

We're Here!

We arrived at Nairobi Airport and were crammed into a very small minibus and all the luggage was thrown onto the roof, well most of it anyhow, one particularly large case missed and plunged to floor with a loud thump! As it was relatively early in the morning the roads were quiet, this was the quiet before the storm, and we soon arrived at the Nairobi Holiday Inn which I'm guessing at one time would have been a jewel of the Empire. Don't get me wrong it is still a lovely hotel, gladly not at all in the style of most modern Holiday Inns or any other hotels come to that, it has a wonderful sense of style with a stress free, relaxed and comfortable feel about it, nestled in the hubbub of Nairobi.

We had breakfast in the tranquillity of the pool area, listening to and watching all the various brightly coloured birds flitting about the shrubs, giving us a short time to recover from the flight before we were whisked off to the David Sheldrick Elephant and Rhinoceros Orphanage www.sheldrickwildlifetrust.org , followed by the Giraffe Centre www.giraffecenter.org and then to the house of the authour of Out of Africa. We had a little while to wait before this and fortunately did manage to get into our room and were able to freshen up in readiness. We ended up being the only people going on the excursion so had a minibus to ourselves. Our driver gave us a running commentary of the Nairobi sites we passed whilst effortlessly negotiating the absolutely manic traffic, he was of the opinion that on Saturdays people took to the roads and just drove around aimlessly not going anywhere. Our journey took us past the national football stadium which was very soon to be the venue of the World Cup Qualifying match against great rivals Nigeria, even though Kenya were already out of the cup they still hoped to be victors as it was a 'local' derby. They subsequently lost. Anyhow, this raised the subject of football, there is a huge following of English football in Kenya not just the premier league but at all levels. Our driver knew all about Cambridge United and even knew that they were in the Conference League, which is more than I knew. Appears that they



do get a terrific amount of televised English football, much much more than is easily available in the UK!

Elephant Orphanage.

We turned off the main road and wound our way up a rough track and quite a hill, little did we know this rough track was a snooker table compared with what was to come the next day. When we arrived we were more or less the only people there and thought 'This is nice', however, five minutes before the 'show' twenty or so minibuses, land-rovers and miscellaneous 4 wheel drive vehicles descended on the place and disgorged their human contents, so much for a peaceful visit. We all filed through the gate and paid our 'voluntary' contribution and onto the place the baby elephants were brought to be bottle fed and have a splash about an homemade muddy pond. A family of warthogs were taking advantage of the facility as we arrived but they glared at us and ran off just for the sake of it rather than being frightened. We didn't have to wait long before the handlers led six tiny elephants down the hill, all orphaned by various means, sad, but they seemed quite happy as long as their comfort blankets and handlers, who appeared to have become their adopted mothers, were close by. Some made a beeline for the water others investigated the oil barrels of drinking water, the remainder were keen to be fed from large plastic bottles of a special formula milk which they took enthusiastically. The 'water babes'



almost ran and jumped into the muddy water and were soon slipping, sliding, splashing and lying in ocre water, smashing! The handlers joined in the fun throwing buckets of water over the babes even more. The lit were inquisitive ing water tried hav- some more success- some were more un- for elephants in methods and drank out the aid of their iantly tried to use its



the muddy wa- who loved this tle ones who about the drink- ing a drink, ful than others, conventional their drinking directly with- trunks, one val- trunk but had

no control when it was full of water! Whilst all this was going on a giant rhino sauntered into sight thinking it might join in the fun, not a good idea so his 'human mother' walked towards him and then away and he followed back to his pen, he is another orphaned animal. After a little while the youngsters were led back to their shelters and another wave of slightly older elephants were led down for a repeat performance. All in all a lovely place where some happiness has come out of tragedy, what wonderful work they are doing. We got away from here quite promptly to avoid being trampled in the rush down the hill to the next destination, the Giraffe Centre.

The Giraffe Centre.

The giraffe centre is situated in an affluent area surrounded by very large houses in their own substantial grounds indeed it shares its own grounds with the very exclusive Giraffe Manor Hotel

<http://www.giraffemanor.com/>.

The original purpose for setting up the centre also known as The African Fund for Endangered



Wildlife was to provide sanctuary for what was the endangered sub-species Rothschild Giraffe and now it also allows people to get up close and see these beautiful creatures and to hand feed them. A lovely place to visit.

Out of Africa.

Our next stop was the home of the Danish author of Out of Africa, Karen von Blixen-Finecke nee Karen Christenze Dinesen who wrote under the pen name



Isak Dinesen. The author Isak Dinesen was a very interesting lady and was very un-orthodox for her time and had a very unusual life. Well worth a bit of research. Our guide was a young Kenyan lady whose enunciation of the script she had learned was perfect and was also very interesting if not a bit recited, however her English was much better than my Swahili, come to think of

it her English was better than my English. The bungalow that was the author's home for a while is set in beautiful grounds and is furnished with some or her original furniture, some of the furniture used in the film starring we were told several times Meryl Streep and Robert Redford plus some random furniture and artifacts that could have been there at the time. Nevertheless it was interesting and I'm glad we went and Lin purchased a hat that came in useful later. From here we wended our way back to the hotel said goodbye to Antonio our driver and went to our room.

Change of Plan.

A message from Kuoni, our holiday company, had been pushed under our door advising us that our final destination for the beach part of our holiday had been changed from the Kinondo Retreat to the Gazi Retreat and that the hotel owner Staphanie (their spelling not mine) would call me at 6.00pm. This was really weird because in the back of my mind I sort of thought this was going to happen and it had. Sure enough about 6.00pm I got a call from Stephanie (my correct spelling) explaining the situation. The Kinondo Retreat had been almost fully booked for 3 weeks by a veteran French rugby team and she suggested that it may be better if we moved to one of her other 'retreats' the Gazi which was a little bit more luxurious than Kinondo as it would be much more peaceful and suitable. That was fine by us, and was the right decision, but more about that later. It turned out another couple had also been transferred.

To Samburu.

The next day our 'party' of about 23 or so individuals gathered in the departure lounge of the Holiday Inn ready for the next stage of our trip to the first game lodge Samburu. The itinerary seemed to suggest that it would take 3.5 hours, not having any idea just how large Kenya is, none of us would have guessed just how long it would actually take. The minibuses arrived and people started to get their luggage loaded into the very rear compartment, it was amazing just how much luggage was persuaded into these areas. The group had been already been divided into bus size groups of 5 or 6, what logic was used I do not know. We had the full quota of 6 in our bus and our driver's was called Ricardo, who it turns out was the senior of the drivers as soon became in our opinion the best! Our team were John and his daughter Seana, Barbara and Sheila, Lin and me.

John had been posted to Kenya 40 years previously whilst in the RAF so was interested to see the changes. He is blessed with the envious ability to be able to walk up to a complete stranger, English speaking or otherwise, and strike up a conversation.

Seana seems to have a very busy work life even when on holiday and had at least 3 mobile phones including a Blackberry for emails, all of which were used, at the same time she was catching up on her written college course work on learning Russian. She has the amazing ability to be able to read or write or text, on occasions all at the same time, whilst riding in a square wheeled cart on the worst roller coast in the world whilst us mere mortals are just glad to be not falling apart, this type of ride would accurately simulate the road to Samburu in places.

