



KENYA

This Time For Africa

Life in Kenya is not just about spotting wildlife. Hit the silver sands of Diani Beach, go snorkelling at Wasini Island and explore the lush rainforests of Shimba Hills National Reserve. **BY RITU AGARWAL ROHATGI**

HAVE AN ANNOUNCEMENT to make: There is life beyond the Maasai Mara in Kenya! I sit mesmerised on a Fly540 charter headed from Nairobi to Ukunda, staring out as the captain announces that we are about to pass by Mount Kilimanjaro. And then there it is—rising tall on the horizon, amongst floating clouds, the snow ringed Kibo Peak of the inactive volcano in north-eastern Tanzania, the highest mountain in Africa at 5,895m... I don't know why it

was, but it was a defining moment in life. The mountain and me, eyeball to eyeball, up in the skies...

As the small, low flying plane starts its descent, a bird's eye view of a magnificent stretch of unbroken white sand along Kenya's South Coast, the legendary Diani beach, has my excitement mounting. The Diani Reef Beach Resort & Spa is where we are headed. And it looks stunning.

The Maasai, ethnic group of semi-nomadic people



located in Kenya, are waiting to welcome us. African drumbeats, men and women dressed in the traditional red cloth with stunning bead jewellery and ornamentation add much drama to our arrival at the resort. As we cross the lobby to an open courtyard, I get stalled in my tracks by a Disney moment. The Tree of Life in Disney's *Lion King* is the centrepiece of this open space. A baobab tree stands spread over fish ponds looking every bit the provider of shelter, food and water for the animal and human inhabitants of the African savannah regions, that it is known to be.

Part of Zuri Group Global's Platinum Collection, the resort has 143 rooms spread over nearly 30 acres of landscaped tropical gardens with 350 metres of beachfront. Rooms are comfortable and the staff wonderfully warm. As is the African sun that beats down a bit mercilessly. It's been a long Delhi-Mumbai-Nairobi-Ukunda transit. I quickly survey the room equipped with TV offering a variety of satellite channels including *apna desi* Sony! There is an internet plug, mini-bar, hair dryer, coffee making facilities and the attached balcony comes fitted with electronic, computerised locks. A jacuzzi ensures the tiredness melts away quickly. The Maya Spa at the resort offers jetlag massages as well.

There is some great ocean breeze blowing and the swinging coconut palms and the white sands insist that we do not spend a single

HOT DEAL

AFRICAN HOLIDAY

Stay for 4 nights/5 days at Diani Resort at ₹68,000 (approx) with all meals, airport transfers couple spa treatment & sightseeing. Valid till Dec 22

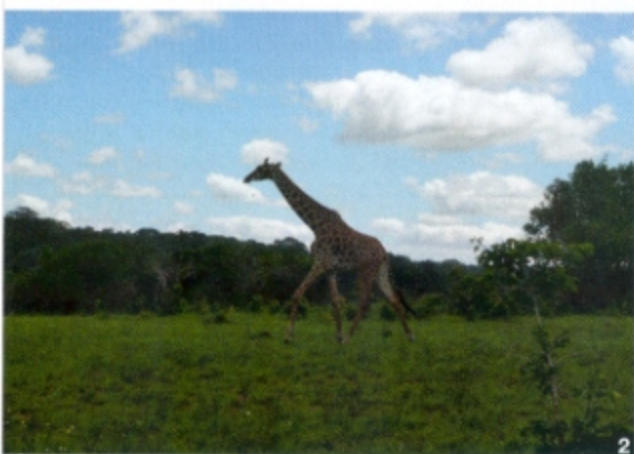
1. Diani Reef Beach Resort & Spa 2. A Maasai tribal poses on the white sands of Diani



PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY DIANI REEF BEACH RESORT & SPA



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extra moment in the room. The resort organises activities and water sports. Glass bottom boats that take us out into the ocean for some marine life viewing. People go scuba diving and snorkelling and I opt for the jetski. As I ride the waves and zip through the ocean waters I must confess I feel like a superstar.

1. Wasini Island 2. Shimba Hills National Reserve 3. A curio shop in Mombasa 4. The stunning lobby at Diani Reef Beach Resort & Spa 5. A baobab tree takes centre stage at the resort

Dinner is on the deck attached to the Coral Rock Café. It's a lovely evening—twinkling stars above, lanterns and candles, live music and cooking counters... we down glasses after glasses of Dawa, a vodka based local cocktail. *Dawa* means "medicine" or "magic potion" in Swahili and Mustafa, our Man Friday at the resort, insists this lemony, honeyed drink would cure us of all our travel fatigue... we are happy to give it a shot. The party moves on to Dune's Night Spot Bar and then to Sin, the nightclub. It's full of buzz, a lively dance floor with a DJ. Africans are magic when it comes to rhythm and the way they move sets the floor on fire! We bully hotel staffer Anne into teaching us a few moves and then groove the night away.

