

March 15, 2010

Hi all. Finally I am able to access internet.

We arrived in Nairobi, Kenya on Monday May 8 after two 8 hour flights - Canada to Amsterdam, 3 hrs in the airport there (great Reicks mini-museum in the centre of the airport), and then another 8 hours to Nairobi. Seats were small and close together but the food, yes, food on an airplane!, was terrific. Although we flew over the Atlantic Ocean during the night, our second flight was during the day. Wow! We flew over the Alps in sunshine. I didn't know they were so extensive. Then we viewed the Mediterranean Sea for the first time from the air. But the biggest surprise was the Sahara Desert. It took about three hours of flying to cross it! HUGE.

We had arranged a ride from the airport with Amos through his safari tour company for \$40 (real cost found out later is about \$13 for a taxi), so, hopefully, Alec and Mckenzie can take advantage of this new information and save some money. Visa and customs were no problem and we soon got our luggage and stepped out into arrivals to a sea of signs with names of people being picked up by drivers who did not know them. In the middle at the back was a sign saying "Len and Sue". It was Amos, who signaled we should meet him near the left hand door. In the parking lot, he lead us to a huge safari 4-wheel drive! It seemed a bit much but at least we knew we were in good hands. It was 10:30 at night, a very dangerous time to be travelling the roads into Nairobi (car-jackings etc.). As we drove out of the airport, Amos pointed out zebras along side the highway in the National Park which is actually on the edge of town. He also pointed out Kibera Slum, one of the world's largest and most violent slums.

I'll tell you, arriving in Nairobi in the dark and being taken to Mama Monica's house was a very anxiety-inducing event. We finally stopped in front of an iron gate and a stone wall. Several young people rushed out and grabbed all our bags. One young woman who I later came to know as Carol, gave us a huge hug and everyone we met said "Welcome to Kenya!" Now I look back on all my fears and laugh!

For the first two days we just crashed, sleeping 13 and 14 hrs a night, getting up at noon each day, with only a couple of sleepless moments when the muezzin call to prayer sounded at 5 am. (Muslim religion) Massive jet lag like no other we have experienced.

We were treated so well by Mama Monica and her son and her nieces and her friends. She became tour-guide teaching us the ins and outs of how to travel around Nairobi by matatu (mini-vans which travel specific routes, like buses), taking us downtown Nairobi and to the City Market on day one. On subsequent days she got us to the African Animal Orphanage run by the Kenyan Wildlife Service where Kyla volunteered a few years ago, and also had her friend, Grace drive us to the Elephant Sanctuary. She fed us every time we appeared in the living room - breakfast with fresh fruits every morning - mangos, pineapple, bananas, all picked fresh. (It will be awhile before I can eat a "Canadian" banana again - no flavour.) Afternoon tea and, of course, dinner every night. She also accompanied us to buy a cell phone, so we can now receive texts (for free, I think). We already have 5 Kenyan contacts in the phone. Our number is +254. . . I can't give it to you right now as someone turned it off and the PIN number is locked in a safe which is somewhere in Lamu right now looking for a safecracker! Also in the safe are: all our

money, our two passports, both bank cards, both credit cards. Well that is a story for another day. You have already read too much!!

March 17, 2010

Well, you are probably wondering what happened with the safe. We do have our identities and our money back but only after the safe, wrapped in a plaid, plastic woven bag, travelled around Lamu by boat and donkey for quite some time, the hotel owner sending out messengers far and wide throughout the town.

We came to Lamu with a friend, Barb Kelly, after our planned 5 days to teach English in Ewaso Ngiro (where the school is to be built) was cancelled. Our first two nights were in an expensive hotel which had a safe - the very first safe we have ever had in a hotel room. We dumped everything in there except a few hundred shillings and went out to walk the beach feeling so free as we were no longer targets for theft. The next day when we tried the code, the safe would not open! The owners codes and keys also failed. Even the special code from Nairobi failed to open it. That was why Pierre (Swiss) opted for the final option which destroyed his safe. He was very good about loaning us some money until her could retrieve our belongings. When we got everything back our money belts were pitted with burn marks from the sparks created by cutting through the metal. Pierre offered to pay for them.

