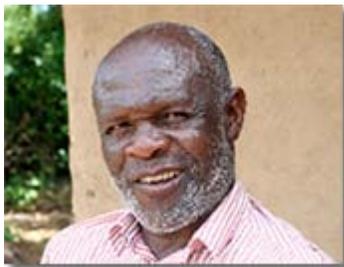


The Tea is Still Good

November 2, 2009

It's been more than ten years since I got lost on an afternoon run and ended up in the tiny fishing village of Kolunga, a village on a remote island in Lake Victoria. Please don't ask how a professional guide got lost on an island! It was far from the first time I'd gotten lost while running (the last time was outside of Cape Town when I was lost for over an hour, turning a 5 mile run into a half marathon!), but it turned out to be, by far, the most productive time that I've ever got lost.

When the dirt road ended and I was looking down over Kolunga and out to the lake; I was wearing shorts and dripping sweat, a few curious villagers said hello as they walked by, and I was basically left standing there, admiring this little humming setting. It was a fishing village, that was easy to see, and I realized that all the lovely lanterns that I had seen out on the bay at night in front of the lodge must have come from here.



I was dying of curiosity as to how that night fishing worked, and asked a man, prior to my departure, to explain it all to me. Over a cup of sweet tea he did, and invited me back for another tea that evening to watch the nightly departure of the fishing boats. I took him up on that offer and over a decade later Oketch and I, now fast friends, see each other almost monthly. The tea is still good.

Once I had seen the nightly departure of the fishing fleet I then needed to witness the morning arrival of the boats with their catch; and wanted to understand how the tiny fish finally made it to Nairobi, South Africa, and even Holland, but during that first morning visit the following dawn I was somewhat put off by the number of children that grabbed at my hands as I walked by. They disturbed my photography, and continually hovered around me, tugging at my arms, my legs, holding onto my pockets. It was, frankly, somewhat irritating and seemed distinctly "un-Kenyan". But I tolerated it, not happily, but tolerated it nonetheless. Only later, when Oketch enlightened me that almost all of those arm-grabbing children were AIDS orphans did I begin to understand.

I distinctly remember the first time I took a group of my safari guests down to the village, because I asked the lodge for a vehicle to drive us there. The lodge management had no idea what I was talking about, had never heard of the village, and, more importantly, had no idea why I would ever want to take my guests there. I knew it was a risk, taking western visitors into what could be viewed as a dirty and squalid little dirt hotel but I had the right type of guests. We were so welcomed by the villagers that the whole experience ended up a roaring success, and proved to be one of the highlights of their entire time in Kenya. I've taken an awful lot of people to Kolunga since (and gotten the lodge management involved with Kolunga) and we've never had anything but the most personal of times, always meeting up with wonderful and caring people, and, for a short period of time, sharing some profound happiness in a difficult world. And always drinking good tea.

Under three trees, on the south edge of a large grassy area where fish nets are spread for repair, were some one hundred and fifty children, divided into three groups, sitting quietly under the trees; one adult supervising each group. Upon inquiring, I found out that this was the pre-school, and was the only educational institute in the entire area. No primary school or secondary school existed. No structure even existed for these one hundred and fifty attentive little pre-schoolers. Even the teachers were unpaid volunteers who were just trying to help out their own community.

When this was gently explained to us my guests immediately offered to provide pencils, pens and notebooks for the "school", and thus it all got started. Kolunga Village Foundation, thanks to Peter Gordon and others in the US, was officially formed, registered and on its, at that time uncertain, way.

I visit Kolunga more than ever now, partially because of the foundation and the work we do there, but probably more so because of all the deep friendships that I have there. It would be unthinkable for me to come to western Kenya without stopping by for a few cups of tea at the "New Senator Hotel", preferably before 8:00am so that I can watch the blue and white parade of uniformed youngsters on their way to school. I just must visit with one or two of the families that have received dairy goats from the foundation, to have yet another cup of tea and find out where the offspring of those goats have gone. We'll sit in the yard, always clean and swept, on little wooden chairs, discuss the world and how to easily solve its problems, and have another cup of sweet tea.

Things have changed in Kolunga and things remain unchanged, and will hopefully never be different. The multi-room school is there now, the computer lab with solar cell re-charging, the toilets are discreetly observable in the background. The foundation for the clinic is in place (and we'll do the brickwork next month), and yet the fishing boats still launch at dusk, to return at dawn. Tomatoes and sukuma wiki are still sold daily along the dirt track that leads down the hill, through the collection of wood and dirt buildings, past the school and ending at the lake. But now over two hundred children go to school, some fifty young adults are working away in the computer lab, and in the near distance one can hear the occasional sound of a bleating goat.

I think that some of my times of greatest peace in Kenya are when I am sitting by the camp fire at dawn, alone, my shins almost burning from the heat of the low flickering flames, my bare toes in the ashes as I listen to the sounds of hyenas, lions and maybe a leopard, reach me out of the dark, always inviting me to come and see them.

And I am at deeply content as I hold a plastic cup of too-hot tea against my chest in the New Senator Hotel, talking with fellow villagers about Kolunga as the blue and white parade, pair by hand-holding pair, walk past with strides too big for their bodies, as the wide-eyed students greet me in their passing.

I would have never thought it possible that I could have gained so very much from getting lost, yet again, so many years back.

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