

On Safari

by Geoffrey Clarfield (February 2015)

"It is impossible that a town will not play a part in your life, it does not even make much difference whether you have more good or bad things to say of it, it draws your mind to it, by a mental law of gravitation."

– Karen Blixen, *Out of Africa*

Going and Coming

In Charles Miller's marvelous narrative history of everything that caused the building of a railway from the Indian Ocean Coast into the highlands of Uganda, at the dawn of the 20th century, we read about travel. In those days men coming out to East Africa would take a steamer from Europe, through the Suez Canal, down to Mombasa and once ashore, they would make ready for what was usually a long walk inland.

Adopting the word Safari from the local Swahili speaking peoples of coastal Africa, it was not without its hazards; bandits, tribal suspicion, malaria (for which large doses of quinine washed down with gin or whiskey were required, which was what became the sun downer, as it was taken in the evening). These intrepid men, and later women, would spend weeks walking towards their destination.

But the dangers were well compensated by the beauty of the countryside, the mystery of and their inability to understand the myriad tribal languages that they encountered and, the equally strange customs of the indigenous people; and of course, the joy of the hunt. They came with good hunting rifles and lived off the land. They were also, mostly of a certain social class who expected to be surrounded by servants and porters who took care of their every need. And so, in the early days of the Safari, men would even show up at dinner, in the bush, wearing a black tie that would not be out of place at the tables of the high and mighty back in England or Austro Hungary.

Today, during the age of mass travel it no longer happens on the ground. It all takes place in the air, and even more so, on line. So first comes the decision to go, where to and for how long, at what price point. This follows a usually stressful search for the right flights at

the right place on the Internet. Although I have never gambled and only visited a casino for an hour to get the feel of the place, (it felt like a shoddy imitation of a bad James Bond film) one feels that every time you lock in a flight and a ticket, there must be a hitch and indeed there always is. It must be like gambling.

And what is worse, is a few minutes after you have pulled out your credit card and paid, inevitably a window pops up on your screen telling you that you could have saved hundreds of dollars, had you flown Burmese Airways, who just worked out a deal with Air France, KLM and Delta. You lament, "I could have gotten more frequent flyer points." For a moment you forget that all flights must go through Rangoon. But that is one of those small details embedded in your itinerary that only becomes clear when you print it out on paper and highlight the flights and their times, "Oh look dear, we have a 17 hour stop over in Rangoon. Is there a Sheraton at that airport?" No, not yet, but there will be.

And so, despite the saintly reputations of Livingstone and the now devilish reputations of his colleagues, Stanley, killer in the Congo and Burton, champion of a militant Islam whose present day activism would have startled even a Victorian rebel like him, and who reveled in tales of cannibalism and oriental sexual practices, one begins to envy those early explorers, missionaries and later on, colonial administrators.

They travelled, slowly. They got the lay of the land. They met the people on the way and if there were roses to be smelled, they smelled them. We see this clearly in the reports of Joseph Thomson, the intrepid 19th century Scottish explorer of East Africa, who was positively thrilled to walk through and botanize the highlands of southwest Tanzania. Clearly, the line between play and work during the opening of Africa to the West is a topic that needs exploring. Simply put, I think these 19th century visitors were having a great time.

And so, first there is that drive to the airport from my house in a mega industrial North American city. Like the explorers before me, I am now pathologically early at airports. If there is any traffic or delay on the highways or even detours, I exult at the fact that I have decided to behave like the leisurely traveller. Any delay does not raise my blood pressure. My stomach is not gripped with that churning feeling. I alone among all these people rushing here and there, am the master of my time, because I have adopted a tempo from an earlier century.

Inevitably, despite the now computerized check in of tickets, I must wait in line to drop my bags, but, this does not usually take long. It is followed by a leisurely walk through security, a bit of a rush to pack everything for the x ray machine, and then a bit of mindfulness to get everything off the rack, including your shoes and computer, while the bags

and the people behind you start pushing you forward.

Having spent much of my adult lifetime flying here and there (I once commuted to Manhattan for 20 days a month from Toronto, for three years, for a contract I had there) I have come to realize that airports are not designed for the comfort of passengers. They are designed for merchants, pilots and flight attendants. Note that the pilots, pursers and flight attendants are always fresh, even when you find them walking in the airport. They get whisked in and whisked out at special passport and baggage controls and of course, much of the airport is taken up by rows of shops and usually, second rate restaurants.

The lighting is always bright; the seating gets tighter and tighter, (there are no longer rows of seats that you can lie down on, they all have steel hand arms). Airports are noisy places, with poor acoustics, without fountains and without greenery or aquariums, the contemplation of that can make waiting so pleasant, and without areas where families can spread a blanket and share a sandwich with their children.

Understandably, this would privilege travellers from the Balkans who do this anyway, but middle class Canadians are so polite that even if it were allowed, they would have a tough time doing it. It is remarkable how few places there are to sit, or stand, or walk about in a modern airport. There is an absence of good art on the walls, or free standing sculpture, but, there are TV screens blaring at you (No, I do not give a shit what the BBC thinks about this or that political topic, I only watch them for their nature shows.) And to add insult to injury, why must I listen to Anderson Cooper every time I go to an airport, or even worse, Christiane Amanpour?