Barbara we soon found out is an experienced game safarier as were one or two other couples in our party, and didn't they let you know it, fortunately they were not in our bus. Barbara, however was a delight and imparted her wealth of knowledge with a gentleness but only after gentle prompting from us novices! She has a wonderful dry sense of humour, on one of the game drives she suddenly said "There's a brother-in-law!" pointing a Maribu Stork, not the most beautiful creature in the world, but it would appear they have an uncanny likeness to her brother-in-law. Barbara has a similar interest in photography to me. She had a weakness for shopping and the inability to haggle, not a good combination in washroom Curio Shop breaks! However, she has a good ally and friend in Sheila providing support and gentle assertion during the times of the haggle.

Sheila, another lovely lady with a bright sense of humour. If someone has asked me what Sheila was, I would have said 'teacher' and it turns out I would have been correct. Sheila and Barbara have holidayed together frequently since they both lost their husbands at similar times a few years ago. Sheila has been the reluctant tourist on one or two occasions at the behest of Barbara, for example being dragged into to a helicopter for a jaunt. During our trip she was so good at recalling and recounting many of her and Barbara's escapades always with a quip or two. A delight!

Without doubt Lin & I both feel we were in the best company and with the best driver and truly had one of our best holidays EVER, our travelling companions for those 7 days contributed greatly to our enjoyment!

We weaved our way through the quieter Sunday morning traffic and were soon out of the suburbs but still in one of the many road building/improvement schemes we we came upon our first accident. A large lorry had simply fallen off the road and was having a little rest laying on its side, as we found out later this appears to be quite a common occurrence. The roads consist of tarmac laid directly onto a compacted but very weak mixture of cement dust and soil, as a result grand canyon-like potholes appear very quickly. Vehicles fall over taking detours to avoid these chasms but the combination of the step down from the road surface to the wildly varying cambered or non-existent adjacent surface does make this action somewhat hazardous for small 7 seater minibuses let alone huge overloaded lorries! Anyhow back to the beer lorry, there were dozens if not hundreds of individuals of all ages scattered over a distance of half a mile before and after the recumbent lorry. They were divided into three groups, those rushing empty handed towards the lorry and those leaving the scene laden with arms full of bottles of Tusker lager and the final group sat nearby attempting to drink the mountain of bottles as fast as possible before the completely un-interested police changed their minds and decided to do something about this mass theft. This was quite a sight in its own right, Tusker lager is a fizzy beer when ice cold let alone when it has been thrown off the back of a lorry and sat in the hot sun for a while, this caused cartoon like effects on the drinkers with their faces and heads almost exploding with beery foam. I'm guessing this had happened a while previously as many of the people coming away from the scene were obviously not on their first trip and were having some trouble standing let alone walking and I suspect this was not due to the weight they were carrying in their arms but was more to do with what was or had been stored internally!

We passed through this without incident and continued on our way, however our driver Ricardo - good old Kenyan name - suggested we closed our windows as we passed through!

Throughout our trip to and from Samburu we must have seen four or five on these types of accidents mostly involving lorries with no evidence of injury apart from sadly of a motorcycle rider who was quite battered, bloodied and bruised. There were no repeats of the looting, mind you there was nothing particularly attractive to prospective raiders. The road was completely blocked on two occasions but this did not stop the traffic, including us, we just used the new road that had been forged by just going off road around the wreckages.

We were travelling on a Sunday and was very noticeably Sunday best clothes and walk to church time. Seemed odd to see men dressed in two piece suits with collar and tie and women in twin sets walking along the side of the road or appearing out of the bush in the middle of nowhere making their way to one of the dozens of churches scattered around. Even the children were dressed in their finery, the little girls in brightly coloured frocks and the boys in short trousers, white shirts often including a tie. Then the next moment you would see a lady in a flowing brightly coloured 'native' dress carrying the contents of a small forest or reservoir on her head. Scattered along the road was the occasional 'village'.

This usually consisted of groups of ramshackle dwellings hand painted signs indicating their function which was anything between beauty parlour, top up your phone, but a frequent one was the somewhat puzzling Bar, Hotel & Butchery! Advertisements for all sorts of items were painted very exactly and precisely on buildings from Coke to Crown paint (these were



everywhere in Nairobi) to the green and white livery of Safari.com the local telephone network. Interspersed amongst these hotchpotches of industry were always several bicycle repair emporiums which indeed were heavily employed. Other curious items were the metal kiosks, usually painted in the Coke livery randomly scattered throughout along this and most roads. These had a footprint similar to a large chest freezer barely over head height were tapered towards the bottom so that customers could stand right up against the heavy duty steel mesh that protected or imprisoned the occupant, I think these were the equivalent of the corner shop, selling I know not what. But in that heat they

must have known what Alec Guinness felt like in the cooler in Bridge On The River Quai!

I don't believe there is a public transport system in Kenya, most people get about by Shanks' pony or by using the local 'taxi' minibuses. These are small minibuses not dissimilar in body size to our bus, but there the similarity ends. These taxis have all sorts of bizarre paint jobs and names, but the biggest difference is that these buses have it would appear an infinite number of seats and often fully populated. They paid no regard to whatever rules exist, all have a loader who's job it is to grab unsuspecting passengers and get them shown or shoved to their specially reserved seats in as short a time as possible preferably without stopping, with the loader sliding the door open and hanging on the outside as he shows his clients to their seat.

These vehicles were the usual targets of the surprising number of roadside check points manned by the police. These were usually in open country, but what puzzled me was the fact that the police had no vehicle so how did they get where they were, was it by one of these dodgy taxi's? These road side checks usually were indicated by a faded and battered stinger strung across the road creating a chicane, but it was no ordinary stinger and consisted of two lengths of faded mangled and twisted sheet metal with lots of 6 inch long sharp spikes projecting menacingly upward waiting for a victim. These were solid steel spikes, none of your namby, pamby "we just want to let your tyres down not cause you to crash" devices used in this country. Occasionally there are permanent road check stations, usually located in built up areas, in these cases they were usually backed by armed civil guards or army personnel.

The normal countryside bush changed into a rolling cultivated landscape apparently growing wheat, seeing stubble fields seemed out of place, these were followed by acres and acres of polytunnels growing roses among other flowers destined for the UK market, this rolled onto pineapple plantations. All this area was surrounded by electric fencing and owned by British companies including the man he say yes, Delmonte. We had our first taste of many washroom stop experiences, these always were at pre-determined (by the driver) venues and were always at Curio Craft centres and the washrooms were always only accessible via a 'shopping opportunity'. The condition of the facilities varied considerably from not to bad to I would prefer not to but needs must. *(However I have to say the most disgusting and revolting toilets I passed (yes passed) through were those at the coach station at Heathrow.)* These shopping opportunities were almost all identical, table on table of wooden and stone and mineral carvings of animals, people or masks some small, some huge, plus hangings and other offerings. Throughout the week apart from two stops

the modus operandi of the sellers was the same, as soon as they managed eye contact they would latch onto their victim and say something like "If there is anything you need please ask, no hassle" then proceed to follow you at a distance trying to engage you in conversation. They had obviously been told that the British, at least, do not like hassle and to hold back. They were by no means aggressive or particularly pushy as experienced in other countries where things can get quite intimidating. One tip, always have a handful of pens in your possession its a good bargaining/bartering aid.

