

## **Tanzania – Volunteer Testimonial**

Arriving at Kilimanjaro airport I grabbed my rucksack, jumped into a pickup and began hurtling over the pot hole ridden roads lined by wonderful trees brimming with purple blossom. I decided there, in the back of the Hilux that the next three months would be quite an adventure.

We were speeding towards Arusha, one of Tanzania's biggest 'cities' where I was to meet my fellow volunteers, our leader, Dave and the scientist, Fran. I had signed up to an expedition run by an NGO called Greenforce and for the rest of that week I spent every day on the roof of our Arusha lodgings, learning conversational Maasai for beginners from Isayah, a friendly Maasai warrior. Each lesson would begin with "enda supai eldorasa" meaning "hello class" and we progressed slowly from there. These lessons would prove invaluable over the coming weeks as we left the relative comfort of Arusha to travel to Eselalai Village, a Maasai village in the heart of the African bush that would become our home.

We were in Tanzania for two main reasons. The first was to continue building a school for the Maasai villagers and between construction we would teach English mainly and occasionally a little geography and math's. The second justification for my wanderings in the bush was to aid the African Wildlife Foundation (AWF) by completing bird and mammal surveys on the previously unchartered Manyara Ranch – a 60,000 acre area of land policed by Maasai warriors and teeming with beautiful and dangerous fauna.

After a week or two in Eselalai learning the rough science to be used on the ranch – how to identify birds, mammals and reptiles, practicing trapping, tracking and transect walks - we were ready to enter the ranch. I shall never forget my first 48 hours in Manyara Ranch.

We pitched our tents above a dry riverbed dotted with football sized balls of elephant excrement, that led us to believe the riverbed was frequently used as part of the legendary 'elephant corridor' – the route taken year after year by elephants on their migratory tour. Having set up camp we rested until the sun blazed less and the air began to cool slightly. Late in the afternoon, five of us ventured into the densest part of the bush heading North East. Everything was bigger, taller and more imposing than me: the coarse grass; the exotic toothy palms; the massive baobab trees; and the thick vines that would hang from between high canopies as if without any discernable beginning – coming to an end strangling some other tentacle-like root in all too perfect a fashion. We recorded sightings of monstrously large raptors and the occasional giraffe – bulky in stature but always graceful and charming - as well as running into the ever fascinating and reclusive warthog. As the sun began to set and we neared camp, across the valley two African elephants came out to play. This was the first time I had ever set eyes on an elephant outside of London Zoo and they struck me as simply majestic in all their natural glory. From the other side of the riverbed we watched these magnificent creatures fight trunk to trunk, tusk to tusk, and then retreat together back into the darkness of the jungle behind them without so much as a handshake, as the show came to its close, and all that was left of the sun was a thin arch of bright orange light visible over the flat topped acacias.

That which less than an hour ago had seemed spiky, hostile and subversive, now seemed to radiate a glow of natural splendor, and it was our turn to retreat back to our tents with a feeling of total security and contentment.

Between 4 am and 6am Dave and I were charged with keeping the camp fire blazing – our main source of protection. As the sun just about began to rise the world around us burst to life. From nowhere, without so much as a warning rumble, a herd of wildebeest stampeded just past our tents, and then the unmistakable call of the source of commotion. A loud reverberating growl, maybe you'd call it a roar. I can only recall a faint fuzzy echo of the sound we heard, but I remember our reactions distinctly. Adrenaline, stupidity and opportunism seized the two of us, and we were both gripped with a sincere desire to run towards wherever that noise was coming from. We grabbed a gun, and traipsed towards that noise, only stopping for an encouraging paw print in the dust about 100 yards from the fire. Minutes later we stopped again to see the figure of a lion prowling over the African savannah, its shaggy mane and hunched powerful shoulders silhouetted against the orange sun rising behind it.

During the weeks that followed I would enjoy many more unbelievable bush experiences, from being circled by barking leopards through the night; to diving into an acacia bush to escape the wrath of a rampaging bull elephant; to watching hyenas drag, tear and ravage the carcass of an unfortunate zebra; to falling asleep under a baobab tree after feasting on its sherry fruits, only to wake up to giant steppe eagles perching on the branches above my head; to venomous snakes falling out of trees and popping up out of the architectural triumphs that are termite mounds; and so the list goes on.

