

TRAVEL & LEISURE

On the slopes of the ranges



The Aberdares offer an opportunity to see rare plant and animal life. **Rupi Mangat** finds out more.

The slippery high road to the slopes of the Aberdares runs through thick groves of bamboo forest that give way to rosewood on the higher slopes. The colours of the forests are rich and lush – the luxuriant green of the thick moss on the fat branches of the rosewood, and the wispy tails of the hanging lichens in the fresh, clean air. At this high altitude, forest ferns and giant lobelia compete for space, with red-hot poker breaking through the many shades of green.

I'm eager to see the mountain bongo – one of Kenya's rarest antelopes – but the antelope with the ivory-tipped horns doesn't dash out of the forest like it did a decade ago.

The road gets really slippery and plans to climb Ol Donyo Lesatima, the highest peak of the Aberdare Ranges at 13,120 feet (3,999 metres), are abandoned. Instead we decide to explore part of the 100-kilometre long stretch of the volcanic Aberdares.

The forests give way to tussock grasses and secret little mountain lakes, called tarns. A reedback dashes across the road and

vanishes into the mountain glades. Great mounds of elephant dung lie on the road.

"The last census in 2005 showed that we have 2,000 elephants in the park," says Catherine Wambani, the KWS warden of the park. "The whole park is fenced with two openings for elephant crossings during their migrations. One is at Shamata and one at Kihuyo, and they are each 65 feet (20 metres) wide.

"We have on-going research with a university that is studying elephant behaviour after the fence," she continues.

It will be interesting to see how the mega-herbivore takes to modern infrastructure. Driving lower down, we enjoy a picnic by a deep ravine. We've been awed by a family of the giant forest hog – mum, dad and babe – munching on the grass. It was first described in 1904 by the infamous Richard Meinertzhagen (who killed the Nandi chief Koitalel arap Samoei in cold blood). It's an animal of the mountain forests and now virtually extinct in the Nandi hills (where Meinertzhagen first saw them) but doing well in the Aberdares. "The giant forest hogs



The garden at Aberdare Country Club.



Thick moss on the *Hagenia abyssinica* tree.

are doing well with no lions around," says Wambani. The lions had been imported into the park at some point but created so much chaos they had to be removed. Another increasingly visible animal is the African wild dog that in the early decades of the 20th century was almost exterminated by farmers who saw them as vermin.

Peering through the stalks at the edge of the bamboo forest, we're in for a real surprise. A zorilla dashes out of the forest and runs along the road in broad daylight. Not to be confused with a gorilla. Whereas a gorilla, a zorilla is about two feet long and almost squirrel like – but with an attitude. It emits a really foul smell from its glands when threatened, and lions prefer to sulk away from it.

We drive out of the park and check in at the Aberdare Country Club. It was once a farm house built in 1936 by Mike and Dot Lyons (not to be confused with Lyon's the ice cream brand) after the great depression in England in the 1930s.

We take a night game drive after dinner and see some rare reticulated giraffes foraging with elands and impalas around. And then it's back to the warmth of the lodge to sleep until the next day.

ESCAPE TO THE ABERDARES

The Aberdare National Park is 767 square kilometres. Entry via Safaricard only. Find out more at kws.go.ke. The northern Aberdares is being developed around Shamata Gate – it is 40 kilometres from Thomson's Falls.



The spa at the Aberdare Country Club.

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