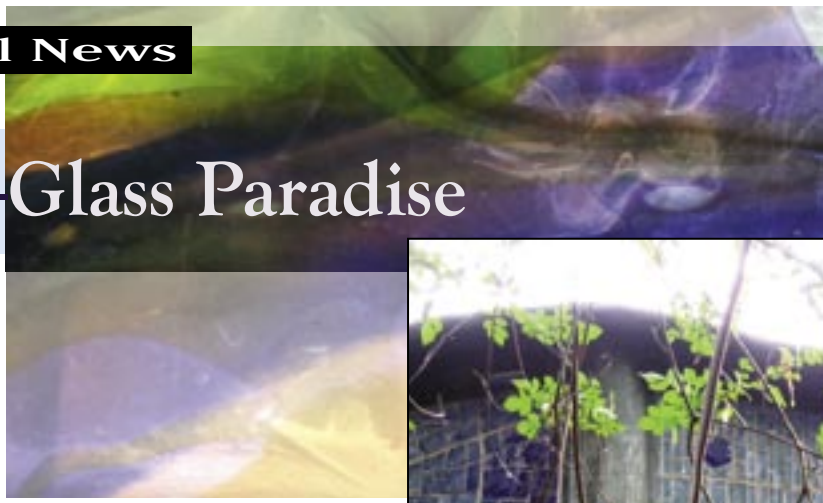


Kitengela—Glass Paradise

— by Leigh Adams



I had received an e-mail inviting me to Kenya, and a lifelong dream of mine, going to Africa, was about to be fulfilled. My hosts were sharing their latest adventure: “We’ve been away and something is tearing up the roofs again, probably bush babies (lemurs), certainly baboons, and probably leopards as well!” I’d heard that Laurel True had just visited Kitengela Glass Research outside Nairobi, and I called on her for advice. “You should go.” Another friend who had recently visited Kitengela had advised me to get in touch with Nani Croze. I had thoroughly reviewed www.kitengela-glass.com, but there was no way possible- that I could ever have conceived the journey I was about to take. And now, I’d like to take you with me!

Necessity, the Mother of Invention

Thirty years ago on the Maasai Mara in Kenya, Nani Croze, looking for a way to support her three children, started Kitengela Glass. Struggling to make a living as a skilled muralist, Nani’s friends suggested that she work in stained glass. (There is a preponderance of churches in Kenya and, thus, a built-in market.) Nani, a multitasking designer, found that there was no glass available. Indeed, it had to be imported from Europe or the United States. With characteristic determination, she decided to make her own glass! Using recycled motor oil for fuel, Kitengela (named for the plains) uses bottles of all kinds, window glass, even broken household glass items, and turns the shards into exquisitely colored glass for blowing, sheet glass to use in stained glass, and dalles to use in dalle de verre work. In addition, they have a bead shop with a kiln that allows three ladies to work at once, lampworking extraordinary beads out of very ordinary recycled glass. The whole creation is one marvel after another.

Refresh the sequence in your mind because we’re going to take it one or two steps further. Waste glass—bottles, broken windows, and the like—is gathered and sorted. It is melted and used for hot glass, that is, blowing glass. The surplus from the blowing is made into sheet glass or cast into dalles (blocks of glass). Now imagine the stained glass windows being made from Kitengela’s own glass, spiced up with a few imported colors that are especially challenging to create (yellow and orange, for example). The stained glass creations at Kitengela are diverse, unique, and completely marvelous, and you can see them all over Kenya. They also have very skilled glass painters creating flawless imagery in glass.

Next, realize that there will be scraps left over from the stained glass as Kitengela’s artists fill commissions daily. No scrap goes to waste at Kitengela, since it is such a precious resource. Let go of all your reservations and dream that magical mosaic artists have

covered every imaginable—and many unimaginable—surfaces of divinely sculpted benches, monolithic gateways, bottle-walled buildings, outhouses, animal enclosures, enchanted cottages, archways, and meandering pathways with kaleidoscopic images of color and light. It is impossible for me to convey the extent of the mosaics at Kitengela! The photos will help, but trust me—you need to see it! And I doubt, even with the photos, that the scope and vision of it will be conveyed.

