

# Elated and frustrated by my African world.



**I first arrived in Kenya in the late 1990s, after numerous work visits through the preceding decade, to India, Bangladesh and South East Asia. So it wasn't as if I was unaware of other cultures, and unable to fathom how best to integrate and adapt. Nonetheless, I found Africa to be quite a different proposition, with a completely new set of characteristics and values.**

In those early days my pack usually held a camera for still photos, along with a small camcorder for video work. I remember being excited by the gabble of *Luo* tongues that turned up on video, taken as we wound our way through surrounding hills, on route to an outlying school near Lake Victoria. Then later I recall being energized by the vibrant colours and distinctive sounds of a local weekly market, in the central square of *Ahero*, a small provincial town, also not far from the big lake. I even sat inside a local café, to some degree overwhelmed, as my camcorder focused on events outside the open double doorway: a moving window to an African world.

The early work took me to schools in that western area of the country: the province known as Nyanza; then later, across the border to Uganda. Always the work was invigorating; over time I've come to realise that most things to do with young people can be stimulating, wherever one happens to be. But working with Kenyan kids was especially motivating, because they could rise to the occasion, despite the poor quality of the schools, and often (but not always) the mediocre standard of education:

their lot in life. In a later project I recall how, during a video hook-up to students in the UK, the Kenyan youngsters appeared to rule the roost, lacking inhibitions and able to speak with a comparative confidence and exuberance, on challenging subjects.

A few years after that opening gambit in Nyanza, I began to connect to schools further to the East, via a university-based project in the Rift Valley. Again, it was the same story: often brilliant students, constrained by inadequate standards of education. In that particular programme we even took the young teacher trainees to speak at conferences in the UK and India, and as anticipated, they shone bright amongst their compatriots from the other two countries.

For about 10 years I was based in the UK, managing projects in Kenya and India, with frequent visits (particularly to Kenya, where the infrastructure for project management was not as advanced). Then in 2007 we got the go-ahead for a new education initiative, which I had helped develop, that focused on a topic that I felt was especially important: climate change. It was then that I opted for a Kenyan stay, to concentrate my accumulated experience on the management of this new project.

That is perhaps when elation began to give way to frustration. During the initial period described above, I was operating as an itinerant worker, whilst the Kenya which surrounded me went through a significant upheaval in terms of political change, moving from the somewhat despotic rule of Daniel Arap Moi to something which looked a bit more like democracy, under Mwai Kibaki. Perhaps rather naively and along with many others, I thought this heralded significant change and a new beginning. I could not have been more wrong.

A few months after I finally decided to settle in Kenya, those blue skies and new horizons of the early 2000s were all brought crashing down by the infamous period of political violence that followed the 2007 presidential election: thousands died, and half a million people became in-country refugees. This is when I started to realise that miracles withstanding, Kenya may never overcome the elements that most impede its progress: graft, corruption, and tribalism. It was, and is, a beautiful

country, with a young people who have enormous talents and potential, but are frustrated and downtrodden by the inequities and inabilities of their political leaders. I look back now with some degree of awe at what we managed to achieve, as a small team of ten people working into the schools and youth sector, around the topic of climate change and sustainable development. Our methods built on the foundations of previous experience, year-by-year, to fashion a technique which in the end was as sophisticated as any I had seen, inside or outside Kenya.

To reduce the budget, our first office was located in my own house in Nairobi, then after some time we took up the option of a larger office in the grounds of one of our partners, a media outfit that focused on youth. We established two satellite offices in provincial centres, ran school meetings of all shapes and sizes, and generally motivated our diverse schools audience to grapple with the task of addressing climate change. Key to our method was students driving practical projects, which in some way or other tackled the devil that had been created by industrialisation, and in addition was made visible to their communities. Particularly vibrant schools expanded their small group projects, so that they became major income generating enterprises: fishponds and greenhouses were the favourites.

As an offshoot of the overall schools initiative, our Kenyan arm branched out to start up youth groups across the country: 25 in all, centred in areas where we also worked with schools, meaning that students could transit on to their nearby after-school community group. These *Climate Action Teams* (or CATs, as they became known) were designed to take the idea of entrepreneurship to a higher level, so the groups became a business enterprise, but still focused in some manner on tackling climate change. Again, an important part of this was awareness raising within their communities. This project was also taken to universities and colleges by students initially motivated through their work in schools. The young people involved, as always, were brilliant.

In retrospect it was interesting to compare how each of the three countries involved responded to practically oriented programmes for schools (It should be noted that the CATs project for out-of-school youth only operated in Kenya). British and Indian

schools were studious and tended towards the theoretical, but did produce some remarkable examples of small, awareness raising projects. One I loved, involved gardens being grown in the discarded and inverted tops of buses, on the flat roof of a school, six stories above the crowded Mumbai streets. At the opposite end of the spectrum, Kenyan schools created projects which tended towards the practical, and often extended to large money-making initiatives that centred on growing produce to either use or sell: a reflection of their relatively poor circumstance.