The landscape started to change into what I thought looked like Game Park terrain and as we came over the brow of a ridge in the distance I could see a rod straight road disappearing over the horizon. After meandering about for a bit we found ourselves at the beginning of this virgin strip of tarmac and blissfully smooth road. Of course we could not use this road it wasn't 'finished' and had to use the 'surprising' hard shoulders which are at best dire at worst hazardous.

Samburu.

Eight hours after leaving Nairobi, we turned off the interstate track onto a countryside track, we had arrived at a Samburu gate alive with swifts or swallows shrieking and flying about a crimson flowered bush. The minibuses have hinged flaps in their roofs that lift and lock enabling passengers to stand and look out, our flap was raised immediately and off we went on our first game drive, brilliant. It wasn't long before we started to see our first 'game' these were Dik Daks very small deer, but we soon progressed to zebra, giraffe and elephant. Absolutely stunning and you had to keep reminding yourself that these animals are wild and looking after themselves and not being managed in any way. The light was going as we arrived at our first game lodge Samburu, a beautiful place



even in the dark. We were given small hot towels and delicious mango juice to refresh ourselves, and after we had jumped through the obligatory hoops of registration were shown to our rooms, on the



way we could not



help but notice the hard standing populated by 10 or so crocodiles right next to a sort of patio area separated by only a low chain link fence. The accommodation was a combination of detached cabins and small blocks of what used to

be called maisonettes situated about 20 metres from quite a wide river, presumably the crocodiles day home. It was



good to have a quick shower and change after what had been a very long and hard travelling day, have a quick look round to get our bearings and then something to eat. I'm pleased to say that seating arrangements in the restaurant were organised in tables of the bus occupants and that was the set up at all the lodges we stayed, it was nice to be

able to chat about the days events with people who had directly shared the same experiences.

As with all the lodges someone was always employed as a guard to prevent the monkeys and other miscellaneous 4 legged friends from nicking all the food from the tables during meal times especially but they were there all the time to keep the upper hand on these primates and others. These opportunistic creatures were amazingly quick, crafty, devious and innovative and always kept their 'guards' on their toes who were dressed in their tribal dress and armed with a catapult and a knobkierrie, a stick with a knob on the end. Despite these defences the interlopers were occasionally successful in raiding the diners tables or the buffet, this was mostly achieved by taking a long and devious route to the target relying on the element of surprise! Seana's desire to feed

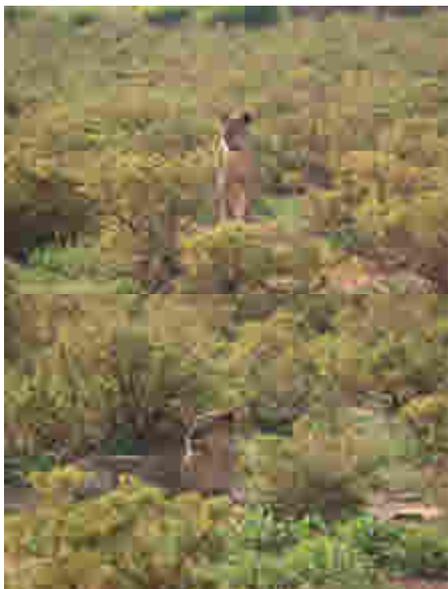
everything and take one home was source of amusement to the table although I suspect not quite so for the staff and 'guards'. In one incident a monkey crept round the side and into the restaurant under all the tables to its goal an unoccupied table laid ready for its diners, it climbed onto the seat from under the table sat down and proceeded to carefully unfold the napkin covering the bread rolls and help itself to three rolls, one in each hand and one in its mouth, I thought it very bad mannered not to refold the napkin before legging it but I do understand he or she was in quite a hurry.

We had two nights in Samburu with a very early dawn game drive the first morning, whilst it was good and interesting to see the countryside there was not a lot to see gamewise, a little disappointing. Later that day we had a guided walk around the grounds with the local ornithologist this was quite interesting although we did not see a wealth of birds. Later we watched a demonstration of dances by the local tribespeople, who also worked at the lodge, our bus was the audience nobody else bothered which was a shame, others in our party had visited a local village. About 4.00pm we went on another game drive, there were more animals about this time. During the morning there had been reports that a big cat had been seen but it was not to be found.

First Big Cat.

However as we were driving down one of the tracks in afternoon our driver suddenly stopped and looked and then looked through his binoculars and said that magic word "LION" pointing out into the scrub. Usually prior to seeing any game there was a lot of talking over the radio between all the drivers

obviously letting each other know what was going on. There was none of this this time, which means we were the first to see it, well Ricardo anyhow as we couldn't see a thing! I quickly changed over to my big lens and scanned the general area and eventually spotted it standing looking back at me but then noticed there was indeed another lion lying down a few metres closer, they were both 100-150 metres away so the people with normal cameras had no chance of seeing the cats in any detail. It is amazing how well camouflaged they are and were easily lost. Ricardo was soon on the radio and vehicles of all shapes and sizes could be seen converging



from every direction towards us. Having had our fill for the time being we drove off Ricardo stopping every few yards to tell the oncoming drivers were the beast was and bathing in the kudos. Brilliant feeling to have seen our first cat. We drove about a bit more and then came back to the throng of minibuses still viewing the lions in the now fading light, I have to admit I did have a somewhat smug feeling knowing that hopefully I had a few good shots in good light tucked safely away in my camera! Then all of a sudden there seemed to be a race back to the lodge to beat the all vehicles off the reserve by the 6.30 curfew. An exciting end to an exciting afternoon.

The next morning it was time to leave Samburu, next stop the famous Treetops lodge where the Queen learnt she was the Queen. But before that Samburu was to give us one more delight. Once we were all loaded up onto the bus off we went on a short game drive on the way out, we were giving a lift to one of the local women and

the nearest clinic to be about 40 how, we had just ney when there ry on the radio ers and we main track onto route as it would eral other vehi- in amongst quite



her small child to which turned out miles away. Any-started our jour- was a sudden flur- between the driv- turned off the a less obvious appear were sev- cles converging large under-

growth. And there lying casually on the grass ignoring the attention, a Cheetah, which although not very far away was barely distinguishable, another fine example of camouflage. Great stuff, another big cat to tick off the list!

We left Samburu via a different entrance and amazingly were soon driving along a a brand new just opened tarmac, yes tarmac road, in those 2-3 days the road had been opened. We all enjoyed the luxury of the smooth ride but it didn't last forever and then it was back to the 'normal' road conditions. All during this part of the journey there was not a peep out of the young woman and her child, as I said earlier it was after about 40 miles that we pulled off the 'road' outside the clinic and dropped our two passengers off. Someone on the bus asked Ricardo how they would get back to Samburu, he seemed unconcerned and said "Oh, she'll get a lift back easily with another bus or by the staff transport."

Is the equator bit here??? NO its after Treetops!

Treetops.

We eventually arrived at the Hotel Outspan which is the reception for Treetops in time for lunch which was very nice, we ate on the veranda, another lovely old fashioned place. Used the washroom which was in the basement, this was a huge room with the usual 'facilities' but also included really old fashioned showers and great big enamel baths, curious.



