

Rome to Nairobi - From Ancient History to Wildlife Adventures (March 2001)

At the beginning of March 2001, I embarked on a month-long business trip to attend a United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP) meeting in Rome and to conduct a GIS training class at the UNEP headquarters in Nairobi, Kenya. After Nairobi I continued on to South Africa to visit a dear friend, Stuart, but that's another story.

I began my trip with an overnight stay at the Los Angeles Airport Sheraton Hotel in order to make an early morning flight to Atlanta and on to Rome the next day. That evening, I enjoyed a fabulous dinner at the hotel – linguine alfredo topped with copious amounts of fresh fish, shrimp, clams, and mussels! There must have been over a dozen mussels and clams, in addition to salmon, monkfish, and Alaskan cod.

At the airport the next morning, there were several passengers that were re-routed to European destinations by way of Atlanta due to a huge snowstorm in New York. Once I was aboard the new Boeing 467-400 aircraft, it was a very nice flight to Atlanta, along with a delicious cheddar cheese omelet, smoked ham, and hash brown potatoes for breakfast. After that, I watched an amazing movie directed by Robert Redford titled *"The Legend of Bagger Vance"* starring Will Smith and Matt Damon. It was beautifully filmed in South Carolina and Georgia. Later in the flight, as I went to the restroom, I saw a sign that read "No Smoking Alarm will sound" – I wasn't smoking but no alarm sounded!

We arrived in Atlanta a few minutes early, but it was a long walk from the arrival gate (T1) in the main terminal to the international gates in terminal E at the very end of the airport. Still, I had plenty of time to pick up my free award ticket on South African Airways. However, I had to pay \$137.00 in taxes. But I comforted myself with the fact that a regular roundtrip business class ticket from Nairobi to Johannesburg would have cost me well over \$3,000! After receiving my award ticket, I proceeded to the Delta Airlines International Business Class Lounge to await the boarding call for the flight to Rome. After a glass of cold beer and a small snack, I stepped aboard the plane and settled into my seat in the business class cabin. Although the aircraft at that point was only 20% occupied, we had to wait for an additional 71 passengers to board from the arrival of delayed flights. It made sense to wait for them, but it was still frustrating to sit at the gate for another hour. However, the two glasses of chilled champagne helped make it tolerable! Finally, we had everyone on board and ready to depart for the 9-hour flight to Rome. Dinner was served shortly after takeoff, and it was very enjoyable – pan roasted giant prawns in a fantastic lime-chili cream sauce! Later we were served a wonderful cheese course along with a chilled glass of Austrian Ice Wine – excellent!

Following the delicious dinner, I watched a documentary film on the PBS channel about "Nellie Bly", the first female investigative reporter to voluntarily commit herself into an infamous women's mental asylum in order to expose its cruelty! Later, after exiting the asylum, she traveled around the world in 72 days, following the route of the fictitious Jules Verne character, Phineas Fogg (*"Around the World in 80 Days"*) – the film was fascinating! Then I watched a marvelous film about a huge South African woman travelling by train from Cape Town to George along the "Garden Route" She was a very bubbly, vivacious character with a beautiful sense of humor! And the scenes of the old steam locomotive set against the stark South African landscape were stunning. She even talked the dining car chef into letting her in the kitchen to cook her special version of a local favorite called "spoon bread". All the train staff seemed to have a lot of fun with her. The film was an episode from a series called "Dinner on the Diner".

Later the next morning, the flight followed the west coast of Italy before landing in Rome amid cloudy cold weather. After a long wait for my luggage, I joined the line for a taxi to the Hotel Forum in the center of Rome. Once I had checked into a nice room overlooking the Forum, I discovered the *"Shamrock Irish Pub"* on a narrow side street nearby where I enjoyed a pint of Guinness while I watched an Italian soccer match on the TV, along with many locals. Later that evening I met up with my Esri colleagues CJ and Emmanuelle, for a drink in the hotel bar to discuss the UN meeting agenda the next day.



Hotel Forum - Rome

We shared breakfast the next morning in the hotel's rooftop restaurant where there were beautiful views of ancient Rome – a nice start to the day! On the first morning, the UN meeting consisted of typical formal presentations and lots of political discussions that were not very interesting or intelligible, at least to me. Later in the afternoon, CJ and I set up a small tabletop exhibit of Esri GIS software at the far end of the coffee bar upstairs, along with a few other vendors who had been invited to exhibit, including a couple of Esri competitors. During the “reception” we had a nice couple of hours talking with people and enjoying the complimentary drinks and hors d'oeuvres. Following the reception, we were invited to join a large group of UN staff for dinner at “*La Grotto Azura*”, a well-known Sardinian restaurant. A “set menu” had been arranged of many assorted seafood dishes – everything from appetizers to entrees. We were all seated at long tables where we feasted on a huge array of fresh, local seafood – hot & cold calamari, snails, clams, mussels, crab risotto, small fried fish, and sauteed octopus! It was truly an amazing display of dishes from the sea, and in massive amounts. To top it off there were huge amounts of fresh salad, bread, and several bottles of wine, as well as large plates of fresh fruit for dessert. At the end of the evening, some 4 hours later, three different kinds of “grappa” were served, along with plenty of espresso. *(and all of this cost each of us less than \$40, including tips – truly amazing!)*

After dinner, now midnight, Claudio insisted upon driving CJ, Emmanuelle, and me to our hotel, which ended up being Claudio's personal tour of Rome's most famous sights at night, among which were Piazza de Espana (*Spanish Steps*), Piazza di Popolo (*with a laser light show*), St Peter's Square (*beautifully lighted under a full moon*) and finally a walk through Piazza Navona under beautiful dark, quiet skies. When at last we arrived back at the Hotel Forum, it was well past 1:30am and the doorman had to let us in, the doors having been locked hours ago! Despite the late night, it was a very fun time with Claudio!

After breakfast in the hotel the next morning, we spent another day listening to very boring, very dry, and mostly unintelligible speeches before enjoying a lovely lunch on the outdoor patio atop the FAO building – the best view anywhere in Rome! Then it was back for more boring speeches in the afternoon. But at one point, Tim Foresman from the UNEP office in Nairobi stood up and made a brilliant cynical observation that the meeting had cost over half a million dollars in labor and travel expenses! *(his message – this was a grand waste of time - I couldn't have put it any better myself!)* The other “*breath of fresh air*” came when Mick, also from the UNEP office in Nairobi, made an obtuse remark comparing the rise of “Napster” to that of maps on the internet – “Mapster”!

