

Economist.com**Articles by subject: Topics:****CORRESPONDENT'S DIARY****Africa****Race through the night**

Nov 10th 2006

From Economist.com

A week in the travels of our East Africa correspondent**Monday | Tuesday | Wednesday | Thursday | Friday****[Get article background](#)****Friday**

LAST notes from my plane journey to New York, as I continue to chew over Al Gore's film, "An Inconvenient Truth". Gore says that the snows of Kilimanjaro are melting away. Within a generation, he says, they will be gone. He's probably right. The glaciers on the Congolese Rwenzori are going. The ice on Mount Kenya, which waters the Kikuyu highlands, is receding.



The lights I saw on the tip of Iceland have vanished. We're approaching Greenland, which makes me think of the Viking sagas I read as a boy—of my patron saint, Magnus, and, even more so, of Erik the Red. He sailed from Iceland to Greenland, which was fertile enough then for settlement. Over the centuries the place became too cold to farm, except in fjords around Cape Farewell. The worry now is that the Greenland ice sheet will melt, raising the sea level, washing over cities and islands.

Everything seems to be accelerating. There's a smoothness in modern life that is waiting to be ruptured. It's like cruising on this jet plane—and knowing that there is a great roaring out there on the other side of the glass.

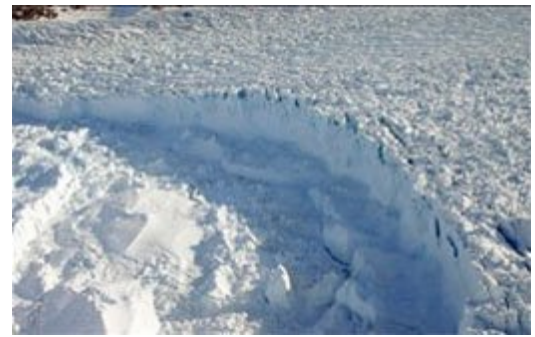
The Viking ships were wonders of engineering, the planking set to maximise elasticity, bending with the crashing of the waves. They knew where they were going, and they rejoiced when they got there. Up here in the jet plane we're playing dead, some momentary uplift into an afterlife, there's a little turbulence now, the announcement comes on, but my coffee is not spilled, there are no waves. This is what happens when you are lifted up from the earth and made to look down at it. A clarifying vertigo.

Tonight the Greenland ice sheet is still in place. I can see it now, and moonlit. The fjords are black and blue. From this height and this distance Africa feels like a parallel

AFP

universe—the desert scrub, the withered acacias, the teeming tented camps, the ruined towns, sand, goats, camels, guns, Islamists.

We, the rich countries, need to recalibrate our policies towards Africa. We need something that is both tougher and more generous, a new New Deal. But a different sort of recalibration is perhaps more likely—that, faced with more failing states, the developed world will turn away. It already has in Somalia, where the UN reckons one-third of the country may need some kind of food assistance by the end of the year. There is hardly any reporting on that. The foreign press corps is dwindling in Nairobi, the staffers cut to stringers, the stringers gone. There is even talk of closing the BBC's Nairobi office. Out of sight, out of mind.



Cold comfort from Greenland

It could come right. I would still put my money on it coming right. But it's a soupy cocktail.

[Back to top >>](#)

Thursday

I AM on a plane to New York, chasing the dawn into the North Atlantic. I flew from Nairobi over Mount Kenya's jagged peaks all the way to Dubai, took off again out of the Arabian night, and woke up some hours later over Norway. The plane glided on past the Shetland Islands. I look out now and see the lights on the southwestern tip of Iceland sailing away behind me.

Down there is the cold north. It's my element. I was born on the Shetlands. But even up here, suspended out of time, I cannot escape the burning-up of the Horn of Africa. I'm watching Al Gore's film, "An Inconvenient Truth", on the console in front of me. It's a lecture show on global warming with a little presidential backstory. There's a rather neat moment when Al gets on a forklift truck and is pushed upwards, following the projected trajectory of carbon dioxide emissions. He keeps going up, the machinery bearing his girth.

I listen carefully to what he says about Africa. It's just what I've been trying to say in the paper—environmental stress across the entire dry belt of Africa, from Mauritania to Somalia. It's an argument I'm having to make more often. A soft issue, an incremental, becomes diamond hard.

Darfur is an example of this. The regime in Khartoum is abject, the rebel groups perhaps worse. But the collapse of Darfur was first an environmental problem, then a political one. There simply wasn't enough water, grazing or firewood to go around. Fighting broke out between farmers and nomads. Even if peace is enforced, no one has any idea what to do about the drying up of the land.

