

BBC

BUMPER BIRTHDAY ISSUE!

WIN!
7 MONTHS'
WORTH OF
DINNER DATES

October 2014
DHS15 | QR15

GoodFood

www.bbcgoodfoodme.com

MIDDLE EAST

Diwali
date TRY OUR
TRADITIONAL
INDIAN MENU

REV IT UP
Smart ways to
boost metabolism
with your diet

Cake-off!

7 delicious cakes for our
7th anniversary

Plus:

- * Halloween spook-fest
- * Up close and personal with Jean Christophe Novelli
- * Master your meat skills

CPI
MEDIA
GROUP

Publication licensed by IMPZ



GOURMET SAFARI

When the natural wonders of Kenya are experienced in intimate luxury, and you get to take your tastebuds on adventure too, then it makes for an unforgettable experience, says Sudeshna Ghosh.

“Welcome home,” said the hotel manager to us as we walked into Giraffe Manor. Somehow, it really felt like a homecoming – although I’d never been here before – and not just for the stately yet homely warmth of this boutique property on the outskirts of Nairobi, but for the call of the motherland that seems to instinctively take over when you arrive in Africa. Whether it’s the addictive adrenaline rush of spotting an elusive big cat on safari; the huge expanse of savannah land, humbling in its vastness; or the welcoming warmth of the people – there is something about Africa that makes you feel like this is right, this is exactly where you should be at that point in time.

The inviting comforts of the Giraffe Manor don’t hurt either. Dating back to 1932, this former private home built in a classic English hunting lodge style, and an icon of Nairobi, has just ten luxurious rooms (each named after one of the giraffes), overlooking the Giraffe Centre it is set within. Part of the Safari Collection, an exclusive group of properties across Africa owned by safari and conservation veterans, the Carr-Hartleys, this

is an iconic Nairobi hotel recreating the elegance of the colonial era with perfection. Four poster beds, claw-foot baths, cosy nooks and corners with plump sofas just waiting to be sunk into with a book from the library, Africa-inspired memorabilia adding a personal touch to the décor, and the recurring giraffe theme that is ubiquitous across the hotel – whether it’s in the cushions, canvases, crockery, or stained glass window panels – are all par for course. But that’s not what makes this place unique. It’s the giraffes themselves. The Giraffe Centre is home to a handful of endangered Rothschild giraffes, who roam freely within the complex, and are usually very happy to join guests for breakfast. In fact, alongside the delicious breakfast offerings of fruit, cereal, eggs to order and pancakes, the menu also includes a jar of giraffe food pellets – which the friendly animals are eager to partake of, poking their long necks in through the windows. A wakeup call from curious Lynn (one of the seven giraffes) snuffling around your first floor window (a reminder of exactly how tall they are!) looking for treats – which are also provided in each room

– is an experience that cannot be recreated anywhere else in the world. Breakfast then becomes a lively affair in the communal courtyard with everyone busy feeding the giraffes even as they feed themselves, competing for their hugs and kisses, and photo ops galore, while the pack of ugly yet incredibly cute warthogs that also call this home, run around underfoot.

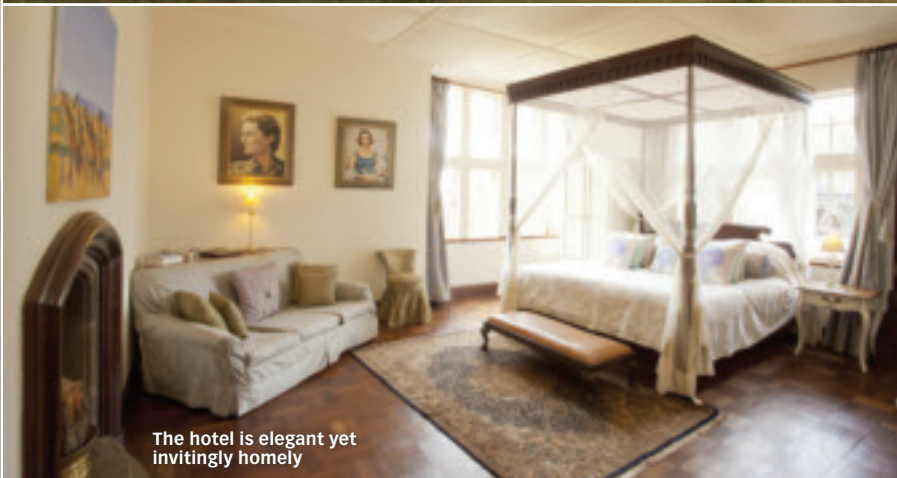
After such an exciting start to the day, you can head out to visit nearby attractions worth checking out, such as the renowned Karen Blixen museum, and Kazuri beads, a bead factory and store providing employment to disadvantaged local women. An equally attractive option is to spend your time taking in the serene surroundings of the 140-acre estate, enjoying the creations of the acclaimed chef, known for heading up one of Nairobi’s finest kitchens – whether it’s a light soup and scrummy fish kebabs with shredded cabbage rice, followed by a refreshing homemade sorbet for lunch; a civilised afternoon tea overlooking the grounds enjoying home-baked cakes and bakes; or a gourmet sit-down candle-lit dinner feasting on asparagus and quails eggs with parmesan shavings,



