

It's A Hard Day's Night: the struggles of youth on Kenya's coast.

It's April 2020: the coronavirus pandemic has arrived in Kenya and though it would have been hard to imagine some months ago, our story of life on the coast (below) suddenly becomes much, much worse! The picture created is one of the rich from abroad supporting a hand-to-mouth existence for the poor who live locally. Now, with the arrival of Covid-19 the hotels are all empty, the restaurants and bars all closed.

With no safety net for the unemployed, what happens to the locals when the tourists disappear? How do mums put food on the table for their kids? The answer is hard to contemplate; the equation extremely difficult to complete. After all, $0 + 0 = 0!$

Resilience is the first word that springs to mind when listening to the stories told by young people who live near the palm-fringed seafront around Mombasa. They inhabit a world of haves and have-nots: master and servant, brought together by necessity. Both exist cheek-by-jowl with the other, though the haves have little idea how the other half lives.

With beautiful beaches shaded by tall coconut palms and an underwater wonder-world just offshore, Kenya offers a tropical environment second to none: one of the closest destinations for Europeans seeking to swap winter chill for sun-blessed paradise. Germans, Italians and Brits: all come in search of the sun and perhaps, to add some spice to their lives. It's an incredibly relaxing setting, with wonderful hotels and glorious pools ...and they love it!

But there's another story, a sub-plot if you like, that hides behind, and supports the lifestyle that tourists expect when they visit the Kenyan coast. This is the story of the young men and women who provide the everyday comforts that visitors from the North require. These servants of the rich live on the edge, within spitting distance of

the luxurious hotels, struggling desperately to make ends meet, in any way they can - to put food on the table and to bring up their kids. Put simply, these people are faced with a day-to-day struggle ... just to survive!

In brief, there are two sides to the coin: heads and it's a glossy view through the rose-coloured visitors' glasses; tails and we see the stark reality of poverty in the slums, which lie just back from the beaches where the tourists stroll. These two juxtaposed worlds are divided by the main highway, which runs northwards. To the East lies the Indian Ocean, and the hotels and houses of the wealthy; to the West, the outlying slums of Mombasa, where the service population for the East mostly live.

A good example is Shanzu Village, home to 20,000 mostly young and more-often-than-not, impoverished people. If they're lucky they work 10 or 12-hour shifts on the other side of the main road, for a monthly pay which equates to one day's wage in Europe. If they're not that lucky they become entrepreneurs of sorts and eek out a living through a small business enterprise, selling second-hand clothes or fruit and veg.: that sort of thing. If they're very unlucky and there's no job or business, then they resort to crime, or drugs, or prostitution –parameters of the poor person's jungle - just to stay alive!

Is it fair that people from Europe and North America (plus in recent years, Asia) can spend more in a week on their tropical holiday, than locals living nearby can earn in a year? Where is the equality when one person lives in air-conditioned comfort, with a mix of fine food and drinks on tap to placate their discerning pallets; while another suffers unabated tropical heat, with typhoid and malaria a constant threat, and struggles to buy even the most basic of foods and clean water.

In this two-sided socio-economic cocoon, we find those at the lower end of the income graph in deep trouble. Many have little if any education, meaning there will never be any chance of decent employment (a high school certificate, or preferably a university degree, is required just to become a waiter). Where they live can only be described as squalid – you don't get The Ritz for ten dollars a month ... or less! Something akin to an extremely ramshackle backyard shed in London or New York, is the norm for a family in this part of the world.

The poverty that comes as a result of a dire lack of income and no fallback safety net, is exploited further from outside the slums by those with power and money, who enable the booming trade in cheap drugs and stoke the three-tongued fire of drugs, crime and prostitution. Miraa (khat), chewed by vast numbers of youth to quell the appetite and provide a constant high, sits alongside marijuana as parallel paths to cocaine, which is priced down to meet poor pockets. In these parts, \$2 a day is enough to maintain a reasonable cocaine addiction.

Whether 50 cents a day for khat, or \$2 for cocaine, that money needs to come from somewhere, and that somewhere - if there's no legitimate income - is from crime or prostitution. It's not safe to walk after dark in the dark alleys of Shanzu, anywhere near the ghetto-style accommodation for young people, who live in a haze of drugs, enveloped by a broader complex of malnutrition and disease assault at knife point is high on the agenda!

Prostitutes - some as young as fifteen - earn small amounts of money (perhaps \$1 or \$2) from local clients in Shanzu, but across the highway in the tourist haunts, their income soars to the dizzy heights of 50, even 100 dollars. There can also be a crossover of crime and prostitution, when the 'bait' snares a mzungu (white person), in one of the beach bars, then calls ahead, to alert accomplices that an unsuspecting benefactor is on the way, loaded with money and an expensive phone. The mzungu is ambushed and the proceeds shared.

On the surface everything in this world of haves and have-nots looks reasonably normal. Let's face it, wherever you travel on our blue planet, there will be some sort of divide between rich and poor. But scratch that surface, here on the Kenyan coast, and you uncover an unsavoury double-edged sword, that pits untold wealth against abject poverty.