Finally, when the meeting came to a close, CJ, Emmanuelle, and I shared a parting drink in the hotel bar as they waited for their taxi to the airport to board a late evening flight to Geneva. After they departed, I walked over to the Shamrock Irish Pub for a Guinness and joined the locals watching more Italian football games. It was fun to be in a real local neighborhood place in a huge city like Rome. Later in the evening I went to the hotel rooftop restaurant for a delicious light dinner of homemade Taglioni with fresh mussels and clams, along with a chilled glass of white wine, all while I gazed upon the lights of ancient Rome at night.

After a lovely breakfast in the hotel's rooftop restaurant the next morning, I grabbed my camera and headed for a walk through the ancient ruins of the "*Forum*" among the many huge stone columns that once formed the center of the known world for centuries.



Roman Forum

From the *Forum* I followed a beautiful old narrow street adjacent to "Palatine Hill" (*Palace Hill*) and past the Belgian Embassy. Suddenly, a small red car pulled up beside me and the driver, with a map in his hand, asked me where "*Stazione Termini*" was located? Then, as he switched to English, I saw a couple of large black plastic bags in the back seat that contained articles of clothing still in their original packaging. Instantly I flashed back to my earlier experience in Rome the previous January when a guy had stopped me to ask directions and then tried to "give" me a new leather jacket and only asked for a "small" sum of money to pay for his gas! So, with this recent memory, I said in a firm voice, "it's that way" and walked on down the street. He drove off, obviously aware that I was on to his "con" game. A few minutes later, as I rounded a corner, there he was again, now with an older couple who were clearly tourists. I walked past them and then stopped a short distance further to watch the scene unfold. At first it seemed as if he might succeed in getting the man to pay him, but the wife suddenly intervened and the deal was off! (*I silently congratulated them!*)



Circus Maximus



The greatest extent of the Roman Empire

Eventually I came to the historic "*Circus Maximus*" as the wind was starting to become very cool and blustery – a sure sign of impending rain. At the far end of the ancient racecourse, I suddenly heard the faint sound of Scottish bagpipes! And sure enough, there was a young guy standing in the middle of the huge

grassy field playing the pipes, the reason for which I couldn't fathom. But I stopped and listened from a distance, and though the sound of the music was beautiful, it seemed a bit out of place in ancient Rome. I continued on to Palatine Hill with the idea of taking a tour of the excavations of some of the earliest Roman ruins. But when I reached the entrance gate and saw the fee was 20,000 Lira, I realized my 10,000 Lira note wouldn't get me in! So, the tour of Palatine Hill will have to wait until my next visit to Rome.



Young man playing the bagpipes

Leaving Palatine Hill, I walked back to the Hotel Forum in the blustery wet weather and asked the concierge to call for a taxi to the airport. After about 10 minutes, a blue car showed up and I was told it was my ride to the airport. But as soon as I didn't see any taxi meter or sign, I realized this would be a lot more expensive, so I asked the driver how much the price would be. He didn't (*or perhaps wouldn't*) speak any English, so we had to communicate by written notes. The 85,000 Lira fee was way more than a taxi, so I told him to turn around and go back to the hotel, whereupon he took out his cell phone and called his boss as he continued driving to the airport. Then at one point, he handed the phone to me, and I told his boss, in no uncertain terms, it was either the same as the taxi fare, or it was back to the hotel! Eventually, we arrived at the airport, and the driver was most upset when I handed him the much lower taxi fare. But I didn't let his Italian curses bother me as I walked toward the airport terminal! After a long walk down a covered passageway, I arrived at the “*Leonardo da Vinci International Airport Hilton Hotel*” where I checked in for the evening since I had a very early flight the next morning. My room was very nice and the Club sandwich in the café was huge and delicious. By that time the heavy rain had finally arrived as the sun was setting. I spent the next 3 hours trying unsuccessfully to connect to my email and ended up having to send a **fax** to Esri instead. After a cold Peroni beer in the hotel bar, I retired to my room and set the alarm clock for 5:00am so as to have plenty of time to check in for the flight to Nairobi via Amsterdam the next morning.

I awoke the next morning at 5:00am in preparation to check in for the 6:40am flight to Amsterdam. As I wheeled my luggage trolley toward the passageway, I encountered a large group of people waiting for one of the only two lifts, each of which had room for just one trolley at a time. Given that the speed of the lifts was terribly slow and the group was very disorganized, I was in danger of missing my plane if I stood around any longer. So, I proceeded to take the ground route across a busy street, over a few curbs, across a small grassy area, and into the airport parking lot where I found plenty of empty lifts! As I reached the Terminal B check-in area I searched the TV monitors for the number of the KLM check-in counter, but it was nowhere to be found among the list on the monitor. Finally, I spotted an airport information person, and she told me it was counter #210 and insisted that it was indeed listed on the monitors, even as she stood beneath one which did NOT list it! When I reached the KLM counter, I pointed this out and the staff said they had been requesting the error be fixed but were told it wasn't possible! For me it was not only frustrating, but it was also a bit ominous! I raced to the KLM Business Class Lounge for a cup of cappuccino just as the lounge

opened. Once on board, I found the plane was almost full and I had a seat next to a tall black man who was also headed to Nairobi. *(as it turned out later, he also had the seat beside me on the flight from Amsterdam to Nairobi)* We were served a nice breakfast shortly after takeoff and had a spectacular view of the rugged snow-covered Alps along the French and Italian border. Upon arriving at *Schiphol Airport*, it was a long walk from the arrival gate at the far end of the terminal to the departure gate at the other end of the airport, with a short stop along the way at the KLM Business Class Lounge.

Once we boarded the flight, we were informed that the flight would be delayed because we had to wait for a new Captain! *(there was no reason given why the first Captain was being replaced)* We took off from Amsterdam in very foggy wet weather but soon settled in for a very nice flight south which took us directly over Rome again! Shortly after takeoff I was able to find an empty seat in the 3rd row of the business class cabin of the new MD-11 aircraft which used to be the former first-class cabin – very comfortable. For lunch the Halibut filet stuffed with shrimp and crab was superb, along with a chilled glass of South African Chardonnay. Later I watched the film titled “*Men of Honor*” based on the real-life story of the first black man to become a deep-sea diver in the US Navy – an excellent film. Upon arrival at Jomo Kenyatta Airport in Nairobi that evening, I took the shuttle bus to the *Trademark Hotel* near the UNEP Headquarters.

