

Gateway



Lafarge Eco-Systems and Tourism Manager Albert Musando explains the features of a tortoise to journalists during a tour of Bamburi Cement's Haller Park Nature Trail.

Delightful Haller

BY GARDY CHACHA

There are only so many places one could visit three times and still feel like giving it one more try.

Haller Park, in Mombasa, is one of them.

Being a Coastal town, Mombasa can be scary humid – especially for chaps who do not call it home.

I had just disembarked at Moi International Airport and I did not seem to be doing a good job fighting off streaks of sweat.

My eyes were fast clouding with tears and I actually felt like crying. My shirt was drenched. “You will feel better when we arrive at Haller,” a colleague commiserated.

“Of course I will,” I said. I knew the sink effect of the park.

The first impression when the main gate at the park swings open is: How green! How heavenly.

Never mind that this was my fourth visit. Birds chirp; antelopes moo; monkeys howl; hippos growl.

It was as if all the animals had conspired to create a beautiful orchestra – beautiful enough to put one in a trance.

That day, I was lucky to be in the company of the park manager, Albert Musando. A keen lover of nature, he would prove crucial throughout our visit at Haller Park. He drove us

around and provided expertise that becomes valuable when one bumps into a hippopotamus and there is very little room for escape.

Haller Park is a labyrinth of nature walks. Its sheer size makes it easy for a newbie to get lost.

Once in a while we bumped into foreign tourists – Italian, German, English, French.

I quickly learned that Germans find the park quite a delight. In Haller, there is one sanctuary after another.

At some sections, we found ourselves alone; cut off from the rest of the world.

We were on our own, with only tall trees, monkeys and crocodiles in the pool, to interact with.

It is scary but you still want to stay put. Make no mistake though; a single shriek from a monkey hiding on the branches is enough to instigate flight.

“Just relax; as long as you don’t bother the animal, it won’t even notice that you are there,” Albert would calm our nerves.

And then we came to this lush, quasi-isolated creek, where butterflies danced with such candour.

And for the first time it no longer felt awkward that a grown man was doing nothing else but staring at a flying insect.

And yes! Like magic, the bright colours on their wings can take away a bit of life’s stress. Haller sits on reclaimed land.

The land was mined in the 50s and

60s to make cement. It remained bare and brown – almost a desert.

In the early seventies, a decision to reclaim the mined land was made.

Trees and shrubs were grown. Waterways were dug. Animals – especially orphaned ones and endangered species – were also introduced.

“What you see is the results of a process that has been taking place for more than four decades,” Albert says.

In a way, Haller Park is the stuff fairy tales are made of.

For a first timer, the park is nothing different from a game reserve.

The diversity of species is one among the glaring characteristics that give the clues that it is nothing more than land reclaimed and turned into a natural habitat.

And it is. There is nothing to dispute that fact. Except for some pretty hungry crocodiles being served pieces of meat. That is in variance with how nature works. We came across lairs. Some clawed mammal was well nested inside one.

The hot and humid air was no longer a problem. It felt as if we were under a parasol.

The trees are tall and their branches block the sun’s rays.

In a way, the park’s natural systems of heating and cooling were working just well.

If you thought being alone with monkeys lurking in the background is scary, wait until you make your way to the snake park.

Ironically, we met a group of pupils waiting ecstatically to see the slithery reptiles.

Haller has many places to just sit and have a meal.

And this is the fun part – for the children. Monkeys cunningly snatch food just when one is about to have a bite. These primates know how to convert eating into a sport.

From a distance, the giraffes, with their lanky steps, looked comfortable.

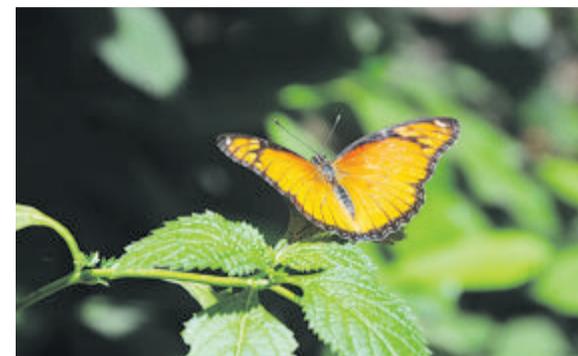
Free giraffe-snacks are available for visitors to feed the tall mammals. And they receive it gracefully: with a slimy tongue all rolled out to pluck the feed from the hand.

Every time I visit Haller Park it feels like I have not had the best of it.

It is large and thus impossible to explore in one day. But that is not it.

It provides a crevice to hide; away from the wet heat that is Mombasa.

At Haller, there is always something to learn about nature and life.



At Haller Park, animals conspire to create a beautiful orchestra – beautiful enough to put one in a trance. [PHOTOS: GIDEON MAUNDU/STANDARD].