While I wasn't running away from every animal the ranch had to offer in the name of scientific research I was in Eselalai village. There were a handful of warriors who had been taught English and maths by missionary schools but in return sacrificed traditional Maasai village culture, revolving around witch doctors and pagan rituals as well as their names, in favour of generic biblical labels on christening. Of these warriors I got to know two particularly well. I would go on long walks with Reuben, who would spin mesmerizing tales of chasing giraffe for days on end, jumping gorges and wrestling leopards and lions. As we walked we would be joined by his friends, who would entreat us to enter their huts be treated to rice or tea or goats milk wolfed down from a gourd by our hosts and politely refused by myself. We would collect bundles of firewood with the women, muck out goat pens and build huts (two parts cow poo, one part water) much to the warriors' amusement. Reuben also loved to talk about the future – his plans to build a house of bricks surrounded by irrigated farmland. He also wanted to set up his own safari company and marry just one Christian girl in mutual agreement. The concept of a loving monogamous relationship is alien to the Maasai who exchange wives for cows, and the number of wives a warrior has is proportionate to his wealth. The witchdoctor in Eselalai, for instance, has about 16 wives and many more children. In that respect Reuben was odd to his family and villagers - revered for his intelligence and knowledge – yet castigated and hushed up for his Christian attitudes. While in the village we attended a Maasai wedding ceremony whereby a group of 12 year old girls stood huddled together like penguins as a semi circular formation of Maasai warriors gathered around them. As they chanted and jumped, the warriors would take turns running out to the pack huddled in the center and earmark their future bride – to be claimed in a couple of

when the warrior relinquishes his duties and is free to marry as an elder, at around the age of 25.

Alexi was my star pupil. I spent long hours teaching him English and geography and after a while, despite initial aggravations, he would arrive at the newly erected school hut with completed homework and another brother or sister or friend who wanted lessons. Alexi loved words and would trawl through an ancient dictionary and would interrogate me until we both agreed he understood the verb, noun or adjective in question. Eventually he arrived at '**internet** *noun* a global computer network providing a variety of information and communication facilities'. He had never seen a computer, was intrigued by the word global which I had explained only days earlier through drawings and diagrams, and had no concept of network or communication. That left us with global information; a pretty fair description of what the internet entails, and yet entirely unfathomable to Alexi. When I drew pictures of a box-like computer on one side of the globe sending dotted line signals to a box on the other side of the world, in an attempt to explain the phenomena of emails, I was entirely alone. By the time I next saw Alexi, Reuben had explained the whole thing thoroughly, a feat I had mixed feelings towards. There was a certain beauty in this technology which defines itself as global, not being quite there, not having penetrated every space and every mind. On the upside Alexi managed a wonderful letter about all the places in the world he would like to visit and how he would get there in our last week together that left me with a glowing sense of pride.

I would like to think that my time in Tanzania had a positive effect. I am sure the work done for the AWF was a useful and valuable contribution to sustainable research. Moreover I learnt an unspeakable amount from the relationships that I developed with certain Maasai and I hope they learnt a few undamaging things from me. Occasionally I was slightly saddened to see the effect of the ever wider reaching arm of global tourism of which I was unquestionably a part. The fashionable concept of cultural tourism that in practice meant local Maasai being paid to perform dances and ceremonies for safari tourists traveling through the area in a circus like fashion, stunk of selling a beautiful culture in an undignified way – and yet was an enormous factor in the healthy economy and relative wealth of the village. The impact of westerners delving deeper and deeper into exotic cultures and bringing them to the fore of our attention as we equally bring ourselves to the fore of their attention, will necessarily change the people and potentially the landscape. It might be too late to consider whether we should follow our paternal instincts and accept the collateral damage or back away leaving their culture and ignorance intact, but I do feel that if there is going to be a burgeoning relationship between the tourist and the Maasai warrior it should be developed sensitively and with a definite sense of respect that anyone living in and off the African bush deserves.

One day I hope I'll return to the Maasai land. I like to imagine myself rolling up in Eselalai, rekindling old friendships through hand signals, pathetic attempts to speak Maasai and Brit abroad loud and slow e-n-g-l-i-s-h. I like to imagine the young warriors I grew friendly with as elder heads of the village council, conducting their meetings in the shade of an acacia tree. I like to imagine the tall stories they will tell me as we walk over the savannah past a herd of giraffe. The only thing I cannot imagine is ever again being asked 'what is the internet?' That's progress, I imagine.