This place had even more of a colonial feel than the Holiday Inn Nairobi. We had to check in all our luggage for the night because only hand luggage or overnight bags are allowed at Treetops, then it was all back on different buses this time for the transfer to Treetops. We

arrived but the Treetops building was nowhere to be seen, we had the choice to bush walk the remaining 400 metres or so under the protection of an armed ranger or be taken directly by bus. Most chose the walk with half a dozen or so choosing the bus either because they were too lazy or more understandingly because they could not run in



case we were chased by something big and hungry. We had a bit of a safety talk before the walk and the two wooden safety stockades pointed out which we were to run and hide in the event of the ranger telling us to and not to wait for him. Now if I were a hungry animal and saw someone with a big gun pointing it at me and a group of defenceless humans running into a nice enclosed glorified lunch box I know which option I would go for. Fortunately the stockades were not required and we all made the trip quite safely, the only minor excitement came when a very bored looking water buffalo sauntered into sight in the distance. Whilst we were constantly told during the whole of

the game part of the holiday that water buffalo are the most dangerous wild animal and they kill more people than any of the other of the big five, all the ones we came upon looked the same, bored, however this may just have been a misinterpretation and in fact it was a look of disdain on their faces and of course we never got the opportunity to see them roused or riled!

Treetops is 'sold' on the fact our Queen became Queen at Treetops, it is not usually mentioned that the actual building she was staying in at the time subsequently burned down and was rebuilt on a different site on the other side of the famous waterhole! Treetops is a glorified hide with beds basically, don't get me wrong its a great place to be and I'm really glad we stayed there the one night, the emphasis being on THE ONE!

The rooms comprise of two small single beds separated by about 9" of standing room and that is it, there is no other floor space, no wonder they advise hand luggage or overnight bag for the stay. They have a system whereby you turn a small red led light on that is visible outside the room so that if any interesting animals visit the waterhole overnight they will come round and knock you up but not in the same way as other less salubrious red light districts I've been told about. They did provide an extra blanket to wrap yourself in should you wish to not show off your jim-jams or whatever else you do or do not wear in bed, however even the temptation of seeing wonderful wild animals the thought of trying to negotiate the very narrow and steep stairs in this precarious state of dress or undress and potentially seeing far worse sights of fellow travellers in similar attire made my mind up, I turned the red light off!

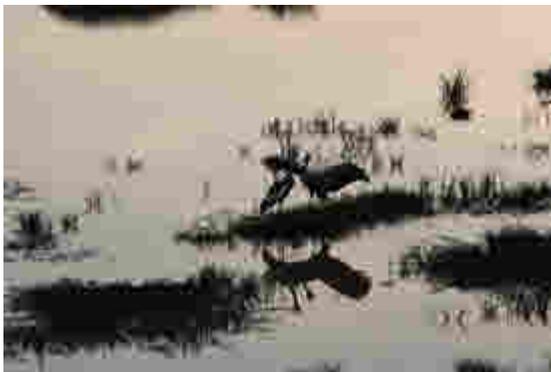
Before bed however we did have a very nice meal sat at two very long tables with equally long benches, the arrangement was quite snug to the point of every one had to get up to let someone out if they were seated on the wall side of the table. Dinner was served via a small wooden trolley that ran in a trench along the middle of the table, the idea being that plates of food were loaded and the end and then a 'take one and move it on' method employed. This worked fine but became somewhat hazardous after a large glass of beer was spilt into the trench transforming it into a canal and the action of moving the trolley generated a startling beery bow wave a bit like the river Severn bore. But apart from that the meal was very enjoyable and sociable.

Treetops is without doubt a magical place with potentially so much to see, from bats trying to catch the bugs attracted to the floodlights to elephants silently appearing to drink from the fresh water trough adjacent to the muddy water holes, when I say silent I mean their footfall, drinking causes significant gurgling and the occasional only what I can describe as an elephant sneeze. Even when there was nothing to see in the darkness just standing enjoying the

peace and tranquillity of the venue was absorbing. At one point through the darkness could be seen two very large shapes moving slowly on the far side of the waterhole, two very shy rhinos that I suspect wished to take advantage of the fresh water trough. Anticipation grew as they drew closer, hesitated and then backed off several times, this was finally spoilt by some idiot using a bright green laser presumably part a focusing system on a video camera, having this shone at them scared them away and they disappeared into the darkness. Rangers in the building were soon padding about trying to catch the offender, I'm not sure if they were successful, I had my suspicions.

We went to bed expecting to be woken up frequently by the nocturnal wanderings of partly dressed animal watchers, I woke up what seemed about 30 minutes later at 5.30am having had a really good sleep, had a quick wash as brush up in the one shared bathroom on that floor and went up onto the roof to watch the dawn and see if any wildlife was up and about. At time it was still pitch dark but slowly you could hear this part of the world start to wake and have a bit of a natter or twitter to be more accurate, the birds were first to enjoy the start of a new day. There was race across the sky between a bank of cloud and the sun, unfortunately the sun lost and had to peep over the horizon behind the victorious cloud, never mind it was still a glorious start to yet another day of this brilliant holiday.

Dawn is my favourite time of the day anywhere anytime of the year, it's the light, the clean new air, I wish I could put the feeling into words. I was visited on the roof when it was barely light by groups of rook like birds that searched for any morsels of food that may on the off chance have been left and then by lots of local brightly coloured black birds who avidly searched all round the floodlight housings looking for creepy crawlies who hadn't gone to bed yet, this was obviously a daily routine. Lin and I were the first in to get a cup tea, we must have timed our run perfectly just as we arrived in the bar/lounge area the door opened to the dining room where tea and coffee was ready. Kenyan tea is so nice and that first cup of tea of the day is always the best and what better place to be drinking it than looking down over the Treetops waterhole at a couple of crested somethings stretching and preening having been stood for the night on one long leg each, sleeping.



We were soon back on the bus back to Outspan for breakfast on the veranda where we were joined by the hotel cat, a peacock and peahen who wandered along the line of tables hopefully for the odd scrap, the cat however wandered everywhere. Seana was in her element feeding all three and wanting take them home as usual.

The Equator.

We had crossed the equator as well as the Rift Valley come to that on the way to Treetop and we were soon on our way back to Lake Navasha our next night's stop. Our driver had said we would stop at the equator on the way back, another commercial opportunity I thought. Sure enough we stopped at another curio shop with washroom plus this time a big equator sign proudly on display.

We were all the facilities encouraged to deed for one of our bus to a pate in an ex-demonstration show that the down the drain direction when hemisphere to does in the



lowed to use but then were witness and in-lucky occupant actually partici-periment. This is of course to water goes in the opposite in the southern that which it northern hemi-

sphere. The demonstration went as follows, our demonstrator had a small pot about 6" dia with a small hole in the bottom and a larger pot that contained water. The first stage was to take us 20 metres from the equator into the northern hemisphere or was it the southern, this was conveniently situated a safe distance from the passing road - a happy coincidence. Water was poured from the larger pot into the smaller pot with the small hole, allowed to settle, and then John our designated assistant from our bus dropped in the small piece of grass and sure enough it turned clockwise or was anti-clockwise. The same process was repeated on the 'equator' where believe it or not the piece of grass did not spin, WOW! The same process was repeated in the other hemi-sphere and you're really not going to believe this the grass span in the opposite direction WOW, WOW, WOW!!! **Utter rubbish of course.** A very clever slight of hand. Anyway it was good fun to watch and its nice to know you've

crossed the equator and have the certificate to prove it. John was given a small carved elephant for his participation. When back on the road there was much discussion on a shopping opportunity missed by the Equator Curio Emporium. All the demonstrators had special red teeshirts emblazoned with the name of the emporium which of course included the magic 'equator' word, however these teeshirts were not for sale (despite John's attempts) without doubt an opportunity missed.