Friendly giraffes patrol the grounds of Giraffe Manor



Dining at Giraffe Manor is always an elegant affair



The hotel is elegant yet invitingly homely



Breakfast with the giraffes is a regular ritual

chicken stuffed with chorizo with red pepper sauce, and chocolate mousse.

With this combination of urban pursuits with wildlife – the giraffes, while accustomed to human encounters, are, after all, wild animals, and you're briefed on safety protocols around them right at the outset – provides the perfect introduction to Africa. As it is standard practice to usually spend at least a night in Nairobi before heading out to the bush, there's no better place to do it than here, away from the hurly burly of the city.

Into the bush

Wildlife reserves are aplenty in Kenya. What is a little more rare is a private conservancy spread over 17,500 acres, with just one lodge set within it. The Solio Lodge, in the privately-owned Solio conservancy, East Africa's largest rhino breeding centre located in the Laikipia region at the foothills of the impressive Aberdare mountain range, is as exclusive as an African safari can get. The lodge has just six rooms – you do the math of the humans-to-animals ratio here!

While on safari, the ultimate luxury is that of

one-on-one time with the wildlife, and while it isn't uncommon here to go for game drives for hours with no other car in sight, and encounter a pride of lions within minutes of leaving the lodge, the luxurious comforts of the lodge are no less impressive. The thatched cottage-style villas combine the best of rustic charm to blend in with the environment, with contemporary design. The luxury here lies not in over-the-top opulence, but rather in space – each room, if you can call them that, is massive (the bathrooms are the size of an average Dubai apartment!) and boasts floor-to-ceiling glass windows to maximise the views, as well as thoughtfully curated African art and artefacts dotted around the space for decoration. My tip? Opt for Room 6, which has a watering hole right outside the bathroom, where you're as likely to have a herd of water buffaloes cast a watchful eye as you brush your teeth, as you are to find a hippo have a leisurely bath as you shower!

The attention to detail is tremendous, not just in the décor but in the personalised service – the fires in your room are lit when you step out for dinner, beds are made up with hot water bags, the

minibar is stocked with whatever you want by your personal room butler, and you can dine where and when you choose...

While the dining room in the common lounge area is lovely both by day and by night, lunch really is best enjoyed on the outdoor deck overlooking the reserve. As you tuck into the fresh, light Mediterranean-inspired dishes, whether it's a healthy beetroot and apple salad, a delicious caprese, an indulgent homemade chicken liver pâté or a piping hot pasta with fresh basil and tomato, expect a zebra or antelope to wander past looking on from a distance.

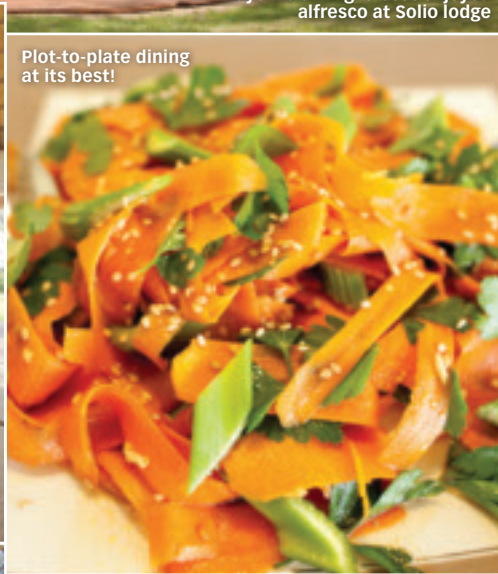
But that feels tame compared to the bush breakfasts you can enjoy on your morning game drives – after a few hours of spotting lionesses lounging on trees or enjoying a kill, rhinos grazing on the grasslands, and the herbivores darting around, your friendly guide parks in a suitable spot, and voila, as if by magic, tables and chairs are set out, and the sizzling sound of fresh eggs being fried fills the air. This is no soggy sandwich on-the-go kind of breakfast – it's a full, delicious hot breakfast, complete with cereal, fruit, eggs made to order, and fresh coffee, >>



