



VILLA INCOGNITO

Arijiju, a new house on Kenya's Borana Conservancy, is a refuge not just from the bush but from the world.

by Alice B-B

Kenya's Laikipia, an hour flight north of Nairobi, has 5,900 square miles of grasslands, a mosquito-free climate, and a density of wildlife second only to the Maasai Mara's. It's here, on the Borana Conservancy, that earlier this year a villa appeared. Or, rather, did not appear: for the house, Arijiju, is barely visible, either from the air (thanks to a green roof) or from the ground (it's camouflaged by wild olive and acacia trees). One could say that arriving here is underwhelming—which is precisely what the owner wanted.

After my twin-prop plane landed at the ranch's airstrip, I took a bumpy ride in a Land Rover until the car stopped beneath a cluster of trees. There was nothing to signify that I was approaching a property that 400 builders worked on for over 21 months. Down steps carved from rose-hued bedrock and inspired by Ethiopian churches, I arrived at a studded double door set into a stone wall. Then, down a dark stone corridor as my eyes adjusted to a shaft of light, the magic of Arijiju was revealed.

I stepped into a rose- and lavender-scented garden courtyard with vaulted cloisters that are informed by Le Thoronet Abbey, a Cistercian monastery in the South of France. Straight ahead, past the tinkling fountains and frog-filled ponds, through the glass doors, was a view of Mount Kenya.

A visionary team built Arijiju, whose owner prefers anonymity. London-based architect Alex Michaelis of Michaelis Boyd

says, "The result is unarchitected. It's about trying to blend in." British garden designer Jinny Blom was also involved. "The owner told me he just needed a courtyard," Blom says. "I ended up landscaping about 30 acres as he kept encouraging me to 'bury the house, hide it!'"

Inside, Arijiju is discreetly glamorous, thanks to Johannesburg-based Maira Koutsoudakis, known for her textured, low-key, luxe design at North Island in the Seychelles. (See "Downtime at the Beach," page 44.) Off the courtyard are three bedroom suites with beds covered in floppy linens and de Le Cuona linen curtains that puddle beside steel-framed windows. The French-influenced

Above: Arijiju's dining and living room. Below: The lap pool, with views of the valley beyond



bathrooms are lit with chandeliers and sconces above copper bathtubs. At night the copper bar in the living room glows with candlelight as Joseph the barman fixes cocktails before serving them on the fortress-style roof terrace. Two guest cottages are up the meandering path.

After sunrise, I was tempted to flop by the Bisazza-tiled infinity pool and gaze out across the plain. But the lure of the bush was stronger. There's endless action: game drives, helicopter rides around Mount Kenya, trout fishing on Lake Michaelson, mountain biking, quad biking, swimming in wild pools in the Ngare Ndare Forest, or horseback riding. Arijiju has both a tennis court and a squash court, with sneakers to borrow in every size. Beyond the pool are a gym, a yoga platform, and a hammam.

On a game drive, Arijiju's encyclopedic guide, Amory McCloud, noticed something shuffling in the bushes. A white rhino emerged. Borana, along with neighboring Lewa Wildlife Conservancy, is custodian of 70 white and 90 black rhinos, which live on the estates' 93,000 acres. It's one of the few places left in the world where both species can be sighted. Indeed, Borana's dedication to conservation is one of the reasons Arijiju's owner built here. Each of the five private houses on the estate contributes about \$100,000 to the conservancy by renting their properties. That is why Arijiju is let for just ten weeks per year. So don't dillydally. ♦

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