

Give a hoot, Nairobi

Navigating Kenya's capital can be a complex affair

It's strange to be stuck in a traffic jam – not just because I'm a self-employed writer whose commute is all of two steps from my bed to my desk. It's because the time is after 10pm on a Sunday night.

Matatus come hurtling down the street with loud music, flashing lights and promises of onboard Wi-Fi

"It doesn't usually take this long," David the driver sighs as we wait behind a long line of cars trying to get beyond the boom gate at the Jomo Kenyatta International Airport. "It's not busy in the festive season when people go up-country to visit their families in the villages or for holiday at the coast."

Once we get through the gate, it's easy to see what he means. Our 20km drive to the Southern Sun Mayfair Hotel in Nairobi is a breeze along a new three-lane highway. And in the opposite direction? It's bumper-to-bumper on the Mombasa Road.

"Mombasa is about 500km away," David says as he avoids the cars that capriciously change lanes all around us, while flashing overhead traffic cameras record licence plate after licence plate. "By plane, it's one hour. By car, it's about five or six. By train? Twelve hours."

Hearing this might make one think that Nairobi hasn't changed much since it was founded as a railway town in 1899 to connect Kampala, the capital of Uganda, with Mombasa, the sweltering ancient city on the Kenyan coast. But Nairobi, which replaced Mombasa as the country's capital in 1907, has experienced remarkable change.

Congestion challenges

This growth has come at a cost. Nairobi is now the second largest city in the African Great Lakes region (after Dar Es Salaam) and home to Kibera. This is considered the largest urban slum in Africa, where 2.5 million people, representing 60% of the city's population, occupy just 6% of its land.

There's also the problem of traffic. While there is



extensive road development with southern bypasses that are already easing congestion, and a standard gauge rail that will connect Nairobi with Mombasa, it's still common to be stuck in a jam.

"The traffic is unique to Nairobi," says the Mayfair's general manager Andrew Hosking. "It's quite uncontrolled. There's a system in place of how people drive here, which is not what I'm used to."

Part of the problem is the *matatus*. These privately owned minibuses (whose name translates to the original cost of 'three cents for a ride') are a flamboyant version of the notorious taxis in South Africa. With their original designs, they come hurtling down the street

with loud music, flashing lights and promises of onboard Wi-Fi. All the while their conductors shout like auctioneers, their maroon uniforms almost blending with the dust the vehicles leave behind.

While these remain the most common form of public transport, apps like *Uber* and *Taxify* are making inroads in the country, where high competition keeps prices low. But many people also rely on the original form of transport: their feet.

Simple is best

"There's a buzz," Hosking says. "A lot of people walk here. When cars are busy at 8am, there's a huge



amount of foot traffic as well. That also adds to the energy. My wife walked from here to the street market, about a kilometre away, quite safely. We even had a bunch of Americans here a couple of weeks ago; they put on their backpacks and they walked out the door and down the street."

Indeed, one of the best ways to explore the area is on foot. The hotel is near the Westlands Market, where light pierces through corrugated tin roofs and locals do everything from making clothes and fixing shoes to selling vegetables and fruit. It's helpful to know how to say 'No, thank you' in Kiswahili (*'Hapana asante'*). Then again, it's hard to decline once you get whiff of authentic cuisine tempting you away from the familiar Western options that fill the city's high-security shopping malls.

Go a bit further and you'll find quieter suburbs with posh schools, where shining 4x4s spill out from high-security apartment blocks. It's easier to avoid the cars that drive cautiously over unpainted speed bumps and around occasional potholes, while motorbikes are kind enough to warn you with hooting when they come zooming over the sidewalk.

And if you're feeling energetic, you can jog to the Karura Forest, which Nobel Peace Prize laureate Wangari Maathai (leader of the Green Belt Movement) successfully fought to prevent being turned into a property development. When you get there, you can hire a bike and pedal around the reserve, now visited by over 15,000 people every month.

To book at the Southern Sun Mayfair, Parklands Road, Nairobi, call +254 20 368 8000 (+27 11 461 9744 in South Africa), email admin@southern.sun.co.ke, or visit www.tsogosun.com