Early the next morning I woke up to find absolutely perfect weather – clear blue skies and 70 degrees. After a massive English breakfast in the hotel, Willy, the manager of the Esri East Africa office, picked me up and drove to the UNEP offices to check that the training class facilities were being properly prepared for my GIS class later in the week. Having done that, we proceeded to take a long walk around the UNEP compound which was more like a grand golf resort than an office complex.



UNEP Headquarters - Nairobi

As we came to the main administration building, we encountered a large group of young people engaged in a conference. It turned out to be a young people’s version of the UN General Assembly, and they had come from around the world to represent their countries. From the UNEP Headquarters Willy took me to a new shopping mall known as “*The Village Market*”, and as we neared the mall there were hundreds of young school children scampering around wearing bright green t-shirts for an event called the “*Charity Run*”. Willy proceeded directly through the young crowd to one of his favorite places in the mall – “*The Italian Ice Cream Place*”! We had a nice time sitting on the terrace enjoying our gelato, overlooking the courtyard under beautiful blue skies. After we returned to the hotel, I had a delicious lunch of traditional English fish & chips as I sat by the pool.

The following day, I started with a huge English breakfast in the hotel’s Safari Café and then spent an hour in the Business Center to check my email. Although it was a slow connection, at least it was stable. Around noon I headed to the gift shop, bought some postcards and stamps, ordered a cold pint of local “*White Cap Beer*”, and wrote to my friends and family. At 2:00pm, Thomas and his driver from the Esri East Africa Office arrived in a minivan to do a drive through Nairobi National Park. We drove to Willy’s house where we found him still packing provisions for the trip. *(Willy is originally from Holland, but he has taken on the “slow pace” of life so typical of Africa)* Thomas was unable to join us due to the recent death of his older

brother. Once Willy had everything packed for the trip, and as we drove toward the main gate of Nairobi National Park, we passed the “*Nairobi City Mortuary*”. Next to the mortuary was a large, thatched building with a sign that read “*Coffins for Sale*” – how convenient! Upon reaching the main gate, I recognized the office where Mike and I had met with Dr. Richard Leaky a couple of years earlier on our way to the airport. There we had a marvelous time talking with Dr. Leaky, but just a few months later he suffered a tragic airplane accident in which he lost both of his legs.

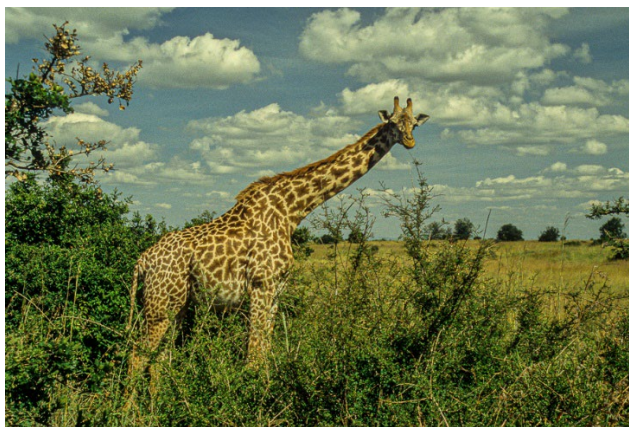


Entrance to Nairobi National Park

At the entrance gate, the park now uses sophisticated handheld computerized devices to read “smartcards” that records data about the vehicle and passengers, as well as deducting “credits” for payment of the entrance fee. After we were “checked in” by a Kenya Wildlife Service Ranger, our driver asked the Park Ranger in Swahili where the big game animals were most likely located now. But despite this valuable information, Willy made a point of directing our driver where to go – contrary to the advice of the Ranger. Our first stop was at a high point overlook called “*Impala Point*” where we had a spectacular view of the vast East African plains stretching out before us for miles in the distance. We stood on the rocky edge and searched the horizon for signs of animals. The color of the new green grass contrasted beautifully with the deep golden tall grass. Scattered throughout the plains were many Acacia trees with their flat-topped, feathery crown of leaves! As I gazed upon the vista in front of me, I remembered a very similar scene from my favorite film, “*Out of Africa*”.



Nairobi National Park



Young Giraffe

Then as we drove down the escarpment through the short scrub landscape toward the broad plain below, we suddenly came upon a young giraffe feeding on an Acacia tree along the edge of the dirt track. We stopped within 15 feet of him, and I was able to take several great photos of him posing elegantly with a beautiful background of deep blue sky and bright light green leaves! As we continued further down the dirt track and rounded a curve, we startled a large family of warthogs that darted quickly into the tall grass, their

tails sticking straight into the air! Our tour of the national park continued in a southerly direction, following the rough, bright red dirt tracks that weaved their way across the vast open tall grass plain stretching far ahead of us to the southern horizon. Behind us, the “*Ngong Hills*” formed the northern horizon. Our driver told us that in Swahili the word “*Ngong*” means “knuckles of the hand”. As I looked back at the silhouette of the hills, it was very clear how they got their name. Driving further south, we continued to descend gradually into the heart of the tall grass plains, a gorgeous carpet of green and gold colors, occasionally dotted with stately flat-topped Acacia trees! It was a classic East African scene.

A few miles further we entered a narrow rocky gorge with a small river that formed a unique ecosystem for a vast array of birds, as well as a small population of crocodiles and hippos. The surrounding Acacia trees with their beautiful light green feathery crown of leaves and bright yellow trunks struck a marvelous contrast with the deep green carpet of tall grass and reeds. Here is where Willy decided we should have lunch, overlooking the valley below. It was a very nice spot as we ate our sandwiches and enjoyed a couple of cold Tusker beers. After lunch, we drove further along the river and came upon the “hippo pools” where we could walk along a trail following the edge of the river. Just beyond the first bend in the river, we suddenly came face to face with a large troop of baboons noisily scrambling through the heavy brush beside us! They were very active and quite curious about us, especially the youngsters. Since they were blocking our passage on the narrow trail, we remained still and just watched them, no more than 10 feet in front of us. It was my closest encounter with a baboon, let alone two dozen of them!