I wake up at the crack of dawn to head to Wasini Island. Located off the shores of Mombasa, on the Kenya-Tanzania border, it is a 45-minute bus ride away. We get on to a *dhow* for a day of dolphin spotting, snorkelling and some great fresh seafood with traditional Swahili cooking in an unforgettable location. The restaurant is built straight on the island face, clinging on to a coral rock, using corals and seashells for the walls. It faces the sea with great views of sailing boats, vegetation formations and a water taxi that ferries people from their dhows to the restaurant. The staff of Coral Spirit that operates the whole tour is very friendly. As we sail back after a gorgeous day, they break into a spirited *Hakuna Matata* song and dance jig and we join in. Dinner that night is at Sake Oriental Restaurant specialising in Chinese and Japanese cuisine with a Teppanyaki table, at the resort.

Another 45 minutes ride from Diani's silver beaches the next morning and we are in the Shimba Hills National Reserve which are made up of 192 sq. km rainforests rolling downhill, home to Kenya's last breeding herds of



sable and roan antelope. Guests are transferred to safari cruisers, and accompanied by the resident naturalist sent off into the thick lush green hills.

It's an awe-inspiring world in there. Maybe not as dramatic as the famed Maasai Mara but that doesn't take away from the wonders of spotting a giraffe munch away from towering heights the top of a tree, or massive herds of elephants stomping down a hillside, black faced vervet monkeys swing from branches, huge buffaloes loll around in the grass and, if you are lucky the Sable Antelope with its handsome near-black coat pose for a perky picture... primeval forest, waterfalls and hilly landscape at an average altitude of 300m provide a cooler temperatures and breathtaking panoramic views. When our time at the Reserve is up we are loath to return and cling on to every extra minute that we get thanks to a wrong turn that the driver makes. At the resort a fragrant bath has been set up in my bathtub, complete with rose petals and lit candles. I soak in it and relive vivid memories of the lurching giraffe.

The last day is set for a trip to Mombasa town. Located on Kenya's eastern coastline bordering the Indian Ocean, there is no bridge between Mombasa Island and the coast and the only way to get there is slide your vehicle onto ferries that operate 24/7. We spend the afternoon at Fort Jesus and the very Portuguese Old Town surrounding it. Cobble roads with boutiques selling African carvings, masks, Maasai beads and other souvenirs.

F.Y.I

THE MAASAI TRIBE

The Maasai is the most authentic ethnic tribe of Kenya. These people have clung to their traditional way of life, making them a symbol of Kenyan culture. Most national parks including Nairobi National Park, Maasai Mara Game Reserve in Kenya and the Manyara, Ngorongoro, Serengeti in Tanzania all stand on what was once the territory of the Maasai tribe. Today, the people live on a smaller piece of land in the Kajiado and Narok districts. Many practice nomadic pastoralism while others have been absorbed into modern day jobs working in tourism where they showcase their culture to visiting tourists.

An "Out of Africa" theme night awaits us at the hotel. Set up in the front lawns of the beach resort it's a carnival of Maasai Flea Bazaar, traditional food and some great music and dance. Shakira's *Waka Waka (This Time for Africa)* and Bollywood's *Sheila Ki Jawani* merge on the dance floor in a total body articulation by local dancers... how I wish I could booty shake like that. Anne tried very hard to teach us. But sadly, I return home a wise woman. There are some things in life you are either born with. Or not.

AT A GLANCE

GETTING THERE

Mumbai-Nairobi on Kenya Airways. Fare: ₹27,000 (approx). Nairobi-Ukunda Airstrip on Fly540 charter Fare: ₹6,000 (approx) per person. The resort a 15-minute drive from the airstrip.

WHEN TO GO

It's an all weather destination being a tropical beach.

MUST DO

STAY

Diani Reef Beach Resort & Spa. This is Kenya's award winning luxury property which recently acquired a 5-star deluxe classification. It is home to the Maya Spa. Tel: +254 040 320 2723; www.dianireef.com Cost: ₹10,000 onwards (approx) for two

EAT

Ugali, maize flour dumplings with coconut chicken curry and *Githeri* a bean curry. Also try some *Nyama Choma* this is roast meat, usually beef, very popular in Kenya.

SHOP

Absolutely must bring back colourful Masai beadwork. You get jewellery, belts, watch straps and delightful footwear.

SEE

Wasini Island, Shimba Hills Game Reserve and Mombasa.