

Kenya 2016 - Kenya in a changing world

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As this is my third trip to Kenya I am changing my journal a little, hopefully to reflect what I have learned in the past and write more on the changes and developments in the area and the people I have come to know and understand a little more.

We have the same three weeks each year, in a resort called Royal Reserve, on the coast north of Mombasa; John has been coming here for around eight years, with a few years break, so is well know to the staff.

For those who may have read and remembered last year's journal, John and I started out following a bout of coughs and colds and were feeling less than energetic; this year we were hale and hearty and raring to go.....

Friday 1st January 2016

It was a cold grey, typical winters day when our taxi collected us from our home to take us to Heathrow Airport. December had been the wettest and warmest on record so parts of the country were waterlogged and the south coast had been battered by gales; enough to disturb our sleep, night after night. So it was with great joy and optimism that we greeted this year's holiday; our lovely lady taxi driver was prompt, fast and just great.

We were, as ever, very early for the flight; we like to mooch about the airport, drink coffee and generally chill. One of our favourite coffee shops is Nero 's and whilst we were endeavouring to relax, a large family group of young Orientals, maybe Chinese, ordered some type of beverage with at least six inches of whipped cream and chocolate bits on top...I mused that they were still all very thin.... odd, how do they do that!

When the information boards showed that our Kenya Flight gates were open for baggage drop, we scooted off to show our pre-booked boarding cards and headed for security checks. John always sets the alarms off; his braces are the usual cause!

Once through and into the departures area, we were free to brows the shops and get some real food. We know that once on the aircraft, our hot meal is not served until about 9.30, so best not to get too hungry,

We found a decent place to eat and sat observing our surroundings and 'people watching', one of my favourite occupations. Alongside shops like Harrods and other designer outlets along the concourse, there was a shell fish and oyster bar called Cavier House and Previour, Creators of Fine Gastronomy; we have never seen anyone eat

there...ever...One because it horrendously expensive and two, you sit in full public gaze whilst far too many waiters hang around you. I would never dream of eating oysters and drinking champagne, whilst sitting on high bar stools in a shopping mall!

As we were waiting for our food to arrive, I noticed a large plaque on the restaurant wall, it read "It is better to travel well than arrive- Buddha" must take note I thought....

The flight left at 7pm and was to last eight and half hours; even though we had tried to book decent seats before we left home, we found ourselves in a row with less than enough legroom for John. He spent the flight constantly adjusting his six-foot three-inch frame, most of which is comprised of legs, to get even a short time in comfort! In fact, most of the journey saw John with his legs stretched out into the aisle, being bumped by the passing trolleys.

We were in a set of set of three seats, me in the middle, John on my left and a small Indian lady travelling alone, on my right. We exchanged a few words, about important things like "which toilets were out of order" and were astonished to see her later, curl her legs into the lotus position under her 'salwar kameez' and fall fast asleep. She talked about her travels to see family in London and Nairobi, where she lived and apart from her traditional dress this lady was very modern, with short hair, dyed a shade of ginger which looked rather strange. I wished I had been able to get my body into a place of comfort, enough to sleep.

Saturday 2nd January - Happy Birthday Shelly

We eventually arrived at Nairobi Airport and queued, not very patiently, to clear immigration. The arrivals hall was hot and the wait was long, but thinking about the quote from Buddha again..... we were still travelling...!

We retrieved our baggage and then embarked on the walk across the airport to Domestic Departures to get our connecting flight to Mombasa. Much better than the transfer last year, when I was being pushed along in a wheel chair...

Two more security checks and on the very last one a mini pair of scissors from my holiday sewing set showed up and was confiscated...third scan, so why not before?

Next the short trip to Moi Airport (Mombasa) where we were given another snack and coffee, this time by a tall and stately Air Hostess called Peggotty; her name conjured up thoughts of the Dickensian housekeeper in 'David Copperfield' ... and did not fit her at all.

Our driver met us at the Arrivals Gate to take us to Royal Reserve and to our horror he was driving an eight seater safari van....no air conditioning and it was 33 degrees. He lifted the top up to give us some air, but as the drive through Mombasa was more

stationery than moving, it was not much help. Think....Buddha again! It always took us a couple of days to acclimatise and being tired, it was not a comfortable journey.

Nevertheless, on arrival at the resort we were happy to be there and meet and greet the staff. We always accept the fact that our apartment will still be getting cleaned and ready. But.....this time we were told that we would be having a different place “Much better, nicer for you, good view, new fridge, TV that works, bed with proper mosquito net...” etc. and eventually we accepted the change. As it transpired it was a good move.

Monday 4th January - Happy Birthday Florence (now 8 years old)

Sunday and Monday were uneventful really, settling back into the African holiday way of life; getting fresh fruit and fish from the beach boys and Monday shopping at Nakumatt for our basic provisions. This is the main supermarket in the City Mall just outside Mombasa and there are many nice shops, the best being the CafePatisseri where we buy decent bread and have coffee and almond croissants for our mid-morning break. It is a highlight that we look forward to each year and every time we visit.



