

THE WEEKENDER

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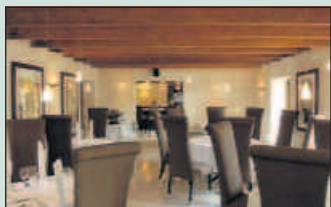
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PICTURE PERFECT: Mnarani Club Resort, overlooking the bay on the Kilifi cliffs, is approached by roads with chasm-like potholes – but it's worth the bone-rattling drive. Picture: NEIL JACOBSON

# The road to paradise is paved with holes

NEIL JACOBSON takes the slow road to a Kenyan coastal resort

**T**HE locals call it the Road From Hell – the pitted track that runs north from Mombasa up the Kenyan coastline towards Somalia. What was once a well-surfaced two-lane road is now a series of devastating potholes linked by the odd patch of tar. It takes us nearly two hours to drive just under 60km – but it turns out to be worth it.

Our destination is the Mnarani Club Resort. Once the local club for British expats and civil servants living in Kenya, it is perched over a sweeping bay on the Kilifi cliffs just south of Malindi. The setting is breathtaking – but let's not get ahead of ourselves. Getting there from SA is easy; Kenya Air flies regularly from Johannesburg directly to Mombasa. The doors open to the tropical heat of Kenya – that powerful smell of damp vegetation as you

step from the plane, sweat already darkening your shirt. It's an easy stroll through immigration, although the customs officer seemed disappointed in us. "You have cigarettes?" No. "Whisky?" No. He sighed and glumly waved us through to the waiting crowds of hustlers, taxi touts and would-be porters. Onto the waiting Mnarani bus. Our guide promises us a "free massage". Once we hit the road, we understand what he means.

The road from Mombasa has been repaired over and over again, possibly by ill-tempered relatives of road maintenance engineers. Potholes have been left to deepen to chasm status, while the few remaining bits of road have been deliberately corrugated into a kidney-rattling series of perfectly spaced ridges and bumps. Cars, taxis, trucks, buses, bicycles and tuk-tuks tear alongside us in a bizarre mechanical ballet, lurching from side to side to avoid the

worst of the massive sinkholes. Nearly two hours later we pull into Mnarani and stumble thankfully into the lobby. Awaiting us is a glorious vista: a huge, curving infinity pool stretches out before us, perched high above the distant lights glimmering on the Kilifi creek down below. Can it get better? Yes. Functioning air conditioning hums in our spacious, simple room, which

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FROM FIVE STARS TO THE BIG FIVE

# Sun, sea and serendipity

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faces out over the boats moored on the creek.

Come dawn and we fling open the curtains to a breathtaking view of green-forested cliffs and the bay curving out to the sea beyond. Fishing dhows edge their way out towards the ocean as we wander down to the beach and paddle in the soft, brackish water. A lone fisherman, bucket in hand, trudges across the beach and calls out "Jambo!", the typical Kenyan greeting.

Breakfast is served on the massive palm-frond patio that gazes out over the edge of the infinity pool to the sea. We eat fresh fruit, eggs and bacon and drink great coffee — this is Kenya, after all. And so the tone is set for what is to be a week of sheer indulgence. We spend most of our time either slumped on the well-padded loungers around the pool, book in hand; or in the water — warm and silky, but just cool enough to be refreshing — gazing out over the magnificent view.

For the more active, there is deep-sea fishing, water-skiing, sailing, jet-biking, tennis and various local tours on hand. Undeterred, we opt for the lounge, the pool and our books.

The food at Mnarani is good, if simple. There's a set menu with breakfast and dinner included in the price, and lunch available at a small surcharge. You can also order local delicacies à la carte, which we did one night, and we were delighted with a starter of Kilifi crab, delicately flavoured with chives and garlic, followed by a crisp salad and beautifully grilled lobsters.

And then, well-fed and happy, the Masai warriors arrived. Tall and striking in their red and purple robes, they use dance and music to tell stories of courtships and bravery, of lion hunts, revelry and death. The men perform the famous Masai leap; straight up into the air, feet together, bounding higher and higher, to land flat-footed on the final jump, their soles loudly slapping the floor. Their dance is punctuated by curious yelps and underscored by rhythmic droning, mysterious and hypnotic.

Then, the dancing over, they are transformed in seconds from warriors to tradesmen. Rolls of deep red cloth are unfurled to reveal tribal jewellery, spears, carved daggers, decorated belts, fighting sticks and other curios. It's a disconcerting switch, but I suppose even warriors have to eat.

By midweek we decide to drag ourselves from sloth and try our hand at scuba diving. A professional scuba club is situated on the hotel beach and we're given our first lesson in the pool.

That afternoon, with the wind bristling and the water choppy, we head out for our first sea-dive; past the mouth of the bay; past mansions set along the wooded cliffs. Some seem derelict, decaying slowly back into tropical bush. Others are freshly painted and manicured, crisp in the heat.

Then we're in open water and fitting our wetsuits, weight belts, goggles, flippers and air tanks. Once in the water, and closely accompanied by a watchful instructor, I haul myself hand-over-hand down the anchor chain, heart pounding and my breath roaring in my ears. Suddenly we penetrate the gloom of the brackish surface water and find ourselves floating above the reef.

A vastly different world of



EVENT HORIZON: Above, the pool at Mnarani, the perfect spot for a week of sheer indulgence; below, the rim pool at sunset. Pictures: NEIL JACOBSON

wonder where I soon (almost) forget that I am 10m underwater as my instructor and I drift among the fascinating array of fish and coral life. It's such a great experience we repeat it the next day.