Stop for lunch



Baboons on the trail

Finally, the troop tired of us and scattered into the brush. We proceeded along the trail as the lovely Acacia trees formed a small forest around us. Still, we failed to see any hippos, although we did come upon a couple of young Masai warriors dressed in their traditional red blankets over the shoulder, red mud caked in their long hair, and carrying tall spears! They greeted us with “*Jambo*” (*hello in Swahili*) as they passed and we returned the greeting! As we came to the end of the trail, we could see the steep, eroded riverbank where the hippos had climbed out of the water at night to feed on the tender young grass along the shore. While we stood on the edge of the river, a rare “Red-billed Kingfisher” flew by us and landed only a few feet away. Then I turned around to see a couple of huge vultures perched in the top of an Acacia tree above as they spread their massive 6-foot wings toward the sun. Beyond us was a gorgeous view of the vast expanse of tall golden grass plains – a memorable moment!

As we made our way back to the vehicle, we ran into a Kenya Wildlife Service Ranger who asked about the animals we had seen. Then he told us about a report that lions had been sighted on the main road toward the park exit, so we kept our eyes peeled for lions on our way out of the park. But it was in vain – however we were treated to a gorgeous sunset over the Ngong Hills that made a perfect ending to our day in Nairobi National Park! (*the lions and hippos will have to wait for another day*) After leaving the park, we

dropped Willy off at his house and I thanked him for a very nice day trip. Then the driver took me to my hotel as night fell in the city. At the hotel, I relaxed in the cool evening beside the pool with a cold pint of Tusker beer and wrote in my journal. Soon it was time for dinner, and the hotel restaurant had a very tasty BBQ pork dish on the menu. After dinner, I had another Tusker beer in the bar and recorded the list of animals and birds I had seen in Nairobi National Park.

[Impala, Gazelle, Water Buffalo, Warthog, Tortoise, Hartebeest, Antelope, Giraffe, and Baboon – among the birds I spotted were Splendid Starling, Vulture, Red-Billed Kingfisher, White Headed Bustard, Greater Hornbill, Blue Heron, and Red Breasted Finches]



Nairobi National Park

I spent the next day at UNEP Headquarters installing software and dealing with computer technical problems. During breaks in the routine, I was able to explore the UNEP estate and appreciate its beautiful location amidst the gorgeous, forested highlands above the city. The grounds of the estate were incredibly landscaped and made it look more like a luxury resort than an international office complex. After a long, frustrating day dealing with computer technical issues, I returned to the hotel as the sun began to set. My first destination was the pool bar for a cold pint of Tusker beer. Shortly after sitting down with my beer, I began to hear the sound of raindrops on the thatched roof of the bar. Within seconds, the skies unleashed their payload of tropical moisture! I managed to sit in one of the only “dry islands” during the torrential downpour. But just as quickly as it began, so did it end very abruptly. However, literally everything was flooded with water – a very impressive thunderstorm! After the storm, I moved inside to the hotel bar to write my travel notes, while a boxing match was playing on the TV above the bar. Later I went to the restaurant for dinner and enjoyed an outstanding buffet of delicious Italian dishes, complete with the chef preparing my choice of fresh pasta. Dinner was fabulous, especially for less than \$20! Now, being “stuffed to the gills” with delicious Italian pasta, I retired to my room and discovered the “*Screen Actors Guild Awards Ceremony*” on TV – the precursor to the Academy Awards. It was fun to watch, especially as I was “halfway around the world” from Los Angeles.

After a night of rain showers, the early morning air was very refreshing – pleasantly cool and moist. After breakfast, Thomas, Willy’s sidekick in the Esri East Africa office, picked me up and we drove to UNEP headquarters following the usual route along Parklands Road, complete with its massive potholes, now filled with rainwater, and scarier since it wasn’t obvious just how deep they were! People walking along the muddy edge of the road were frequently being drenched by the passing vehicles. Other people were dashing across the road, deftly dodging all manner of vehicles. At the same time, the people riding old WWI vintage bicycles struggled to keep themselves upright on the rough pavement while trying to avoid collisions with the bumper-to-bumper traffic of cars, trucks, and buses! (*what a chaotic scene – only in Africa*)

Once we had arrived at UNEP, the first day of my GIS training class went fairly well, in spite of several technical problems with the computer system. After the class I returned to the hotel and once again sat at

the pool bar with a cold Tusker beer, where a weird combination of African Rap music emanated from the TV above the bar, while typical “elevator” music was coming from the hotel sound system at the same time! Needless to say, neither of them enhanced the atmosphere of the bar. Meanwhile, an Indian man and two Kenyans who had been sitting at a nearby table suddenly left after having concluded a “hush hush” deal that involved several calls on their cell phones. (*who knows what the deal was about, but not that I really cared to know*) For dinner that evening, I asked the hotel chef if he would combine two dishes on the menu, diced chicken in garlic sauce with tagliatelle and spicy tomato sauce. He said it was no problem, and the combination was fabulous! After finishing dinner, I began to hear the sound of raindrops falling on the broad leaves of the banana trees just outside the open window. Within a few seconds it became another torrential downpour! Later, in my room I opened the windows and enjoyed the cool fresh evening air, rinsed clean by the tropical rain. It was a very soothing moment before I retired for the night.

The next morning began cloudy, but by 10:00am the skies had cleared and the beautiful UNEP campus really shined with so many flowering shrubs, trees and flowers in bloom that it looked like a botanical garden! It was pretty much just another usual day of training with not much excitement. However, on a routine trip to the toilet, I suddenly noticed the paper towel dispenser had been refilled. But as I reached for what I expected to be a paper towel, I realized the “dispenser” was filled with packets of “condoms”, all of which were free! It was quite an unexpected discovery, but I felt it was a good thing I had been alone, otherwise it could have been a bit embarrassing! Back at the hotel that evening, I enjoyed another cold bottle of Tusker beer at the pool bar and another delicious dinner in the restaurant.