Mr Simon, the safari organiser, and close friend, called in to see us; as ever making suggestions for our trips. All the usual goings on, of our first few days.

Our regular 'beach boys' are Sampson and Moses; they helped to get John's feet better last year and gave him 'a check over' on the beach this time.



We hoped we do some business with them, apart from general shopping. They make a decent percentage on selling a safari package so it was very important to them and when we eventually booked to go to Tsarvo West, they were very happy.

Before we had been able to go shopping, we had used the restaurant for a couple of meals, one of which was breakfast; accompanied by two cats, no..... not the big cats, and a troupe of black faced vervet monkeys, intent in getting as much fruit off the nearby bushes as possible.



We also met the new Restaurant/Catering Manager, a lovely lady called Rose, dressed in white, who greeted us with courtesy and a big smile.



What was striking, was the consistent decline and deterioration in the area as a whole and even at RR; as last year, the unfinished and the empty hotels and apartments blocks along the coast road stood like dusty ghosts, the roads with even more potholes but the locals busied themselves around the street markets as usual...life goes on.

There was more evidence of building though, with piles of sand and gravel on the roadside, destined for buildings we were told.

The coastal resorts are reasonably full around Christmas and the New Year, mostly with Kenyans; locals and people from Nairobi having holidays. The drop in numbers is marked when they depart, the children start school and businesses gets back to normal. Then the tourist season would have started, but has now become severely depleted as very

few tourists arrive. It's like we have this huge complex to ourselves (almost) with a skeleton staff and everyone needing to do some business. It is hard work with so little money about.

Our intention was to spread our money around again this year; a little for many, is better than much for one. We eventually decided to take one safari from the beach boys we know and trust and one from Mr Simon.

We also had decided to make this holiday a continuation of our present healthy lifestyle; with walks on the beach most days, fresh food, mainly cooked by me; this is no hardship as I love cooking ... even on a very strange gas stove....and of course the ever present glass or two of wine with dinner.....!

During our beach walk on Monday afternoon we came across, or more accurately, we were harangued, by a different or new to us, beach boy called John 2. He was making necklaces from shells and beads and we eventually bought a small bracelet from him. It is not easy to barter, which is expected, and get a good price and this man took to pleading for more than we offered, just so his daughter could go to school this week. It is difficult to say no in these circumstances and as most schooling costs money, almost everyone we meet is in the same position.



Another walk introduced John to his first taste of fresh coconut water; we watched the beach boy trim the husk down to the fruit layer with consummate ease...and a good heavy knife! The coconut water was sweet and refreshing and as we paid for two, we had one trimmed coconut to take back to the apartment with us!



The mornings are mostly beautiful; sea and sky in mottled blues and greys of light cloud. The lagoon changes every moment; first shallow waters, then receding with the tide to reveal greens of algae and weed, and silvery pools into which terns dive and egrets paddle.

Looking outwards the lagoon closes on the Indian Ocean with crashing surf, the sound of which we can hear clearly from our rooms.

Wednesday 6th January

Tuesday seemed to pass in a blur; everything takes time and our most pressing arrangements for safari's were all sorted out. Tsarvo West with Sampson and Moses and Masai Mara with Mr Simon.

Shopping day, so another trip to Nakumatt, this time with a car full. Two ladies on holiday with family from Nairobi and a man who is a regular at RR. Once again we had our coffee at CafePatisseri and when getting the bread at the bakery, we found some lovely little almond cakes, so we got some to take back to RR. Very indulgent....

After lunch we decided to go and use the computer bureau at reception, only to find that nothing was working and there was no internet connection anyway! We then spent a happy half an hour with Abdul, the Guest Relations Manager, complaining....

Abdul made some interesting comments on the news report in their daily paper, that tourism from the UK is set to boom in 2016. According to the Rough Guide publishers, Kenya will be in the top ten destinations..... well I hope so...! Abdul was not so sure, but the new Governor of Kilifi County, the coastal region, was at least doing something to encourage more tourists. There were new roads being built and the fast rail connection from Nairobi to Mombasa was almost complete; shortening the journey from ten hours to five.

The afternoon found us collecting fresh vegetables and a huge pineapple from Moses and Sampson, I purchased a shell necklace to match the bracelet from John 2, the beach boy and John bought two small figurines from Augustus, a regular on the beach, who carves the most amazing wooden pieces.

To see the joy and relief when we spent some money with them was almost heart-breaking. There are more beach boys than tourists; not good for either group. The locals have very little other sources of income; they do not have cars, maybe a small motor bike in a few households, or they walk everywhere or take matatus. The children go to school when there is enough money to pay the teacher and they live on the food staples of maize flour, rice and beans.