We soon arrived at our next Curio Shop, this was different in two main ways. The first being that there was no hard sell or mention of no hassle a wonderful and refreshing change and indeed a profitable one for the shop because once visitors realised this they did express more interest in the goods and inevitably purchased more, they was still of course the need to barter. Barbara succumbed to temptation and her barteraid Sheila mediated once again. But I have to admit Barbara did purchase a beautiful malachite necklace. The other difference with this stop was that this was more like a town and was not behind gates and we had a visit from a cow which walked about the seating area searching for the odd blade of grass completely ignoring the clientele. Of the several curio shop stops this was one of the better ones.



Soon back on the road towards lunch at Lake Navasha followed by a game drive and then onto a hotel I can't remember the name of but I think it was next to the lake, hopefully when I get that far I will have remembered the name.

Lake Navasha.

We arrived at Lake Navasha just in time for lunch but had a mini-game drive from the entrance to the game lodge/hotel, during this relatively short drive we saw rhino, antelope, zebra, water buffalo and kept wanting to stop to look but I think we were running late and Ricardo was keen to get us lunched and indeed we were beginning to feel a bit peckish. The game lodge is in a fabulous setting up on a hill overlooking the lake with its flamingos which I have to say were just a pink haze in the distance. The terrain and geography of Navasha is completely different to that of Samburu. After a very pleasant lunch on the veranda overlooking a small waterhole being used by a couple of buffalo with

the lake in the distance and the occasional wispy fingers of white dust spiraling skyward from the several vehicles around the lake edge we were off on our own drive. Brilliant it was too, we saw white and black rhino the only difference is their mouths you know, zebra with young, antelope, buffalo, giraffe and then onto the lakeside out of the bus to see the flamingo quite close up. Lake Navasha is a salt lake hence the poetic white wispy fingers, but the air by the lake is quite astringent so after a few photos we moved on to see yet more wonderful creatures include a huge confusion of brother-in-laws all stood just standing glaring back at us doing nothing!



Then onto the hotel which was very grand indeed, comprising of a central building housing reception, lounges, bars and the restaurant with the accommodation in the form of houses with tiles roofs in the style of large sweeping tents, each of these 'houses' had four huge rooms 2 up, 2 down that overlooked vast landscaped grounds which led down to the lake, although we never made it that far. The contrast between this accommodation and the previous night's at Treetops could not have been greater. The grounds were open to the local wildlife and zebra, antelope and the like could be see dashing around, however significantly large and much more dangerous creatures frequented the area after dark. Reception instructed us to ensure that we phone when going to dinner so that security could escort us safely to the main building. What's this I thought are there vagabonds and bandits prowling the grounds, no it was hippos, whilst we didn't see any going to dinner we were indeed shown them on the way back grunting and grazing amongst the buildings. Another species to tick off the virtual list! One slight oddity in the main building were the log fires lit under large grand canopies within the lounge areas, maybe they thought it was cold, it certainly wasn't to us Europeans. After a good night's sleep and a very pleasant breakfast we were soon on our way to our final game park and possibly most well known destination, the Maasai Mara.

Maasai Mara.

This was another major trek with the usual Curio Shop stops. As I may have mentioned earlier the roads had not been particularly good so far, but this had not prepared us for what was to come. For the greater part of 40 or 50 miles there was no road to speak of, there were long stretches of rutted and topsey turvey sand and even longer stony stretches which I can only describe as like very very aggressive cattle grids, very uncomfortable indeed, to point of thinking, never never again. After what seemed like hours we arrived at a small village just outside the main entrance to the game reserve, we drove off the 'road' into a small enclosure to check in for the balloon trip a few days later. Puncture repairs was the mainstay of the small centre of enterprise, I wonder why! The gates were closed behind us in this enclosure and there soon a throng mainly of women crowding the entrance trying to sell souvenirs, I found this quite intimidating but came to realise later that this was not the case, all they are trying to do is earn a few shillings to feed and support their families and survive. Back on the 'road' we were through the main gates to the game reserve

followed by a reasonably uneventful drive to the lodge, we only saw giraffe, antelope, elephant, zebra and buffalo, it is amazing how easy it is to become blasé about seeing these beautiful WILD animals. We soon were checked in and shown to our lodges which were semi-detached small but very comfortable wooden bungalows scattered



around the fairly extensive grounds. Of course the first thing to be done was lunch and very nice too with very friendly and attentive staff who seemed to be there whenever something needed collecting or clearing without being at all intrusive.

After lunch we went on our first game drive, the terrain was again different to the others we had already experienced with wide open rolling plains over a huge area and again we saw all the usual animals including a rare antelope, it would be of great use if I could remember its name, Barbara knows. This was

pretty much the routine for next few days, saying this by no means suggests that this was mundane, there were some spectacular highlights.

On one drive we counted over 35 lions most of which were close up, on another 2 cheetahs trying to spot a snack, another there were 20 elephants in one group with young at various ages from only a few weeks old to 3 or 4 years old. Another day we travelled just across the border into Tanzania a very casual and laid back affair. No passport control, the 'guard' cadged a lift in our bus up the hill to the big



lump of concrete with Welcome to Tanzania painted on it, another 'guard' sauntered out from his hut about 100 metres away had a big of a chat and a laugh with the other guard and Ricardo and then sauntered back to his side of the border.

This tome is not meant to be a where where of washrooms but I just have to mention this. There on top of this hill in the middle of nowhere, admittedly on the border of two African countries was and I assume still is a washroom, granted not the most luxuriously appointed facility in the world but nevertheless a washroom, in this particular case comprising of an 'L' shaped concrete wall about 5 feet high.

Oddly from the top of this hill there was not one animal to be seen anywhere, near or far except for a solitary large black butterfly with white spots. We were soon back on the bumpy bus on our way to another reserve called County Council of Transmara - Mara Conservancy. As



we crossed the river here there were quite a large group of large hippos mostly lying on the bank but there were one or two submerged at the river's edge. We went through into the reserve and had a delightful picnic on top of a hill under a tree. This is a popular destination for local school trips as there is now quite an emphasis on the value of the countryside and its inhabitants in both monetary and quality of life terms. Whilst we were there a bus from a local

primary school arrived, Barbara grabbed the opportunity to pass on her supply of pens and exercise books she had specially brought with her on holiday to give to a worthwhile cause.

Help!

