical experiences, all different, always exceptional.



Zebra, eland, rhino and warthog graze the open spaces of Solio Reserve. Such animals live in harmony with the rhino population, which is vegetarian. Predators in the reserve include lion, leopard and cheetah.

"That road" is the road around the 68-square-kilometre Solio Reserve, named after a Maasai chief and one of east Africa's largest rhino sanctuaries, where armed guards and tough fences protect 69 black and 158 white rhinos from poachers. These measures are not always successful; a week before my visit, a rhino was killed, its horn cut out in a gory mess like something out of a horror movie; one of the poachers was caught, along with a G3 rifle.

Before that, there had been another incident in August, and barely three weeks after I left, a poacher was shot dead by guards. I thought he deserved shooting. There's certainly something of the Wild West about the big skies and sparse landscape of undulating telegraph poles and occasional roadside shacks that flank the northern end of the sanctuary, yet this only serves to heighten the sense of protection within it. We pass through "Rhino Gate" and make our way through grasslands and scrub, stopping in a clearing just as dusk descends. The clouds have dispersed and we see a group of grazing white rhinos, including a mother with a baby, not more than 20 metres away. After a recent trip to the Masai Mara, where I saw just one haggard-looking white rhino in three days, it feels like luxury to see so many healthy specimens all at once.

And this is Solio's success. The world's first private rhino sanctuary, Solio Game Reserve was started in 1970 when Courtland Parfet, the owner of Solio cattle ranch, fenced off a large section of land and dedicated it to conservation; since then, breeding has been so successful that rhino from Solio have stocked game reserves all over Africa.

Solio's existence has turned out to be crucial: 40 years ago, according to the World Wildlife Fund, there were 65,000 black rhinos worldwide; today, because of rampant poaching, there are just 3,600. Thanks to reserves such as Solio, numbers are gradually on the rise again. Centres such as Solio are privately funded and Solio Lodge, a brand new collection of luxury cottages and the latest in the Tamimi's group of properties (Giraffe Manor, Sa-

saab and Sala's camp) is seen as a way of helping to secure the financial future of the sanctuary.

Arriving at the property for the first time four days before, I was immediately taken with the effortless blend of homeliness and exclusivity. Now, I'm sure that I won't want to leave. The main building and five individual cottages have beautifully thatched roofs with wisps of smoke coming from their fireplaces; inside, the main building is open plan, with a glass rear leading onto a broad terrace with views of Mount Kenya's massive base and, when it is not obscured by clouds, its tapered summits.

The property's finish throughout is slick: in the main lodge, there's a bar and cosy sitting area to the right, complete with a designer fireplace and bound volumes of African wildlife on the coffee table. There's a smart, intimate dining area at the other end, and the cavernous space also houses a mezzanine level with a walkway out to an upstairs terrace; again with views across the reserve to Mount Kenya. It doesn't feel like I'm in a wildlife park but in a private home miles away from the outside world. Which, it seems, is entirely the point. The best thing, perhaps, is that a maximum of 12 people can enjoy the lodge at any one time.

Ava and I are joined for dinner by Mark, who has been helping at the property and conducts photographic safaris with several companies. Mark's father, it turns out, was the district game warden for the area when Solio was established all those years ago. "In 1972 my father was posted to Nairobi as chief game warden while the white wardens were being replaced by African wardens," he says. "When his time came to be replaced, the Kenyan government asked the British government to keep him on as adviser to the chief game warden, a job he held until 1992. This was fantastic for my sister and I as we spent our childhood, when not in school, visiting and camping in all the Kenyan parks and reserves."

My eyes are starting to grow misty with such good food, company and a warm fire. My memory of the three sleepless, freezing nights I've just spent on Mount Kenya has begun to fade. "Actually, you look very well," says Ava. "Tomorrow, we thought we'd



take you up to the Aberdares." "Will there be any walking?" I ask. Ava looks incredulous. "Of course not!" It's as if she's read my mind. While she could have simply sent me out with one of her drivers around the reserve, she's thought of how to get the most out of my two-day stay, with as little effort as possible required from my blistered feet.

But first, to bed. And what a bedroom. And bathroom. And fireplace. And (in the morning) view. My cottage has an open-plan living area and bedroom, with fitted sisal carpets topped with a well-edited selection of rugs. There's a huge comfy bed with crisp sheets and fireplace to take the chill off and thick curtains to screen the floor-to-ceiling glass windows at night. About 90 per cent of the interiors have been made in Kenya. The bathrooms seem to go on forever – mine has the biggest rainbath shower I've ever seen and a Palazzo bath from South Africa so big that it takes more than half an hour to fill. I'm in heaven.

The next morning, there's a polite knock on the wooden door and coffee is delivered to my room before breakfast. I open the curtains and Mount Kenya is covered in mist. Fog and dew cover the reserve, which unfolds behind my cottage, and two beautiful crowned cranes strut across my terrace. After breakfast, it's back into the Land Cruiser for Ava and Mark's tour of the Aberdares National Park, a 767-square-kilometre national park just 20 minutes down the road. Inside the park, we're the only visitors.