Mr Simon called to see us again, with reference to the payments due for our trip to the Mara, he sat and had a glass of wine with us.... just as well. He noticed that our settee was wet.....water had been dripping from the air conditioning unit, maybe for a while. He called the maintenance people for us, the man came and it continued to drip into a bowl. The unit needed gassing, when?.....OKwait and see!

Thursday 7th January

Thursday dawned hot and sticky with low cloud but an assortment of birds on the lagoon and even an African pied wagtail lurking around the resort. *Not my picture they move too fast....*

Lots of swifts circling over the lagoon catching insects; it's hard to realise that these are the same birds who fly back to the UK to breed in our summer.

There was no air-conditioning in the main lounge as we waited for it to be fixed, so we just hoped that it would be put right before evening and fortunately it was. It was also the first day I got a swim.....the pool, the small one right in front of the apartment, had been closed for cleaning on Tuesday and Wednesdaydon't ask....

everything in Kenya takes an inordinate amount of time.



African pied wagtail



As we had to leave for Tsavo West at 5.30am on Friday it was a day of preparations, packing our safari clothes and a breakfast to take with us.

Friday 8th January

We had a hot and sticky night with no air-con; the electric had gone off about midnight and did not come on in time for our departure...so tea and coffee made from boiled water in a pan on the gas stove and our two little torches and two candles provided just enough light to see our packing finished and packed breakfast assembled. Thank goodness we had already sorted ourselves out on the previous day. Note to self, take head torches next year.....

We groped our way from the apartment to the main gate to see the safari vehicle waiting; Moses, Sampson and another guy were to come with us to Mtwapa office where we paid our final bill, and we were introduced to our driver Dowdi.

It was quite a relief to be on the road, even it was only 5.30am.....Little did we know what more was to come.

We negotiated Mombasa quickly, before the main rush hour started and headed off on the A109 to Nairobi, not going all the way of course, we would turn off and head West after about 150 kilometres.

What we had not been prepared for, was the amount of lorries and trucks on the road; the new port had been opened since we were on a 'road safari' in January 2014 and the subsequent increase of heavy traffic was marked. It is the largest deep water port in Africa and was funded by Chinese investment, as is the new, not yet completed railway line to Nairobi.

Obviously no thought had been put into how the trucks, never mind the tourists get around as after a couple of hours the tarmac road gave way to unmade up road. There were deep groves where the heavy trucks had ploughed through, pot holes and great clouds of dust. This was the most uncomfortable part of journey; we were jolted around and had to hang to on the roof grabs to avoid falling. It made us very anxious, even to the point where we thought we should abandon this trip all together and re book for next year...!

We eventually came to the end of the unmade road, 15 kilometres of it and hit tarmac again; we know that the roads are in some state of dilapidation, but seeing the occasional huge truck on its side having succumbed to the drop at the side of the track, abandoned as unrecoverable, was a little chilling.

At a point near the town of Voi, the main road teamed up the new rail line, from Mombasa to Nairobi, and ran alongside; this was quite something to behold. Chinese investment, using local labour, creating new industries for cement, gravel extraction and all the materials needed and importing heavy machinery to do some of the hard work. At least, much needed major progress with the country's infrastructure was being made at last.

Our comfort stop was familiar as it was a regular coffee stop on the route north, used by many of the safari companies. One was expected to run the gauntlet of Curios, in other words all local handmade crafts, carved figures and trinkets, walk through the shop to get to the coffee area and on to the toilets.

Whilst there, we deliberated as to the possibility of returning home or going on with the tour. We spoke to another guide, waiting for his passengers who assured us that the worst was over and a wonderful safari was in front of us!.... only another four hours and we arrived at the entrance to Tsarvo West park. We did not arrive at the Ngulia Lodge, our home for two nights, until 1.30pm, rather achy and very, very tired.



We had just enough stamina to manage to eat a decent lunch, overlooking the park and then back in the safari vehicle for a game drive, to and around the black rhino sanctuary. The black rhino is a very endangered species; all rhinos are elusive and hard to spot and we were unable to find anything but some foot prints on this trip.

Back at the lodge, we had hoped to see the leopard which, we were told, came for a meal of meat, hung on a feeding station each evening, in full view of the diners, but no luck. *The picture is of a young waiter, detailed to cut down the previous night's untaken meat.*

On our return to the lodge for the evening, after being on the go for fourteen hours, we had a really nice dinner and glass of wine and collapsed into bed.

Our room was small but quite adequate with a nice shower and facilities; John had asked for a floor standing fan as there was no air-con and boy did we need it...! Problem being, the lodge was so far from habitation the electricity was only available for a few hours, during times when most needed; it was deemed that night time was not one of those times. It was also not advisable to keep our little balcony door open as the baboons and bats would have found their way in to join us.....so a hot and sticky night but quite bearable as exhaustion got us to sleep.



