

Kelly's Retreat – a garden of peace

A little over six years ago, Kelly Seifu Yohannes (right) acquired an 11,000sq metre plot of land in Adama, the capital of the Oromia State in Ethiopia and her father's hometown. Formerly known as Nasrat, the town lies about 90 minutes drive south of the national capital Addis Ababa. The land was practically barren, but with perseverance and passion, Kelly has succeeded in planting an extraordinary garden with some 1,000 species of flora. She provided **Stephen Williams** with an exclusive preview of her sumptuous creation, Kelly's Retreat.



Kelly Seifu Yohannes' vision in creating a beautiful Ethiopian retreat was to achieve a haven of tranquillity and – in memory and recognition of her late husband (a former Ethiopian Diplomat) – a meeting place where high-level peace talks can be held, well away from the distractions of the big city. She also wanted the gardens to be used as a place where guests can come to simply rest and relax, and painters, writers and researchers can come to work.

In 2004, Kelly erected the first building that now serves as a large reception room, a library, a boardroom and a tea lounge. It is now the epicentre of Kelly's Retreat, and one of the eight blocks that have now been built. Another building incorporates a large living and dining room furnished with her collection of rugs, tables, chairs and seating amassed over the years she travelled around the world. Six other blocks within the gardens provide 22 *en suite* bedrooms for visitors, each with a 140sq metre shaded verandah area, which extends into the surrounding gardens.

The large communal rooms and all the bedrooms have original paintings on the walls, many (but not exclusively) by Ethiopian artists and collected over the years by Kelly herself.

Kelly's Retreat has now become a garden of bewildering bio-diversity, and a living example of what can be achieved with vision and dedication.

The Retreat project also complements Kelly's long-standing interest in ecology – for more than two decades she has been involved with environmental activism, an involvement that saw her work being recognised with two top national awards in 2009.

She is a founding member of Lem (meaning "green" in the local Amharic language) that counts Ethiopia's President Girma Wolde Giorgis as its chairman. Lem undertakes extensive tree-planting programmes and also co-ordinates Lem Clubs in schools throughout the country. These clubs promote children's awareness of the value and importance of protecting the environment, and promote sustainable energy and the use of environmentally friendly products.

Kelly is also a member of the Network for Environmental Sustainability and Development in Africa (Nesda) – or, in French, *Réseau pour l'Environnement et le Développement Durable en Afrique (Redda)* – headquartered in Abidjan,



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Côte d’Ivoire. Nesda also generates and disseminates reports on best practice in environmental planning and policy formulation; facilitates the preparation of African positions on critical environmental issues; develops and maintains a database of national environmental policies and strategies; develops country profiles of environmental institutions and experts; promotes effective partnerships with other African environment and sustainable development networks; and collaborates and shares resources within existing networks.

This is important work, and Kelly is clearly committed to both Lem and Nesda. She hopes that her wonderful retreat will be used for meetings by both organisations and many others.

Not only is Kelly extending an open invitation to environmentalists to visit her gardens, they are also serving to protect many of Ethiopia’s endangered plant species. But there is nothing formal or particularly structured about the garden. It has been planted and then allowed simply to grow naturally.

“I wanted to create a jungle,” Kelly explains with a laugh. Throughout the mass of trees, tropical fruits, shrubs, herbs and flowers that constitute her “jungle” are specifically designated areas for guests, interlinked with covered paved walkways. There is an area for the traditional Ethiopian coffee ceremony; another area where massage, manicure, pedicure and beauty therapies can be carried out; a large 18.5m x 8.5m swimming pool and surrounding sun deck; and another area for Tai Chi or Yoga.

As Kelly walked with me through the gardens, the privilege of a preview before the retreat’s recent opening, she stopped to point out various plants. It was particularly interesting to see, among a profusion of familiar herbs such as mint, sage, parsley, thyme, lavender etc, that Kelly has planted a number of herb species that are specific to Ethiopia. Plucking leaves for me to taste and smell, she gave me a running commentary – showing me *damas kasa*, a medicinal herb “useful for so many things”; *jamao*, “good for diabetes, high cholesterol, and blood pressure – indigenous, but now endangered”, many varieties of palm including the false banana, indigenous pine saplings (“a hard wood, unlike the European and North American species”); olive trees; no less than 10 varieties of *aloe vera* (“these have wonderful properties”); and all manner of fruit trees – mango, avocado, orange, tangerine – as well as pomegranate and passion fruit (“those we leave for the birds to feast on”).

Next to the large kitchen she has planted neem, a tree that grows across Africa with so many healing properties that, in Kiswahili, it is known as *mwarobaini* (or

At one with nature: Kelly’s Retreat is a haven of elegant beauty and vibrant colour, both inside and out

the tree of 40 cures). It is also reputed to be an effective insect repellent and the perfect choice to be planted so near to where food will be prepared. Kelly also pointed out what she called a “trueman tree” nearby, which I had never seen before, but she assured me had similar insect repellent qualities.

Kelly’s Retreat is now open and as Kelly herself confided, “I love to greet visitors and witness their joy as they view the gardens, relax and make friends”. She has already hosted some international gatherings and former Ghanaian president, John Kufuor was a visitor last November.

Kelly is also convinced that tourists on their way to visit the Awash National Park, two hours drive further south from Adama, will want to stop over with her on both legs of their journey to and from the capital. But, true to form, Kelly does not intend to “rest on her laurels”, so to speak. She is already planning the second phase of the development which will include opening a crafts and art gallery. And, also on the cards, thanks to the chance discovery by one of her geologist friends, is the opening of a natural hot water spa. “We’re in the middle of the Rift Vally, and my friend is sure we can use the hot springs he located,” Kelly told me. “We have so many exciting plans, you must come back to visit us again...” she said as we bid each other goodbye. All I can say is, she’ll not need to ask me twice! ■