And the more one considers the question of climate change, the more appalling it becomes. Why should the poorest people on the planet pay for the carbon emissions of the richest? According to my UN pals, an average American uses at least twenty times as much carbon as an average African, and that ratio rises still more if the African has been given solar panels and an energy-saving stove. The climate-change community is the first to admit that their modelling is far from perfect, but the broad outlines for the dry bits of Africa are irrefutable:

Reuters



Darfur, an inconvenient truth

more famine; more war; collapse.

[Back to top >>](#)

Wednesday

YOU hear a lot about the Reformation in the Church of Scotland. My dad is a Church of Scotland minister—a Presbyterian, to Americans. The Reformation was a brutal time, full of contradictory forces, crushing as well as liberating, but it led to David Hume and more generally to the pursuit of reason. Those same Presbyterians were among the many denominations who ended up sending missionaries to Africa. They were tough. Scotsmen such as Mungo Park and David Livingstone were titans.

Most of the missionaries taught an unobstructed Christianity. The scale of their success has been overlooked: Africa is the world's bible belt. Presbyterians in Scotland and America have become liberals, shedding Calvinist notions of predestination, admitting that the pope is not the anti-Christ and accepting gays as elders. The African church remains deeply conservative, holding to the notion of biblical truth and often preferring the Old Testament to the New.

Religion is powerful in Kenya. Old denominations have lost out to the Pentecostals, who have added entertainment to the usual regimen of brimstone. The Pentecostal insistence on personal growth, entrepreneurial spirit and personal responsibility is not all bad, especially in a listless and no-can-do state, but it comes with a dose of social conservatism.

Creationism is resurgent. The National Museum of Kenya has had to lock away its early human remains in a vault, for fear of vandalism by Christian fundamentalists. Gays continue to be beaten to death with impunity. Discussions on how to limit population growth are undermined by evangelists, at least in part because they think the world is about to end. There is a stiffening among the Muslims too.

I was down in Malindi, on Kenya's Muslim coast, the other week. I wanted to see what foothold the *jihadists* had in conservative bits of the community. I stayed in a hotel on the beach. There were some Czech guests there, among them Michal Horacek, a Communist-era dissident turned tycoon. I had known Horacek by reputation when I was living in Prague. I introduced myself. Horacek told me that he had sold his company for a large sum and embarked on a new life as an anthropology student at Charles University in Prague, a 50-something packed in with the 20-somethings. He had been flying around Kenya studying tribal peoples and writing a column about the trip for a Czech newspaper.



Reuters

Growing apart from secular Europe

In Samburuland, he said, he met a warrior down on his luck. He wanted to help the man, but felt that gifting money was a corrosive way of going about it. Instead, he purchased the right to name the warrior's next child. It would be called Prague.

I invited Horacek to join me the next day on a visit to a Muslim primary school in the backstreets of Malindi. The pupils received a secular education in the morning and a Koranic one in the afternoons. Classes were in English and Arabic. Swahili was reserved for the playground. The message was one of tolerance: non-Muslims were encouraged to attend the school. Were there any? "Not yet" the headmaster admitted.

He purchased the right to name the warrior's next child. It would be called Prague

We were taken to a mosque. We took off our shoes and washed our feet. Horacek said it was the first time he had been in a mosque. We were treated generously. Yet it was hard to shake the feeling that we were regarded as unbelievers by our Muslim hosts, and that, as with the Pentecostals, the pursuit of reason was losing out to unhelpful literalism, born of missionary certitude a century ago, and that this trend would be tectonic, pushing Africa further apart from secular Europe.

[Back to top >>](#)

Tuesday

NAIROBI used to be the green city under the sun. But the population has swelled seven-fold since Kenya's independence in 1963. Large parts of the capital are dilapidated, some are slums so bad that nobody would have thought them possible 40 years ago. One such, Kibera, is set in a hollow by a little stream. Its neighbour on one side is a rich neighbourhood called Langata, on the other side the Ngong forest and Nairobi racecourse. Kibera is home to 800,000 close-packed people. I catch glimpses of it when I drive down to my tennis club. The courts are built on a slope above. After running down a forehand and grabbing for air I sometimes catch a taste of the raw human sewage seeping out of rusted pipes on the other side of the wall.



A tough town to be poor in

Then there is the crime. Locals chirpily call the city "Nairobbery". We're on the equator. Night falls with Truman Show precision. What follows is menacing. There is an edge to any late-night drive home from a party through distant quarters of the city. It's a humming anxiety: that thugs will lurch out of the shadows with handguns, with Kalashnikovs, always with machetes. Do you have enough money to give them? Will they hack at you? It is difficult to say how much of this is a real threat, and how much the workings of whispering in the community. Every few weeks you hear of an incident. Christmas Day in my neighbourhood brought the news that one of the local Catholic priests had been shot dead, through the eye, while driving home from midnight mass.

