

Where a Princess Became a Queen Overnight



Ir. Chin Mee Poon

Ir. Chin Mee Poon is a retired civil engineer who derives a great deal of joy and satisfaction from travelling to different parts of the globe, capturing fascinating insights of the places and people he encounters and sharing his experiences with others through his photographs and writing.

Aberdare National Park was established in May 1950 and covers an area of 766 sq. km. It's about 100km north of Nairobi, the capital of Kenya in East Africa. The park is part of the Aberdare Mountain Range, with altitudes varying from 2,000m to over 4,000m above sea level.

In mid-August 2007, my wife and I, together with a contingent of relatives and friends, arrived at Outspan Hotel in Nyeri and had lunch there. We were in Kenya to view the rich wildlife found in various national parks and conservation areas. Leaving our main luggage in the hotel store, we took a bus to Treetops Hotel in Aberdare National Park, 17km away.

Treetops Hotel also belongs to the owner of Outspan Hotel. In 1932, Eric Sherbrooke Walker actually built a two-room treehouse in a huge 300-year-old fig tree, beside animal trails leading to a nearby waterhole in the Aberdare Range.

The hotel became world famous when Princess Elizabeth of England and her consort, Prince Philip, spent one night there on 5 February, 1952. The young princess was 26 years old then, when she and Prince Philip made a 5-day stopover in Kenya on their way to Australia. At the time, Kenya was still a British colony; it gained independence on 12 December, 1963.

Walker and his wife, Bettie, invited the royal couple to spend a night in their little treehouse, and the royal couple graciously accepted. Frantic preparations got underway to ensure the royal couple's safety during their

stay at the Treetops while fingers were crossed that animals would appear during their stay.

On 5 February, a large herd of 47 elephants turned up at the open space near the Treetops Hotel shortly before the arrival of the royal party, giving rise to much anxiety for Jim Corbett, Walker's family friend who was entrusted with the responsibility of safeguarding the royal couple.

The situation was worsened by the presence of a large bull and two younger bulls in the herd. African elephant herds are led by a matriarch and a bull elephant only joins the herd when it has the intention to mate with the matriarch. The presence of more than one bull in a herd could mean trouble. Fortunately the large bull succeeded in chasing away the two younger bulls before the royal party arrived.

Princess Elizabeth and Prince Philip climbed up the steep ladder to the treehouse and the Princess, who was seeing African elephants for the first time in her life, wasted no time in starting to film the pachyderms below. In fact she was so fascinated by the sight of the wild animals that she asked for her tea to be served at the viewing verandah in order to not miss any of the action on the ground.

The royal party left Treetops Hotel the following morning after a traditional English breakfast. It was only when the royal couple was back at Sagana Royal Lodge that Princess Elizabeth was informed that her father, King George VI, had passed away in his sleep the night before. This meant



she was no longer a Princess but rather Queen of The United Kingdom.

Jim Corbett entered the following remark in the Treetops log book: "For the first time in the history of the world, a young girl climbed into a tree one day a Princess, and after having what she described as her most thrilling experience she climbed down from the tree the next day a Queen – God bless her."

Alas, the historical treehouse was burnt down by guerrillas during the 1954 Mau Mau Uprising. In 1957, another treehouse was built in a nearby chestnut tree, overlooking the same waterhole and salt lick near the elephant migration route to Mount Kenya. This treehouse was subsequently expanded and rebuilt over the years. Today, Treetops Hotel has reached its present scale of 4 decks and a rooftop viewing platform raised well above ground on stilts. It has 50 compact bedrooms that can accommodate up to 110 guests.

Queen Elizabeth II visited the Treetops Hotel again nostalgically in November 1983 during her 5-day official visit to Kenya. I consider my one-night stay in that famous hotel in 2007, one of the highlights of all my travels over the years. ■