We suggested he buy us a beer instead. (hoping he would forgive the ones we still owed for. Alcohol is expensive on this teetotaling Muslim island) He said he'd do better than that and presented us with a lovely Italian red Reserve from his wine cellar. Needless to say, we celebrated the return of our identities that night on the beautiful rooftop veranda of our new hotel, next door to the original one. We flew into Lamu from Nairobi on a one-hour flight. It is like stepping back in time. I didn't know there were still places like this left basically people here still live regular lives untouched much by the bustle and scurry of the modern world. The streets are narrow in this town. 3000 donkeys provide the transport on land. Dhows provide the water transport taxis between Shela and Lamu and transport of goods from the mainland. There are the usual touts, but they only bothered us the first day. After that they seemed to accept that we just wanted to walk around alone.

We have been here now for a week and a half and people shout from passing boats Hi, Canada! This morning a fellow greeted me with Canada, Eh!? Everyone says hello, except for the black-cloaked Muslim women, some of whom are completely covered with only their eyes showing. It is so hot and humid here I don't know how they can stand it in those clothes.

Our first 4 days on Lamu were with Barb before she flew back to Canada. We had a lot of fun at the beach, shopping and sailing on a sunset cruise. When she left we moved to a cheaper hotel just as nice- but only 2000 Ksh, about \$24US a night with breakfast. We have been just trying to mellow out after the past two hectic months. We did hook up with Mama Monica's nephew here who was on leave from the Somali/Kenyan border. Great conversations with him about the political situation here and around the world. He may come and help us at the school when next he is in Nairobi. What a wonderful young man (27).

Yesterday we took a snorkeling cruise with an Italian couple. Amazingly we really clicked with them. They work for the UN in Italy. He works with labour unions and

writes for The Guardian newspaper in London and she works in the field of refugees and has a very controversial book coming out soon about Italy's treatments of refugees. I have to go now as we are meeting them for a drink at Petley's Inn in five minutes.

March 23, 2010

We are back in Nairobi. Kyla is here too.

Yesterday was a very moving day for us as Mama Monica took us into the dicey part of town looking for the animal beads I want to take home for wine charms. The street vendors here sold second-hand Western clothing, probably sent over in containers from the Sally Ann's of the West.

When we couldn't find the pendants we were looking for on River Road, Mama led us into an area which she later described as like the Kibera slums but only it was businesses. It was called Kariokor.

There were hundreds of huts made of corrugated iron and sticks. As we wound our way through this several acre-maze, we saw people making shoes and baskets and other things as they sat in the running oil and polluted water in the gutters. (It had poured the day before.) One man was cleaning a huge pile of second-hand shoes. Other people were literally stripping apart any mechanical, electronic object they could get their hands on. It all seemed so wrong. How the poor people here are living is by scavenging off the garbage of the Western World. This area is really an outdoor factory complex with all the work being done by hand. But it turns out that it is not the factory for the animals we were seeking.

It wasn't long before word spread though the area that we were looking for the bone animal pendants. Men began to appear with handfuls of necklaces with the pendants on. Then we found a place with a whole bag full of them. It was like following a treasure hunt from clue to clue. Mama asking and explaining, we going deeper and deeper into Kariokor. We are now negotiating price with two dealers but we are also following up another lead which may take us into Kibera to the source of the animals. We would like to get the money directly into the hands of the people who are making the goods, rather giving it to a middleman.

That was only one of the many adventures we are having.

March 29, 2010

Today, Kyla, Len and I set out from Nairobi for Ewaso Ngiro in a hired van. Finally, after three years of hearing about this place and seeing it in pictures, we were to meet the people of the village where we would build the school. After traveling for 2 and a half hours, crossing the Great Rift Valley, and passing through the large town of Narok, we spotted Ewaso Ngiro. The fence around the 7-acre plot surrounding the school was the first thing we saw, then the small stone structure currently being

used by the 70 students. A hand waved at us out of the window of that building. The community had been waiting for us since 11 am! It was now 1pm!

We quickly moved our bags into the mission house, then rushed back to the school where we were greeted with a blur of Maasai colour, 30 or so handshakes, many smiles, and speeches of introduction. It gave me goosebumps to hear the words of the committee members, first in Maa our first hearing of the Maasai language - and then in English. Then each of us spoke, hearing our words repeated in Maa and received with applause and cheering. We later met our translators Elijah and Joshua, both teachers in the area. (We have spent many wonderful hours with them since, learning about Maasai culture.)

This event was followed by a tour of the yard and the fence. This was particularly meaningful to me as I knew that it was the efforts of the children at Gravenhurst Public School who made and sold jewellery last year that had covered the cost of the fence. I have often been asked why there had to be a fence. Well, we found out when Elijah showed us the place where the elephants had broken through the fence a month before! It is now repaired. We also viewed the first tree-planting to be done on site. The community had been very productive while waiting for the mzungus to arrive.