On the way to UNEP the next morning, I saw several large billboards along the road, “*RAID – Kills Dudus DEAD*”. (*cockroaches*) As I was about to begin the training class, I suddenly realized that I had no exercise materials because the digital files were in Adobe FrameMaker format and there was no software available to open the digital files – very frustrating! Finally, I was able to access one of the UNEP computers, login to the Esri International Distributor website and download the HTML version of the class exercises, from which we were able to print copies for the students. Amazingly, I was able to start the class only 30 minutes late. We ended the training class early at 1:30pm since the UNEP staff end work at 2:00pm on Fridays. After returning to the hotel, I packed a small bag for the weekend and checked out of the hotel until I would return on Sunday evening. Thomas picked up some bottles of water and snacks at the local 7-11 for the three-and-half-hour journey to Amboseli National Park for the weekend. We made a quick stop at the Esri East Africa office to pick up the Amboseli National Park Lodge reservations from Willy, as well as a cash advance from Barclay’s Bank next door. Our last stop before leaving Nairobi was at the Kenya Wildlife Service Headquarters to “load up” the “*Smart Card*” with the national park admission fee. At last, we left the city and were on our way to Amboseli, and as soon as we were beyond the city limits on the main highway south towards Tanzania, Thomas put the minivan into high gear, and we cruised along at 140kph (*85mph*). Along the way we passed a great many lorries (*trucks*) loaded with cement as they labored up the hills toward Nairobi. We passed a couple of police checkpoints for inspection of the heavy trucks where there were heavy steel plates with 6-inch steel spikes laid across the road as a “barrier”! We quickly left the beautiful, forested hills around Nairobi and descended onto the vast plains of East Africa – golden tall grass and flat-topped Acacia trees. Soon we began to see more and more Masai herding their cattle alongside the road. The color of their clothing, face, and hair was the same as the earth – a very deep red! As we neared the small town of Namanga, we began to see some of the high rugged hills marking the border with Tanzania. We pulled into the town and were met with a large number of speed bumps. Thomas informed me, as we approached each one at full speed before slamming on the brakes at the last possible moment that they were called “sleeping policemen” designed to slow traffic! The turnoff for the road to Amboseli was just a few meters from the border with Tanzania and next to a “Total” petrol station where we filled up with diesel fuel, since it was the last petrol stop. As Thomas filled the tank of the minivan, a group of elderly Masai women pounced on us before I had a chance to roll up the window! Suddenly there were half a dozen hands filled with bracelets and trinkets sticking in my face! I did my best to smile and say no, despite the

rapidly dropping prices being **shouted** at me. After about ten minutes the van was ready and we roared off down a very bumpy, dusty road which quickly turned into a dirt track that was heavily “washboarded”, full of large potholes, and many rocks, some of which qualified as “boulders”. Thomas did his best to keep the small minivan on the road, but his fast driving was not helping! It turned out later that he was speeding in order to reach the national park entrance gate before it closed at 6:00pm! After a half hour of this crazy driving, I began to think we were part of the “East African Road Rally”. As we got closer to the national park entrance, the condition of the road deteriorated considerably with huge ruts that scraped the undercarriage of the small vehicle, the sound of which was like metal being torn off the minivan – not good!

Finally, we reached the national park entrance gate, exactly at 5:50pm! Thomas went to the ranger station to check us into the park. Meanwhile, a small horde of vendors descended upon me as I sat defenseless in the minivan. This time wood carvings and Masai spears were shoved in my face. Finally, while still waiting for Thomas, I bargained with one man for a gorgeous pair of Ebony candlesticks. He claimed I was his first customer of the day, to which I replied incredulously that he must be a lousy salesman! Everyone had a good laugh at that point! Once we had entered the park, the road became a bit better, but only slightly – it was still a bone-jarring, noisy ride. As we approached Amboseli Lodge, the sun was setting and Mt Kilimanjaro came out of hiding from behind the clouds. Then, all of a sudden, we hit a long, muddy stretch of road with a detour around it. As Thomas prepared to return to the main road, the small minivan became “high centered” in a very large rut! I got out and stood on the rear bumper in an attempt to add weight to the left rear wheel that was spinning. After several “rocking” movements Thomas was able to free the vehicle from the “jaws” of the rut! (*little did I know then that this would become a premonition of things to come*)



Road to the lodge



Amboseli National Park Lodge

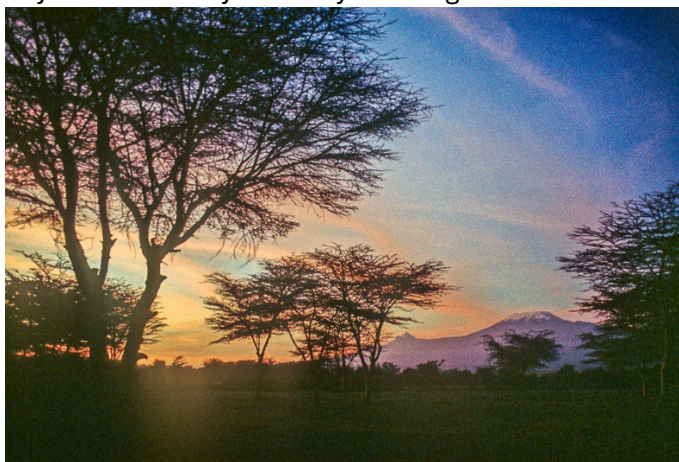


My Cabin (“Bungalow”)

A short time later, we arrived at the lodge and checked in. As I walked into the lodge it looked very much the same as I remembered it on New Year's Eve in 1974 – a beautiful old wooden building, very open and warm. My “room” was actually a small log cabin (*bungalow*) set alongside a rock path through a lovely grove of beautiful Acacia trees. Earlier, the maid had prepared the mosquito netting over the bed, a nice touch! Then I washed up for dinner with Thomas in the restaurant. On another note, the lodge was where we celebrated New Year's Eve in 1974, and the lodge still has many lovely memories, including when Marion and I shared a small bottle of brandy with our fellow SIAFU overland travelers as we rung in the new year! Scottish John provided us with entertainment by singing a very traditional Scottish New Year's Eve song titled “A Wee Cock Sparrow” in his heavy Scottish brogue that sounded like “A Wee Cock Sparra and a boy with a Wheel Barra” – it was one of my most memorable nights!

Before dinner, Thomas and I had a couple of cold Tusker beers in the “Kibo Bar” as we discussed the appalling condition of the road from Namanga into the national park. It had been a tough day driving for Thomas. Then we headed into the dining room for delicious meal. The room was set with large tables to accommodate several tour groups, but we were shown to a small table in the corner of the room, table #14, as a “group” of two. The buffet had a large selection of dishes, all of which were very tasty. After dinner we were invited to a performance of native dance and music by the local Masai villagers, and later I took a beer from the bar and sat on the small veranda just outside my bungalow to watch the bats swooping above me in search of mosquitoes. In the distance, beyond the lodge, I could hear the sounds of Africa in the night. It was very peaceful and relaxing, and I felt happy to be back in Africa again!