I took a long hard look at the Meditation Room sign. I thought, ah ah, I am a sincere but lapsed practitioner of Transcendental Meditation. Could I not go in there, put a pillow behind my legs, sit on my haunches and just get a bit of peace and quiet; no radio, TV or flight announcements polluting the sonic sphere? I did not, but I thought of doing so, even if I had to share the space with Saudi and Afghan frequent flyers. On second thought, no, perhaps I should let that thought go.

And so, in the spirit of the East African travellers of old I carry a Sarong. I bought it in Zanzibar years ago. It is a wrap around that you can climb into after a shower, wrap around you in a dust storm, dress in while you serve cocktails at parties without anyone questioning your sexual identity and best of all, it is an innocuous floor covering in those airports where whether, carpeted or tiled, you do not want to spread yourself on the bare floor.

So once settled, I strategically place it in a corner, put my luggage in front of me and do a

half hour of Yoga. No, it does not make the seat that I must sit in if I am not flying business class any more comfortable, but like good psychiatry, it allows me to manage the physical and mental discomfort of the flight with greater poise.

And like the travellers of old, I decided in my mid fifties that I would no longer be a transit passenger. So this time I took the car to the airport, the plane to Amsterdam, the shuttle to my hotel, took a hot shower and slept off jet lag part one, slept through the night (with the aid of a pill) had a healthy, leisurely breakfast, caught up with my email on my laptop and discovered that already, KLM had sent me an evaluation (yes, we are now living in the Age of Evaluation, the Age of Exploration having finished when they flew an airplane to the source of the Blue Nile in the 1920s). As a returned KLM frequent flyer I filled it out. They asked me if I had used the Frequent Flyer's Lounge. I answered, no!

Back at the airport, I organized my ticket, dropped off my bag, passed immigration and security and waited. I actually found a couch at a snack bar and slept for an hour. Luckily, I had layers of clothing and a ski jacket. The Dutch, ever known for their remarkable frugality, are fixing the airport and it was very cold. I lay down in my wool hockey cap, wrapped my scarf around my neck and in my ski jacket experienced the difference between a cold and a comfortable nap. I then pulled out my blue and white Sarong, draped it over me, thanking those British explorers who brought this bit of cloth back to Western manhood.

I dreamed of travelling on an old steamboat, watching the hippos as I approached a village to exchange cloth, wire for jewelry for whatever they had to offer. In those days it was mostly ivory. I did this because, thinking of the evaluation form I had filled out at the hotel, I had asked KLM whether I could use the Frequent Flyer's Lounge. The smiling, bleach blond flight attendant explained that this was simply not possible (pronounced in clipped Dutch English as "poshible"). I did not have enough points.

The last flight of any journey is usually the hardest physically, and the easiest psychologically. I caught my connection from Nairobi to Kilimanjaro, arrived at the airport, got my visa, filled in my voluntary Ebola health check form, and looked back at the runway. The airport is way out of town. It is nestled in the green hills near Mount Kilimanjaro. It was and is a sight for sore eyes. The jovial Tanzanian staff were their usual helpful selves.

In this country if you have a job, any job, even a poorly paid one, you often do it with joy and good cheer for the alternative is abject poverty and the shame of living off your extended family. I find that the approach to customer service here is almost religious. Tanzanians are dedicated to full service and are grateful that they are not working on the farm or herding

cattle, unlike the hundreds of thousands of under employed college graduates who man the restaurants of Manhattan and serve you in a manner that says, "I am only doing this until I get that career break on Broadway."

Before I turned away to take my bags and greet my friend who had come to pick me up, I looked out at the planes standing on the runway. The first jet belonged to Qatari Airways, just the modern version of the more than thousand year influence that the Arabs of the Persian Gulf have had on this part of the world, with their 19th century slave trade, their recent oil supremacy and their still slave like use of immigrant labour from this part of the world – old habits die hard.

The second was a plane belonging to Kenya Airways, a large jet representing the entrepreneurial nature of that British/Bantu entente that characterizes modern Kenya, a country that never expelled, and indeed embraced its expatriate minority after independence, creating a cultural hybrid that has provided the majority of Bantu East Africans with their Christianity, entrepreneurship and mastery of the English language (Yes, East African English is usually spoken in a more grammatical, clearer style and delivered with more grace than the speech of the average North American college graduate. We can thank Dr. Livingstone and his colleagues for that.) And so, Kenya Airways, having emerged from that cultural hybrid, is a tribute to a still rising, independent Africa.

And finally the small plane of Precision Air in which I had arrived, an airplane, not a jet, symbolizing the slowness with which Tanzania has been joining the open market after decades of a failed, Marxist inspired socialism, that took this once rich nation and turned it into a poverty stricken basket case, but, counter intuitively, also allowed it to coalesce through the efforts of a newly empowered administrative elite that in the early days of African independence, made tribalism in Tanzania a minor issue, and Swahili, a functioning national language whose future is now assured.

