

[PHOTOS] A visit to the Presidential Palace Museum

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At a glance, it looks like a large old abandoned hotel. A closer look however reveals to you an affluently built palace as you enter through its large maroon gate into the tarmac pathway flanked on every side by white and black pavements.



The Presidential Palace Museum in Kanombe was home to former presidents Juvenal Habyarimana (from 1973 to 1994) and Pasteur Bizimungu (1994 to 2000). (Faustin Niyigena)

Several avocado, mango and palm trees lead to the building that once housed two of Rwanda's presidents and their families which is now a museum that attracts hundreds of local and international tourists daily.

Why turn it into a museum?

Except for the fact it is old with the paint peeling off, the house still looks strangely beautiful on the outside reflecting the opulence in which former President Juvenal Habyarimana lived.

So, I find myself asking, "Why was it made a museum?" Because it is still a very elegant house that with a little bit of renovation, could still be a state lodge.



The museum has portraits of former presidents Habyarimana and Sindikubawo. (Faustin Niyigena)

Jackie Mudahogora, the Manager of the museum who was guiding us on the tour replies: “Just like we have a museum for the ancient kings in Nyanza, so do we have this one. It is as a result of the history about this house”.



Museum manager Jackie Mudahogora explains to The New Times reporter about the phone that was used by President Habyarimana. (Faustin Niyigena)

As we enter from the rear since it is where the history begins according to Jackie. A single look inside is simply mind blowing not only because of the beauty but also the ironic facts about how the president lived his life.

The office

From the rear, you enter into the president's office which is preceded by a small waiting room furnished with the antique styled king Louis sofa set that bears the usual museum precautions of "Don't touch" inscribed on masking tape that stretches across their arms. Like the walls and curtains, the chairs are white too reflecting Habyarimana's obsession with the colour.



One of the offices in the house which was used by both presidents. (Faustin Niyigena)

These like many other items in the house have been here since 1980 the year which President Habyarimana entered the house shifting from Kiyovu save for a few which were brought by President Pasteur Bizimungu.

A large beautiful art piece, a gift from the president of North Korea ushers you into the president's office that except for the phones, it absolutely looks like a small dining room because of a round table surrounded by about four chairs in what looks like a real dining setting.



Control protocol house. This is where every armed man would leave his guns before entering the president's office. (Faustin Niyigena)

“These didn’t belong to Habyarimana,” Mudahogora explained, “These were introduced by Bizimungu after the previous ones had been looted in the war”.

The sitting room and dining

This except for a few chairs has become nothing but an eye catching gallery that mostly depicts the pictures of Rwanda’s dark history. On display are portraits of crying children, water bleached dead bodies, a collection of machetes and many other pictures throw you into a somber mood as they silently speak about the gory details of the Genocide against the Tutsi.



Dining room. (Faustin Niyigena)

Asked why they were be in a former president's sitting room, Mudahogora explained that it was due to the undeniable role the government played in the 1994 tragedy.

Then there is a large dining table that has more than ten seats to suit Habyarimana's large family of eight children.



Gym room. (Faustin Niyigena)



Habyarimana's house before he became president after a military coup in 1973. (Faustin Niyigena)

In the dining room is the maroon carpeted staircase that leads to the bed rooms. It is wired with security sensors that notified the president as soon as anyone stepped on them trying to go up. They were switched on only when the president had gone up to his bed room.

The president's bedroom is furnished with only a king-sized bed, peach black leather sofas and a large mirror. All these belonged to Bizimungu except for a large table with elephant legs that Habyarimana received as a gift from Mobutu.

The secret exit, TV room and gym

On the first floor is the TV room that also doubled as the president's secret exit in case of trouble. One of the walls of the room is completely wood paneled only leaving space in the middle large enough to fit a television set.



Habyarimana's python house and its swimming pool. It was also a gift given to him by Mobutu Sese Seko. (Faustin Niyigena)



Habyarimana's deer heads, gift received from the Netherlands. (Faustin Niyigena)

On the left is a gun chamber from which the president could hastily access a gun to flee with to the remote controlled door on the right- his secret escape to a staircase leading to the third floor.

The third floor bears the president's gym, a room containing two deer heads with protruding antlers which were given to the president as a gift from Netherlands and other few art pieces and a small private office for the president.

The irony of the witch and the priest

After the deer antlers, there is the presidential chapel that has an entrance from the balcony where the priest used to pass. This entrance also doubled as the president's emergency exit from the house in case of trouble.



The museum gives an overview about the Genocide against the Tutsi in 1994.
(Faustin Niyigena)



The museum has an exhibition showroom. (Faustin Niyigena)

He had two entrances from inside and another on the balcony. The ironic part of it is that just in the proximity of the chapel is the office of the witch doctor who used to render services to the first family. The floor finally winds up with the first lady's saloon and a study room where private coaching was administered to the first children.

The plane wreckages

After a tour of the palace, an epic sight awaits you outside to bring your tour to a climax. The plane wreckage that tells the story of the death of a president in his own compound on April 6, 1994.

The debris of the Falcon 50 lay at the extreme end of the compound where we could only have a look at them by standing on what used to be a guard's watch tower.



Waiting room. (Faustin Niyigena)



This table stands on elephant's legs. (Faustin Niyigena)

The wreckages are just a little portion of the rich compound where such eye catching sights like the shade for the president's convoy, a house for his python which he received as gift from Mobutu, the former president of DR Congo and a large fountain can be found.

At the extreme opposite end of the wreckages is a large tennis court from where the president used to play.