Daytime dining is best enjoyed alfresco at Solio lodge



The cottages at Solio are designed to maximise the views



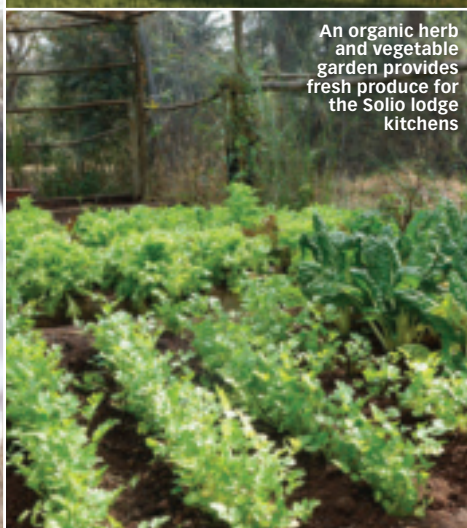
Plot-to-plate dining at its best!



The lodge blends in seamlessly with its surroundings



A delicious bush breakfast is whipped up by the intrepid chefs from the back of a car!



An organic herb and vegetable garden provides fresh produce for the Solio lodge kitchens

tossed up by the chef from the back of a 4X4! It feels like an extreme privilege to be enjoying these luxuries surrounded by the natural habitat of the wildlife. Dinner is usually enjoyed communally with all the guests, after social drinks by the fireside, and to mix things up a bit, the menu ranges from Indian curries to delicious steaks with mustard roast potatoes and candied butternut squash, or even local East African delicacies (usually arranged on request).

The lodge's manager Ava takes a personal interest in the kitchens, and ensures most of the produce is sourced as locally as possible, to make the most of the abundant and high-quality produce available in the region, including from the lodge's in-house herb and vegetable garden, which grows everything from lettuce, basil and kaffir lime to tomatoes and eggplant. This results in consistently delicious food, using fresh ingredients put together with care – a very important of a luxury safari experience. This, for me, would be reason enough to revisit – if the stylish luxury or fantastic game viewing opportunities offered at Solio weren't enough.

Glamping getaway

Kenya is almost synonymous with the Masai Mara, one of the world's best known wildlife reserves, which is a quick flight from Laikipia. Tucked away discreetly amidst a lush jungle enclave of the Masai Mara, Sala's Camp is not only set in one of the farthest reaches of the Mara – the Serengeti is within spitting distance of the camp, and you can easily end up crossing over to Tanzania by accident while on a game drive! – it is as remote as it gets. To enjoy the vast Masai Mara but escape from the busloads of holidaymakers – after all, on safari, the only herds you want to get close to are wildebeest or buffalo, not tourists! – this 'hidden camp' is the place to go.

One of the best times to visit the Masai Mara is of course, when the annual Great Migration moves here from the Serengeti plains, and this lodge is well positioned to offer incomparable access to this wondrous natural phenomenon – with the Mara river famed for its made-famous-by-Nat Geo river crossings just a short drive away, and massive plains thronging with the wildebeest during the season. But, there's plenty of resident game and other attractions to tempt in visitors all year round as well.

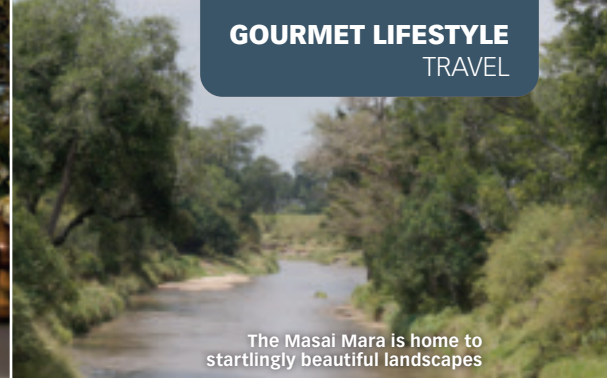
Not least the actual camp. The unfenced tented camp blends in seamlessly with its surroundings, where you can expect to go to sleep lulled (!) by the sounds of lions roaring in the distance, and have the occasional leopard passing by at night; safety is of paramount importance though, so guests are not allowed to walk out of their tents



Fresh produce features heavily in all meals



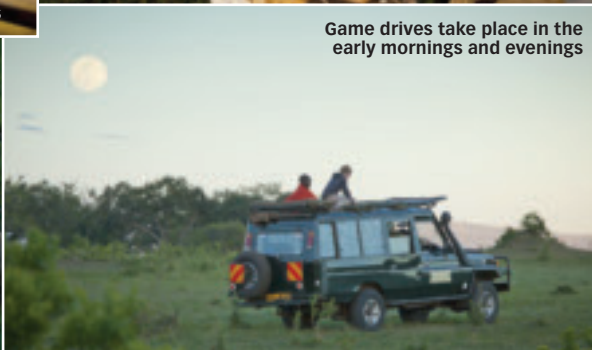
No compromises need to be made even when breakfasting in the wild



The Masai Mara is home to startlingly beautiful landscapes



Seeing wildlife in their natural habitat is unforgettable



Game drives take place in the early mornings and evenings



The tents at Sala's camp are luxe and elegant

after dark unless accompanied by a Masai guide.