Whilst Kenya is rich in wildlife and the local populations appear to be reasonably content with life living is difficult and certainly not prosperous monetarily speaking. As a result most schools are desperately short of even the basic things like pens, pencils paper and are genuinely grateful to receive and contributions. I wonder if things could improve if travel agents were to mention that this sort of small donation will be much appreciated and improve the lives of so many at very little individual cost. Maybe the reason they don't is because they wish to avoid highlighting the poorer side of the glamorous destinations they are selling. I can also see that causing this sort of thing to become large and organised would inevitably result in people's kindness and generosity sadly being misused and corrupted. In the future we will ensure we take a few pens, pencils, erasers, paper etc.

Enough of my preaching on with this increasingly extended account of what was our best holiday ever.

The Balloon Trip.

The highlight of the last days and possibly the whole holiday was without doubt the balloon trip. We had to be up and out ready for collection by 5.00am, the hotel provided tea and coffee to get us started but no breakfast that was included in the balloon trip. As we were driven to the takeoff site in the pitch dark before dawn started to soften in the



East, but even then there were animals wandering including hyena and zebra, strange to see them in the dark. The darkness of night had broken by the time we arrived at departure site and we were talked through the safety procedures and taken through security including a detectory wand thing waved over us before being directed to one of two huge red and yellow balloons being prepared for take off. The balloon baskets hold 16 passengers in 4 compartments of 4 with a central compartment for the pilot. Our pilot was one of the most softly spoken and laid back Americans I have ever met with the driest of

dry sense of humour and was able to effortlessly put the nervous at ease. The procedure for embarking and take off was to clamber over the ends of the basket using the foot holes if possible and then sit on a large block of foam grab hold of loops of rope and push your head back against the outside wall off the basket this was in the basket fell over during take off to avoid whiplash. When sat down even my head was a full 6 inches below the top edge of the basket. As all sixteen of us sat there hanging on for dear life with the ground crews hands helping anchor the basket to the ground and the gas burners roaring the tongue of fire up into the inflated balloon, Mike, the pilot, said "When I say, everyone stand up and wave to the crew and shout thanks", what seemed like only a few seconds later came the words "Ok, everyone up" which we all did

and looked expecting the crew to be at eye level only to find we were already about 40 foot up with the ground crew waving up at us, we hadn't felt a thing. The sun had just broken through the skyline in a spectacular sunrise. The next 80 minutes flew past in a seamless stream of wonderment, from being hundreds of feet off the ground down to 2 or 3 feet off the ground skimming



along the tops of the grasses.

We saw a pair of young inexperienced lions stalking and chasing an antelope who had no trouble dancing away from them, then one decided to go after a warthog by going down its burrow, all that could be seen of the lion was its bottom half stuck in the air with its tail swishing side to side, the front half was down the hole, apparently a foolhardy thing to do if there is a warthog at home.

We saw wilderbeast commencing their late migration across to the other side of the Serengeti plains. Everyone says how quiet it is up there when the burners are switched off and it is, honest, so peaceful and tranquil. A photographic opportunity not to be missed, and it wasn't, Mike even had a camera rigged so that



photos could be taken of the basket and its occupants whilst aloft.

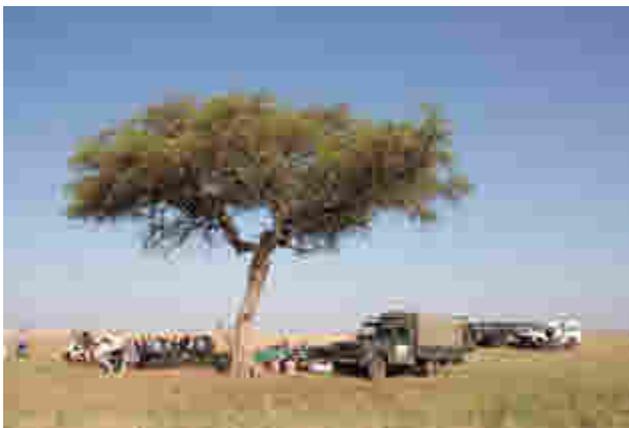
Sadly, it was soon time to descend for the last time in a suitable landing zone to where our ground crew was travelling in their Landrovers. We took up our landing positions, the same as take off, and waited for the bump and hopefully safe landing without any falling over and dragging, the next thing we knew the hands grabbed the basket edge and the smiling faces appeared over the basket edge, nice one!



Disembarking was a somewhat inelegant affair for some more of a controlled fall over rather than a seamless exit. To get the huge and heavy basket onto its trailer the pilot 'flies' the balloon and then releases a flap to let the hot air out, simple, another photo opportunity all the passengers grouped in front of the basket on its trailer with the balloon still partially inflated.

Then we were taken off in a large Landrover driven by Mike the pilot to our picnic site. This had been positioned on top of a hill under a solitary tree where

two long tables with white linen tableclothes and been laid with fresh cooked sausages, warm and other delicious pastries and coffee. Be-



fore we sat feast we were ice cold spar-and/or orange toasted the

crew and pilot, and it kept coming throughout the meal. It was a magical, surreal hour, including a Land Rover with skirts used as a bush toilet, a barbecue, hot food, ice cold bubbly, delicious pastries, and the most strange, looking at photos of ourselves in a ballon basket hundreds of feet in the air on laptop computers and taking away DVDs of our excursion all on the top of a

hill under a single tree in a stunning landscape in Africa. A memory that will always be with me.

If anyone reading this has the opportunity to do a similar trip, DO IT! I'm not a great lover of heights a feeling shared to a greater degree by at least one fellow traveller, her immediate reaction was "CAN WE DO IT AGAIN!" I fully agreed. There was reference to fear of heights in the supplied excursion notes where it was suggested that fear of heights is usually attributed to situations being directly connected to the ground, eg., being on top of a high building or cliff, in my experience there is something in this, I'm not afraid of flying and you don't get much higher than that. If you think you are nervous of heights **STILL DO THE BALLOON FLIGHT** believe me you won't regret it, if you don't you will for ever wish you had.

After a short game drive back to the hotel we were told by the rest of our bus that we were seen during their own early morning game drive and Barbara had pictures to prove it. Up until our very last game drive we had seen all but one of the Big Five as they are known.

Last days of our safari holiday followed the same routine breakfast, early morning game drive and then lunch and then an end of afternoon/early evening game drive, the sunrise and sunset are at about the same time every day, about 6am and 6pm, so the light starts to fade from about 5pm. Generally our drives were fairly uneventful but nevertheless enjoyable and enthralling. I forgot to say earlier as we first enter the reserve we did get a puncture, Ricardo was soon on the radio and help was on hand from other buses to change the wheel. This had its amusing side. John was the only passenger allowed to get out of the bus, this was from necessity rather than choice because the jack, tools etc were under his seat, but he was under instructions not to wander off. Ricardo took on an overseeing management role rather than a hands on approach in the wheel change operation with drivers from another bus from our group plus another from a completely separate tour doing the actual work under constant (and unnecessary) instruction from Ricardo, this was all done in good humour with lots of banter. Unsurprisingly they were obviously used to wheel changing. The very next day we were no further than 300 metres away from where we had the puncture watching a pride of about 12 lions with their recent kill, danger is never far away!

