

"I had a farm in Africa, at the foot of Mount Ngong"

Karen Blixen "Out of Africa"

Ngong Race Course, Kenya

The sport of horse racing knows no borders. It does not relate to GNP or religion. Where there are people and horses, there is horse racing. It's as simple as that. Swedish writer and photographer Ardina Strüwer takes us to a racing scene that is so different, and yet so similar. Welcome to Kenya.

TEXT & PHOTO: ARDINA STRÜWER





Spectators of all colours, nationalities and social standings gather and the air is full of festivity. On the infield some people play golf.

The scent of newly cut grass, horse and ... popcorn. The sun shines from a clear blue sky and the temperature is—as it usually is here, regardless of season—around a comfortable 20° C (around 70 °F).

Tall trees and the occasional palm tree give shade to the parade ring, and not far away the turf of the track is shining in green.

Spectators of all colours, nationalities and social standings gather and the air is full of festivity. Balloons and ice cream stands are open. Children run around barefoot in the grass. Someone plays golf in the infield.

I'M AT NGONG RACE COURSE in the Kenyan capital of Nairobi, just a few miles from the place where author Karen Blixen once had her coffee plantation. This place is full of beautiful one story buildings, hand-painted signs and English ladies in floral blouses and skirts that belong in another time. Men in hats sport binoculars in frayed leather covers that have seen a



Just like at home. But different ...

safari or two. Gin & Tonics are two pounds (or Euros...) per glass, served by waiters in white dinner jackets.

The feeling of being in a time long gone is very present, but the shining thoroughbreds wouldn't be out place at any modern race course in the world. The rules, routines and the training methods are very similar to what we find in the rest of the world. Yet the atmosphere is so different. After all, we are in central Africa.

Going to the races in Nairobi is a bit like stepping in to a time machine. Not only when it comes to details like the results being posted by hand on a black-board, but in the intimacy of it all. There are 250 horses in training, eight runners in each race and a handful of trainers. After just a few visits you have a fairly good idea of who is who in Kenyan racing. The next weekend you are likely to run into many of them at a polo-game or a showjumping event. People here race horses for the passion and the love



In the middle, on a white bench, is Paddy Migdoll. She still has the best parking spot on the track.

se owner and former trainer who likes to talk about her tea visits to the Queen of England. She still has the best parking space at Ngong Racecourse even though the sign with her name is tilting a little. Mrs. Migdoll was introduced to the sport by Beryl Markham, the first female pilot to cross the Atlantic. Markham was also the first woman in Kenya to get a race trainers licens in 1926. Long before any woman in most European countries.

The Jockey Club of Kenya was founded in 1965. Originally an upper class sport, today you find Kenyans of all aspects of society cheering for their favourites. Parts of the track have free admission and the lowest bet is 20 cents.

The bell tolls, jockeys jump up on their mounts and canter to the start. Everybody leaves the parade ring and we spread out to our favourite observation spots.

On the grandstand I run into Rune Carlsson from Norway. He is the proud owner of several horses, including Kenyan Derby



The massai Jacob Lokorian in Rune Carlssons Norwegian silks.

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of horses. There are no big purses, and the training fees are among the lowest in the world.

IN THE PARADE RING I SPOT Leslie Sercombe, the most successful jockey in Kenya. She is tall, blond and thin. Her mother Patsy is a trainer and a vet. Her twin sister is a showjumping rider.

Julie McCann is a foot and a half shorter, and second in the standings. She doubles up as jockey and trainer. Julie didn't start riding until in her 20s, after a career as a speedway motorcycle rider. She is married to Stewart McCann, a jockey too, who spent some years riding in Sweden—in a very different climate. Stewart has some weight issues. Earlier in the day I saw him sweating heavily while dressed in a ski-suit in his car with the heater turned up to the maximum. Saunas are only found in the 5 star hotels of Nairobi.

IN THE CENTER OF THE PARADE RING Paddy Migdoll sits on her regular bench. Mrs. Migdoll is an upright lady in her 80s. A hor-

winner Martial Art who now continues his career in South Africa. Next to him is swede Johan Svensson who does peace work in East Africa. Johan got in touch with racing after a few years playing polo in Kenya. A knee injury put a stop to his own riding, so he bred his two mares to Riverton Heights (*Seattle Slew*) and Heard a Whisper (*Bellaphy*). The result was African Storm who won the Kenyan 2000 Guineas in 2008 and Peacetime, a multiple winner.

"What I love about racing in Kenya is that you are so close to the horses," said Johan. "They thunder by you a few feet away. Racing here is not so much about the races as such. It's common to bring family and friends just to hang out."

They're of and we follow the first part of the race on the TV-screen. After a while the horses turn in from the bend. The crowd starts cheering, people get up from theirs seats, children stop playing, arms wave race cards. The speaker is yelling. Everybody is yelling. The field is well together but Jacob Lekorian, a man from the massai people, in silks the colour of



1 LESERCOMBE 7
2 P. MUNGAI 2
3 E KIPTOO 7
4 I. WACHIRA 4
5 R. PETERS 3
6 D. KIPROTICH 8

7 N. KISILU 1
8 H. MUYA 5
9 D. NGURE 6
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facts

Race course: One – Ngong Racecourse, Nairobi

Season: September through July, every other sunday.