Without compromising on any mod cons, 'glamping' is at its luxurious best in here, where you'll find yourself ensconced in luxury – not just the hot shower, proper toilets, and warm beds kind of luxury, but stylish Africa-inspired furniture and silk cushions kind of luxury. With the option of sitting out on your outdoor deck on a colonial-style armchair with a drink of your choice served whenever you feel like, you'd find it hard to tear yourself away. But when you do venture out, you'll be rewarded with wildlife sightings that will excite the most jaded travellers, and incomparable vistas of the reserve.

One of the best ways to enjoy this vista is over sundowners, when, after an afternoon game drive, the driver parks on a raised hillock, pulls out a makeshift bar table from the back of the SUV, and chairs and tables, Mary Poppins-style, and serves up drinks and nibbles to enjoy while taking in the quintessential African sunset. These driver guides tend to be quite versatile folks, as come morning, they are equally adept at turning chef, when they cook up a hot breakfast of eggs and bacon, for a bush breakfast in the middle of a long morning game drive.

But while eating and drinking in the middle of the wilderness has its own charm, the lovely alfresco lunches and cosy dinners in the mess tent – where each night the table is set up in a different theme, flamboyantly showing off African handicrafts – are the meals to really look forward to. In spite of being in such a remote place, the kitchens manage to produce gourmet European-style meals to match any leading restaurant, and dietary restrictions are well taken care of, with allergen- and intolerant-friendly food options

provided for those who need it.

Whether it's creative salads and quiches (balsamic roasted couscous with beetroot and thyme, anyone?), succulent, beautifully marinated meats, or dessert offerings that can range from fresh fruit platters to decadent banoffee pies – the Kenyan head chef is very talented in the pastry department! – mealtimes, which are usually a social affair, become something to look forward to. While sitting by the fireside swapping stories of the day before dinner is de rigeur, on some evenings, weather permitting, the camp staff even set up dinner on the riverbank the camp overlooks, to make for a truly magical experience.

Here again, produce is sourced as locally and sustainably as possible – from vegetables, including the indigenous tree tomato (tamarillo) grown on-site that lends itself perfectly to a refreshing lunchtime sorbet, and the excellent cheese that comes from a nearby farm, to the camp manager even having his own beehive to produce honey in-house.

Not everything always runs smoothly though. Be prepared, as, for all that it offers, Africa can still be unpredictable and disorganised in many ways, and some things we might take for granted in more developed countries, can't always be taken for granted here (for example, flight schedules might change last minute, the wi fi can be unreliable...). But, to enjoy raw, beautiful Africa up close, and yet in a way where every effort is sincerely made to ensure you are as insulated from any possible discomforts as possible, it is important to put yourself in good hands. And to take things a little 'Pole, Pole' ('Slowly, slowly in Swahili) – that is, after all, part of the destination's charm. ☑

TRAVEL DIARY

GETTING THERE:

- Air Arabia offers convenient direct flights between Sharjah and Nairobi daily. With affordable prices, timings that are perfect for connections with local flights in Kenya (all flights into wildlife reserves are daytime), some of the most comfortable seats around, and the option of buying wholesome food on-board, this is one of the best flying options you can find. Tickets cost from Dhs1,400 return, visit www.airarabia.com.
- Within Kenya, short flights are necessary to get from one lodge to another. Safari Link is one of the leading local flight operators, offering smooth flights on small aircraft, efficient flight connections, and professional service, between various airstrips across east Africa. Ticket prices vary depending on the destination, starting from around US\$150 (around Dhs550). Charter flights are also offered, visit www.flysafarilink.com.

STAYING THERE:

- Giraffe Manor, Solio Lodge, and Sala's Camp are all part of the Safari Collection group. Room rates start from about US\$520 per person at Giraffe Manor; US\$640 at Solio lodge; and US\$440 per person at Sala's camp, including all meals, game drives, laundry and other select activities. Rates vary according to season, additional charges apply, and special packages are also available. Visit www.thesafaricollection.com.