

## Kenya: On Shopping Safari

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This is not my first time in a developing country so I am familiar with the squash of coloured faces, the dusty 80s style clothing, the rotting garbage heaps and the kids and dogs who ransack them. On the road from Nairobi to the Masai Mara game park, I know the ramshackle stores propped up by listless vendors who sell yellowed boxes with curling labels to godknowswho. The wide rural roads are lined with reed like people who walk from nowhere to nowhere and the scent of sweat, dust and diesel hangs thick, as usual. I have mixed feelings about our white minivan which announces “pale tourists aboard” and “James”, my driver/guide, who is far more confident and I, far less, than I expect us to be.

I have packed all my favourite clichés gleaned from novelists and friends who have experienced Kenya in earlier days. There will be bundles of children with whiteboard smiles and grasping fingers running by my side and guides who will introduce me to their culture as though it were the first time. People will tug at my broad-brimmed bush hat, my sunglasses, my watch and smile for the camera. “Send photo”, they’ll say. By night, I will sleep *Under African Skies*, as Paul Simon sings.

“James” the tour guide is a bulky, smiley character and I look forward to camaraderie and jovial misunderstandings formed by his clipped vowels and my long, rounded ones. “Michelle”, “Liz” and “Julie” are the names he chooses for me and I correct him only once because it disturbs to think he can’t be bothered remembering my name. We stop three times each day, twice to wee and once to eat, always at roadside stalls run by vendors named “Robert” or “Peter” or “Albert” who are friendly with James and persuasive with me.

There is no time for snap shots of the fertile Rift Valley as Albert flags me to attention with his miniature tea-sets that don’t hold enough milk or sugar for two. It would be impolite to ignore his wares since he allows me to use his toilet and he has a large family to support. Every wee stop, my booty mounts: hand-painted postcards, lopsided elephant bookends, beads, fake ebony carvings, Kenyan coffee. There is so much shopping to do that my workload and pack weight become taxing. James is amused by my compassion to shop. “Don’t buy it!” he laughs, mounting his driver’s seat again.

The next day, on murky Lake Baringo, “Christopher” steers our motorised dingy in search of crocodiles. He points out the big resort on the banks being built by a white man who will not hire locals to run it. He confirms, when I ask, that many Kenyans do not like white folk because of their land-owning decades past and present. He says he works with children orphaned by AIDS and explains the difficulties of educating illiterate Kenyans when tribal elders will not countenance changes to their culture that promote safe sex. They also need money to translate educational literature into many tribal languages. “You want to make a donation?” he suggests, producing a raffle ticket booklet with an address on it. Back on the banks of Baringo in a rusty cafe, a younger boy with poor English and scrappy clothes ushers me out back. “Orphanage. Donation!” he proffers his hand and book of stubbs. Later, I ask James for more information about the orphanage, but he pretends not to hear me.

I pay for my next toilet stop and waive the right to browse their souvenirs. Instead, I wander across the road to a lonely general store and purchase a fistful of pens. The local children crowd and grasp and run. The tourist toilet owner berates me well: "They are street boys. They don't write! They use the pen to sniff glue and they fight if you don't have enough for them all. Don't you *know* this?! You must *know* these things!" James sips his coffee quietly and reads his paper. I feel like an idiot.

Outback in the game parks, there is respite in documentary moments. A goofy giraffe stoops under a lost acacia tree, twining his blue tongue between the thorny branches, peeling off the leaves. We trundle up to a pride of lionesses and their cubs with rose-red jowls from the kill. Nearby, two cheetahs pant in the shade of the only bush for kilometres, their hooded yellow eyes ignoring the clamber of minivans - all 20 of us - surrounding them. The driver/guides will receive a better tip at journey's end if they zoom in on their prey; provided they don't get caught first by park rangers for harassing wildlife. I feel pangs of doubt about these intrusive encounters. True, the animals can run, but there aren't many places to hide in this dust bowl, and we'll track them down anyway.

On the way back to Nairobi I remain withdrawn. My Kenyan dream safari weighs upon me like a nightmare. I have ravaged the game parks for not-so-happy snaps and my paltry, guilt-ridden efforts to appease poverty are pointless. James tries to comfort: "Better to help one person, than no person." I am ashamed that I long to leave this place because I don't want to be seen as a walking twenty-dollar bill any more.

"Michelle," he says as we part, "you have a very good hut." I blush. For the first time in weeks, I think I am understood as the compassionate (awkward and naïve!) visitor I have tried to be. Me and my stupid, fat, aching heart. "Everywhere I have looked for a hut like this." I panic, wondering if James is about to propose. "I think your hut would look very good on me," he says, grinning.

"Oh," I say. I remove my broad-brimmed bush "hut" from my head and hand it over, thinking of the tiny shepherd boys lost in our dust who might have worn it better.

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More information on Lisa Mitchell's writing at [lisamitchell.net.au](http://lisamitchell.net.au)