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## Bantu Mountain Lodge: A Resort With a Heart

*A quaint lodge located in a forest reserve on the plains below Mount Kiriyanga in Kenya, offers personalised experiences and great service*



The entrance of Bantu Mountain Lodge Ashish Kothari

Ashish Kothari

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Nestled in the plains below Mt. Kiriyanga (also called Mt. Kenya by the British colonial rulers) near Nanyuki in Kenya lies the Bantu Mountain Lodge.

Spread over 19.4 acres of land within the 40 acres leased from the Kenya Forest Service, much of the lodge is part of the Gaithuru Forest Reserve. Here, the

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waterbuck, elephant, three species of monkeys, dozens of bird species, a delicious diversity of plants and insects, and more) are conserved.

Last August, I was hosted by the lodge, along with colleagues from various parts of the world, at a gathering of the Global Tapestry of Alternatives. When we were considering holding our meeting here, we were a bit uncertain, as we'd read a few negative reviews online. But we decided to go ahead based on strong recommendations from some Kenyan civil society organisations who had held their gatherings here.



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The lake within the lodge premises for boating Ashish Kothari

## A Unique Visitor Experience

Bantu Mt. Lodge was established in 1978 by Gabriel Wanjohi Waweru, who passed away in 2010—his son, Patrick Wanjohi, now runs the lodge. They aimed to provide a comfortable and lively experience for visitors, connecting them to the local communities and nature.

Other than boarding and conference facilities, the lodge offers trekking, mountaineering, forest walks, a walk to the nearby Mau Mau caves (where rebels of the famous Mau Mau uprising against British colonial rule took shelter), fishing, birdwatching, team building (through some very cleverly designed physical props), horse-riding, canopy walks, and plenty of activities for kids. While we were there, nearly every day, there were batches of schoolchildren coming to use the facilities. We also availed of the local guides Peter Mwangi, Sammy Njuguna, Amos Kabiru, and Sammy Kamiri, who had many fascinating stories about local plants and animals, culture, and social life.





Ashish Kothari participating in one of the team building activities Ashish Kothari

It was delightful to wake up every morning to the calls of half a dozen bird species. On stepping out, I could see some of the most stunning species of sunbirds and weaverbirds hovering over the flowering bushes and trees, thoughtfully planted or preserved by the lodge. A few steps further, and on the edge of the forest, one could observe the striking Eastern black-and-white colobus monkeys, the somewhat less common Syke's monkeys, and on the lawns, quite boldly close to us, Olive baboons with their babies riding on their backs.



Black and white colobuses Ashish Kothari

In the forest, we came across fresh tracks and droppings of elephants and saw some waterbucks. The weirdest was the nocturnal screams and grunts of the Tree hyrax, a small nocturnal mammal related to elephants and sea cows. We saw a couple of them slumbering during the day in a notch high up on a tree. Giant Strangler figs (*mugumu chiano*) had become trees across the campus (smothering their Cedar hosts), and it took six of us to straddle the trunk of a particularly massive brown olive tree.

## Empowering Local Communities

During the time that we were at Bantu, we were treated to a spread of wholesome and tasty fresh greens and fruits, meat or fish, curries, chapatis, brown rice, and other local and international cuisines. The lodge claims that most food is locally sourced from farmers, and some is organic.

The lodge is committed to supporting the local communities, which includes purchasing all their water from three community-run water projects (though the lodge could make its arrangements), and hiring most of the staff from neighbouring communities; this includes tour guides, mountain camping cooks and porters who are trained by them if necessary. The lodge also funds or facilitates development works and tree-planting by the surrounding communities.

Beyond all these facts, however, it was the attitude of the staff that was outstanding. Always helpful, *always* (I'm not exaggerating) with a smile or welcoming look, but also with the dignity of being self-assured rather than as servile service providers. Flexible with working hours and very proactive when they saw someone in need (including myself when I got a tooth infection and other colleagues who had colds or a fever), offering herbal teas, rides to Nanyuki medical centres, and more. The manager John Muthii Kinyua, and head waiter Erick Gichuki Mathenge, were especially mindful of our needs. And I will not hide my particular delight when, on learning that I was spending my birthday there, they organised a surprise cake. The manager, John gave me an "elder's authority" stick, used only by those who have established some credibility with the community. I'm not sure I did any such thing, but it was a touching gesture that left me feeling paradoxically humble and also ego-boosted!

When the GTA Assembly members were leaving, we requested all the staff members to meet us for a special round of thank-yous from our side, and the following day, they organised a farewell party with a local dance and singing, which was very touching.

## The Information

The Bantu Mountain Lodge near Nanyuki can accommodate 37 people single-occupancy or 70 to 100 sharing; its lawns can also be used to set up tents in which another 100+ people can be housed. The rates are Kenyan Shillings 8000 (approximately US\$55), including room, food, and conference facilities. The group also has lodges or guest houses at Masaai Mara, Nairobi, and someway up Mt. Kiriyaanga.

### How to get there:

Address and location: Bantu Mountain Lodge Ltd, Naromoru, Gathiuru Forest, Mt. Kenya.

Along Nyeri Nanyuki Highway, 1 km from the main road, 14 km south of Nanyuki town, 6 km from Naromoru town, 5 km to Nanyuki airstrip, 10 km to the Equator crossing point; 180kms from Nairobi, about 3 hours by road, 45 minutes by air.

### Nearby sites worth visiting:

Mt. Kenya National Park for trekking, mountaineering, and wildlife; Mau Mau caves well-known for the freedom struggle against British colonial rule; Samburu Game Reserve, rich in African wildlife including most of its big mammals.

**Author bio:** Ashish Kothari is an Indian environmentalist working on development, environment interface, biodiversity policy, and alternatives. He has been associated with key peoples movements like Narmada Bachao Andolan and Beej Bachao Andolan.

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