We had seen elephant, lion, water buffalo and rhinoceros but not the most elusive leopard. Suddenly there was great activity on the radios between the drivers, Ricardo did a U turn and we dashed off in the opposite direction and soon joined a group of vehicles gathered round a tree in the bush, yes we all thought, "what are we supposed to be looking at" and then Ricardo said the



word "Leopard". At first glance it was just a tree but then with a second glance there it was reclining in the branches of the tree, a leopard stretched out as comfortable as could be, it made the hairs stand up on the back of my neck, NUMBER FIVE! Because I was running out of storage cards for my camera

I had purchased another big one from the shop in the hotel so was able to fire off loads and loads of shots without the fear of running out of space, excellent. Later on the same drive we came across the 12 lions and their recent kill I mentioned earlier, and I was merrily clicking away when my camera displayed an error saying the storage



card was corrupt, I quickly changed over cards to my last and smallest card and carried on shooting. It wasn't until later I suddenly realised that I may have lost all the leopard shots as they were on the now corrupt card. As soon as we got back to the hotel I tried to back up the corrupt card onto the portable drive I had with me that held all the backups of the other cards, it seemed to work and what is more the card appeared to be working again, so I put it back in the camera as there was still loads of space available.

The Americans Are Coming!

All during our last full day small aircraft had been flying in to the hotel's landing strip all day. We were to find out later that evening at dinner that the hotel had been inundated with Americans and Japanese. The previous relative tranquility and decorum of meal times was shattered by the colonials from across the water. I have never experienced such a display of arrogance, greed, rudeness, bullying, inconsideration and pig ignorance. They were incapable of talking quietly, they were very capable of piling their multiple plates high with food and not eating most of it, they were very good at pushing people out of the way, they were also very good at bullying and treating the staff like the

lowest of low. One horrifying example of this was by the leader of a group of religious missionaries that bellowed at one of the poor waitresses to get him "A BOTTLE OF COLA HERE NOW!!!!" whilst jabbing one index finger towards this poor girl and banging on the table with the other. The bottle of cola appeared on the table only to be left untouched by this 'delightful' 'Christian' American. I hasten to add that this influx of Yanks were not all of the same group or party, however their general behaviour was similar. What a contrast from Mike our delightful American pilot of the balloon no wonder he had left his country of birth. Made me ashamed to be white, thank goodness we were leaving in the morning.

Not wanting to end this part of my holiday account on a low I'll tell you about Daniel a young Maasai warrior employed to keep the local animal population under control in the hotel grounds. Like all the staff he was very friendly and helpful and willing to engage in conversation if prompted, he was also very handsome and had charisma and was a bit of a favourite and the subject of many a photo. We were able to have a brief chat just before we left and were able to find out a bit more about him. He lived in the village just outside the reserve where we had stopped to register for our balloon flight this was 10 Km from the hotel. He had not been to school but had taught himself English, he was paying for his younger brother to go through school, he was married with one child but still lived with his extended family. He walked the 10Km to work every day on his own through the bush but sometimes got a lift back by hotel transport. When asked about what about the dangerous animals, his response was a smile and the words "Animals run away when they see us" pointing at his bright native clothes. A delightful young man.

Back to Nairobi.

Now this part of our holiday was coming to a close in one way it was good to be leaving to get away from the infernal Americans but in another way it was sad that our small band of travellers would disband and no longer be sharing spectacular animals and panoramic views of this beautiful country, but we also realised just how tiring the hectic schedule had been and started to look forward to the holiday's second half, the beach and doing absolutely nothing for a few days.

The trip back to the Holiday Inn in Nairobi was uneventful, we arrived at lunchtime. John, Seana, Barbara and Sheila were all travelling back to Heath-

row that night about 11.00pm so had a bit of a wait we had time for a leisurely lunch and a lounge about before we were off to the airport and onto Mombasa. I always find it strange ending a holiday having got to know fellow holiday-makers in passing almost, but this time it felt doubly strange as the six of us had started to get to know each other quite well, then you arrive, disembark from the bus, disperse and go your separate ways never to see each other again. We were soon at the airport with the other couple who had had their second destination changed like us together with several other people from our group who were going to the more touristy destinations near Mombasa.

Mombasa and Beyond.

The flight was very straightforward and at 45 minutes quite short, Mount Kilimanjaro was visible in the distance its snow covered peak soaring high above the clouds. Then we were down landed, luggage collected and out into the exit area beginning to wonder what this different destination was to be. Somewhat apprehensively we answered "Gazi" to the Kuoni representative's question of "Where to?" hoping that he would know all about it, fortunately the response was "Oh, yes you've been transferred from Kinondo haven't you", phew. It was much much warmer than where we had come from. We were led away together with the other couple to a 30 seater bus that was to be our transport to Gazi which according to the rep may take up to 2 hours depending on the ferry. Ferry? So with our luggage on board off the four of us went with a driver and co-driver in this great big bus towards Mombasa city. By this time it was dusk and all the shops were lit and it was disconcerting to see that whilst the shop fronts looked normal the counters inside where all protected by substantial steel grills, what sort of a city is Mombasa? The traffic was crackers, with the taxi minibuses adorned with flashing strings of lights, strobes with ultra violet interior lighting a bit like some futuristic film.

Then we came upon the ferry and luckily were able to drive straight on, time that just right. Unfortunately a large bus had broken down on its deck and 6 people were trying to push it up the slope off the ferry, a futile exercise. We parked up and waited for the other vehicles drive on, this soon happened then a bell or whistle was sounded which was the signal for all the foot passengers to come on board. What can only be described as a tidal wave of humanity surged down the slope onto the craft, there were hundreds and hundreds, another disconcerting moment. We crossed the fairly narrow stretch of water used by ocean going container ships on their way to the large nearby port.

There are three ferries that run twenty four hours a day with one being loaded each side and one in transit so to speak. As we landed the wave of humanity swept onto land and up the slope and away in no time at all.

We drove through the busy Mombasa suburban streets that were lined with small stalls selling all manner of produce all lit by single kerosene open flame lamps, this went on for several miles but slowly this bedlam like scene softened into houses with the occasional shop. I later read that fumes from kerosene lamps are the biggest single killer in Kenya. Our co-driver was on and off the phone all during the journey and as we were about to leave the last few buildings behind I noticed a large four wheel drive vehicle flash its lights as we passed. From then on the co-driver kept nervously looking back over his shoulder to the road behind us, sure enough vehicle lights kept appearing in the distance getting quite close and then falling back, I don't think anyone else had noticed this but I could not help but keep watching the co-driver and looking back at the same time as he. The bedlam like atmosphere and the fact that two British people had been murdered in the Mombasa area two weeks before our holiday did sort of spark my imagination. Apart from these two vehicles the road in both directions was deserted then all of a sudden there was a sign with Gazi and we turned off the road onto a winding tree lined track by this time the four wheel drive vehicle was right behind us. Outside it was pitch dark without a light in sight, and we kept driving along this winding tree-lined track until we came upon a set large metal closed gates which were opened as we stopped, "Okay we are here" said the driver.

Gazi Retreat.

We were met by a small man in tribal costume carrying a spear and a knobkierri who gestured we follow him into the grounds, it was still hot, not that I was complaining. Just inside we were warmly greeted by Stephanie the hotel owner who led us straight to our 'tents' unzipped the outer flap and took us inside



to the wonderfully cool interior with its huge four poster kingsize bed with the Swahilli word for welcome 'Karibu' spelt out in flower petals. We are going to

like it here we both thought. After a quick freshen up we found our way to the restaurant and had a couple of drinks a delicious dinner followed by a comfortable sleep looking forward to exploring our new surroundings the next morning. I did ask our Kuoni rep during his visit the next morning about the following vehicle during our transfer, he said that they provide an escort vehicle when travelling and night on quiet roads just to be safe. I said I'm glad they do but that it may be a good idea to tell the people they are transporting.