The following morning was our first and last complete day, so we arranged with Dowdi to take us to Mzima Springs. John had been there some years ago and sort of remembered it, saying it was a good place to see. Well it was like an oasis in the desert, though of course Tsarvo West was no desert. Mzima was a lush area of spring waters, starting in Kilimanjaro, running through the Sagala hills and pouring out of the ground, pure and clean.

The water then caused pools deep enough for crocodiles and hippos to live, and then it flowed all the way down the rivers to Mombasa. We saw the crocs and hippos alright, but only in the distance, not close enough to get pictures.

Our guide there was a lovely young lady in military style uniform and a gun! She explained that should elephants come near she would shoot to scare them off. The elephants had definitely been there, as there were droppings and some trees were recently damaged.

It was only about a kilometres walk around the site, during which we were led to a hut with steps leading down to an underground (under water) viewing area. It was not as John had remembered which was a shame. When he had been before there were many hippos in the water and visitors could see them swimming along.....this time only a few colourful fish could be viewed.



Back on the road again and on our route back to the lodge for lunch Dowdi took us through an extinct volcano. The Chaimu Crater was not that old, in fact the last eruption was only about 200 years ago; the lava flow, cold of course, still looked amazing. A high wall of black basalt rocks traversed down the side of the crater as far as we could see, eventually coming to a stop against a large hill on the other side of the valley.



As we drove through the rocky hillside John spotted, a goat like animal on top of a rock. Dowdi said it was a rare sighting of a Klipspringer; a small goat like antelope and found up the heights of up to 4,000 feet.



Our afternoon drive was back to the Rhino sanctuary, where once again we were unsuccessful in spotting one.... though we had some spectacular views of giraffes feeding amongst the bush. When all we see are the long necks swaying around, it reminds me of Jurassic Park!



Dowdi also pointed out a monitor lizard, so much larger that we had imagined and on our way back, almost to the lodge, a leopard tortoise crossed our path, not as slowly as I expected. It was good to see one in its real home, not in a back garden in England!

There were very few guests at the lodge so we got excellent and friendly service and spent our mealtimes watching rose coloured starlings and little squirrels with tails like bottle brushes running around and looking for scraps. We even saw a giant millipede at close quarters.....many legs but not very scary!



Sunday 10th January

We started the day with a late (for safaris) breakfast and set off back home at 8am; we were not really expecting to see very much wild life on the way as the bush was so lush and thick, so were surprised to see a small herd of buffalo blocking our way. No one messes with buffalo, they are prone to get edgy and charge, but Dowdi moved the vehicle gently forward and they dispersed; looking vaguely miffed at our very existence.



The dik-dik are the most common and the smallest antelope to be found in Kenya, they were everywhere this year and maybe that is why the leopard was absent from the feeding station at the lodge...!



A few minutes later I caught sight of an elephant in the bushes next to the track and he obligingly stood around, letting us take nice close ups.....very, very close up.....

We eventually got to the main road again and took our last look at the Tsarvo Park and hills, and prepared ourselves for the road journey home.

The highway's old name was Mackinnon Road, now the A109, but some small villages used the old name as a point of reference. So there are small shops, one ironically called Mackinnon Road Supermarket, at about four-foot-wide and a depth of about eight feet, I guess it may have had some items for sale! There was a shop called Gladys Town; I would say about the same size as all the little shanty shops and the supermarket, selling goodness knows what as the sign gave no clues. We did seem however, one remarkable business called the 'Corrugated Steel Company, Pickling Division', just set back from the road with parking for visitors....it just made us laugh.

John was finding the noise in the vehicle a little too much, so stuffed some tissues in his ears.... very fetching!

Petrol stations abound and are increasing daily; petrol costs around 86.50 shillings a litre and diesel around 73.80, approximately 57p and 48p respectively. The stations are almost as common as the dik-dik.



In the new port at Mombasa, Shell and BP have built a new oil refinery to service the docks and new industries. We then heard on the radio that the price of crude has fallen to an all-time low.....changing world.

Talking about the radio, Simon and Kay (my eldest son and wife) bought us a world radio for Christmas and it has been a great success, we can get BBC World Service, clear as a bell, so can keep in touch with the news a bit better this year.

On our return to Royal Reserve we talked to the beach boys and Sampson in particular thanked us very much for booking our safari through them. They split the commission around the village, and his share enabled his children to go school for a few weeks. Makes you think...



Monday 11 January

A quiet couple of days ahead of us but still no internet, so Mr Simon decided to buy us a USB modem (at our cost) which would plug into our net-book computer and gain access like a phone. Happy to say it worked and we found that I had 180 and John had 56 emails in our 'In' Boxes, but at least we could send a communication to the family.