Kitengela also has its own metal shop with very skilled and inventive work taking place there. From the Kenyan cowboy to more traditional African figures, wrought table frames, twisted and hammered benches, and utterly whimsical figures, the work is positively inspired! It is a continual and delightful surprise to turn a heavily overgrown corner and find a brilliantly sculpted bench or figure.

A Dalle de Verre Wonderland

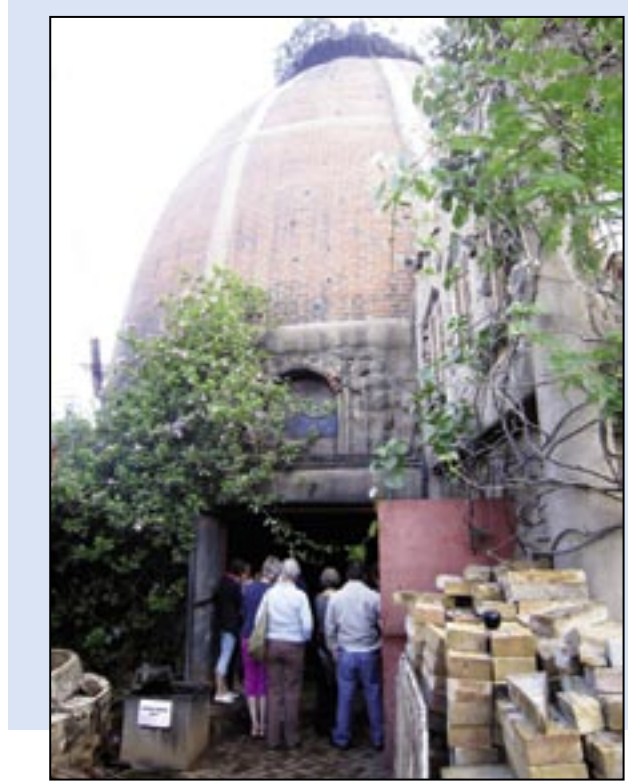
Dalle de verre is another specialty of Kitengela Glass. Large pieces with architectural integrity, able to serve as walls, windows, counters, tabletops, room dividers, and countless other magnificently designed, jewel-toned objects fill every possible void in the compound, contributing to the “Garden of the Divinely Absurd” sense of the place.

Try a cross between Harry Potter, JRR Tolkien, and the Magical Mystery Tour and see if you can imagine dragons, baboons, vultures, and mischievous monkeys all described with colorful fragments of stained glass, mirror, broken dishes, tiles, bottles, blown glass, and finely worked metal. Oh, and swimming pools, walls, saunas, floors, roofs, and ceilings! Kitengela is a veritable glass artist’s paradise. I spent two weeks there and never passed a day without discovering something new and worthy of writing about—something amazing and calling to me to investigate further.

Limitless Discoveries

Most days were filled with the wonderment of constantly unfolding discoveries, up to and including the last day when I was led to an open field containing a variety of pieces, mostly large sculptural walls (in a field inhabited by excessively friendly and very long-legged camels!) “Here’s where we do ceremonies and special occasions,” Edith Nyambura told me. Edith has worked at Kitengela for twelve years and is a very accomplished glass artist and mosaicist. While Edith posed with the Muslim-inspired piece, I elbowed the smaller camel that was determined to insert herself into the photograph. The next photo was the Judaic piece and two camels bullying this writer/photographer, but I managed to shoot (the camera!) over the neck of the smaller camel. By the time I got to the Christian piece, three enormous camels blocked the view fairly successfully (and there is no photo)! The point of this vignette is that there is mosaic, beautiful mosaic, everywhere you look at Kitengela, but there are completely unexpected adventures, too!