Our house is set in an overgrown bit of Karen, a neighbourhood on the edge of the Nairobi national park named for Karen Blixen, a Danish writer whose coffee plantation once covered most of the area. Leopards sometimes pass through our garden. One recently mauled a neighbour's dog. Our house is large, worn out, and fortified beyond any reasonable standard—though by local standards it is not fortified at all. We don't have an electric fence, or dogs, or a shifts of uniformed guards.

We do have, at the top of the long red earth drive, John, a resident of Kibera, who sits awake (I can only hope) all night in a sentry post by the front gate, teaching himself English and studying the history of Christianity from a Swahili textbook. We have security lights, iron bars on every window, and an iron gate locked by numerous padlocks before bed each night. It is no way to live, especially with children, but yet you get used to it. This is what it means to live in an African city. John is wiry, subsisting on a porridge tea, white bread, avocados, and mangos, and uncommonly strong. A while ago I asked him if he had everything he needed to keep my family safe. Boots, raincoat, balaclava, torch. He looked at me directly. "Bow and arrow please," he said. "I'm sorry?" "You buy bow and arrow. I bring the poison. Shoot them through throat." He gestured. Kenyan friends shrugged when I told them this story. Their security guards have bows and arrows also.

No one really knows the murder rate in Nairobi. It wasn't always this way. Old timers tell me that there was hardly any crime in the 1960s. It has exploded along with the city. Without jobs it is

likely to keep growing. So when we sit out on our veranda at night, we do so behind an iron fence. Through the railings we can see the bats swooping down over the blue swimming pool, lit with the arc of the security lighting, and away into the darkness. But we seldom unlock the padlocks and sit out under the stars. Which is a shame.

[Back to top>>](#)

Monday

WE GET woken early by our youngest son. He's two. "Ostrich," he says, and he jumps up and down on my head. I look blearily out of the tent. A pink and yellow dawn. There is indeed a large female ostrich pecking at the guy ropes. She retreats a little. Several of us, including our young son, climb out. We wave our arms and bang pots. With utmost disdain she unfurls her wings. Finally she moves off.

I've spent the last few weeks dealing with Ethiopia and Somalia. This week I will be off to New York, in part to promote a novel I've written, "Giraffe", about giraffes and communism. Just now I am back home in Kenya, and this past night we have been camping out in the bush. One of the privileges of living in this great ramshackle country is to get out into the wild. With kids it is quite an expedition: not just toys and sweets, but tents, food, lanterns, knives, fuel, and spare tyres.

Our small car struggles when we make the long uphill drives out of Nairobi to the slopes of the Aberdare mountains. The roads are abysmal. Very occasionally you hit a stretch of road made over by the European Union (hardly ever by the Kenyan government). For those few miles you feel as if you're flying. Then the road narrows and deepens into potholes, and you're pinned in among overburdened lorries coughing up black phlegm, with other lorries and cars careening at you the other way. Only Somalia is scarier.

We're in the Kigio conservancy, a private wildlife reserve between the towns of Naivasha and Nakuru. You reach it down a long dirt road that becomes slippery as ice under the slightest drizzle. The future of conservation in Africa is tied to initiatives such as Kigio. The Malewa river flows slow and brown through the middle of it: there are hippos in the pools. There is a lodge and a camp site (where we are). A glorious walk across a creaking bridge leads you up a ravine to a secret swimming hole.



This is your morning call

The reserve was formed out a dairy farm in 1997. At 3,500 acres it is too small to accommodate lions. Even inside the fence, parts of the land are grazed thin by goats. The watering points are trampled down by cattle. The water is thick with floating mounds of shit from animals domestic and wild. It is a necessary compromise. The first challenge for conservancy, in a country as crowded and poor as Kenya, is to be sustainable. That means giving the locals some grazing rights.

When the afternoon comes, the equatorial sun is directly above, but hidden by thick grey clouds. There is a chill. We see two white rhinos out on the grassland. We come close. There is something of Jurassic Park about them. It's hard to imagine they could survive anywhere in the wild in modern Africa, not with the continent's appetite for land and for bush meat. Their future is on postage-stamp-sized estates like this one, fenced in, with sometimes heaving communities just outside. There are always stories in the Kenyan papers of an animal that has accidentally veered into a settlement from a game park. They are killed, skinned, and eaten.

A Kenyan elephant expert showed me some research recently about how elephants struggle to find corridors linking one safe area to another. They run fast through the night, trampling newly planted corn fields, ripping through flimsy fences, clinging stubbornly to a memory of a burial ground or watering hole. I look at the rhinos with the kids and think of the elephants. It is a melancholy theme: a few surviving elephants racing through the darkness in search of a safe place.

Copyright © 2007 The Economist Newspaper and The Economist Group. All rights reserved.
