Expedition Report Sarah-Anne Milne

Nairobi, Kenya, July-August 2013

I spent 4 weeks of the last summer in Nairobi, Kenya. I left London Heathrow on the 15th July 2013 and headed to Doha, Qatar. My connecting flight left at 1.30am yet despite the early hour it was still 38°C. I landed in Nairobi shortly after 7am and after filling in all the required forms to enter the country I met my taxi driver. I arrived at the hostel bleary eyed and slightly shaken after a trip through the city’s morning rush hour.

My first morning in Nairobi was spent unpacking as much as it is possible to do so in an 8 bed dorm while the overly enthusiastic dog who lived at the hostel decided he wanted to help. Once I had recovered the shirt that Scooby (the dog) had decided to ‘borrow’ I ventured out of the hostel and worked out the route to the orphanage I was going to be volunteering at for four weeks.

I met Guy and Susannah Bastable who run the New Life Home Trust in 2009 in Scotland when they came to speak about their upcoming move to Nairobi. At the time I said I would go out and volunteer with them at some point but it took until the summer of 2013 that I was able to do so. The New Life Home Trust began in 1994 and was founded by Clive and Mary Beckenham as a baby rescue programme particularly for abandoned or orphaned babies with HIV. Now there are several homes and schools across Kenya run by the Trust.

The home in Nairobi has 3 nurseries; one for very young babies and those requiring special care, a second for babies aged approximately 8-12 months and the last for the toddlers up to the age of 3 years. I spent majority of my time in the Alice Hardy nursery which is for babies from approximately 8 months old. When I arrived there were 14 babies in the nursery all of whom had vastly different personalities and after a few days I was beginning to learn each of their little quirks and habits. For example one little girl loved to be moving. She was always crawling or shuffling herself around and was not at all happy if she had to stay still. She was delighted when she was introduced to one of the toys she could push around and walk with.

I easily joined in with the babies daily routine and would arrive around 8am in the morning to play with the babies and give them their morning milk while the nursery staff washed and dressed them. Each day had a different theme of clothing and Saturdays were ‘denim days’. Once everyone was washed and dressed there was about an hour for them to play before they had their morning nap. After that we took them outside for a couple of hours before they had lunch. As I discovered in the first few days there some of the babies were very easy to feed whilst others took great effort trying to convince them to eat. The after lunch nap time was normally an opportunity to go and find a clean apron.

During my time in Nairobi I also visited the Kibera slum. The enormous slum is divided into 13 villages and is approximately 5km from the city centre. There are around 800,000 people who live there, a quarter of the population of Nairobi.
There is a Bead factory in the slum that opened in 2006. They use the bones that the butcher throws out and turn them into beautifully carved and painted pieces of jewellery. The factory was once robbed of all its equipment and almost resulted in it being shut down. Luckily this was not the case and the factory continues to provide employment and skills for the people within the slum.

One of the most striking things that I noticed while being shown around the slum was the smell. Sewage flows alongside the tracks that people are walking along and it wasn’t rare to see a group of children skipping over the sewage on their way to play.

I was taken to visit the Children centre within the slum. It has 250 pupils including 11 orphans that live there. The classrooms are very small yet held desks crammed together for around 15 pupils in each room. There were chickens, goats and a sheep wandering around and roaming through the classrooms. The centre also included a seamstress who employs young mothers to teach skills necessary for obtaining employment outside of the slum.

The Kenyan-Ugandan railway runs through the slum. I was told how it once derailed and people trapped inside for a month. Unfortunately they died as there was no way to get any vehicles or help to them. The photo shows the area where the train was trapped; just to the left of the image was a steep incline making it very difficult for help to reach the people inside.

There is only one public school inside the slum which was opened by Queen Elizabeth. The other schools are run by NGOs, churches and other organisations. However the teachers in the schools are mostly high-school drop outs. So the children in the slum are receiving a poor quality of education which consequently means they do not have the opportunity to get a formal education which may allow them to get job and the chance to leave the slum.

My guide took me on a home visit to meet lady with HIV. She lives with her 4 children and grandchildren in tiny home. The home could only have been the size of a small shed yet around 8 people live there. The lady to whom I was introduced spends her days making items such as beaded bags which are bought by traders and then sold on at markets.

