

Nairobi's Architectural Diva

It's said to be the most photographed house in Africa, rising from the parched plains of Nairobi's outskirts like an architectural mirage. Overlooking Nairobi National Park, and with views of Mount Kilimanjaro and Mount Kenya, **African Heritage House** ★★★ (www.africanheritagebook.com) was actually designed by an American, Alan Donovan, a former bureaucrat from Colorado whose love of the continent started at an early age. He made wildlife scrapbooks as a child and designed jewelry based on tribal ornaments that he encountered on his travels through Africa after he ditched his job as a bureaucrat sent to Nigeria during the Biafran War. His African Heritage House is similarly inspired by the monumental mud architecture he'd seen 20 years before in Nigeria and Mali. Naturally, the mud mosque tradition strongly influences the nine-room African mansion, but so do the architecture of coastal Kenya and the sculptural house styles of northern Nigeria and southern Morocco. And, inside, Donovan's African handicrafts make up one of the finest private collections of this kind in the world. The house, with its hand-painted ceilings and walls, and extensive African art, artifacts, and ornamentation, certainly lives up to its name; it's a look that's lavish and original enough to have graced the cover of *Marie Claire* and has long been a popular choice for fashion shoots, architecture spreads, and all kinds of television programs. It never pretends to be a traditional African house or structure, but is a fabulous (if somewhat ostentatious) homage to the building traditions and creative diversity of Africa.

If you have any desire to see how "African luxe" *should* look, then this is an essential stop during your time in Nairobi. The house is available for tours, meals (breakfast, lunch, and dinner on the rooftop or by the refreshing pool), as well as overnight stays in its luxurious rooms (with modern appointments). Accommodations cost \$265 double (with breakfast and a tour of the house). Otherwise, tours must be prearranged and cost a minimum of Ksh2,500 for up to five people, including tea and coffee. You can also organize a house tour combined with rooftop lunch or sundowner dinner for Ksh2,500 per person; the chance to see the sun disappear behind the famed Ngong Hills is worth planning for. If you want to arrange this yourself, you can call Alan at ☎ 072/151-8389, also useful if your taxi driver doesn't know the route (which has changed recently).

For some, the mélange of African textiles, masonry, wood, weaponry, pottery, art, and furnishings may prove too much, but the eclectic willfulness of what's been assembled and the dutiful manner in which the collector has paid homage to Africa is definitely worth seeing. In a way, the house is a grown-up rendition of those early scrapbooks, testament to an enduring love affair with the continent's endlessly fascinating colors, textures, patterns, and designs, synthesized and blended in a refreshing way. It'll more than likely change the way you see Africa and hopefully inspire in you a better understanding "of the irreducible modernity of African crafts."

Frommer's Kenya & Tanzania