Royal Reserve was empty, one apartment in use on the far side and just us on the beach side. You may remember from my previous journal that there are two parts to the resort separated by a dirt road, used by locals. There is a large pool and restaurant on the other side and we have the beach and a small pool in which I swim when I can. The walk is all of a few yards from one side to the other.

Tuesday 12 January

Rather a squall in the night and very high tides, we had a full moon on Monday so I think that would be the reason. But as we had our first cups of tea and coffee on the balcony there was quite a wind; first time this has occurred during the times we visit. It is normally very still and humid until around 10am when the wind starts, only dropping at dusk. More signs of the climate changing I would think.

I took advantage of the quiet and had an early swim; only the guards around and not even a pool attendant. I was however joined by a couple of African pied wagtails and a hooded crow, waiting for me to displace the water enough for them to take a drink. At this point I would like my readers not to picture a hippopotamus entering the pool please!

John took some time birding from the balcony with his scope; brings it every year and we both enjoy watching the world go by..... including the birds.....

There was a massage still to look forward to, booked for 2pm; it's amazing that the little beauty parlour is still going with so few visitors, but at around £7.50 including a tip, it's an opportunity I can't miss, and it is always amazing!

The afternoon, or part of it, was spent with me preparing a meal of bits of left-overs from the fridge, including some chicken from the supermarket the previous week and spinach from the beach boys.... making a decent meal from nothing is something I find enjoyable. I know, strange woman.....

Wednesday was Nakumatt and food shopping; good thing as we were clean out of food and wine. We also get the opportunity to talk to people again...even if it is only the driver. Fortunately, we still find lots to talk about between ourselves, discussing the day, people and things; though I guess for some couples, this enforced privacy could be the end of a lifetime of bliss!

Wednesday 13th January

At 6.30am we were greeted by an exceptionally high tide, the waves high on the beach and the reef not even visible.

There was a regular dog walker, a local man with three dogs all the same breed; John commented that they looked like 'Lowri' dogs, rather stick like, with tails straight up in the air, but that day they were unable to get past the resort as the waves were too high and the beach had disappeared. We heard their plaintive cries as the owner tried to carry one of them around the rocks, but they were rather frightened and kept running away from him. The dogs were light framed and the waves, if they hit them, would dash them on the rocks. Self-preservation ruled and they must have gone inland and used the road.



We spend some time during the day in preparation for the safari to the Masai Mara the following day, we had dinner at our usual time and just as we cleared up around 8pm Mr Simon arrived. He was wearing an Arsenal football top with the O2 logo spread across his expanding stomach, the O looking more oval than round!

He was in good form and though I expected to hear more about our forthcoming trip, the time was taken up with football chat, only interrupted by Simon's phone constantly ringing. He is a regular Mr Fixit; getting transport for some and accommodation for others. Small fry jobs but done in volume it makes him an income.

Thursday 14th January

Masai Mara - take two....

Car was due at 5.40am so up early again, at least this time we had electricity so making our preparations was easy.

Dawn rose just about the time our taxi reached the outskirts of Mombasa but 'wake up' on the streets of Kenya had started long before that. People on their way to work, children to school and road side shops getting ready to open up.



Tuk-tuks, essentially motor scooters towing a two seater cabin (like rickshaws) and matatus, small buses always crammed to the roof tops, which roar around at breakneck speed, were all touting for business.

It's not easy to reconcile the poverty of many with the middle classes; the shanties against the high rise 'luxury' apartment blocks, with prices that would sound like Monopoly money to the needy.



Mombasa is an island city and on the way to the airport the road passes over a bridge and into the area of rubbish dumps; some smouldering and sending foul smelling smoke over the road. I had heard a radio program some weeks before about the children who scavenge on these dumps. Without shoes they are prone to getting a parasitic worm in their feet called Jiggers; they have to be removed as they bury into the foot, but it is so painful that most times this has to be done under anaesthetic. There is no free health service, so this program was about a charity that looks after the children and pays for the nurses. It seems that the country is at this time, unable to look after the very poor and children are still being used and traumatised, I hope this changes very soon.

Whilst we were sitting around at the Mombasa Safari Flights terminal building; now furnished with a television, hot and cold water and coffee, we spotted the pilots who had taken us out to the Mara the previous year,

There were three craft on the ground and the pilots made their way to one craft, not ours we were told. 'Our' pilots eventually arrived and as we were the only passengers departing from Moi Airport, we got the seats directly behind the pilots, so John had the extra leg room.

John had noticed the huge Pilots Operating Manual stuck between their seats....it was referred to on several occasions.....not that we found that worrying...much!



The first stop was Diani Beach as usual, picking up the rest of the travellers, then on for the two and quarter hours to the first stop on the Mara.

The weather was perfect with just some light cloud that we flew through; so the views of Mount Kilimanjaro after about three quarter of an hour were good enough to photograph. The snow covering the rim of the crater

seemed less than last year, but it said that it never melts.

