MEET...

Alan Donovan

Recently awarded the 2015 Afrika Handmade Lifetime Achievement Award, in recognition of “...the immense contribution in the identification, collection and preservation of Africa’s heritage and culture through music, dance, fashion and most significantly, artefacts,” Alan Donovan talks to msafiri

AFRICAN HERITAGE HOUSE
The African Heritage House was conceived by American-born Alan Donovan based on the indigenous architectures he encountered on his many trips through Africa. Africa’s first Pan African Gallery was co-founded with the late Vice-President of Kenya, Joseph Murumbi, and his wife Sheila in 1972.

LEFT: Alan Donovan at the front door of the African Heritage House, filled with pieces he collected over a 40-year odyssey through Africa

BEST REVIEWS
Recently won an award from Trip Advisor for the Best Reviews of all accommodation in Kenya

Q Recently the African Heritage House was gazetted as a national monument in Kenya. Can you tell us about that? The former Director General of the Kenya National Museums, Dr Idle Farah, had asked me many times to gazette the house and its contents. I finally gave my permission for this in 2013. Archivists from the National Museums and from abroad made visits to the house to prepare documentation, but it was not until 26 January 2015, that the gazette notice was signed by the Minister of Culture. There was a period of 60 days given for any objection to the gazettement, which passed with no objections, so the notice took effect at the end of March 2015.

Q What makes the contents of the house and its architecture so unique? The house is a work of art itself. The original inspirations include Swahili architecture from the East African Coast and the ‘lost’ mud styles of West Africa that I encountered when I first crossed the Sahara Desert in 1969, most of which have been washed away and have never been replaced. The house contains an invaluable companion collection of the Murumbi Collections — that is the world’s largest private collection of African art, crafts, textiles, shapes, patterns, books, documents and postage stamps. It is housed in the Kenya National Archives and the National Museums of Kenya as well as at the Murumbi Peace Memorial in the Nairobi City Park. This is one of Kenya’s greatest pieces of heritage.

Q There was a threat from the SG Railway being built by the Chinese since the house was on the route of the railway line. Is that still

DID YOU KNOW?
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a threat to the house? Well, the residents of the borderlands of the Nairobi National Park, who belong to an association of which I am Vice-Chairman, were approached in January 2014 and told that their houses and many other factories and houses were on the route of the SG railway. This was long after the gazettement process had started. However, after a public outcry from around the world, and a petition that was signed by several thousand people, the railway found an alternative route.

It would have been impossible to relocate the house as the site was chosen because of the African wildlife that is an integral part of African culture and the African Heritage House. Also, much of the art is embedded in the structure, walls and ceilings with plasterwork and paintings. It has never been a matter of the Park or the House or the Railway or the House. We all support the railway and hope that it will help diminish the need for thousands of lorries which cramp and ruin the roads of Kenya.

Tell us about your house now. Is it open to the public?

Yes. The African Heritage House recently won an award from TripAdvisor for the Best Reviews of all accommodation in Kenya. It also won top ratings from the prestigious Frommer’s Guide to Kenya and Tanzania. It is open for home stays (B&B), meals, sundowner dinners overlooking the Ngong Hills, and larger events such as weddings and conferences for up to 1000 people.

What do you provide for such occasions? We provide only the grounds. The customer can rent the train to come out to the house. The customer also provides a generator, toilets and all catering. Customers can contact us at the details below to find out more.

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