MARVELLOUS MARA
PROTECTING IT FOR ALL

CHEATING THE CHEETAH
BETTER VIEWER MANNERS REQUIRED

ARABUKO SOKOKE
KENYA'S FAMED FOREST GETS REPRIEVE
SEGERA RETREAT
Where Luxury and Philosophy Meet

BY ANDREW HILL

Take an old cattle ranch facing Mount Kenya on 50,000 acres of sumptuous Kenyan savannah. Build eight separate wood and thatch villas to Conde’ Nast luxury travel standards with a hot tub on every veranda overlooking a watering hole for every view. Add fine cuisine, an extravagant and huge art collection, enlightened Community Conservation programmes and run it all on solar power and sustainable water management and what do you get?

The answer still would not add up to the unique experience that is Segera Retreat. The scope and breadth of it all defies simple addition.

So does the philosophy of the Zeitz Foundation, which is behind it — one whose mantra is sustainability through the 4 C’s — “a healthy balance of Conservation, Community, Culture, and Commerce.”
Small wonder that Joachim Zeitz, the man behind Segera, and a chain of allied destinations, was invited to provide a keynote address representing the global business community at this year’s International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) World Park Congress, a landmark global forum on protected areas in Sydney last November.

In these troubled times of global economic uncertainty, violence and security blighting Africa’s tourism, it takes a wealthy man to propound such views with confidence, and he is and does. We will interview him in a future issue.

Segera oozes high-end luxury, and it takes a privileged pocket to pay for the experience at about $1,000 per person per night. Such people voted Segera as one of the world’s top new hotels in Conde Nast Traveller magazine.

But it’s the kind of place, and experience, that sings “Special” and takes the term unforgettable out of the realm of hyperbole and into reality.

There’s something reminiscent here of Out of Africa, the 1985 Sydney Pollack film that launched a generation of safari-suited visitors to the continent and a wave of films, books and shops to feed that curiosity.

It’s not just the yellow Gypsy Moth bi-plane in the hangar, the same one used in the film and flown occasionally by Zeitz, or the convertible Rolls Royce Silver Shadow on display in the garage.

Being there reminds you of Africa’s unending magnetism for those in search of space, spiritual refreshment, wildlife and astonishment. And in remarkable comfort.

It’s odd to be writing about a relatively new addition to Kenya’s high-end lodges – Lewa and Ol Jogi are not far away – when the country’s tourism is in the doldrums.

But manager Jens Kozany is unphased, phlegmatic and optimistic.

“We are actually doing quite well.”
Tourism will increase again, that’s sure, and it’s not all about making money, it’s to share.

This is not New Age babble or Marketing-Speak but reflects the philosophy of Zeitz, whose foundation set up the Long Run Initiative grouping 35 similar destinations around the world, and allied establishments trading under the banner as Global Ecosphere Retreats (GERs).

The mission of the Zeitz Foundation is to “create, support and sustain, ecologically and socially responsible projects and destinations around the world to achieve long-lasting impact and sustainability.”

“Without ever generating income, we can only preserve so much of this planet, therefore we’ll have to create concepts and ideas that are commercially based that will ultimately allow us to increase the amount of protected areas”, Zeitz says on one of the movement’s websites.

How does that thinking translate into what happened when Zeitz acquired the property eight years ago? “The first thing we did was to tear down all the wire fences so that animals could move freely, especially as this is a migration corridor,” says Kozany, all except for the fence to the South, “to keep the animals away from the communities and keep them safe.”

Community involvement is Laikipia’s watchword and Segera has engaged local people in Grazing Committees so that they can feed their livestock in an organized way at rates agreed by landowners across the plateau.

The lodge employs about 200 local people but the community has, with Segera help, created income for itself by growing and cultivating food with rainwater harvested for the purpose.

“We thought we could teach people how to grow vegetables. What happened was that we created a sustainable business for the community – they sell a lot and women have turned into remarkable entrepreneurs,” says Kozany.

Water shortages are omnipresent on Laikipia. What Segera did was to get three schools for children built with help from the Zeitz Foundation, all innovatively designed with inverted roofs and water catchment tanks to catch the downpours, feeding school and community gardens. There’s a library, environmental education centre and sports stadium too, also supported by Zeitz Foundation, Segera and neighbouring ranches.

“Many kids just didn’t go to school. They went out and collected water. Now they come to school instead. There’s a programme on hand washing to stop infections, and we’ve noticed that two thirds of the children are now free of stomach upsets. All that in a short time.”

Inside the retreat itself sustainability is a watchword. The place runs on solar power completely with backup generators for emergencies. “We don’t just shine in the front and burn at the back,” says the manager. “We are serious.”

Grey water is recycled for the ornamental and vegetable gardens.
An extraordinary tower shaped like a Samburu women’s neck decoration, which keep 20,000 bottles of African wine cool through a collected rainwater system and solar-powered air conditioning.

There are numerous other touches too that remind you that the governing ethic is not to take things out of the ecosystem for ever.

Small wonder that the animals appreciate the retreat too. Segera has not had a single case of poaching in two years and relies on its own community guards and people to sound the alarm if intruders come into the area.

I saw innumerable elephant on a private game drive in addition to the ones that performed dusk and dawn around the water hole in front of my villa. Martial and Snake Eagles, Silver-backed Jackals were highlights.

The Zoological Society of London is involved in projects to monitor Cheetahs and wild dogs, whilst other conservation organisations work with Segera to monitor and protect lions, Grevy’s zebra and the rare Patas monkey. Whilst Patas numbers fluctuate, these have risen in numbers since Segera’s active conservation efforts started and I didn’t get to see one but only because time was short.

No two villas are alike but all are furnished to the highest standards and taste. Guests are encouraged to enjoy the place as the word retreat suggests: “a religious or spiritual term for time taken to reflect or meditate.”

There are no organised daily game drives, no bells sounding dinner. Guests can dine together if they want, but privacy and serenity are respected above all. It can take only 30 guests in the eight villas, which is low-volume high-cost tourism in action.

The villas are enclosed behind a natural fence that has been there for decades and once protected cattle; inside the landscaped garden drips bougainvillaea and succulents and indigenous trees interspersed with a salt-water pool and striking sculptures from all over Africa. Zeit’s collection of modern African art is one of the world’s biggest, and the Segera selection is stricking in its mix sculpture, painting and artifact. Some are housed in what were once the stables, each door opening to another artist and another concept.

Segera’s Paddock room – you can dine downstairs and lounge upstairs – is, like most public areas, decorated with some of Zeitz’s personal art collection and eclectic antique collection, anything from an ancient hand-written bible to a 1920s alto saxophone.

This is a wonderful space in which to sink into an armchair and look at nightfall over Mount Kenya with elephant, giraffe and zebra in the foreground.

From somewhere, my memory perhaps, I think I could hear Mozart’s Clarinet Concerto in A playing scratchily on a wind-up phonograph.