



FRIENDS OF THE FOREST

Kenya is famous for its national parks and wildlife, but the coast north of Mombasa offers an idyllic alternative to safari: a vibrant forest that's sustained by local commercial projects

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I'M STANDING IN the Arabuko Sokoke Forest near the coastal town of Watamu, Kenya, exploring the farm of local beekeeper and butterfly farmer Abbas Sharriff. This forest is completely unlike anywhere else in the country, and a world apart from the beaches and reefs this area is generally known for. Alongside beehives and butterfly farms, this colossal coastal forest is home to birding safaris, mushroom foragers and forest nurseries – commercial projects that run alongside others aimed at preserving this unusual woodland.

Watamu is famous for its Marine National Park and its precious sea turtle population, for which the area's beaches are a critical nesting zone. What is less known, but just as impressive, is the unsung Arabuko Sokoke Forest. The enormous forest reserve is the largest belt of indigenous coastal forest in East Africa, measuring 42,000 hectares – a strip of land that once extended south all the way to Mozambique. Today, what remains stands sentry over Watamu, which is about 110km north of Mombasa between Kilifi and Malindi. According to the Kenya Forest Service, this forest harbours 20 per cent of Kenya's bird species, 30 per cent of its butterfly species and at least 24 rare and endemic bird, mammal and butterfly species, including the endearing golden-rumped elephant shrew.

Previous page: A herd of elephants gathers at the Arabuko Swamp

Left to right: An enormous termite mound in the forest; Abbas Sharriff, chairman of ASFADA, at his farm in Arabuko Sokoke



There are 50 villages that border the forest, and various organisations have been set up to help facilitate a harmonious relationship between the community and the forest. Sharriff is the chairman of the Arabuko-Sokoke Forest Adjacent Dwellers Association (ASFADA) and a spokesman for the Community Forest Associations (CFAs), which help combat illegal logging and other facets of human encroachment, and carry out various sustainable income-generating activities in the forests, such as beekeeping.

The high-quality honey produced by bees in Arabuko Sokoke has a distinctive taste thanks to the forest's unique flowers, and Sharriff can tell what flowers were used to create his honey just by its colour. The local honey has been a particularly successful project, with beekeepers struggling to keep up with demand.

Butterfly farming is another source of income for the community, and more than 7,000 people living adjacent to the forest practise butterfly farming as part of the Kipepeo Project (*kipepeo* is the Swahili word for butterfly). Experts say that Kenya has 871 species with 263 found in the Arabuko Sokoke Forest, and the group sells butterfly and moth pupae, and other live insects, as well as honey and silk cloth produced by the community.

At our next stop, another forest-adjacent village, I'm introduced to community officer Sammy Safari by Lissa Ruben from the Friends of Arabuko →



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Sokoke Forest (FoASF), which has funded several more initiatives in the area. The latest project is a cassava plantation created by the Songa Mbele self-help group. Sixteen women have been employed to work the farm near the Arabuko Swamp. "We have been growing maize as our staple food, but cassava has many different uses, and it's better for the land," says Safari. "The more people we involve in the forest, the less destruction. These kinds of community projects help us to find value in other aspects of the land. Instead of logging, the local community can make money from farming cassava."

The next morning, back at my beautiful base, Watamu Treehouse, I enjoy a dollop of Arabuko Sokoke honey on crêpes with new appreciation while looking out over the forest it came from. This eco-friendly retreat – whitewashed and studded with extraordinary glasswork – is like something dreamt up by Dr Seuss. Built high in the trees to avoid spreading out and damaging the surrounding environment, its unique architecture allows for

sublime views across the Indian Ocean coastline on one side and the native forest on the other.

After breakfast I meet with Jonathan Baya, one of the resort's guides, and we head into the woodland where the shade of towering trees offers a welcome respite from the equatorial heat. Baya started working in Watamu as a gardener in 1982, before becoming a guide. Despite spending so many years here, he still lights up with each forest scene, happily pointing out birds and giant termite mounds.

"We are starting our visit in the mixed forest – we call this mixed woodland *mohrihi* in Swahili. Watamu Treehouse is actually the start of this mixed forest habitat," he says. "About 500 years ago, it was complete, but development has fractured it."

Today, Arabuko Sokoke is ranked as the second most important forest in Africa, after the Congo, for the conservation of threatened bird species. Baya describes these birds – which include the Clarke's weaver, Amani sunbird, East Coast akalat and the rather cute Sokoke scops owl – as "the special stars of Sokoke". They're far from the only stars, however. The forest also provides sanctuary to 52 mammal species, including a population of around 300 African elephants, the shy Aders' duiker (antelope), Sykes' monkeys and yellow baboons. →

*From top left: Watamu
Treehouse guide
Jonathan Baya; Watamu
Treehouse, an eco-friendly
retreat in the forest*





Left: A golden-rumped elephant shrew, one of several endangered species found in the Arabuko Sokoke Forest

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The most special creature Baya wants to show me is the endangered golden-rumped elephant shrew, so named because it boasts an elongated snout, much like the world's largest land mammal, and sports a magnificent patch of golden fur on its rear. Ninety per cent of the known population live in the Arabuko Sokoke Forest.

I hear a scuffling in the dark undergrowth, which is mottled mud-brown and dotted with yellow leaves that match the markings on the elusive little animal. I have to squint through the foliage, but guided by Baya, I eventually catch sight of its golden rear scampering into the darkness.

On our way back to Watamu Treehouse, I consider the delicate balance between the needs of humans and the wild – a balance that the people who run organisations like ASFADA, FoASF and the CFAs aim to preserve in harmony. "I still do landscaping and gardening sometimes," says Baya as we walk. "When I do, I treat all my plants like children." It makes me think – the Arabuko Sokoke Forest is really just a very large garden, but it's one with a team of committed, fiercely protective plant parents looking out for it. If only we all loved our own backyards this much. 🌱

friendsarabukosokoke.org, kipepeo.org, treehouse.co.ke