It was after a few years of living in Kenya that I felt compelled to expand our work with schools to the eastern seaboard. The Kenyan coast was an important part of the country which we needed to include. Until then the priority was centre and west of the country, including Nairobi, Mount Kenya, Rift Valley and Lake Victoria regions. So we decided to cast our net to incorporate the coast. I made an initial reconnaissance visit and was immediately captivated. The area reminded me of a place I had known in my younger days - beach Australia - with lots of greenery and a million palm trees, along with low rise buildings and casual lifestyle. It was the environs I had come to recognise as the trademark of the tropics the world over.

With very little persuasion, the people I worked with agreed in unison that expanding our work to the eastern seaboard was necessary (perhaps in part because the coast was viewed as a holiday destination) but I was secretly very wary of the overbearing heat and humidity, which I knew would be an everyday feature.

Working in Mombasa schools turned out as I had thought: a considerable challenge. For nine months of the year the heat was indeed oppressive, with brief respite in the June to August (so-called) winter season. One day, half-way through a multi-school seminar, I remember dousing myself with a bucket of cold water, to help maintain some cool, in front of a hundred startled onlookers. It was all in vain, but we battled on in a sweaty co-existence. Despite all this, I still loved the place; so much so that I decided to visit for a private vacation over the Christmas period.

So as a result, there I was, a year or so after first travelling to the coast, sounding out a local teacher regarding holiday prospects:

*“Kamau,” I said, “I would really like to come back to the coast for a holiday, but over Xmas the hotels are charging two or three times the normal rate. What can I do?”*

*“Hakuna matata bwana (no worries sir),” came the reply. “Let’s meet tomorrow.”*

The following day we travelled by tuk-tuk a few kilometres along the coast, away from Mombasa, turning off the main road and arriving at a coastal enclave I had not been to before: *Serena Beach*. Our three-wheeler spluttered to a stop outside a small hotel, across from the beach. It was reminiscent of an Italian scene: shuttered windows and small tables with chequered tablecloths, adorning a bricked courtyard.

Kamau looked at me inquisitively. *“What do you think?”*

*“Hey, I like it,” I replied. “If the inside matches the outside, I’ll take it without looking!”*

This was my first glimpse of *Sonia*, a small hotel at the centre of the village: quaint to look at, but, as I realised later, running on borrowed time. In fact, the hotel’s fall from grace was in many ways symptomatic of the whole area.

As chance would have it, I had missed the hay-day for *Serena Beach* by a decade or two; that was back in the 1990s, when – so I was told - a group called *The African Safari Club* ran a flotilla of fine hotels, set in place along the coast to make the most of the sun blessed beaches, and tropical marine world just offshore. They even had dedicated charter flights bringing in thousands of sunseekers from Germany and Italy and other countries to the North. All through the peak summer season in Kenya, when Europe was freezing, the *African Safari* hotels were packed. And of course, a small hotel like *Sonia* caught the overflow and reaped the benefits.

But like life in general, after the boom came the bust. This was influenced both from within and without, the downturn set in motion by Al-Qaeda’s devastating 1998 attack on the American Embassy in Nairobi, which killed hundreds. Since then, spasmodic terrorist assaults have continued, with further negative impacts on tourism; then to add fuel to the fire *African Safari* pressed the self-destruct button, with arguments between owners causing the final demise of the hotel chain. All those once-marvellous hotel resort buildings fell into disrepair, and over time became gutted ruins: mementos to the good times. I was quite happy in a sort of selfish way,

because at the end of it all there was more solitude for meditation, and a wider swathe of beach space for my daily walk, under the fading sun.

Today however, Serena Beach is on the rise again, promising to return to the top of the pile: the jewel in the crown on the Kenyan coast. This began with the remains of one *African Safari* ruin - a 200-room, 10-acre affair – being completely renovated in fine style, and another built from ground up on a much grander scale than before, some buildings in that complex rising to five or six floors. A variety of other appealing hotel-apartment complexes have also sprung up just north of the main beach precinct, adding a choice of short and long stay options for visitors.

But when I stumbled on the place a few years back, Serena Beach was still very much in the doldrums, and though we had stopped outside what my brain equated to a rustic little spot in the backstreets of Naples, on closer inspection it became quite apparent that both the hotel and its surrounds had seen better days. The receptionist was charming, and the room she showed us enormous, with not one, but two adjoining balconies. A bit of peeling paint and a few chipped tiles, but who cares, when the price is less than 20% of the trendy places down the road.

Thus, *Sonia Hotel and Apartments* became my home away from home, whenever work took me to Mombasa. I always insisted on that same room, shown to me on the very first visit, which I later came to discover was in fact the best room in the house.

