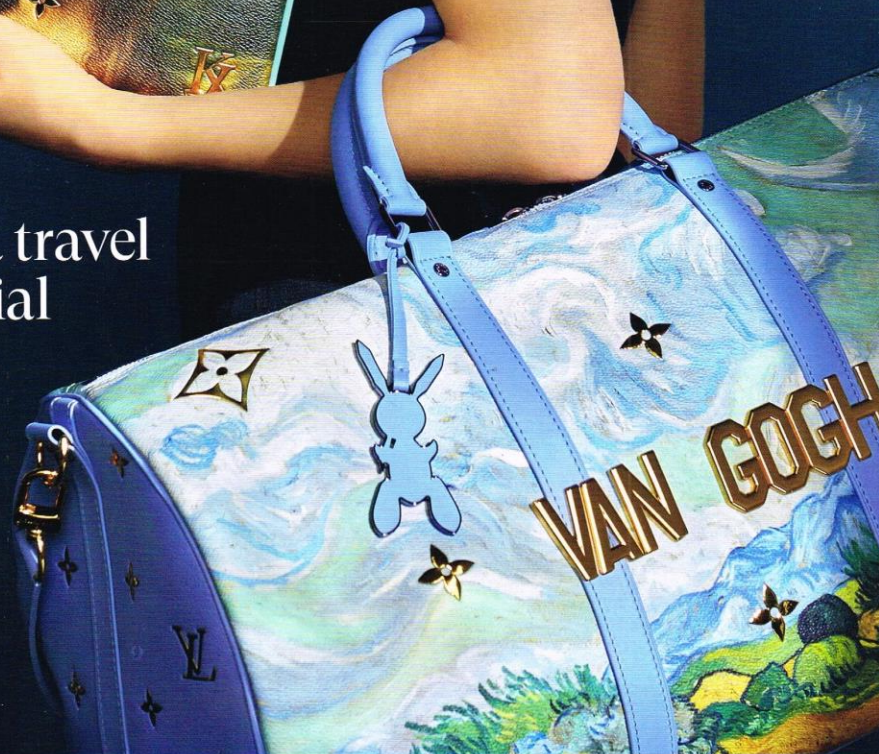


THE  TIMES

L U X X



Design & travel
special



Wild about it

A private Kenyan safari home with polished interiors, 35,000 acres and an owner who shares it to raise funds for conservation. By *Lisa Grainger*



NOT MANY WEALTHY CEOs' homes could be described as discreet. But then, there aren't many CEOs quite like the owner of Arijju in Kenya. The half-Nigerian, half-English former investment banker is not only a keen conservationist, he is also extremely private. Talk to anyone who knows him and his Norwegian wife - whether that's the well-known architects of the house, Alex Michaelis and Nick Plewman, the interior designer Maira Koutsoudakis or the 14 Kenyan staff who work on the property, and they all say the same thing. He's quiet. Gently. Down to earth. And a total stickler for detail.

So it's no surprise that when flying over the Laikipia valley in central Kenya, Arijju is hard to

spot from the air. It's as understated as its owners. Cut into the side of the gently sloping hill from which it takes its name, its walls are fashioned from golden Meru stone and its roof has been planted with the same creamy grass that characterises the plains below. If it weren't for a dark blue infinity pool reflecting the expansive African skies and a bank of solar panels, the house would simply vanish into the hills.

Although Arijju looks as though it has been part of this landscape for centuries, it was finished only last year - one of five private homes on the 35,000-acre Borana ranch and wildlife reserve, which has been owned by the Dyer family for more than a century. In previous generations the Dyers

wouldn't have needed to encourage other families to build here. However, in the 21st century, in this politically volatile part of the world, conserving wildlife is an expensive business - particularly when you are protecting rhinos. Borana borders the well-known Lewa Wildlife Conservancy, and between them they have a number of these endangered creatures, which require 24-hour protection from a highly trained army of rangers.

When Michael Dyer offered the owner of Arijju the chance to build a property on Borana, in exchange for a substantial annual fee to help to fund their conservation efforts, the Londoner jumped at the chance. What took him longer - three years - was to find the perfect spot on Borana on ->

PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHAEL DIER

LUXX TRAVEL

HILLSIDE RETREAT

Arijju's courtyard, planted with fragrant herbs and roses (below), and a bedroom with bush views (left)



which to build. "I needed to see what the views were like, what it smelt like, what the light was like," he says. "I knew what I wanted, which wasn't a king of the castle-type place at the top of a hill, as you get so often in Africa, or a typical A-framed thatched lodge. I wanted it to be tucked into the ground – a bit like one of those Ethiopian churches, but surrounded by bush, so that the trees, the birds and the animals were all around, while still getting those panoramic views."