Below us were the dense patches of bush and miles of open plains. Some roads go straight, like Roman roads, from town to town and others meander around little settlements, large rocky outcrops, fields of maize and cattle enclosures. Africa is vast.



I love flying over Lake Natron in the Rift Valley; the colours vary from pale blue, grey and pink. This area is one of the most fertile regions on our planet and has been farmed for centuries by colonials for coffee, tea and cattle and now also grapes for some decent wine.

We then could see the Lebtron Hills, forming great mounds on our flight path.....it paid to have a map this year, it was good to chart our route as we flew!

We reached the Mara and noticed how wet everywhere was; January is usually hot and dry but this year the land was marshy in places, with an abundance of watering holes.

We made two short stops to drop passengers when we reached the Mara triangle, as it is known, eventually arriving at Olkiombo, our air strip at 4,800 feet above sea level, with then, only us on board...and the pilots I hasten to add....

The driver, there to take us to Ashnils Camp, asked us to wait a short time in the 'arrival's lounge'; a timber framed, thatched, open sided hut, with displays of tribal art hanging around, until the next plane landed and the pilots who were to come with us. They would be staying overnight at the camp and flying off in a day or so. They were the pilots we remembered from last year, so were very friendly.



We took the long way to the camp, as we would normally do, a game drive which was part of the safari. It appeared that this was the first time the pilots had been on one, a safari I mean; startled expressions came over their faces as we plunged down the side of a river, through the quite deep water and up the other side. That took their minds off their gadgets for a while!

On our arrival at Ashnils we were given a tent overlooking the river; I say tent but the structure has wooden floors, balcony, fitted bathroom, lovely lamps and four poster bed with top quality mosquito nets!

We lunched very well, the food there was extremely good, and we rested with our coffee on the terrace watching the hippos. We had had an amazing welcome, Vincent our waiter from last year greeted us like old friends, the chef and the manager, Edwin, all came and greeted us with big welcoming smiles. On returning to our room we found a complimentary bottle of wine with a 'thank you for coming back' note. How nice was that?



Musa, our guide last year, had been in touch and was waiting at 4pm to take us out on our first long game drive. We were so happy to see him, our emails over the year and even at the last minute had paid off. He was just as delighted to see us, lots of hugs and handshakes, but we know he is in great demand so we felt privileged to have his expertise for a couple of days.

We set off on the drive but the light was poor and there was rain in the air; it had been like this for three months we were told. January was normally hot and dry but this year things were different. It was also cold; normal temperature is around 30 degrees at this altitude but it must have been more like 20. Musa commented that this was climate change and “We should stop messing with the earth and let nature get back to normal, the weather was doing strange things to the animals”. We told him that where we live on the south coast of England, November and December had been wet and warm, there again not as expected. Topsy-turvy world!

This is a picture of water buck, rarely seen at close quarters, but enjoying the extra water and marshy landscape.



Nevertheless, Musa took the tracks he knew so well across the Mara in search of Nobo the notorious lion killing lion. Nobo was the largest and fiercest of the lions on the Mara around at that time, and sure enough Musa found him.

He was watching his latest conquest (female) sort out his dinner; the lioness was on the hunt a little way off, pondering on the activities of an antelope, but it looked like a

long stalk. The pair had been ‘baby making’ in Musa’s words for seven days and not bothered to eat. Now the honeymoon was over and hunger returned.

Even though we did see lots of animals and birds on that game drive, the lions took our breath away and eventually, quite tired, we returned to the lodge for dinner. The evening was cold and damp, fortunately we had both packed warm tops to wear; there was also a strong wind which had made the tent noisy in the afternoon but diminished in strength at night, and we were happy to find the hot water bottle in the bed.



Friday 15th January

Early start with the alarm going off at 5.30am and after a quick coffee with Musa in the main lounge and collecting our packed breakfast, we set off to see the sunrise over the Gama Hills. The weather was showing signs of improvement and as the sun rose the temperature rose with it.



The morning game drive was remarkable only by the absence of the animals we were looking for; in particular, the leopard, cheetah and rhino. Lots of others to see and after a short stop for breakfast we came across buffalo and many species of antelope in small and medium sized herds.

Over breakfast Musa reminded us of his adopted twin daughters; now twelve years old; they were doing well at their boarding school in Talek. He supports them and the school and has them home in the December holidays; he commented that if they had been left in a Masai village they would have been given in marriage at eleven or twelve years old and would have had no hope of an education.

He talked about the changing world and having to leave the old ways behind now; at least his girls will have a great start in life.

On our travels we passed a vehicle with a complement of Park Rangers, they look after the Mara and keep the animals safe from poaching.



They had a chat with Musa, he is well known...