On our last day, for a change of pace, we book a dhow cruise with Captain Issa, a well-known local personality. His battered wooden boat, the good ship Margie, sails under three flags: a Welsh dragon, a tattered South African banner and a giant pennant featuring the face of Bob Marley.

We moor over the reef and for a glorious hour snorkel in the warm, clear water, seeing almost as much as we did while scuba diving. Back on deck, we sip cool beer as we head for the pristine white beach below the scattering of luxury holiday homes.

"No Kenyans here," says Issa. "All these houses, they belong to Germans and Italians and English." How little things seem to have changed in parts of Africa.

Lunch is served on board, cooked in the prow. Plastic plates are packed with coconut rice, freshly cooked fish, sliced tomato and cucumber. A green-skinned but gloriously ripe banana is used to roll the rice into a ball, to be shoved with your fingers into your mouth. It is delicious and we enthusiastically clean our plates. But it's not over. We're each handed a grilled crayfish, sweet and succulent, and slices of fresh pineapple.

The wind is up and Issa rigs the great, curved sail. We skim across the water back towards Mnarani bay as the crew performs an impromptu concert, singing, beat-



*"The good ship Margie sails under three flags: a Welsh dragon, a tattered South African banner and a pennant featuring the face of Bob Marley"*

ing a drum, rattling a tin lid and thumping on the deck, to the clapping and cheers of the sated guests. Issa joins in, blowing melodiously on a conch shell.

For our last night, it's a barbecue on the beach. The Mnarani staff go to lengths to make even simple events memorable.

The entrance to the beach bar is decorated with a palm-leaf arch laced with flowers, and we're each bedecked with a lei of frangipani blossoms as we enter. The food, yet again, is simple but excellent; a delicious seafood bisque, fresh salads and prawns, chicken, steak and, believe it or not, boerewors on the braai.

The return flight departs early,



KENYAN CUISINE: Lunch is served — grilled crayfish and fresh pineapple.

which means a predawn awakening before we tackle the Road From Hell in the hotel minibus. It's as rough as we remember —

but we take it in our stride.

■ Mnarani Club Resort: [www.mnarani.co.za](http://www.mnarani.co.za) or (012) 425-1000

## Finding the loo in Boo is a journey into darkest Africa

IN THE tropics of Africa there is a country called Boo, a land of significant stature among the continent's nations, and a destination of some potential. I find it necessary to cloak the country's identity in mystery to avoid becoming the target of its Boomen, their especially dark faces given prominence by white, belted mackintoshes (despite the humidity), fedora hats and shiny shoes.

Possessing excellent roads, a rich history, a growing economy and some fine minds, Boo could be forgiven for thinking itself superior to its neighbours, but repeated images of its citizens squatting on a beach outside one of its premier tourist destinations, defecating, rallies against such thought.

The bottom-feeder Boolander, it seems, does not share the vision of the country's leaders in aspiring to greater heights, nor their



*"Biff stumbled upon the giant turds. He actually wasn't in any danger of stepping on or in them as he was in a fishing boat"*

tourism chief's when trying to sell the country at international trade shows.

It was my colleague Biff who first noticed what we regarded as this unusual beach behaviour while he was taking photographs. (Biff is obviously not his real name, but a device used to ensure his own protection from the Boomen.) Biff and I were on assignment, looking for a selection of great Boo pictures and stories as suggested by the country's eminent tourism authorities.

Against this background Biff stumbled upon the giant turds.

He actually wasn't in any danger of stepping on or in them as he was in a fishing boat, taking them in instead through his lens while appreciating the early morning light on the castle, the waves lapping up against the rocks.

It was actually quite interesting, according to Biff, as they were

all the same colour, which must say something about their diet.

Maybe cassava, I put it to him, or possibly yam, at which we both set upon the task of working out the difference between the two.

Did you know that cassava is used as an alternative to potato in making chips, the health bonus being that they absorb less fat?

No, Biff said, he didn't. As he'd been at the French fries every night for the past week, I somewhat presumptuously thought it worth mentioning.

Castle and turds behind us, we pressed on to our next location.

Also on the beach, but some six hours east (in Boo, three hours can be added to any journey involving a major town, such as the traffic congestion), is a wetland estuary apparently of great importance for birders, with a beach of some attraction too.

The Lonely Planet guide

describes our hotel as "the only accommodation of international standard" in this location, so when we arrived to shoot photographs and pen some alluring copy about it, you may imagine our surprise at being confronted with a particularly unattractive dredging machine spewing the guts of the riverbed onto the beach.

We gathered from the bow-tied waiter, standing alone among tables with perfectly folded serviettes but not a single guest, that the beach needed more sand.

Fair enough, we thought, occupying ourselves by seeing if the mud-splatter hurled by the dredger could reach our feet as we sipped beers instead, but a bit bloody pointless to send us all the way down here through that awful Booland traffic for nothing.

A few days forward found us in an equatorial rainforest of mighty trees and leafy paths, which has

been protected from forestry and poaching by legislation since the '70s and commercially pretty much untouched since then.

Impressive, we thought, but that was before we discovered no one at all had touched the park, not even the park authorities.

The restaurant the guide spoke of (almost proudly) was long abandoned, as were the occasional crossings over the numerous streams. Even a bench overlooking the river was rotten through.

All the time surrounded by the quite spectacular butterflies and birdlife of Boo, we were now even more unsure of what we were supposed to be doing here.

When our request, more hopeful than expectant, for a toilet revealed another ruin, we looked at each other, thought back to the squatters on the beach, and had a fair idea of what we would find out there if we really started looking.