



TO THE MANOR BORN

Breakfasting with long-lashed, long-legged Rothschild's giraffes is the highlight when staying at **Giraffe Manor**, a luxury lodge at the foot of the Ngong Hills in Nairobi, finds Michelle Wranik-Hicks

With the overgrown garden and tangle of vines creeping over the brickwork façade, Giraffe Manor, a luxury 10-bedroom lodge at the foot of the Ngong Hills in Nairobi, looks like something plucked from an episode of *Downton Abbey*. It's easy to imagine a booted Earl of Grantham striding up to the entrance lined by butlers, valets and housekeepers. But the only thing striding up to the doorway at Giraffe Manor are the Rothschild's giraffes.

Set on five hectares of private land, a herd of resident leggy giraffes is a fixture at the manor, loping over from the 57 hectares of forest that surrounds the Langata suburb of Nairobi to freely wander the property's grounds. We arrive just

in time for afternoon tea with the animals on the front lawns, hand feeding the creatures and squealing with delight (and horror) when their 46-cm tongues emerge to snatch up the pellets. I politely decline the opportunity to "kiss" the giraffes (by holding a pellet in-between my teeth), though some guests are more game.

The chance to interact with these graceful, long-lashed creatures is the highlight of the stay at Giraffe Manor, but though they appear gentle, the reality sinks in at check-in when we are asked to sign an indemnity form. Indeed, when I read a description of each giraffe's personality later in the compendium, the females seem to be the most naughty. Kelly ("AKA Grace Kelly, AKA Naughty Kelly") will apparently "headbutt you in a split second, should you dare to

stand by the side of her head", while Stacey, another female in the herd, is pregnant and is – according to staff – particularly moody. The males are more good-natured, especially the youngest, a looker named Jock.

Built in 1932, the stately stone manor was inspired by a Scottish hunting lodge and the bedrooms and suites are characterful and beautifully appointed. Most are named after the resident giraffes, but ours, the Karen Blixen Suite, is named for the author of *Out of Africa*. With a comfortable bed and a fireplace, the ground-level suite is decorated with some original furniture from Blixen's guest house. There is a television – though staying at such a place, it's the last thing on our minds – along with a mezzanine area with twin beds reached by a spiral staircase; high ceilings with glass skylights allowing

you to see the treetops above, and a bathroom stocked with Giraffe Manor-branded soaps and shampoos that instruct guests to "wash away the African dust". The doors open out directly to the garden, filled with manicured hedges and planted flowerbeds, where warthogs scuttle about nibbling at foliage before being shooed away by staff. "They get everywhere!" exclaims one of the waitstaff as he chases a warthog snuffling near the manor's entrance.

The interiors of the main manor, only footsteps away from the suite, are elegantly furnished with a large log fireplace surrounded by armchairs, books about Africa placed on carved wooden side tables, black-and-white giraffe photography adorning the walls and polished wooden floors that creak underfoot. Guests are encouraged to



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join a communal dinner in the dining room, though travelling with a toddler means we take an early meal in the manor, our candlelit, three-course meal accompanied by wonderful wine and truly hospitable service from the manor's Kenyan staff.

The giraffes are still moving about in the darkness when we finish dessert and night falls with a chirping of insects and a star-filled sky. A sense of quiet falls over the manor, and we retire to the garden chairs in front of the suite, glass of wine in hand.

Most guests go to bed early when staying at Giraffe Manor in order to wake for breakfast, where the animals poke their heads brazenly into the manor's windows, nuzzling guests' hands for food. As to be expected, it's a surreal, once-in-a-lifetime experience. The wonder of being so close to these great creatures

at breakfast is the stuff of Walt Disney fantasy, and though the cameras and iPhones are out in force, the breakfast too, is worthy of attention, with fresh eggs and juice along with home-made toasted muesli.

But not for long. Spying another long-lashed giraffe leaning in to nibble a pellet, I abandon my eggs. It's time for my morning "kiss".

The important bit

WHAT: Giraffe Manor
WHERE: Karen Hardy, Nairobi, Kenya
PRICE: Karen Blixen Suite from US\$1,825 (for two adults and two children)
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www.thesafaricollection.com