

East African Reflections

We went to Lushoto because the Lonely Planet Guide told us it was off the beaten track. We certainly left the pink-leisure-suit/gee-whizz tourists behind on the savannah, watching the wildlife tuck into each other and getting fleeced on souvenirs, but up in the hills they were replaced by other tourists: European students and career wanderers – all clutching a copy of the Lonely Planet ‘blue book’.

The first evening, as we drank a beer in the courtyard of the cheaper of the two hotels, we were engaged in conversation by an affluent looking African man. He turned out to be the Governor of the surrounding district. He was in Lushoto because they had achieved 100% adult literacy in the town and there was to be a celebration the next day. Conor and I said we’d come along and, true to our word, mid-morning, we wandered down and stood at the edge of the crowd and listened to a wonderfully out-of-tune brass band playing in front of a stage of dignitaries. The Governor spotted us and waved towards two empty seats on the front row of the stage. We looked at each other in our scruffy travelling gear, and then made ‘no thanks’ gestures back at him, and shuffled off meekly.

We climbed up to the End of the World instead, as instructed by the LP, where the hills drop dramatically down to the plains of Tanzania below. On the way back down we came across a group of kids sitting talking watching two others playing football with a ball made from plastic bags and elastic bands. One of them cheekily booted the ball towards us and I hoofed it back. I took off my rucksack and walked between the crudely fashioned goalposts. A cheer went up from the kids and it was them against the Wazungu. The fun was stopped by a nun who chased the kids back to class and gave us a withering look.

Back at the hotel the Governor was surrounded by a host of other men in suits, all well oiled with Safari lager.

“Mgale all round!” he cried at the waitress. We winced as we had previously found this East African speciality as edible as dried wallpaper paste.

Later the Governor came to our table.

“Where are you going next?” he asked.

“Tanga. Tomorrow.” we told him.

“I’m going back to Tanga tomorrow, too.” he smiled.

We waited for him to offer a lift in his comfy four-wheel drive, but he didn't (or couldn't), so we suffered a full day of bumping along some of the worst roads I have ever experienced on some of the least comfortable bus seats I have ever sat on. With every jolt and bang, I wished again I'd taken the celebration of what was by any standard an extraordinary achievement a wee bit more seriously.

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The Dhow from Tanga to Pemba Island leaves at midnight, but we got into all sorts of confusion with Swahili time (where 1 o'clock is the first hour after sunrise ie what the rest of the world calls 7am) so we missed the Immigration man at 10pm. I approached the Customs man to ask him what to do.

"No problem." he said, knowingly.

"But... will we be OK?"

"Come with me." he said and led me out of the tin departure hall.

We walked along the wharf where huge empty moored barges groaned and moaned at each other and the scratching of their crews of rats were amplified to truly disturbing levels. Above us, old grey cranes, proudly bearing the slogan 'Made in Bristol' glowed in the full moonlight. We walked quite a long way before he started speaking and it made me nervous.

"My friend, if there is any problem, give them 1500 shillings. No more."

"OK."

"That is how it works,"

He grinned at me, sensing my discomfort, and started walking back.

"They don't pay us enough to live on for a whole month, so, half way through the month we have to take bribes. I go up into the mountains..." he swept his arm grandly at hills I couldn't see, "...and catch some smugglers. They pay me to let them off and I can feed my family. It is the same in the rest of the Civil Service. That is how it works. Don't worry about it."

All this time I had been waiting for a request for a donation, but to my shame it never came.

Later I sat on the gunwhales of the Dhow as we chugged out into the Indian Ocean, watching the fishing boats with their outriggers and lanteen sails gliding past silhouetted by the full moon against the deep blue sky. My simplistic 20 year old's view on bribes and corruption had just been blown

completely out of the water and I was disturbed and thrilled what I had learnt. Eventually tiredness took over and I lay down on the salty wood of the deck and slept.

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The famous overnight railway journey from Mombasa to Nairobi was an excellent way to end what had become an arduous trip. Three days previously I had been relieved of my camera in a slick mugging minutes after getting off the bus from Dar at 6am (against the advice of the locals who stayed put, but, hey, what do they know?), then Conor had come down with a nasty flu bug. There had been no running water in Mombasa and going to the toilet had become an acrobatic act, so the relative luxury of the train was a welcome relief.

An hour after departure, still down in the scorching heat of the coastal plain, I opened the compartment window and leant on the sill to enjoy the breeze. The train was chuntering through vast fields of sisal, grown as a cash crop to bring in foreign currency for debt repayments. We had seen in the papers that malnutrition was a problem in parts of the region, so to see a non-food crop in such huge quantities was a surprise.

Two or three windows along, a white man and two stunningly beautiful and well groomed African women were also leaning out of the train. The man was dark haired, porky faced, and a good deal older than his companions, his white shirt understated against their colourful dresses. From one meaty hand hung a large polythene bag of boiled sweets. As we passed each farm, raggedy barefoot kids came tearing out of the fields and shacks, tripping and scrambling in their haste, hands outstretched, snot-strewn faces screwed up as they screamed at the train. Each time a group got close, the man tossed out a handful of sweets with a lazy sweep of his arm and a bundle of kids flung themselves down in the dirt in pursuit. The two women squealed with delight at each mad scramble, but the man stayed emotionless as they gripped his biceps in excitement. When the sweets were finished the trio ducked back inside, and I stood and watched the empty bag drifting off on the breeze across the fertile fields.

This trip took place in September 1992, but was written up at various times and edited together in 2006.