From the minute you walk down the rocky path, through triple-height wooden doors and a fortress-like tunnelled entrance into a glass-fronted living space, it's the views that knock you out – of elephants walking among wild olive trees, of hundreds of miles of golden Laikipia wilderness dotted with buffaloes and, in the distance, the snow-capped, jagged peaks of Mount Kenya.

The house has been built as a quadrangle, its almost monastic, vaulted cloisters and rooms set around a pretty Provençal-style courtyard garden planted with herbs, white roses and lavender. From

NATURE'S WAY
The interiors of Arijjju feature natural materials, from copper in the bathroom (right) to wooden ceilings in the living room (below)



almost every space you can see out into the bush. The bedrooms all face east, so guests can watch the sun rising from their beds. Dining tables on verandas face south, towards Mount Kenya, and from the rooftop one can look out over what feels like the entire country by day – and lie under a cosy duvet watching shooting stars while listening to lions roaring all around at night.

Although the house is surrounded by untamed nature, inside every detail has been considered, and then refined again. Maira Koutsoudakis – the South African designer best known for her rustic-chic villas on North Island in the Seychelles – has imbued the interiors with real soul, mixing the simple with the rich, the monastic with the decadent. Her mission, she says, was to try to create spaces that would become more beautiful as they aged, using mottled, muted colours that would fade gently in the sun, textures that would improve with weathering and old pieces that would reflect the influences of the cultures that had passed through Kenya.

"I wanted a house with so much character that a blind man could feel what it was like," she says. "Heavy Moroccan doors, weather-beaten Chinese

LIGHT AND SHADE
The pool (right) was built beside an old wild olive tree to shade loungers



tables and rough linen alongside polished *tadelakt* walls, super-smooth glass vases and sculptural Christian Lialgre lamps. Nothing built in, so that it felt like a beautiful clean box filled with treasures."

When Koutsoudakis couldn't find old pieces to use, she had them made. For the bedrooms she had wardrobes handbuilt in India and covered with leather to look like old travelling trunks. For the bathrooms, basins were fashioned from old Indian temple bowls and placed on weathered Chinese workbenches. Drinks cabinets were made from cracked, carved armchairs.

Then, to ensure that the house didn't feel overly ethnic, Koutsoudakis added slightly decadent European touches – oversized French-style mirrors leaning against the walls, crystal chandeliers hanging from rough wooden ceilings, a brass-topped bar with an Italian espresso machine and, in the bathroom, deep copper baths and white towelling chaises longues, "so that after a long bath you can lie in the sunlight, slowly getting dry".

Staying here it's clear that this house has been constructed so that its inhabitants could get the most out of life's simple pleasures, from bathing

under the stars, sleeping in the shade and swimming in cool well-water to eating fresh produce while admiring the views over virgin land.

When the owner isn't using the five-bedroom home it is rented out exclusively, with 14 staff, a safari guide and a charming general manager called Karina Jessop, who also happens to be a chef who can turn out Ottolenghi-style feasts. Breakfast might be a surprise bush picnic of warm frittata, raspberry muffins, green kale juice and espresso after a dawn horseride alongside giraffes. Lunch might be exotic salads and woodfired pizzas served in a shaded poolside gazebo after a morning's lion-tracking on golden plains or watching rhinos grazing in thickets. Dinner might be a hearty bush barbecue under the moon or a formal four-course feast in the chandelier-adorned dining room following a game of tennis or squash on the private courts, a hell-fishing excursion in the volcanic lake or a quad-biking safari across the plains.

Having said that, most guests seem to want to do nothing more than stay at the house and soak in its quiet beauty. To read safari books in the shade of a gnarled old olive tree. To have massages in the

African hammam. To swim in the Bisazza-tiled pool watching clouds skudding across the burning skies. To sit in the courtyard listening to frogs croaking while inhaling the scent of jasmine and rosemary. And then, at the end of the day, to wander into their rooms to discover a fire burning with aromatic cedar, candles twinkling in alcoves and a silver tray laid with an antique teapot, a fine white china cup and a glass bowl of Kenyan roses.

"What seems to strike the visitor to Arijjju," says Koutsoudakis, "is the soulful serenity – as well as the feeling that everything belongs. People say that it feels as though it's been there for ever." ● *Journeys by Design* (journeysbydesign.com; 01273 623790) can arrange a week's exclusive stay at Arijjju from £6,046 per person based on a group of ten sharing. The price includes return air charters from Nairobi to Arijjju, full-board accommodation, safari activities, the use of tennis and squash courts, a gym, mountain bikes, a yoga studio, a hammam and four hours of spa treatments between the group daily. Return flights with Kenya Airways (kenyaairways.com; 020 8283 1818) cost from £715pp in economy and £2,628pp in business