Average purse/race: 600 Euro

Biggest race: Kenyan Derby (10 000 Euro)

Trainers: 14

Training fee: 350 Euro

Horses in training: 250

Race meetings: 30 meetings with 8 races/day

Jockeys: 35 (incl apprentices)

Number of foals/year: 65

Horses: Mostly locally bred, but recently som import of brood mares from South Africa, UK and USA.

The most popular stallions are Ashtontown (SA), Russian Revival (SA) and Makaarem (USA).

The Jockey Club of Kenya follow the british rules of racing.



facts about Kenya

Capital: Nairobi.

Population: 43 million.

Aera: 582 646 km²

Language: English (official language),
Kiswahili (national language); several local languages.

Government type: Republic.

Important industries: Tea, horticulture, coffee, petroleum products, fish, cement, tourism.

Exchange rate: 100 KES (Kenya Shilling) = 0,91 Euro.

GDP/Capita: 882 USD.

Religion: About 80 % Christian, 10 % Muslim,
10 % indigenous beliefs.

Average age: 18,8 years.

Life expectancy at birth: 63 years.

History:

Before the colonization of Kenya the most of the country was relatively unknown to the outside world. The coastline was however well known due to the trade with the Far East. Kenya came under British colonial rule in 1895. European settlers was given



rights to land that was not cultivated by Africans.

This happened mainly in the highlands where settlers grew coffee, tea, cotton and weat.

After a while, this lead to violent protests and attacks on European farms. After a long struggle the country gained its independance on Dec. 12, 1963.

One of the biggest British projects in Kenya was the construction of the railroad from Mombasa to Uganda. The new capital Nairobi was built right next to the railroad.

”I can think of no better way to start my own day than to ride out with the exercise riders in the Ngong forest”



the flag of Rune Carlssons’ native Norway, makes his horse give that little extra and wins by a length.

Fun for Rune—the owner—but even more so for Jacob. At the age of 20 decided to become a jockey, even though he was scared to death of horses. The first time a thoroughbred ran off with him he was so ashamed that it was a week before he dared to return to the stable. In Kenya there are no jockey schools and the trainers do not always have the time to teach the new riders.

Now Jacob is one of the top riders and works as a head-lad at McCanns. His family are proud of him, he says, but they refuse to set foot at the track. Horses are still considered a very strange animal in Kenya. Jakob won the Kenya Oaks in 2011, and recently spent a few seasons in Denmark.

”I want to be better, learn more, and become as good as I can possibly be.”

Every second Sunday from September to July races are held at Ngong Race Course, There is a yearling sale in August, and this

years record selling horse was sold at Euro 12 000. Considered a very high price in this country, especially in light of the turmoil in the region the last few years.

Almost all horses in training in Kenya are at Ngong Race Course. The vast majority of the stable staff have tough lives, with marginal salaries, regularly sick children, school fees to pay and elderly parents to support. School fees to pay. But I never HEAR anyone complain, rather I hear constant jokes and laughter.

The love for the horses is there as well. Patience. Wisdom. They might not know as much about racing as we do in the industrialized world, but the passion for the horses and the sport is exactly the same.

Even at the foot of Mount Ngong. 

Ardina Strüwer is a freelance journalist and photographer. She spends her time in Kenya and France

Hippo?



Discover Kenya!

Kenya is a fantastic country to visit, and if you don't want to go for an extended and expensive prepared tour, it is easy to just fly to Nairobi and discover the country on your own.

Hotels:

Lovely boutique hotel in Nairobi
www.palacina.com

Hotel with bush-feeling in Karen
www.ngonghouse.com



Tribe hotel next to the shoppingmall Village Market with many good restaurants
www.tribe-hotel.com

Restaurants:

The Talisman bar and restaurant—lovely atmosphere, good food, popular hangout for horse people in Karen.
Haandi restaurant—very good Indian food in Nairobi (Westlands)

Seven Seafood Grill—fantastic seafood
www.experienceseven.com

Tours

The National Park—10 minutes from Nairobi you can be on the savannah with lions, rhinos, zebras and antilopes.
www.kws.org

David Sheldricks elephant orphanage—in Karen
www.sheldrickwildlifetrust.org

Giraffe Manor—hotel with its own herd of giraffes—in Karen
www.giraffemanor.com

Naivasha Lake—1 hour from Nairobi—with lodges in various price ranges—contact Tour Africa Safaris.
www.tourafrica-safaris.com

The Sanctuary Farm, Naivasha—ride among antilopes and giraffes for 15 dollars. The Erskines, who own the farm, are thoroughbred breeders.
sanctuaryfarmkenya.com

Stay over night:

Elsamere, Naivasha—a rather plain lodge where the hippos come up to graze in front of your cabin and where Born Free's Joy Adamson lived
www.elsatrust.org



