

Saturday, September 28

We meet at the Kenya Airways check-in desk at Heathrow, the five brave souls who are to form our party from London. In addition to me and Dan, they are: David Sanderson, a thoughtful and kindly fellow joining us now in his capacity as urban specialist; Justin Linnane, an intent but amiable young maker of television documentaries; and the photographer Jenny Matthews. White-haired and sweetly unobtrusive, Jenny is easily the wonder of the lot. If you saw her in a supermarket you would take her for a schoolteacher or civil servant. In fact, for 25 years she has gone wherever there is danger - to Chechnya, Bosnia, Afghanistan, Rwanda. She is fearless and evidently indestructible. If things go bad on this trip, it is her I'll hold on to.

It is nighttime when we land at Jomo Kenyatta Airport and pleasantly cool. We are met by Kentice Tikolo, an immensely good-natured Kenyan lady who helps run CARE's Nairobi office and who shepherds us into waiting cabs. In *Out of Africa*, Nairobi was depicted as a sunny little country town, so I am disappointed to find that at some time in the past 50 or 60 years Nairobi became merely another modern city with traffic lights and big buildings and hoardings advertising Samsung televisions and the like. Our hotel is a Holiday Inn - very nice and comfortable, but hardly a place that shouts: "Welcome to Africa, Bwana."

"Oh, you will see plenty of Africa," Kentice assures me when we convene at the bar for a round of medicinal hydration. "We're going to show you lots of exotic things. Have you ever eaten camel?"

"Only in my junior high school cafeteria, and they called it lamb," I reply. I take the opportunity, while Dan is at the bar, to ask her about the street children I read about on the flight.

"Oh, that's the least of your worries," Kentice laughs. "Car-jackings are much worse. They can be quite violent."

"What a comfort to know."

"But don't worry," she says, laying a comforting hand on my arm and becoming solemn, "if anything goes wrong we have excellent hospitals in Nairobi."

We retire early because we have an early start in the morning. I am disappointed to find that there is no mosquito net around the bed in my room. Unaware that Nairobi is malaria-free, I slather myself with insect repellent and pass a long night sounding like two strips of parting Velcro each time I roll over in the bed.

Sunday, September 29

In the morning we drive to Kibera, a sea of tin roofs filling a mile or so of steamy hillside on the south side of the city. Kibera is the biggest slum in Nairobi, possibly the biggest in Africa. Nobody knows how many people live there. It's at least 700,000, but it may be as many as a million, perhaps more. At least 50,000 of Kibera's children are AIDS orphans. At least a fifth of the residents are HIV positive, but it could be as high as 50 percent. Nobody knows. Nothing about Kibera is certain and official, including its existence. It appears on no maps. It just is.

You can't just go in to Kibera if you are an outsider. Well, you can, but you wouldn't come out again. Kibera is a dangerous place. We were taken on a walking tour by the district chief, an amiable giant named Nashon Opiyo.

To step into Kibera is to be lost at once in a random, seemingly endless warren of rank, narrow passageways wandering between rows of frail, dirt-floored hovels made of tin and mud and twigs and holes. Each shanty on average is ten feet by ten and home to five or six people. Down the centre of each lane runs a shallow trench filled with a trickle of water and things you don't want to see or step in. There are no services in Kibera - no running water, no rubbish collection, virtually no electricity, not a single flush toilet. Especially at night when it is unsafe to venture out, many residents rely on what are known as "flying toilets," which is to say they go into a plastic bag, then open their door and throw it as far as possible. In the rainy season, the whole becomes a liquid ooze. In the dry season it has the charm and healthfulness of a rubbish tip. In all seasons it smells of rot.

Kibera is only one of about a hundred slums in Nairobi, and it is by no means the worst. Altogether more than half of Nairobi's three million people are packed into these immensely squalid zones, which together occupy only about 1.5 percent of the city's land. In wonder I asked David Sanderson, "How much is rent?"

"Oh, not much. Ten or twelve dollars a month. But the average annual income in Kenya is \$280, so \$120 or \$140 in rent every year is a big slice of your income. And nearly everything else is expensive here, too, even water. The average person in a slum like Kibera pays five times what people in the developed world pay for the same volume of water piped to their homes."

"That's amazing," I said.

He nodded. "Every time you flush a toilet you use more water than the average person in the developing world has for all purposes in a day - cooking, cleaning, drinking, everything. It's very tough. For a lot of people Kibera is essentially a life sentence. Unless you are exceptionally lucky with employment, it's very, very difficult to get ahead. The governments won't permit any kind of permanent improvements because they fear it would just affirm Kibera's existence, and also they are afraid that it would encourage more people to pour in from the countryside. So they'd rather pretend these places don't exist."

"But they must know it's here."

He smiled and pointed to a big house commanding a neighboring hillside only a couple of hundred yards from Kibera's edge. The house, David told me, was the Nairobi residence of Daniel Arap Moi, president of Kenya since 1978.

"This is what he sees every morning when he looks out his window. Of course they know it's here."

- *Taken from Bill Bryson's African Diary, by Bill Bryson, published in 2002.*

- How does the writer's tone and use of words reveal his values and beliefs?