

By Kelly Hushin

Photography by lyamila.com and Mark Treon



# rwanda reborn

A rainforest retreat that's not just for the birds







**When the nearest airport** is a half day's drive and all that surrounds the site is a rainforest full of rare gorillas, birds, and plant life, all of which must remain unscathed, building a 5-Star hotel is a challenge, to say the least. Add to its remote location the fact that Nyungwe Forest Lodge is part of Rwanda's effort to turn its reputation right side up from a history marred with a tragic genocide in 1994, and the true scope of this project comes into focus.

"The greatest difficulty is changing people's perception of Rwanda prior to experiencing the country and the people first hand," says Mark Treon, project architect with Cape Town-based

*Above:* The exterior of Nyungwe Forest Lodge. *Below:* Red upholstered chairs provide pops of color in the otherwise neutral Tea Lounge. *Opposite page:* Traditional African patterns line the walls of the Gallery.







*Above:* A modern silhouette sets Nyungwe apart from typical lodges. *Below:* Natural materials abound in the cozy dining room. *Opposite page, from top:* Tufted leather chairs and paper pendant lamps in the function room; infinity poolside dining.











M2K Architecture, which worked on the project with partner company Keith Interior Design, as both firms were founded by Keith Mehner. “Once in Rwanda, the warmth of the people and their desire to welcome others and share their country quickly changes any misconceptions.”

Situated on a working tea plantation that hugs the rainforest’s edge in the Nyungwe National Park area, the two firms conceived and built the 24-room hotel (including two suites) as a window into the surrounding rainforest with utmost respect for nature and the native culture. “The guest accommodations are really at the forest edge so you’re right there with the monkeys and birds,” says Mehner. The lodge’s buildings consist of two types: those in the middle of the plantation, made of a solid construction with stone walls to recreate an extension of the solid earth, and those sitting near the forest, which have lighter footprints, perched on wooden stilts and surrounded by native plants to simulate an extension of the forest.

“We looked at the local patterns and customs and traditions of how the Rwandan people make things and copied those patterns into the carpets and other design elements,” says Mehner. They also used local materials and artisans’ work throughout: clay tiles handmade by the river, stone that was shaved on-site, and traditional *imigongo* panels made of cow dung by local women. The team was conscious, however, of keeping the design contemporary as they did not want it to look colonial or like a game lodge. Pops of bright red and irreverent elements like a chandelier made of tea balls spice up the neutral black, white, and tan palette. “We wanted it to be different but rooted in that area,” notes Mehner. **hd**

[www.keith.co.za](http://www.keith.co.za); [www.nyungweforestlodge.com](http://www.nyungweforestlodge.com)





*Above and opposite page:* In Guest Villas, guests can bathe, sleep, or entertain with nonstop views of the surrounding rainforest. *Below:* Objects like this tree-trunk table are an elegant way to bring the outdoors in.



## **Nyungwe Forest Lodge**

Gisakura Tea Plantation, Rwanda

**Owner and Operator** Mantis Group

**Architecture Firm** M2K Architecture, Cape Town

**Architecture Project Team** Keith Mehner, director; Mark Treon, project architect; Mercia Erwee, senior architectural technologist; and Christina Marsden, architectural technologist

**Interior Design Firm** Keith Interior Design, Cape Town

**Interior Design Project** Keith Mehner, director; Ian Hannay-Robertson, director; and Michael Dolbow, interior designer

**Contractors** ROKO Construction Limited (main building, back-of-house buildings, infrastructure, and roads); T&B Log Homes (guest accommodations); Thomas & Piron (pool and pool buildings); and Earthquest Management

**Purchasing Firm** Groenhof McCann Procurement

**Lighting Consultant** QDP Lighting and Electrical Design

**Civil and Structural Engineering** ASCH Consulting Engineers

**Mechanical and Electrical Engineering** WSP Consulting Engineers

**Landscape** OvP Associates

**Environmental Consultant** Chand Environmental Consultants

**Quantity Surveyor** Davis Langdon

### **TEA LOUNGE**

**Chairs** Designed by Keith Interior Design; manufactured by Benchmark Joinery

**Sofa** Designed by Keith Interior Design; manufactured by Wunders

**Chair and Sofa Fabric** Tessa Sonik

**Coffee Table/Side Tables/Log Baskets** Designed by Keith Interior Design; manufactured by Jurgen Schirmacher & Associates

**Upholstered Cubes** Wunders

**Cube Fabric** Wolfe Street Fabrics

**Carpet** Designed by Keith Interior Design; manufactured by Rugalia

**Turned Wood Tables** Weylandts

**Central Seating** Designed by Keith Interior Design; manufactured by David Morgaas and Sons

**Central Seating Fabric** Home Fabrics and Wolfe Street Fabrics

**Painted Stool** Designed by Keith Interior Design; manufactured by Mila

**Stool Fabric** Wolfe Street Fabrics

**Lighting** Designed by Keith Interior Design; manufactured by Ikhaya Design

**Fireplace Artwork** Rwanda-Art

### **GUEST VILLA**

**Tub** Libra Bathrooms

**Faucets** Newform XT

**Baskets** Rwanda-Art

**Chaise Lounge** Designed by Keith Interior Design; manufactured by Benchmark Joinery

**Chaise Fabric** Tessa Sonik

**Minibar Unit** Designed by Keith Interior Design; manufactured by Mila