Our dwelling for the next few days was a bit more than a tent. Granted it was



primarily a tent of canvas construction but with significant enhancements, the canvas part included zip up windows with a separate lounge area with directors chairs a table and two deck chairs, the canvas was se-

curely fixed to a two foot high brick wall. At the back of the tent was a full height brick built bathroom with walk in shower as well as the usual accoutrements. The whole of the tent and bathroom was under a palm thatched shelter.



The area of the the retreat was I would guess about 150 metres wide and stretched back from its beachfront about 300 metres with eight similar dwellings for guests scattered around a swimming pool and about 100 metres down a flower bordered winding path to the spacious bar and restaurant which was on the first floor of a large similarly palm thatched open sided building which overlooked a small creek, access to the beach was via a small wooden bridge. Dotted around the site were lots of tall graceful coconut palms complete with coconuts towering high over the brightly flowering shrubs scattered about. A beautiful, beautiful serene and tranquil setting, ideal for relaxing after our travels.

As I may have said already the staff had been so very amenable and friendly at all the previous places we had stayed, here they were the same but even more friendly and helpful without being pushy or over attentive and at the same time enjoying a bit of a joke, banter and the opportunity to talk. Nice people.

Between the restaurant and the beach was a stretch of pure white soft sand dotted with palm trees with mango trees in the water. A few metres to the left were fishermen's boats pulled up onto the beach near the access to their village. I got up early one morning hoping to see the sunrise over the bay which I did but was also pleased and interested to watch the fishermen preparing to go to work. Their craft varied from small single handmade dugouts to quite large hand built but motor driven boats that held a dozen or so men to the odd fibreglass boats. One of the single man dugouts was being dug-out while we were there a long and laborious task tackled with quiet patience day after day. Dawn was a peaceful and very enjoyable affair crowned by a stunningly tasty pot of coffee at a comfortable settee in the restaurant and a nice chat with one of the staff, bliss. Who then offered to bring tea to our tent as one of them did every morning and afternoon to each tent.

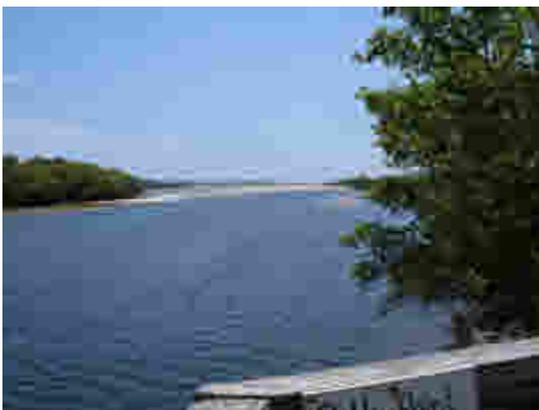
About an hour before lunch and dinner the chef would come round with the menu and ask what you would like, nice change not to have to wander round buffets choosing your food. After dinner was also different to usual, people would move to a square of comfy settees and armchairs set round a huge low table have drinks and chat about



everything and nothing, Stephanie and her husband, and their puppy, were often there, with Stephanie gently cajoling people into trying different drinks and being a great hostess engaging and stimulating the conversations along. Stephanie did give us a couple of updates on how the French rugby team were fairing at Kinondo. One time she phoned her manager there to let him know she was visiting but he pleaded with her that it was not necessary, she finally got the reason out of him, apparently that particular day was a naked day, not a pretty sight! Another day was a tricolor day various bits of the guests were painted as the French flag photographed and then displayed on the fridge behind the bar, I say again not a pretty sight. These after dinner gatherings could go on to wee small hours or sometimes until dawn although I don't think they did when we were there. A few days of doing nothing except sleep, eat, walk, read, swim in all combinations, in glorious unbroken sunshine in temperatures in the mid-thirties.

Gazi Women Boardwalk.

We had one very local excursion to the Gazi Women Boardwalk, a conservation scheme managed by the women of the local village. A boardwalk has been built by the locals through and in the mangroves with almost unbelievable patience and sympathy for the environment and the very mangroves they are meant to show off. The result is a wonderfully higgledy-piggledy hand built walkway of locally sourced materials where



possible that twists and turns through the mangroves in a route determined by the mangroves rather than a line on a plan. Funded surprisingly by the EEC in Brussels, it's heartening to see that something good does actually come out of the EEC. The boardwalk is work in progress and will eventually run in a loop that finishes near the village.

One of the hotel staff escorted us to the boardwalk and then a local villager gave us the tour explaining the project its aims, describing the different mangroves and it's wildlife ending with a walk through the village.

Please if you are in the area and get the opportunity to visit please, please do so and take some pens and exercise books with you for the school.

There was one moment of slight excitement during these days of leisure. We were sat at our tent reading or doing nothing, I can't remember, suddenly something small and dark and extremely fast scuttled across the floor and headed into the lounge area of the tent and disappeared under the lounge. The guy who did our rooms saw us looking and came over and asked and started

looking, he thought it would be a lizard but continued to search the tent from top to bottom, we hoped it hadn't hidden somewhere surprising for us later. A short while later Lin pointed to the thatched roof and said there's a snake! Sure enough there was a small green snake about three foot long weaving its way through the thatch. Neither of us were particularly



alarmed but were naturally curious to know if it was dangerous. Our staring and pointing at the roof attracted the attention of our room bloke and one of the gardeners who also seemed interested and somewhat surprised to see a snake, the gardener chap said it wasn't dangerous and that it was a green mamba! I'm no reptile expert but I seemed to remember that a mamba is in fact quite dangerous. Turned out that our snake was a harmless green striped grass snake, after that we were quite happy to be sharing our lodgings with him or her, but more importantly he or she did not mind us sharing his or her home either.

Considering we did nothing for these few days time absolutely flew by and it was soon time to leave and whilst we were almost ready to go home it was never the less sad to be leaving. Stephanie made a point of coming round and saying goodbye and giving everyone a hug before we left . One of the few destinations I've visited that I genuinely would love to go back to.

That's the end really of what was the most memorable holiday we have ever had, over a month later as I finish this account everything is still so very fresh in my mind and I'm sure will be with me for a longtime yet. What was going to be a brief account of our trip grew into something quite large, but I hope you enjoyed it.

Lastly a significantly incomplete list of what I found interesting:

All the animals of course.
The people - so friendly.
The country - so diverse.
Cashew nut trees.
Coffee bushes.
Coconut palms.
Small land crabs on the beach.
Pineapple plantations.
Mango trees.
The Rift Valley.
Mount Kenya.
Kilimanjaro.

Here are some of the things I forgot to write about and should have really.

The lunch stop at the Trout Farm on the way to Samburu.



The Thompson's Falls named after the chap who discovered them and who also named the gazelle



The hippos wandering about the grounds at the Keekrock Lodge (Maasai Mara) looked like someone has meandered about with a lawn mower in the middle of the night.