

CULTURAL THEMES: The four bedrooms of Heritage House can take nine guests at a time and each is themed around an African culture such as the Ashanti of Ghana and the Bakuba from central Africa

PLENTY OF AFRICA AT HERITAGE HOUSE

By Kari Mutu, Special Correspondent

Sandwiched between the busy Nairobi-Mombasa highway and the Nairobi National Park is Kenya's "most photographed house."

The tan-coloured African Heritage House is the home of Alan Donovan, an American art connoisseur and long-time resident of Kenya. In the late 1960s, Donovan travelled overland from West Africa to East Africa, arriving in Kenya in 1970 where he has since lived.

He says the style of his home was inspired by the earthen mosques and mud-houses of West Africa. Square turrets, stone floors, carved wooden doors, ceiling beams of mangrove poles and geometric wall patterns add to its uniqueness.

The four-storey African Heritage House, completed in 1994, is open to visitors and overnight guests. Mutisya, who been working at the house since its construction, took us on a tour. For over 40 years, Donovan scoured the continent collecting authentic cultural pieces for his home and the African Heritage Gallery, which he co-founded in 1973 with the late Joseph Murumbi, Kenya's second vice-president and an ardent collector of African artwork.

I marvelled at the artwork, antiques, artefacts, ceremonial costumes, traditional pottery, weaponry, jewellery, textiles and brassware. There are over 6,000 pieces, some that can no longer be found in their countries of origin.

The four bedrooms can take nine guests at a time and each is themed around an African culture such as



Maasai Lounge at the African Heritage House. Picture: Kari Mutu

the Ashanti of Ghana and the Bakuba from Central Africa.

The walls of the large third floor lounge and bedroom are painted in the geometric patterns found on Maasai shields. I stayed in the Lamu Room, facing the park. The room is furnished with traditional furniture from Lamu Island, and the walls are inlaid with pink coral stone. The high four-poster Lamu bed with trellis work, was comfortable. The sunken stone bathtub is evocative of the communal baths of old Coastal towns. At night I could hear lions roaring in the park.

There is an easy ambience at Heritage House, with soft jazz music playing in the background. Lots of balconies and lounges means plenty of places to relax. The swimming pool surrounded by a sculpture garden offers a welcome respite from the

afternoon heat.

Dinner was understated and delicious: Tomato soup followed by Swahili style chicken stew in a creamy coconut sauce. Then fresh fruits and banana bread for desert.

Donovan joined us and regaled us with tales of his travels through the continent and the African cultural and fashion shows he has organised.

The next day we had breakfast in the covered front terrace facing the park, as a monkey in a tree nearby eyed our sliced fruit with interest. Donovan pointed out the wedding tree (*Acacia nilotica*) on the lawn where numerous wedding ceremonies have taken place.

At 76, Donovan is getting on in years and worries about the future of the house and its collection. He watched Murumbi's former house fall into neglect, and its even larger assemblage of African artefacts is now mostly stored at the National Archives. Donovan would like to avoid this fate. One idea is to make Heritage House an African studies centre in partnership with a university.

Lunch was at the poolside lounge, whose walls are hung with traditional fishing baskets from different communities, traditional Maasai shields and authentic Tinga Tinga paintings from Tanzania. The meal was a light affair of avocado with a sweet vinaigrette, tomato salad, sliced cold meats, cheese and crackers with chilled wine.

Later in the day, more visitors arrived for a day tour and tea. It was very hard to leave this serene getaway on the edge of park.

African Heritage House. Picture: Kari Mutu