Over three or four years I came to know the people well. Liz the receptionist, whom I met on the first day, became a good friend and my housekeeper some years later when I bought an apartment nearby, after Sonia had descended through poor repair to closure. James the barman, along with housemaid Vivienne were also firm favourites. But perhaps more intriguing was my coming to know the owner, a Kenyan who seemed to have made a total mess of running the place since day one.

It all started one morning over breakfast in the courtyard, when Liz happened to mention that the hotel was in receivership. The small guy with ill-fitting clothes and a sickly grin, who I assumed as the manager, was in truth employed by the bank as their overseer in situ. Liz later confided that any profits went into this guy's pocket,

and from their, paid for his addiction to drink, drugs, and young ladies. There was thus no hope of the business ever returning a profit, and it seemed likely that receivership would convert to bargain price resale, in the not-too-distant future. My long-smouldering entrepreneurial instincts were fascinated by this; I could imagine developing my very own Italian-style boutique hotel, out of what was fast becoming the decrepit ruins of Sonia.

On a subsequent visit, learning that the owner was in the building, I arranged to see him. His office turned out to be a large, relatively palatial room, better decorated and equipped than any other room I had seen to that point in time. And not unlike many senior civil servants I had become used to meeting as part of my work routine, I faced him across his voluminous, mahogany coloured desk. Then, similar to the doubts I often had with government heads, I began to wonder if he was the major reason for Sonia's fall from grace, or whether he was a victim of the times and circumstance of the moment. The fact he had concreted over the swimming pool to make a large underground water tank, I felt had probably not helped matters.

We met four or five times over the next few months, and I went to see the receiver manager, plus the bank, in Nairobi. After that I invited Norbert, a German friend - and builder-electrician by trade - to take a closer look at the place. We stayed in adjoining rooms and partied on many evenings, but during the day I was out doing my work, while he was firmly fixed on uncovering Sonia's closely guarded secrets. He took a full three days and came up at the end of it all with a long list of items that required fixing: rust encrusted water pipes, leaking rooves and failed electrics. These and many other challenges were all there.

The potential cost of renovation came in at a massive 25 million Kenya shillings (about \$US 250,000) which pointed me towards placing an offer on the table of about half the asking price. This was rejected out-of-hand, which in glorious hindsight was probably extremely fortunate, as I would have had to go into enormous debt, and that, plus the oncoming Covid-19 pandemic just around the corner, would have meant probable ruin for Sonia, and another business debacle for yours truly!

Interestingly, the bank did accept a similar offer from another (Kenyan) buyer, though I suspected underhand dealings, between the owner and the responsible bank officer, enabled this to take place. Around a year later the hotel was sold on, yet again, for not much more than half the price I had offered - something less than land value – and today, at the end of this corona virus year, Sonia sits in a half-renovated state, boarded up behind rusting iron sheets and looking distinctly forlorn.

However, I would hesitate to see this as the end of Sonia. A massive hotel development (mentioned above) is well underway almost opposite, on the beachside, with hundreds of rooms and plans for extravagant convention facilities: the largest on Kenya's coast. This venture is assured success, assuming the owner remains amongst the high echelon of politics, with shoehorn connections to large ministry and parastatal conferences, which translates to thousands upon thousands of convention goers and hotel guests: a massive and guaranteed income into eternity. The conflicts of interest of course are enormous, but this is par for the course in Kenya, where many multi-million dollar businesses are run by politicians, and their burgeoning profits enabled by politics.

Sonia, being just across the road, could benefit handsomely, because it is well known that politicians and ministry personnel will often take the option of bedding down at a reduced rate, if they can pocket the balance. As well as this, they may wish to seek out night-time pursuits such as bars and clubs, that may not be attainable on the inside, but are very much available in the immediate vicinity.

Not long after the failed bid for Sonia, and hotel ownership stardom - or downfall - I began to feel so much at home in the area, that I decided to buy a small place just a kilometre or so away from the main village: one of several apartments which surrounded a communal pool. I was drawn to the place because it was encircled and camouflaged by tall *Neem* trees and exotic palms. To add to this, the apartment was on the first floor and had a large terrace (which I later expanded even further). I loved the district, and the outdoor living style had great appeal. An additional bonus was that the floor below me was owned by a couple who visited for Xmas holidays, for

just one month of each year; for the other eleven I was in effect living in a two-story house, with a vacant ground floor: peaceful ambience guaranteed.

One of the advantages of my current beachside home is that it is situated towards the centre of a small peninsula, just a few minutes' walk from ocean going beaches on one side, and the beautiful mangroves of *Mtwapa Creek* on the other. A small cluster of fisherfolk work on the banks of the creek, so fresh *Taffy* fish is plentiful, while at low tide I can wander down to the sea beach and walk along to the Serena village for everyday needs. It has been a few years now, but I still love and very much appreciate the relaxed environment. And by design or coincidence, this my most recent residence, has given me distance and protection from the corona virus, which may not have been possible had I been living in Europe.