Animals are a theme throughout the oasis of Kitengela’s garden environment. Vultchi, an Egyptian vulture, is twenty-eight years old and a household pet with more intelligence than one usually gives a bird credit for having! Vultchi is surrounded by three Rottweilers, one Lab/Ridgeback/Blue Heeler mix, and seven small dogs (dachshunds and Jack Russells plus Coco, who fancies herself “not a dog”). Many of the animals are immortalized in mosaic or glass, metal or paintings, and sculptural pieces throughout the grounds. Toss in a couple of African Grey Parrots that mimic everyone, a lone monkey that was recently reported to have found a mate, countless bush babies seeking handouts, and my favorite aerial terrorists, the hyraxes (ungulates that inhabit trees and hurl themselves at tin roofs while looking like a cross between a large guinea pig, a Chihuahua with small ears, and a Disney character) and you have set the scene for the animal tour.





The Atmosphere Surrounding Kitengela

Mind that you have passed zebra and Maasai cattle on your way to Kitengela and if you are lucky, you may have seen giraffes and baboons. Kitengela is adjacent to Nairobi National Park, so the wildlife is abundant. How wild the life is depends on the participants! The camels really are quite docile, albeit large and pushy. The ostriches are not intentionally rude; they're merely dim-witted. The pigs, horses, mules, donkeys, cows, chickens, geese, rabbits, ducks and turkeys are just part of the tapestry of nature that delights the senses at every turn at Kitengela.

And the cottages?! Have I mentioned the private cottages available as bed and breakfast habitats for humans? Each one is an individual creation of clever design, containing unique artwork and blissful living space replete with net-covered beds, sanitary facilities, creative design, and cozy comforts. The food served for meals is fresh and appetizing, delicious, and healthful. It's served in the main house or out in the patio when appropriate. Even for those to whom glass is not a passion, a person would be delighted to stay in this unique and otherworldly place.

At Kitengela, you can share in the adventure of blowing glass, buy one-of-a-kind pieces of glass, commission glasswork, take classes, or buy unique beads and jewelry. You can watch as highly skilled women recycle found glass into delightful and wondrous beads—carefully crafted and artfully annealed—ready to make into gorgeous, gemlike creations custom-designed for *you*! You can feed the ostriches, pet the camels, and swim in the Dragon's Den pool. You can hike the suspension bridge and sway above the river canyon below. Yes, there *is* a crocodile, but there are plenty of old cow carcasses for him to munch on, and it was nowhere nearby when I went looking for it! Besides, maybe it's just a story to ensure that travelers have something to talk about when they get home!

You can have the most memorable trip of your life . . . at Kitengela Glass! Ask about classes and talk to your accountant. Your trip may be tax deductible if your income is glass related. Wouldn't that be nice! If like Nani Croze, Laurel True, and I, you would like to donate your services at a local school while you're there, something might be arranged. And certainly, you will enjoy this trip as you have enjoyed few others in your life. Go for it!!!

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Leigh Adams loves art and children, and her commitment to doing public art with children has resulted in a variety of differing art installations and activities. Although most of her work is done in the Pasadena, California, area, Leigh has traveled and worked with children in Mexico, China, and Central America for many years. Whether teaching folk arts, language or life skills, Leigh believes that cooperative learning, achieving consensus, and building new skills that can result in public acknowledgement are some of the greatest gifts we can give our children and our society. She believes that public installations are an excellent way to elevate children's belief in themselves, their self-worth and the value of their efforts. As Artist in Residence at the LA County Arboretum, she has completed a 960-foot mosaicked Serpent Trail made of tiles glazed by local children and is currently at work on the Permasphere, a permaculture demonstration garden, as well as mosaics in the Celebration Garden. Leigh is available for architectural glass design and commissioned work. You can find her glass art at www.laglassart.com.

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