My third weekend in Kenya was spent in Maasai Mara National Reserve, a large game reserve in Narok County that is contiguous with the Serengeti National Park in Tanzania. The drive from Nairobi to the camp took around 5 hours including a couple of stops one of which was at a viewing point which overlooked the Great Rift Valley. We arrived at the camp in the mid afternoon and had an hour to settle in before heading off on the evening game drive. Maasai Mara is one of the national parks in which it is possible to see the Big 5 (Lion, Leopard, African Elephant,
Cape Buffalo and Rhinoceros) and the time of our visit coincided with the Great Migration in which approximately 1 million wildebeest and zebra migrate from the Serengeti to Maasai Mara. Saturday included an all day game drive leaving at 0700 and ending the day with a trip to visit the Maasai village.

My group was met by a group of young men who performed a couple of their tribal dances. Our guide then took us into the village for a tour and an explanation of Maasai life.

The village consisted of several very small houses constructed using cow dung and sticks. It takes 2 months to build and each house lasts 9 years as they are waterproof. Once this period is over the entire village moves site because of termites. The women build the houses and the men provide assistance by cutting the wood. Approximately six people live in each house plus a number of young cows and goats.

Circumcision is an important ritual in the Maasai tribes. Maasai boys are circumcised at the aged of 15 and after the ceremony they are sent to live in the Bush for 4 years. During this time they have many tasks to complete one of which is the killing of a male lion. The lion’s skin must then be returned to the village chief. If the boy returns before he completes the four years it is considered disrespectful to the village and he may not marry. However after 4 years in the Bush the boy is considered to have become a man and his family will select a bride from another village. The bride has to be selected from another village as each person in the village is most likely related to each other. Each man can take many wives and each wife will bear many children. The father of my guide had 5 wives and his mother had 8 sons and 3 daughters. The chief of the village also has 5 wives.

The Maasai diet is based on meat and blood. Cows’ blood is consumed following ceremonial events such as circumcision and sheep blood is ingested warm following slaughter.

The men spend their days taking the animals to graze. They are armed with a spear and knives because of the threat of lions attacking their flocks. My guide demonstrated how they throw one of their wooden weapons which are targeted at the head of a lion. This is intended to daze the animals allowing the man time to cut its throat. He had killed two lions during his time taking the sheep to graze and another during his 4 years in the Bush.

I returned from the safari on the Sunday afternoon and returned to the hostel at the same time as another group of people returning from another safari. We were slightly baffled to discover that the building was empty and all the furniture was gone – including my luggage. The owner of the hostel was waiting for us and explained that they had moved very suddenly the day before because of an increased threat of armed robberies of tourists walking down the quiet road the hostel was located on. She had personally packed up our luggage and ensured it was all safely moved to the temporary house while we were away.

One of the drivers collected us and drove us across the city to the temporary hostel located in a guest house. We stayed there for 5 days before the new hostel was ready to be moved into.
Unfortunately due to the distance that we were now staying from the orphanage I was unable to get there while we stayed at the guest house.

On the last day in the guesthouse and five days before I was due to leave Kenya it was reported that Nairobi Kenyatta airport had caught fire and sustained serious damage. The damage was extensive and the airport temporarily shut down but fortunately no one was injured and the airport managed to reopen later that day with a restricted service. Several of the flights had been diverted to Mombasa and the next day I met a Canadian girl who had spent what was apparently a dreadful 12 hours on a bus ride from Mombasa to Nairobi because of the problems with the airport.

We moved again 4 days before I was due to leave Kenya. The new hostel had only just finished being built and still had a rather temperamental electricity supply. It cut out on the first evening there which was then spent by candle light.

I used my last 4 days in Kenya to return to the orphanage and see the babies each day. The journey there was no longer a 10 minute walk and instead a 75 minute walk through some quite dusty roads. Unfortunately the hostel spent two days without working showers or clothes washing facilities so I attempted to clean the dust of my clothes using face wipes.

My last morning in Nairobi was spent by saying goodbye to the hostel staff with whom I had spent the last four weeks. My taxi driver took me to the airport at which point the damage the fire had caused became glaringly obvious. The entire arrivals terminal was burnt and black. The departures terminal wasn’t able to be used either so the departure lounge was instead a tent next to the planes.

The nursery in the orphanage in which I spent the majority of my time originally had 14 babies. 3 boys were moved to a different New Life Home, 1 little girl returned home to her mother and unfortunately another girl was moved to the special care unit with suspected pneumonia.

I met some lovely and inspirational people from all over the world during my stay in Kenya many of whom had interesting stories to tell about their travels or why they were in Kenya.