Then it was on to tea at Mama Ashes place an invitation into a Maasai home! After 45 minutes of visiting we left the house only to discover that the community members were still waiting for us! They intended to accompany us the 2 km back to our house and they did! I feel tearful just thinking back on all that we experienced today.

March 31, 2010
Ewaso Ngiro

We awoke early this morning and went out to enjoy the sunrise over the acacia tree-lined Ewaso Ngiro river. As we gazed out over the savannah to the river, the landscape began to move. We realized there were people walking, walking from all directions, individuals, small and large groups dominated by the red of their Maasai blankets.

Later this afternoon we walked out into that landscape, also becoming a small, distant group moving across the vast Maasai Land. Amos, Joshua (the teacher), another Maasai (who turned out later to be the brother of the woman we were visiting), Kyla, Len and I used the only mode of transportation available our feet! There was something Zen about this day, about the walking. No rush, no hurry, just walking and talking as we followed the trails winding through the acacia and olelele trees, heading straight out into the plain.

At about 2 km, we met two little boys, ages 4 and 5, who attend the school. Joshua explained that they walk to school by themselves through the bush.! At 4 km we met three little girls tending a herd of cows. Amos told us there are no boys in the family so the girls take over the herding duties. Traditionally, this is the boys task. When thinking about all these children out on the savannah, I couldn't help but remember that the majority of herders deaths are at the hands of elephants who roam freely in these parts.

Eventually, we arrived at a thorn and bush-enclosed compound. We were welcomed by adults and children. In Maasai culture, adults shake hands and say Sopa in greeting. Children present the tops of their heads to be touched by adults or elders, almost like a blessing. (In our 3 days here, we must have shaken the hand of every adult and touched the head of every child in Ewaso Ngiro!)

The family we were visiting has been assisted by Kyla's parents for the past couple of years. The mother is badly disabled so her mother looks after her and her children. The brother, who had walked with us, lives on an attached plot. In addition to the mud and stick houses, the compound also contained a vegetable garden and two paddocks for calves and adult cattle.

The woman whom we were visiting appeared to greet us. Her handicap only allows her to move across the ground using her hands and feet. Kyla was told to sit beside her and was presented with a beautiful Maasai beaded necklace and pendant. Then I was asked to join her and also received a Maasai necklace which she removed from her neck. What an honour! Kyla presented the family with a solar lamp for their son to use to study at night.

Originally, we had been told the family would be preparing a meal for us, however, things turned out quite differently.

We passed through the gate to the brothers compound where we sat in the sun on the grass and enjoyed hot chai which his young wife (more about wives later) served. Extended family members materialized out of the bush to greet us as we chatted. There were 15 of us at one time or another. Fortunately we were able to communicate as Amos and Joshua translated.

As we swatted the flies away (anyone with livestock will understand their prevalence!), the brother, Malanto, appeared with a bar of soap in one hand and a bracelet in the other. He went over to Len and began to soap his hand and wrist. Getting the bracelet over his large fundi (carpenter) hands was quite a feat. I have the picture of the struggle on Malantos face as he pushed the bracelet on.

Then a young boy appeared. The boy presented Kyla with our dinner a live chicken! Well, that bird has caused us great hilarity all day. We carried it to our next stop a Maasai wedding, then home. We tied it up outside the back door with our clothesline only to be told by the night watchman that it would attract jackals so we needed to bring it inside. It spent the night in the kitchen.

The big question for us was: who would kill it? First, Len was assigned the job; then, when Geoffrey (the Kenyan on the school design team) arrived he offered to do the dirty deed. However, the situation was solved when our landlord, Alex, said he would prepare and cook it for us the following day.

My next report will be our time at the Maasai wedding celebration.

My last email left off as we were to continue on to the Maasai wedding. Here is the rest of the entry from my diary:

March 31 continued. What a day!

Following chai with the Maasai family, the six of us and the live chicken set off again. It was another 3 km walk to the home of David, the school committee treasurer, whose son, Stephen, was getting married.

Just a little about David whom we had met on two prior occasions dressed in traditional Maasai shuka (the red plaid blanket). He has the traditional elongated ears which he does not adorn with bead work. He has been the kindest and most welcoming member of the community. He has the carriage and presence of leader but the biggest smile to soften that.. We are all in love with him.

At the compound gate of the wedding house, we were met by another David, dressed in a black suit but his smile was even bigger! Our arrival was treated with great excitement. All the guests rushed out to greet us. We saw many familiar faces in the crowd. Once again we shook so many hands and patted an equal number of children's heads before being lead into the yard surrounded by the crowd.