But there again it probably pays not to get too carried away by this situation of environmental bliss; for every silver cloud there is a darker lining. I have just described a world that viewed through rose-coloured glasses appears to be a calm and clear millpond, but closer inspection reveals an underbelly of discord which comes largely as the result of disparities in income, between the rich - which for the sake of this example includes myself - and the abjectly poor. The rich live in gated communities, behind high walls, electric fences and razor wire, driving out in their *Prados* and *Land Cruisers*; the cars alarmed and the occupants unseen behind tinted glass. In stark contrast, the poor live in squalor, and exist for a month on what the rich consume in a day. Many of the poor live in a world of drugs and prostitution ... and of course, intertwined with that, a world of crime.

And it is the world of crime which impacts – or has potential to impact – on my own existence in the area. So far nothing serious has happened, apart from minor theft, but I am always very aware that with white skin and hairy legs, I stand out like a flashing beacon to anyone from a nearby slum, who might wish to fund their never-ending cocaine habit. Not long ago a good friend of mine was accosted in his bedroom by machete wielding thieves, intent on stealing his worldly goods. On a somewhat calmer level, I know that I am fair game for the corrupt policeman who

wishes to add to his daily allowance, by catching the *mzungu* (white man) on a technical issue, while other drivers flash past, breaking road rules in all directions.

I guess what I am trying to say is that life is seldom perfect; there is almost always a risk factor. I appreciate my current lifestyle in Kenya, which I know comes with built in risks, but on balance it is for me better than the alternative.

*“And what is the alternative?”* I hear you ask.

*“Well,”* I would have to say, *“The alternative is to return to those places I have inhabited in the past: the UK where I was born, or Australia, where I lived out a large central chunk of my life.”*

Quite frankly, these alternatives would both be possible, but they both frighten me. Last time in Australia I was driving in the city, on a very broad, virtually car-free dual carriageway, where 10 or 20 cars flowed along, exactly on the speed limit and in waves that accorded with the previous traffic light. Everything - the road, the cars, the speed limit, the timing – everything was perfect. That’s what scared me: Utopia! Give me a bit of Kenyan chaos anytime (but perhaps just not too much of it!).

The other element of release in Kenya is that even though I am now into my seventies, I can still conduct business as though I am a middle-aged stripling. I drive out to cafes and shops, or the beach in the daytime and an open-air pub at night, mixing with an age range of people, both black and white, and all skin tones in between. I have seen the alternative of segregated old age in the West, which also terrifies me. I am lucky I know to have the choice. Some day of course my choice might all come crashing down. That I guess, is the risk!

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Looking back over the past couple of decades, I could sum up my major frustration with life in Kenya as the disparity between rich and poor; a disparity that seems to highlight the diametrically opposed values of trust and greed. Kenya is not bracketed with the poorest nations of the world, such as Burundi or South Sudan, yet more than 50% of its people live in abject poverty, on less than two or three dollars a day. It has one of the largest income gaps between rich and poor of any nation, and yet its

political leaders are willing and happy to let this continue. I remember some years ago, meeting one of the Ministry of Education heads in Nairobi, who appeared – on the surface - to be a fine lady, who was good at her job. Later this same person was identified as part of a high-level clique that stole a large amount of money, donated from UK to supply millions of textbooks for primary school children. At the time I thought: *“How on earth could you do that? You have money and power, yet you are still content to help impoverish your own country’s children: unbelievable!”*

This is the aspect that has frustrated me most - more and more as each year passes by - and could indeed be the reason I leave Kenya, if I ever do. It could be passed off as a different psyche, or an opposing set of values, but to me it just seemed all about people more concerned with themselves than others. More recently I wrote a poem on the issue where I attempted to summarise these frustrations:

### ***Trusting in Greed***

***Greed is the upmost value,  
As trust descends the abyss.  
The lords of greed  
Are the ones on high,  
Admired by others way down below.  
And the pyramid of greed  
Flows from bottom to top,  
Growing the seeds  
That the high ones sow.***

***Trust is a value that’s stated,  
To rank above all its mates.  
In personal terms,  
Or the public sphere,  
It underpins all the values we know.  
Those known marriage vows,  
Business deals that we make,  
Depend on the value  
Of trust that we show.***

***Greed and trust are entwined,  
Like opposite-ended souls.  
The weeds of greed  
Undermine the seeds of trust,  
Cast into the air for winds to blow.  
Those stated ideals  
Bewitched by the pull:  
The glitter of coins  
And the powers that glow.***

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Frustrated by people’s values,  
Mombasa, Kenya, 2018.

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