We're accompanied by two of Solio's young guides, Amos and Blackie (his real name, rather than some colonial hangover), from Naivasha and Samburu. Blackie sits on the roof seat and acts as a spotter. We see a leopard flash into the bushes ahead of us within minutes. Soon we enter thick forest through a track lined with ancient African rosewood (*hygenia*) trees, dressed with thick wisps of old man's beard. As if wanting to blend in, white-haired colobus monkeys hang from the trees and, further along, we come across herds of buffalo, waterbuck and elephant.

We drive along a saddle of alpine moorland towards Satima peak, the highest point at 4,001m. Mark explains that this is one of Kenya's chief water sources. We stop at an idyllic spot beside a stream near Chania falls. Mark goes off to fish for trout while I walk down to the falls. By the time I return, a lunch spread has been laid out on a fold-up table and I'm invited to sit in a picnic chair and be waited on. There's quiche, cheese and a delicious chicken-liver pâté served with fresh bread. The sense of silence and purity is complete, though when Mark returns, he regales us with a tale of the wife of a European ambassador who was pounced upon once by a lion near where we are sitting. We are safe, however, as lion, which had been introduced into the park, have since been removed. Mark knows this park like the back of his hand – on the way back down, he reveals that his father was stationed here fighting the Mau Mau rebels in the 1950s, who based themselves in the forests of the Aberdares and Mount Kenya. "In quieter times my father recruited some of the Mau Mau from



Crowning glory Black-crowned cranes take flight near the swamp on Solio Reserve. Solio Lodge offers game viewing by vehicle, on foot, on horseback or by helicopter. The lodge is accessible via direct daily flights from Nairobi to Nanyuki, or via Solio's own private airstrip. Ava Paton, the lodge's manager, has worked at a number of other lodges in Kenya, including Loisaba, Elsa's Kopje, Sompole and Rhino River Camp.

the prisons where they were detained after the emergency to act as game rangers in the Aberdares, as it was generally accepted that no one knew the forest quite like the old terrorists," Mark says. "I was privileged enough to have spent a great deal of time with these same game rangers, Bill [Woodley, the then warden of Aberdare National Park] and my father in the Aberdares, and there was no animosity between them despite them having fought each other."

The following morning, I'm treated to an equally bespoke safari through the Solio Reserve. Back in the Land Cruiser, we make our way through the acacia trees surrounding the property and into the series of wooded thickets that characterise the southern end of the reserve. Thompson gazelles and impala scatter as we approach. "Twenty, 30 or 60 female impalas can be with just one male, but another can take over so it will mate as much as it can," says Amos. "It's dangerous because mating with so many [females] can make him weak. Also, some males fall from the herd because of stress. Always having to keep a look out for danger means he doesn't have time to eat. A group of bachelors can also charge the group and can mate and then run away."

We skirt an exquisitely green and wooded swamp brimming with lilies, papyrus reeds and swamp grass. Coypus are swimming in the water and hamerkops and Asian bee-eaters fill the trees. There are yellow-billed ducks and spoonbill storks. I'm starting to recognise a tiny fraction of the hundreds of bird species listed in the book in my bedroom and can't help feeling how ignorant we all are of the diversity in places such as this – so ignorant that we hardly know what's being lost.

We cross the swamp over a small bridge and head up to the reserve's high plains, where we find big groups of both white and black rhinos, zebras, giraffes and olive baboons. I ask Amos why rhinos are labelled "black" and "white", when they look pretty much the same to the untrained eye. "I think it's because of the mouth," Amos says. "They have a wide mouth, not a white mouth. They also have a hump, whereas the black rhino are smaller, with a concave back." Several huge rhinos look aggressively at us. "Like lions, they have bad eyesight," Amos says of the 2.6-tonne animals.

At the highest point of the plateau we get out of the vehicle for a tea break under a huge blue sky filled with white clouds. The sense of space is immense. Heading back to the lodge via some more thickets, large flocks of crown plovers congregate in the grass and a Bateleur eagle swings overhead.

I give silent thanks Edward Parfet, the current owner of Solio Ranch, who could have turned all this over to cattle but has continued to let nature reign here.

Solio Lodge costs from US\$620 (Dh2,277) per person, per night, including all food, game drives and most drinks (www.thesafaricollection.com). Kenya Airways (www.kenya-airways.com) flies direct from Dubai to Nairobi from \$469 (Dh1,720) return including taxes.

THE WORLD'S FIRST PRIVATE RHINO SANCTUARY, SOLIO GAME RESERVE WAS STARTED IN 1970

SOLIO LODGE, A BRAND NEW PROPERTY IN THE TAMIMI PORTFOLIO, ACCOMMODATES JUST 12 GUESTS

