
Dispatches / Michael Holman

Out of fashion, out of Africa

Kenya, and on a clear day you can see snow on its peak. When it rains, I smell the earth, tangy, acrid and smoky, and if I stand downwind I can smell the rain coming.

It is a hotel where you wake to the clink of thick crockery rattling on the trays carrying early morning tea, with the sugar in bowls and not in sealed paper packets, and a jug of hot water comes with a pot of strong tea.

You know that if you doze off, there is no danger of missing breakfast (served between 7am and 8.30am, except on Sundays, when it is from 7.30am to 9am), for you will wake again when the verandahs

get their daily red-wax polish.

The dining room floor creaks, wooden beams cross the ceiling, and the food is British colonial. The menu for each table is typed on the receptionist's Remington, which also taps out the bill at the end of your stay.

A faded map in the lobby shows the walks you can take, but I have never gone beyond the garden, acres of lawn and shrubs and flower beds, with benches beneath trees. I always mean to take the river walk, but I haven't got round to it, just as I have yet to play the adjoining golf course. Nor for that matter have I used the squash court, just across from my room. I

have never seen anyone on it, but it is nice to know that it is there, if you want it.

The breakfast menu has "Good Morning" without an exclamation mark, and there is no sign saying "Please wait to be shown to you table".

The waiters are not servants but retainers, in bow tie and black jackets and starched white shirts, and expect you to be at your table between 7.30pm and 8pm. They want to serve you coffee by 9.30pm because they like to leave for the village by 10pm.

The ceilings in my room are high, and gekkoes come out in the evening. I lie beneath a mosquito net,

and watch the flames from the fireplace flicker on the ceiling, and when I awake the embers still glow. I do not know if the radio in the old wooden cabinet by my bed works, because I have never thought to turn it on.

The bathroom is as big as some modern hotel bedrooms, and has a deep, enamelled tub, and an Armitage and Shanks lavatory, substantial and solid on its porcelain plinth. I distrust those bowls that project from the wall, with no visible means of support.

At night the sky is clear and the stars lie low, and the sounds of the village drift up from the valley, where the cooking fires flicker, and

my cigar smoke hangs in the air.

If you are patient, and wait around the hotel watering hole you may spot an Old Buffer coming for his evening drink. The barman, as old as he is, places it in front of him without being asked, and watches out of the corner of his eye as the *mzungu* (white man) leaves, unsteady on his pins.

I sit by the pool, and am the last to leave. I watch the steward lock the changing room and close the bar and fold the chairs. And after he has poured chlorine from a sawn-off plastic bottle into the deep end of the pool, he picks up his newspaper and bids me good night.

No key-cards here, just mortice locks and long-shanked keys, attached to blocks of wood, polished by handling over the years.

As I say, it is a hotel at the peak of its decline. No doubt someone will decide to improve it. Then I will not stay there any more, and I will tell you where it was.