Early the next morning at 6:00am, I was awake and ready to do a morning game drive with a young, local Masai man who Thomas had met last night to be our guide. After a quick shower, I walked from my bungalow to the lodge under a feathery green canopy of Acacia trees, when all of a sudden, I looked to my right and abruptly stopped! There in the distance, framed by two large Acacia trees was the majestic summit of Mt Kilimanjaro, softly illuminated by the early morning sunshine!



Mt Kilimanjaro at Sunrise

It was a “magical” moment, very much like that of the New Year's morning 26 years earlier when I had popped my head out of the tent and gazed upon the great mountain for the first time. Its crown of snow shimmered as the mountain dominated the vast plains over 16,000 feet below! As I stared at the mountain shining in the clear blue sky, I was transfixed. I must have taken at least a dozen photos, including one from the pool area where brilliant red Bougainvillea blossomed profusely in the foreground. The scene could have been straight out of a travel brochure. I savored the moment as long as possible before hunger overtook me and I joined Thomas for breakfast at “table #14”! We enjoyed a superb English breakfast of fried eggs, sausage, potatoes, toast, and baked beans. Then we met up with “Simpati”, the young Masai man who would be our guide for the day.

As we exited the compound surrounding the lodge, we were met by a large group of stately “Maribou Storks” standing beside the road like butlers at the ready. Actually, they are “scavengers”, like vultures, but looking very “formal” with their long black “waistcoats”.



Maribou Storks

Just beyond the Maribou Storks to the north of the lodge was a flock of Pink Flamingos wading in the shallow water of Amboseli Lake. Their reflection in the mirror smooth surface of the lake made the water turn a gorgeous shade of pink – very beautiful in the sunshine of the morning. Simpati directed us toward an area where there had been earlier reports of lions with cubs. We drove down the dusty dirt track through a beautiful savannah landscape dotted with lovely Acacia trees, with the summit of Mt Kilimanjaro shining in the clear blue sky, more than 19,000 feet above us!



Mt Kilimanjaro and elephant herd

Soon we began seeing small herds of elephants, wildebeest, zebra, and gazelle but still no sign of lions after several kilometers. Suddenly, Simpati pointed out two hyenas just ahead, and hyenas tend to follow lions, so we followed the hyenas in our search for the lions. However, the tall grass made it very difficult to spot them. And although we didn’t see any lions, neither did anyone else! But we did see a pair of Black-Backed Jackals that had made a fresh kill near the road. They appeared to be extremely nervous knowing that hyenas or lions could easily steal their kill.

On our way back to the lodge, we came to a rough, old mud hole, and immediately both Thomas and I looked at each other without saying a word because we recognized it as the place where we had been stuck last night! Just then we heard the ominous sound of wheels spinning in the mud! Silently we looked at each other again, knowing very well what each of us was thinking! Simpati and I got out of the minivan and saw the left rear tire slowly spinning, almost 18 inches off the ground! This time we were really “high-centered” and going nowhere. There was nothing we could do but try to push the vehicle backwards in hopes that the rear wheel would find some solid ground. Simpati and I pushed as hard as we could, and fortunately, after several attempts, we managed to get the minivan back on some solid ground. That’s when Thomas roared

off to reach the main road a few meters away. While we all celebrated our “escape” from the infamous mud hole, little could we know what was in store for us later!

Now back on the main road, we headed to the lodge to get some petrol. As we approached the small petrol station, a group of Vervet monkeys were enjoying their play on a couple of ladders that were leaning against the building. It was a lot of fun watching them chase each other up and down the ladders. Amazingly, two of the monkeys had young ones who clung tenaciously to the bellies of their mothers, which wasn’t easy as their mothers raced around! They provided us with a lot of entertainment as the minivan was serviced. Back on the road, we headed northwest towards “Observation Hill”, a small volcanic outcrop sitting prominently 200 meters above the surrounding plains and swamp. We parked at the base of the hill among several other vans and a couple of Land Rovers. The trail to the top led us around the side of the hill, with Simpati in the lead and me close behind, but Thomas fell back as we neared the top. As we reached the top of the hill, we suddenly found ourselves smack dab in the middle of a very “elaborate” **brunch**! There were several long tables set with crisp white linen, shiny crystal and china for a large group of Japanese tourists seated at the tables and obviously enjoying a delicious gourmet meal, including tall glasses of Champagne, while they gazed upon snow-capped Mt Kilimanjaro! This was pure decadence – brunch with Mt Kilimanjaro.



Trail to Observation Hill with Simpati and Thomas



Japanese tourists with Champagne Brunch

As I took photos of the unique event, I couldn’t help wondering what these people from Japan must have thought as a Masai warrior suddenly “crashed” their party! Perhaps they just assumed that Simpati was there to be part of their experience of being in Africa! Simpati got a real kick out of it, and I believe the local African servers and chefs also enjoyed seeing the reaction of the Japanese tourists. As I looked around, I saw a couple of the Japanese struggling with their monstrous camera lenses, some being at least a half meter long! Beyond the hill was a spectacular 360-degree view of the entire national park, with Mt Kilimanjaro dominating the scene. Directly below the hill, hippos and elephants spent much of their time wallowing in the mud and water of a huge swamp!



View from Observation Hill

We descended the hill by way of another trail on the opposite side and prepared to head back to the lodge for lunch. As we approached the road junction, we saw a large herd of elephants blocking the road. We stopped and watched as two Land Rovers approaching from the opposite direction took a “deviation” around the far side of the herd. As Thomas proceeded to follow the same route in reverse, we suddenly encountered a deep mud hole ahead in the middle of the road! In just a few seconds, Thomas was committed to going around the right-hand side of it, but just as quickly, the small minivan slid off the edge of the road and into the deepest part of the mud hole! Immediately it was all too obvious, as the vehicle tilted 45 degrees to the left, that we were hopelessly stuck! Thomas made a couple of fruitless attempts to reverse our position, but it became abundantly clear to all three of us that we were not going anywhere soon!