Since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1990, and the economic and political defeat of its Soviet supporters, Tanzania has opened its borders and markets to the world. Despite serious and ongoing administrative and commercial corruption, and which remains the country's greatest impediment to equitable development, its youth will do anything and go anywhere to study and get a job that may provide them with a middle class existence – a house, a car, a phone, a computer and the income to support it, as well as some land and livestock back in their home area, even if it means putting up with the modern version of the slave trade as guest workers in Saudi Arabia or the Emirates. That is the new Tanzanian dream.

And then there is the jet lagged drive into town, looking at everything as if you are not well, but being particularly comfortable with the fact that you have been here before. Then a shower, and a deep, deep sleep. You have arrived.

Morning Has Broken

Although Arusha is a large Tanzanian city bustling with businesses and traffic and the urban capital of the Northern Safari business, that takes so many people to the Serengeti, a wonder of the world, it is also a city that merges with the agricultural countryside in which it is embedded. Waking up here is different than in any European city. Despite its small Muslim population they have been in the region for over a thousand years. The city is peppered with mosques and the first thing I heard from my room was the early morning call to prayer.

The city was still asleep and so, there was little traffic to be heard, just the lone voice of the muezzin with his call to the faithful, a minority in this city, but a majority just down the road on the Indian Ocean Coast and, who are becoming more and more radical, as once again, they absorb the Wahabism that follows the old trade routes from Oman and Arabia down the East African coast.

This is an outpost of missionary Islam. The goal is not to be one voice among many, but to once again, as during the 19th century slave trade, the only one for all. There was one muezzin that I heard clearly. The singer explored the ups and downs of the scale of the prayer. You could tell, that as he was alone and not competing with fifty others as the case now in Cairo or Istanbul, his call was an exploration of his faith ending with a definitive, yes. In the distance I could hear another muezzin, probably from another mosque in a different part of town. Then silence.

If you stay in bed for another hour you will dimly hear a church bell ringing, a reminder of the missionary effort to oppose the slave trade and give inland Africans a different way of thinking about the divine, one that has actually given East African women, rights and opportunities that have never developed in the Islamic world despite their vast oil wealth. Such is the persistent and personally liberating power of ideas in an age where we believe that we are all living in a material world.

Soon after a chorus of roosters erupts out of nowhere. It is as if a rooster on every family plot decided that it was time to wake up. Even the most middle class of Tanzanians keep domestic birds in their compounds, for the eggs and occasional special meal. Even most urban Tanzanians grew up in a village before coming to the city. If they were born in the city, they

still maintain strong roots in the countryside making periodic visits to their natal village, very often during the Xmas holidays or when school is not in session. Every Tanzanian is in essence a villager, a member of a family, an extended family, a lineage and a clan. This is changing but it has not died out.

Then, just to remind us that the city is at the foot of Mount Meru and looks south to the Masai plain, the wild birds erupt in a variety of bass twitters. As I am not an ornithologist, I cannot identify all of them, but their songs are various and as they die down they are followed by what I think is an East African dove with its specific song; long, long, short, short, long long, long long, short, short, long long, long long short, short, long, long. (Years earlier I had bought a cassette of bird songs of Kenya. I would take a cassette tape recorder and play it as I tucked in my youngest son during the evening. He would fall asleep in a soundscape that mixed the actual bird calls outside of his window with the recordings of them). This dawn chorus then continues for a while and then the sounds of the day settle in, the sound of traffic and cars coming to and from the lodge, the background of various wild birds, the interference of a crow looking for garbage and the clucking of hens, pierced occasionally by a rooster, just to make sure that everyone knows who is in charge around here.

Then there are the sounds of the day, as I hear it now, for just over the wall from my lodge compound is a church. Someone is using the sound system. "One, two. One two, Jesu, Hallelujah." This is repeated at a very loud volume, as loud as the music from the local club. In fact, the structure of the music is often the same, three chord songs and hymns with infinite variations. As sudden as this auditory onslaught begins, then it ends and we can hear the birds once more. Then some time later the disco next door erupts at high decibels. You can feel the recorded bass guitar sounds resonate with your stomach.

Travellers are no doubt reminded that in this part of the world, even the most downscale drinking and dancing establishments may have a sign that reads, "Day and Night Club." This is where men come to drink alone or in groups, served by subservient bar girls or bar maidens, as they are sometimes called here, and who function in a way that the 18th century cartoonist Hogarth would find surprisingly familiar. Here the men are no doubt in charge.

Years ago, when I was working in Kenya, I noticed that the emblem of the Kenya African National Union (KANU), at the time Kenya's one and only registered political party, was the rooster. It is appropriate, for East African politicians remain dominant, aggressive and inevitably polygamous. It is the goal of every East African politician to rule the roost. As East Africans jokingly say when they make fun of political candidates, "If I am elected, I promise to rule." For all the development talk about gender equality, which is referred to at

the highest levels (largely to please Western donors) this is still a man's world, although millions of women here are doing their best to change that. It will take another generation.

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