

So ... This is Africa!

A Letter Home from a New Expat

A rich kaleidoscope of colour shimmers brightly under the hot equatorial sky. The monochromatic plantations of the fertile north, merge into impressive gardens of Jacaranda, Frangipani, Bougainvillea and Flame Trees. The burnished earth offers a visual relief from the dusty bush and deposits a russet tint on the otherwise pallid pigment of the elephants' hide. The southern plantations of sisal, mango and coconut, fan out from the roads in orderly and regimented ranks.

From the plains to the bush, the savannah to the forests, the cost to the five borders – Kenya is as dazzling and as diverse as a patchwork quilt.

.... AND THEN THERE IS MOMBASA

A remarkable melting pot of cultures and tribes. The exotic Arab, Asian and African cultures could have produced a city of psychedelic mysticism and sensual, gastronomic delights. Instead, Mombasa's unvarnished and cosmopolitan canvas is soiled with wretched dwellings of poverty and indifference.

The city appears paralysed in an antiquated and long forgotten time-warp. The roads are made of fatigued tarmac or crumbling coral murrum. Driving is hazardous and most of the drivers appear moronic. In almost every pothole rests a weary, overfed or pregnant goat, insisted we make a detour rather than respond to our ceaseless reminders of its folly.

Where the avenues once had tended grass verges and an abundance of flora, there are corroded cars, refuse and debris. A semblance of a former glory struggles to hang on to an insecure and dusty life. The streets are lined with flimsy shanty shops – and vendors selling tea, corn and various other native beverages and bitings.

Old, ruptured and tattered tyres have become street loungers for the over-exerted or the work-resistant. The parking meters are abandoned, wobbling and tilting together to remind each other of more glorious and affluent days.

Wires of telecommunication and technology twist undisciplined black lines from building to building. The crows enjoy these advantageous perches from which to scream their impromptu lectures – and most insistently – over the unyielding traffic. The shops have a paucity of stimulation, quality and cleanliness. Stock is limited, tired and outdated, and a choice is a mere fantasy.

We must anticipate and accept continuous water shortages, stifling power-cuts and incessant telephone malfunctions. We must courageously defy exposure to Malaria and personal assault. We must – because 'this is Africa'.

YET ...

... We can spend weekends on safari and camp in tents with double beds, flushing loos and operational showers – or purely relax in small, back-to-basic Bandas along the south or north coast. We can jetski, snorkel, windsurf, waterski or scuba dive. We can learn to fly, go deep sea fishing or relax to the sound of the sea sensitively licking the exotic and romantic coast.

We can revel in the wonders of the wildlife on our doorstep, where the birds are exquisite the frogs both loud in dress and voice, and the Vervet monkeys comedians of the treetops and patios.

The audacious and roguish primates' reputation is poor and unquestionable... they may steal – perfume from this house and fruit from another – yet to others they come to play, tenderly socialise and gather in family groups on patios and lawns. They dance at their reflections in the windows and mischievously taunt our pets. The dogs silently and suspiciously patrol the property's perimeters to shield us from the vervet invaders – any confrontation climaxes in shrieks of delight and howls of frustration.

We can eat out like monarchs – always in the open and under. Majestic 'makuti' roofs of arresting architecture. The coconut palms standing tall and erect, like telegraph poles, are surely Africa's most important asset, providing uses for roofing, building, industry, food, drink, implements, matting – and more.

We can befriend weary giant tortoises of twelve decades, who gently graze and puff at our feet, or admire shiny black *Jongolulus* purposefully trek paths across our patios. We can feed bush-babies whose ears are acutely

tuned, like soft leathery radar, to elicit and amplify the flagrant gossip of the African night.

We can stroke and feed fish on the coral reef or watch speechlessly and sympathetically as weary turtles nest on our beaches. We can find elephants aimlessly and silently hiking too close for comfort, or wonder at the unpretentious and serene rock hyrax, the elephants' sticky padded and tiny relative.

We have been surprised by the friendliness of the people and the desire of some to rob us of everything we possess. We have been appalled by the squalor that the people accept and live with, amongst the extremes of wealth, unparalleled wildlife and a thriving tourist trade.

We are privileged to experience such diversity, untold adventures and this marvellous opportunity to reawaken our senses, knowledge and understand of Africa ... because, most important of all ...AFRICA HAS SOUL!

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Journal of the East Africa Women's
League
1997