We arrived back at the lodge around 11am and sat watching the hippos in the river. we were very lucky to see a mother and baby; mum shepherding her youngster from following in her wake, to upfront and up the river as she walked behind, eventually grounding on the bank for a sleep in the sun. As we watched we could see several other mums and babies.... looked rather like a crèche.



After lunch we took a rest, despite the high wind rustling the tent flaps (John can sleep anywhere) and freshened up for the 4pm game drive. Rather like Royal Reserve it seemed we were almost the only guests, we hoped the situation would improve as the evening people arrived.



This drive proved very fruitful; we found the two brothers of Nobo the dominant lion, who had seen off all competition, killed all the young that he had not sired, and chased off his brothers.

They were sleeping under a tree, breathing heavily and very fat after eating well, not even noticing us or even the many flies that surrounded them.

We also saw a Hammerkop in flight and rare sighting of a Kori bustard, see right, not seen before so we were very pleased.



There was what looked like a mini migration happening, as herds of Thompson's gazelles, Topi and zebra approximately two hundred in total, moved swiftly in a line across the land, only to stop some way off and start grazing again. Not a real migration but quite spectacular anyway.

At dinner that evening a new group, a party of seven from the USA, took a table near to us and we could hear them discussing the animals and they sounded very knowledgeable. We guessed they may be from a Natural History Club as the ages and sexes did not make a family group and one of the older men had a camera that was more professional than we would normally see, with a huge telescopic zoom lens.

Saturday 16th January

We were woken by the sound of hippos snorting at each other, back on the river from their night time grazing on land.

It was the day to go home, back to Royal Reserve, so after breakfast we packed up, checked out and said our many goodbyes. I took some time out on the tent balcony as we were getting ready to leave, taking in the sights, smells and sounds of the African

bush; monkeys chattering, birds chirping and hippos engaging in their daily business. I was hoping that we may be back on the Mara another time, in the not too distant future.

At 8am we met Musa for our last game drive, and he was set on finding Rhino, cheetah and even leopard if he could. It was quite a way into the morning and the sun was getting hot as we passed another safari vehicle. The driver informed Musa that the cheetah known as Malika (Little Angel) and her cubs had been seen not far away, so we drove quickly to the area and sure enough, there they were, resting under a bush. The cubs at eighteen months old were almost ready to start lives on their own and as they were a large as mum it would not be long. They were indistinct; their coats making ideally camouflage in the light and under a bush made the light even worse, but John got this amazing picture.



We had lunch on the Mara, under a tree, in an area that was used by other tourists as a place for a sundowner, there was evidence of a fire and logs on which to sit but we did not tarry long, as by then the insects were a nuisance and it was very hot.



We arrived at the airstrip early for the flight to see our craft standing in the sun. A tin box with wings in the heat of the African plains.....not good I thought! Anyway eventually the pilots emerged from lunch at the nearby lodge and as they were the ones who had been with us at Ashnils, we were greeted with hands shakes and big smiles.

As we were the first passengers, we got the good seats with leg room, said a sad goodbye to Musa and prepared ourselves for the flight back to Mombasa. With only two stops before Diani it would only be a two and a quarter hour flight.

But then we ran into storms, the plane was jolted about it bit and we saw the occasional flash of lightning but the pilots were quite serene, obviously well used to that kind of weather.

On landing there was no transport so we had to wait around again, typical of life in Kenya, hakuna matata, poly poly, take it easy, slowly slowly!



It was good to be back 'home' and as we were both quite tired we ordered dinner from the restaurant; a lovely meal of seafood, they had a good Chef on that night I reckon.

Sunday 17th January and Monday 18th January

Time to chill and rest; it is surprising how tiring travel and game drives can be.....!

The weather continued to be unpredictable; not like last year when every day was sunny! Some mornings were grey and cloudy and until the wind started at around 10am, very humid. Our early morning tea and coffee time was spent mostly indoors in the air conditioned cool of the lounge.

We had long conversations with Abdul, the RR owner's representative, about some of the small issues that surrounded our holiday at Royal Reserve. Like no telephone in the apartments which meant taking a walk when we needed something, no internet connection which entailed us purchasing a USB modem and no television stations other than football, which of course made John quite happy. We didn't even mention the lack of electricity on occasions...it's Africa after all. Thank goodness for the World Radio...!!

Tuesday 19th January

A day for treatments; I had a facial with Nora at the beauty clinic and John had a foot massage from Moses and Sampson. Made us feel even more privileged, as my facial cost about £12 and John's cost all of £5, which was a way to pay for school books for one of Sampson's children.

Wednesday 20th January

Shopping day at Nakumatt...car arrived at 9.30am from the local hotel Sun and Sand, as the RR car was still off the road. We had a very good driver but the roads are getting worse!

After our usual coffee and almond croissant at CafePassiterie we shopped for the last time. Minimal shopping really but I did go upstairs to look at the clothes. Found a lovely cotton nightdress for around £6, very happy. We also found a 'Woolworths' found around Africa I gathered, which had some lovely clothes in organic cotton.... oh yes!