As we looked around, we saw that we were now surrounded by the herd of elephants, all 40 or 50 of them, and no sign of any vehicles. When Thomas switched off the engine, the silence was broken by the snorting of the elephants as they sprayed themselves with muddy water. I noticed that the large “matriarch” of the herd was standing in the middle of the road closest to us and between us and the rest of the herd. She was a very large elephant with long tusks and still nursing a baby. This fact began to worry us a bit. Some of the younger adults were obviously curious about us, especially since we weren’t moving, but she always moved to block them from approaching us. As we sat helplessly in the mud hole, watching the herd getting closer, we tried exploring our options, but the only thing we could do safely was to remain in our vehicle until someone came by. To step outside the minivan would have posed a threat to the herd since they were accustomed to seeing vehicles, but not humans outside! Time passed very slowly as we sat in the minivan with the hot midday sun beating down upon us. But it gave us a marvelous opportunity to observe elephants interacting with each other at “close range”! There were times when we became a bit anxious as the large matriarch kept coming closer, but it was also a fascinating experience to watch how she “managed” the herd. She always positioned herself between us and the herd, She was especially adept at reigning in the young adults who were curious and constantly trying to approach us.



View from the Minivan



“Matriarch” and the herd

At one point, as we were sweating profusely in the hot vehicle, she moved to within less than 15 feet of us – we all held our breath, knowing she could very easily overturn the minivan if she chose to. And on top of that, another large herd of elephants was approaching us from the opposite side! Still, there was no sign of any vehicles yet, and to add to our anxiety, this herd also decided to occupy the road. We continued to watch the two herds that were surrounding us as we sat helplessly in the hot sun. Meanwhile, the babies nursed and played in the mud as the “teenagers” jostled with each other – the mature females paid little attention to them. At the same time, large flocks of White Egrets followed in the footsteps of the elephants, picking up worms and insects stirred up in the marsh grasses. A couple of beautiful Black and White Ibis joined the flock in search of food. The scene continued to play, until we spotted a trail of dust on the

horizon that signaled the approach of vehicles returning from Observation Hill. But would they see us and turn in our direction at the road junction?

Then I looked to the east and spotted a herd of Cape Buffalo heading in our direction. To say that we were now in a potentially dangerous situation would have been an understatement! Luckily a Land Rover approached us, and we all shouted “Thank You” – but at the same time, the matriarch suddenly moved directly toward us, apparently having been “spooked” by the arrival of the Land Rover. She became more nervous and agitated as the Land Rover came closer. Finally, with the Land Rover positioned in front of us and ready to connect their tow rope to our minivan, she came toward us to within a few yards, her ears outstretched and trunk flaying about! Everyone in the Land Rover and the three of us in the minivan began making as much noise as possible in hopes of driving her away. But in the first minute or so, she just got more agitated – then suddenly she turned away and the rest of the herd followed. At that moment, I jumped out to connect the tow rope to the front of the minivan and signaled the driver of the Land Rover to slowly take up the slack in the rope. Then, with the rope securely connected, he gunned the engine and within a few seconds, with a giant “lurch” forward, our minivan was “jerked” out of the mud hole! We all cheered and I gave the Land Rover driver 1,000 ksh (*Kenyan Schillings*), then disconnected the tow rope. I think it was the best 1,000 ksh I had ever spent! Now free of the monstrous mud hole, we roared off following the Land Rover, lest we got stuck again. In retrospect, although the experience had its tense moments and very hot uncomfortable conditions, having been so “close” to nature and being helplessly stuck was an adventure of a lifetime! However, I was pretty certain that Thomas had a very different feeling about the experience, having been the driver responsible for the situation!

Having survived the monster mud hole, we drove straight back to the lodge by the most direct route, and soon the three of us relaxed on the veranda with cold Tusker beers in hand as we reminisced about our “*mud hole adventure*” with the elephants! Then Thomas and I had a late lunch in the dining room, after which Thomas retired to his room for a short nap, while I returned to the veranda to write notes about the day in my travel journal. Later in the afternoon around 4:00pm, Simpati arrived and reminded us of our afternoon drive. Although we searched high and low for lions, they were nowhere to be found. As the sun began to set behind Mt Kilimanjaro, we headed back to the lodge since all vehicles were required to be off the roads by dusk.

Back at the lodge, I spent some time on the veranda writing in my travel journal until Thomas joined me for dinner in the dining room at our usual “table for two”, #14 of course. After another delicious dinner buffet, we joined other lodge guests in the lounge to watch a short performance by a local guy who did various juggling and fire-eating acts. He was followed by another local guy doing tight rope walking acts. And all this entertainment was constantly narrated with the phrase “No Probleme” for the benefit of a group of French tourists. At the end of the “show”, there was the traditional “*passing of the hat*”! I stayed in the lounge for another beer while Thomas headed back to his room. As I savored my glass of beer in the quiet peace of the evening, only the gentle sounds of birds and crickets broke the silence. At that moment I felt as if I was a million miles from anywhere! It was such a beautiful moment to remember for a lifetime!

As I walked back to my bungalow, I stopped in the darkness of the night and stared up at the southern night sky, ablaze with billions of stars. The Milky Way galaxy was so bright it appeared like a brilliant lace curtain across half the sky. That moment took me back to the memories of incredible nights in the Sahara Desert when I would lie alone on the sand, looking up at the clear night sky with its billions of stars and galaxies – that was when I felt the feeling of being “infinite”, without earthly bonds, infinity itself being capable of consuming me in a breath! For those precious moments, the space between me and the universe seemed to disappear and I became one with the stars! (*even as I write this today, I remember it as a beautiful moment in my life that is still almost impossible to describe, but that remains deeply imbedded in my soul – a “magical” moment!*) It was very hard to tear myself away from the “link” with the heavens, but the reality of having to be up early in the morning, as well as the pesky mosquitoes, convinced me to retire to my bed for a very quiet, peaceful sleep.

I set my alarm for 5:30am so I could watch the sunrise. It began very slowly as a faint glow on the eastern horizon, highlighting the summit of Mt Kilimanjaro with a soft glow. Gradually the eastern sky became a brighter shade of orange, and the summit of Kilimanjaro turned a golden yellow, its massive glaciers reflecting the long rays of the morning sun. As the sun continued to reveal itself to the world around me, Kilimanjaro passed through an infinite range of colors to finally reveal its massive white crown of ice and snow! At that moment, I reflected back on the “*Christmas Story*” I wrote in 1975 describing the sunrise on Mt Kilimanjaro, and little has changed since then, with the exception that my experience in 1975 changed me forever!



