

Steam locomotives offer a blast from the past

■ ARGWINGS ODERA

IT'S hard to find the right words to describe the weekend's African Heritage Day. "Stunning" springs to mind. No, "inspiring". "Thought-provoking". "Colourful".

Alan Donovan's Heritage House on the Athi River plains left dignitaries and visitors awed by the sheer richness of African culture gathered under one roof.

Finance Minister David Mwiraria, his counterpart in Industry Mukhisa Kituyi and US ambassador William Mark Bellamy were among the galaxy of dignitaries gathered for a unique event.

Tickets did not come cheap. Guests had been invited to pay Sh4,500 for the 30 kmph ride aboard an old 1955 Manchester-built steam locomotive from Nairobi to the Heritage House, about 30 kilometres away.

But the passengers, some of whom had flown thousands of miles from Europe and America for the day, cheerfully shelled out. They knew the proceeds would go to the Friends of Nairobi National Park, which is determined to protect 11 threatened lions – all that is left after 12 of the big cats were killed last year – and a coalition of environmental organisations fighting to keep wildlife migration routes open.

A dedicated team of local engineers had been brought out of retirement for the event. At the engine was locomotive driver Benjamin Muoki, 61, assisted by fireman James Mathuva, 63. Overseen by 69-year-old senior technician Joseph Gakunga, the affable pair twisted chrome-plated wheels in the hot engine room, yanking back levers that sent the locomotive into a shrill chug-chug from Nairobi train terminal.

James Otieno, a railway security officer in his brown smart uniform, manly stood at the entrance of the only best coach in the train, the Buffet Car, ready to restrain anybody intent on disturbing the serenity of the special guests.

As the train pulled out of the industrial zone, shacks almost scraping the coaches were a shameful reminder of how Kenya Railway land has been grabbed by greedy developers. Grim-faced at the sight of slum families and children in tatters waving excitedly at High Society, Mwiraria waxed nostalgic about his train-riding days.

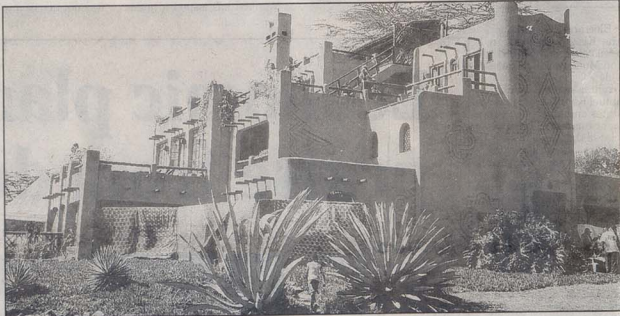
"I started riding in trains from my school days between Nanyuki, Nairobi, Kikuyu and later when I went to Alliance High School." Almost embarrassed by what he was saying, given his Caucasian seatmates, Mwiraria recalled how his train journeys were soured by racial prejudice.

"I used to ride in the natives section of the train," recalled the minister. He was not allowed to board the first and second classes, even if he had the money. "Even when I went to Makerere between 1957 and 1969 when I could afford to pay... I was not allowed to ride in the other coaches."

The native section was poorly-ventilated, smoke-filled, hot and noisy, with hard metal seats. There the natives, now known as Kenyans, were packed like sardines away from their masters in the luxurious buffet car.

This Sunday, the minister was surrounded by visitors all paying due respect. The minister, who last enjoyed a train ride in 1997, smiled at his guests, almost apologetic for evoking such bad memories.

"I am wondering what this kind of initiative would do for tourism," he said as the train jerked for the first



PICTURES: MOHOLA WONG



Retired driver Benjamin Muoki, left, mans the controls of the 1955 Mount Gelati steam locomotive (above), built in Manchester, which brought guests to Alan Donovan's remarkable Heritage House in Athi River (top).

time, picking up a downhill speed.

Two seats ahead sat Kituyi, appearing to squash Ambassador Bellamy, enjoying a window seat.

Kituyi's last train ride was aboard a 200kmph Japanese bullet train. He estimated that the train, which he rode during an official visit by President Kibaki, moved at around 10 times the speed of his current ride. For Bellamy, this was the first steam train ride experience ever. "I have never been on a steam train. I am enjoying the interesting landscape and I believe more can be done to improve the railway infrastructure because it is an important part of Kenyan history."

Luckily for the ambassador, the conversation was cut short as the train smoothly came to a stop at the Heritage House. Luckily, because the next question was going to be about his government's travel warnings to its citizens, which seem somewhat at odds with his obvious enjoyment of the day.

The Heritage House, painted in

orange earth colours, appeared to rise from the grounds like a gigantic anthill. The house is an art collector's fantasy come true. Precious works, from artefacts in Nigerian gold to wooden carvings, feathers, grass, paintings and canvases adorn every room.

The downstairs toilet in the house that Donovan built perhaps best summarises the authenticity that left many visitors agape. The only modern items in the toilet are the ceramic bowls, tissue paper, soap and light bulb.

A canvas painting of bare-chested African women dancing in a traditional ceremony by renowned Ugandan artist Jack Katirikiwe greets people answering the call of nature. One guest appeared relieved that Donovan had not gone overboard and put soft wild leaves to replace the tissue paper – an experience many present-day Africans had to undergo in their youth.

Beauty was everywhere and one is left wondering whether Donovan acquired his taste for African art during his days in the American army in 1962, when he

was drafted for the Biafran war. Donovan's collection, majestically displayed, is the work of many years of dedication aided by a former vice-president, the late Joseph Murumbi and his wife.

A complete tour of the nine-roomed house left Donovan's visitors exhausted. A huge old US clock traded at the coast by broke sea merchants, Nimba masks, Congo beads, Ndembele loin clothes, Ashanti curtains, Guinea fetishes, Zulu carpets and Sudanese art: the list was endless.

Speaker after speaker heaped praise on Donovan. The day was rounded off with a remarkable fashion show which showcased glowing textiles from Nigeria and Madagascar, elephant-masks from West Africa and modern prints by celebrated Kenyan designer Makenna, decorated with Tusker bottle tops.

A beautiful sunset over the plains heralded the end of festivities. The train's whistle blew, and the guests regrettably returned to the reality of smog, grime and crime that is modern-day Nairobi.

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