On arrival at RR we were stopped whilst making our way back to the apartment from reception by one of the beach boys, carrying our fish order; instead of parrot fish we got two grey snapper, which we would be having for dinner. Last time I had cooked snapper I decided to take the cooked fish off the bone..... not again.

This time they were baked whole, though with no oven I had to improvise with a pan and another pan on top as a lid. Also the gas cooker, though I did get it sorted in a way, was kind of difficult to regulate; only a small flame was needed to poach the fish and too small a gas flame and the wind would blow it out ...! The gas was very fierce and when lighting the rings, we had to stand well back.... boom!

Living in the apartment was lovely really; we had a daily maid or man, who made the bed, cleaned around and moped the floors. Our balcony was furnished with a table and four comfy chairs and we sit outside to watch the tide come in from the Indian ocean, over the reef and back again. The sea is much nearer to us here than at home, though we can see the water from our balcony in Saltdean; the sounds of the waves and the wind are comforting at both homes.

This year it seemed that we had less birds on the lagoon; many species only in very small numbers, though we did see the Goliath Heron again, flying past us and making a regular feeding stop when the tide was out.



There were a couple of regular ibis who were often accompanied by the smaller, white egrets. The ibis seem to do all the work, probing in the sandy pools and the egrets follow closely behind, mopping up what's left.

Thursday 21st January

Day before we departed for home and we had to see Abdul again with reference to the final bill. But before that, just as we were preparing our lunch, Rose the Catering Manager and the young chef appeared at the door wishing to speak to us. It was all about the complementary dinner that Abdul has promised as compensation for the difficulties of our stay. It was all amicably agreed in the end, but we put our points and comments plainly, in the hopes that some constructive criticism would be good for the resort in the long term.

Simple economics means that lack of visitors equals loss of income, and the knock on effect is no money for upkeep of the resort or quality staff. All the people we met here did their very best in difficult circumstances, not knowing if they would be paid in full at the end of the month. Not a happy way to live.

Our final Dinner of Caesar Salad, sea food platter and banana split was to be brought up the apartment; the trouble was, at the time, there was no electricity so we were in the dark for about an hour and a half. Fortunately, we had our little torches and candles and after a while into the outage, housekeeping man brought up two more candles.

With no TV, we amused ourselves with a radio programme I had saved on the computer; Desert Islands Discs with Jack Dee, followed by the closing chapter of 'Winged Migration', a lovely DVD we brought with us. All with stored battery life; making do is what we do, getting very good at it by this stage.

The waiter, Abisai, came up to the apartment in the dark, first bringing our starter, then back with the main, just as the lights came on, and finally our desert, the chocolate ice-cream and sauce rather melted.

Friday 22nd January

Slow start to the day and for once the sun was there to greet us. We were in no rush as the car to the airport was booked for 5.30pm, we had all day.....

We did however seem to have accumulated several small bites each during the night; we sleep under a mosquito net with an electric zapper in the room and wrist bands on. So the bites were not mosquito, they were something else and they itched.....I had managed all the holiday to have only two real mozzi bites, and then to go home resembling a pepper pot was not what I wanted.

We were enthralled to see more Sacred Ibis on the lagoon early in the day; it had turned a deep shade of green being mountains of weed thrown up by the storms and the ibis had found a lovely place for breakfast.....not even bothered by egrets. There were a couple of groups of five or more and as we watched several more flew in, they are remarkable birds, with long curved beaks, ideal for dipping into shallow pools.

After our 10am coffee we started to plan the packing and sort out the apartment; we also had to meet the beach boys, Moses and Sampson at 11am to pass them some clothing brought from the UK. What they do with it is up to them; keep, give away or sell.

Saying goodbye is never easy; they will miss us and be happy when we return. We also miss Kenya and talk about our holiday and the next one during the year at frequent intervals. I keep a list of things to take next time, and of course complete this journal with our pictures.

We had a cold lunch of leftovers, a short rest and then afternoon tea. This was more than tea, we decided to have the last of the eggs, scrambled and served on toast. This was to make sure we had enough to eat before we started out at 5.30 for the long journey home.



As we sat on the balcony, having a last chat with Abdul about our next visit, we heard a load of children descend on the beach and run helter-skelter into the sea. School was out and this was a swimming lesson.... Life for the little ones is not all hardship, thank God...!!

We reluctantly bade farewell to the Indian Ocean, our apartment, the staff and ended our holiday with the drive to Mombasa airport, a transfer to Nairobi and our Dreamliner aircraft home to Heathrow.

That would be Saturday 23rd January, quite a start to another year.....

Many thanks to Simon Hett for collecting us at Heathrow and delivering the weary travellers back home.



Bye for now, more next year..... John Hinton and Diane Holliday