View of Mt Kilimanjaro from the lodge

Now that the sun had fully risen and the landscape awakened, I returned to my bungalow to shower before joining Thomas for breakfast at table #14 – our table! Later, the young Masai server approached me and nervously asked me for my “contact”. At first, I was a bit confused, but then I realized he wanted to know my name and address, so I gave him one of my business cards. A few minutes later, he returned and handed me a small piece of paper on which he had penciled his name and address. I promised to send him a postcard from California and he was very excited! After breakfast I sat on the veranda with a cup of coffee in the shadow of Kilimanjaro and waited for Thomas to join me. It was a very quiet, peaceful moment - only the flight of swallows overhead broke the silence as they soared and dived after mosquitoes. Meanwhile, small black and white birds patrolled the edge of the veranda in search of insects, and a few beautiful yellow and green birds stalked other insects and worms in the grass. I remained absorbed in their world until Thomas appeared, indicating that we were ready to depart for our return journey to Nairobi.

Simpatu was nowhere to be found, so we left without him, but we followed the dirt track to the area where lions had been spotted before. But despite our best efforts, we failed to see them. Well, maybe next time. However, just being out in the wilds of the East African plains in full view of Kilimanjaro was a joy in itself! We faithfully followed our map of the national park and found our way to the entrance gate. As we approached it, I felt a bit sad after just three days in the park. When we pulled to a stop, Thomas went into the ranger station while I was left to deal with a small crowd of “hawkers” who suddenly showed up selling Masai spears, knives, wood carvings, masks, and candlesticks! I was able to fend them off for a short while, but as Thomas took more and more time in the ranger station, I finally broke down and had to buy something, sort of like paying a “toll”! I ended up purchasing two Masai warrior wooden candlesticks which gave me some relief from the rest of the hawkers, except for a few who were very persistent.

At last, Thomas returned to the minivan and announced that we had “overstayed” our entry permit, and we had to pay a fine of 2,150 ksh! Of course it was me who had to pay the fine! Fortunately, it gave me a great excuse to tell the hawkers that all my money just went to the park ranger, so unfortunately, I couldn’t buy anything more! Then they asked what I had to trade, and one young girl asked if I had a pen to trade, so I

gave her my pen as a “gift” and she was absolutely thrilled! Before we were allowed to leave the park, a couple of “hip looking” young guys came over and started talking about the Los Angeles Lakers, especially Shaq and Kobe. That led to a question of whether or not I had any magazines or t-shirts from Los Angeles, which made me believe that such items had a very high trading value! These guys were dirt poor, but they were very open and friendly – so typical of my experience in Africa. Just before Thomas finished paying the fine at the ranger station, three beautiful young Masai girls passed by and giggled when I said “Hi” to them. They were very colorful dressed in long red robes, shaved heads, and lots of jewelry around their neck. As we left the park gate, I realized once again that it requires time to really experience Africa, not just short stops on a tour. Upon the return to my hotel in Nairobi, I enjoyed a delicious dinner at the Italian buffet and pasta bar.

The next day I joined Willy and Thomas for a fantastic dinner at a local Indian restaurant near the hotel called “Haanali”. We dined on chicken tandoori, chicken thurga thikka, lamb birri gnost, and Dal Bukhara, in addition to lots of fresh baked naan and ice-cold glasses of Indian beer! An excellent place. The following day, Johannes invited me and the students in the UNEP training class for lunch in the “food court” at the Village Market Shopping Mall nearby. We shared a very nice time as we celebrated the successful end of the class. Early the following morning, I packed my bags and enjoyed a delicious breakfast of fresh fruit, pastries, and coffee in the hotel before Thomas took me to UNEP headquarters to collect my DSA (*Daily Subsistence Allowance*). I received the check just hours before I had to leave Nairobi, even though the UNEP Travel and Finance Office had more than 10 days to prepare the payment. With the check in hand, I bade farewell to the class and proceeded quickly to the UNEP bank to cash the check that was over \$3,300.00! Then Thomas drove me back to the hotel to pick up my bags and check out before proceeding to the airport through the midday Nairobi traffic. As we approached the airport, past the edge of Nairobi National Park, I felt strong pangs of sadness at the prospect of leaving East Africa! I bid a fond farewell to Thomas and thanked him for the wonderful weekend in Amboseli National Park before I checked in for the South African Airways flight to Johannesburg. Then I sat in the East African Airways Business Class Lounge enjoying a cold pint of South African “Castle” beer.

The 4-hour flight was very comfortable, and I spent much of the time remembering the experiences I had while helping Stuart repair the old British Army bus on our 5-month journey overland across the African continent from Morocco to Kenya in 1974-75. I was really looking forward to getting together with him after so many years. He had arranged to meet me at the Johannesburg airport and drive me to his nature reserve called “Boondocks” on the border of Kruger National Park! The story of my time with Stuart at Boondocks is another travel blog titled “*Boondocks – A Private Game Reserve in South Africa*”! I invite you to check it out.

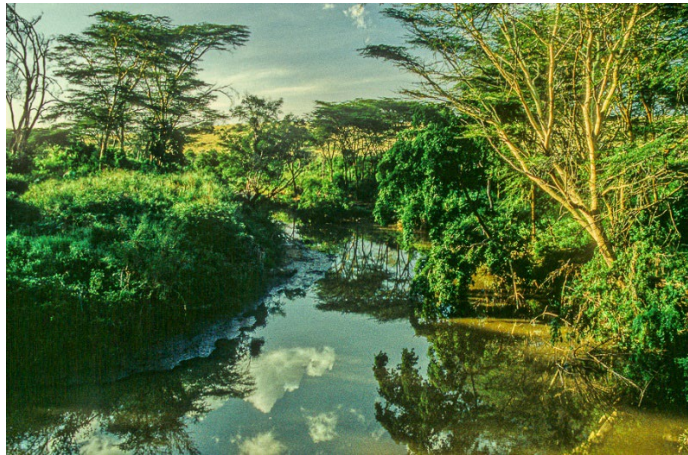
PHOTO GALLERY



Roman Forum



Circus Maximus



Hippo Pool – Nairobi National Park



Willy on the Trail with Baboons



Mt Kilimanjaro – Amboseli National Park





Bungalows at Sunrise – Amboseli Lodge



View of Mt Kilimanjaro – Amboseli Lodge pool



Amboseli National Park



Mt Kilimanjaro at Sunrise – Amboseli National Park