Further excitement and laughter was caused when one woman latched onto Kyla and me insisting that we learn a Maasai dance as we entered. Our attempts to coordinate shoulder jerks, head thrusts and hip maneuvers caused everyone to laugh and cheer. Fortunately for Kyla and me, Len did not get this on film.

Then Joshua announced that the women wanted to sing a traditional Maasai song for us. What voices. One woman stepped forward and lead the singing in a call/response. Fabulous voice. During this song, our dancing friend expected us to continue to dance and insisted strongly that I join in on the song with her. I imitated various sounds which she demonstrated in a call/response counterpoint to the other women deep guttural grunts, high-pitched trills etc.

Afterward, we were invited inside the house for a plate of the wedding meal a chapatti with mutton, rice and a mashed potato and maize mixture. Other than the gristle in the meat, the food was quite tasty. Sodas were served to drink. Len sat with us, young and old, traditional and modern Maasai women chatting as best we could.

When we decided to leave, Kyla was pressed by the mother of the groom to have us stay overnight. Kyla refused firmly saying we had a guest arriving that night (Geoffrey, Alec and Karls design partner). The hospitality here is unbelievable. Everyone is so proud to share what they have with us.

Hearing of our departure, the bride emerged from the room where she had been sequestered with her family to greet us. She was SO young, beaded from head to foot and never smiling. She looked very unhappy. We later found out that this also is traditional. The bride must appear sad as she is leaving her family and will now be living with the groom's family.

What has surprised us through all of this is the openness to our taking pictures at these events. Sometimes people even ask us to take pictures of them. We were invited to have our picture taken with the bride and groom!

ASIDE (my political rant for this email!)

The reason that this is so unusual is because the influx of Western tourists on safari has created an economy based on picture-taking of Maasai in traditional clothing and

involved in traditional ceremonies. They have become the poster children of Kenyan tourism. Sad.

Ewaso Ngiro is located on the main road to the famous Masai Mara National Range (the top end of the Serengeti Plain). Even now in low season, hundreds of tourist vans roar through the town daily. Daily, we see and hear the fallout of the mindless interaction of some of the tourists with the children of Ewaso Ngiro. Children (as young as 2 and 3) rush out to the road (a highway) and call out Give me a sweet. to passing vehicles and to us, the mzungus who are walking by. Elijah told us sometimes tourist vans stop and the tourists throw handfuls of sweets out at the side of the road!!! Shocking.

I have my own little side project on the go with the kids. They already have the sentence structure Give me a ... So I am teaching them to say Give me a school. If each of those tourists gave one dollar, Oleleshwa Primary would be completed by the end of this year! (END OF RANT!)

When we left the wedding, many others did too. Three large groups set off on different trails across the savannah. Our group was about 20, headed to town, chatting and laughing. I spoke a lot with Daniel, a young high school graduate who does community development work in Ewaso Ngiro. He wants to go to University. (Yes, Janet and Marilyn, this is the Daniel whom we elected to support. We really must get that scholarship fund together!) Daniel only needs \$1000 a year. I believe he will be a great asset to his community. He is extremely articulate and has an understanding of issues beyond his years.

In town, we bade farewell to the rest of the group and continued on home another 2 km. Total walking for the day 10 km. We collapsed at home so full of our experiences that we could hardly speak. It is going to take months to process the experiences of just the past three days.

And I havent even reported on our visit to the classroom which occurred the morning of the wedding! However, Kyla has nicely covered that in her blog on the H4H site: www.harambee4humanity.org Please visit it for continuous updates and pictures about the building of the first classroom.. The site is also a place where you can read about our other projects or, if you feel moved to do so, you can click the Donate Now button and be a first-hand participant in building the second classroom which we could begin right now with a few more dollars. .
Oleseri, Sue

P.S. H4H also has a facebook page. Please join us.

April 5, 2010

Hello everyone. This morning was an eventful one. We began clearing the site for Oleleshwa Public School, in Ewaso Ngiro, Kenya!

At 9am, Len and I met on the school ground with about 20 community members armed with pangas, the Maasai version of a machete. We whacked away at prickly pear cactus, trees and aloe plants for several hours. Finally, James, the fundi (head tradesperson for the project) began stringing the site with masons twine and we

could see where the classrooms will be. At this moment, Kyla is at the hardware store in Narok purchasing a 3000 gal. tank to hold water for preparing the cement.