

Adapting to my African world



About ten years ago I was looking for a place to stay for Christmas, on the coast of Kenya. I had come there for work, a year before and was immediately captivated. The area reminded me of a place I had known in my younger days - beach Australia - with lots of greenery and a million palm trees; low rise buildings and a casual lifestyle, which I have come to realise as the trademark of the tropics, all around the world.

It was only after a few years of living and working in Kenya that I struck out for the coast; until then the priority was centre and west of the country. After very little persuasion, the people I worked with agreed that expanding our work to the eastern seaboard was necessary - perhaps in part because they viewed the coast as a holiday destination - but I was secretly quite wary of the overbearing heat and humidity, which I knew would be an everyday feature.

Working in Mombasa schools turned out as I had thought, to be quite a challenge. For nine months of the year the heat was indeed oppressive, with brief respite in the June to August (so-called) winter season. One day, half-way through a multi-school seminar, I remember dousing myself with a bucket of cold water to help maintain some cool, in front of a hundred startled onlookers. It was all in vain, but we battled on. Despite all this, I still loved the place.

So, there I was a year or so later, sounding out a local teacher:

“Kamau,” I said, “I would really like to come back to the coast for a holiday, but over Xmas hotels are charging two or three times the normal rate. What can I do?”

“Hakuna matata bwana (no worries sir),” came the reply. “Let’s meet tomorrow.”

The following day we travelled by tuk-tuk a few kilometres along the coast, away from Mombasa, turning off the main road and arriving at a coastal enclave I had not been to before: *Serena Beach*. Our three-wheeler spluttered to a stop outside a small hotel, across from the beach. It was reminiscent of an Italian scene, with shuttered windows and small tables with chequered tablecloths adorning a bricked courtyard.

“What do you think?” Kamau looked at me inquisitively.

“Hey, I like it,” I replied. “If the inside matches the outside, I’ll take it without looking!”

This was my first glimpse of *Sonia*, a small hotel at the centre of the village: quaint to look at, but, as I realised later, running on borrowed time. In fact, the hotel’s fall from grace was in many ways symptomatic of the whole area.

As chance would have it, I had missed the hay-day for *Serena Beach* by a decade or two; that was back in the 1990s, when – so I was told - a group called *The African Safari Club* ran a flotilla of fine hotels, set in place along the coast to make the most of the sun blessed beaches and tropical marine world just offshore. They even had dedicated charter flights bringing in thousands of sunseekers from Germany and Italy and other countries. All through the peak summer season in Kenya, when Europe was freezing, the *African Safari* hotels were packed. And of course, a small hotel like *Sonia* caught the overflow and reaped the benefits.

But like life in general, after the boom came the bust. This was influenced both from within and without, the downturn set in motion by Al-Qaeda’s devastating 1998 attack on the American Embassy in Nairobi, which killed hundreds. Since then, spasmodic terrorist assaults have continued with further negative impacts on tourism, but to add fuel to the fire *African Safari* pressed the self-destruct button, with arguments between owners causing the final demise of the hotel chain. All those once-

marvellous hotel resort buildings fell into disrepair and over time became gutted ruins: mementos to the good times. I was quite happy in a sort of selfish way because at the end of it all there was more solitude and beach space for my daily walk.

Today however, Serena Beach is on the rise again, promising to return to the top of the pile: the jewel in the crown on the Kenyan coast. This began with the remains of one African Safari ruin - a 200-room, 10-acre affair – being completely renovated in fine style, and another built from ground up on a much grander scale than before, some buildings in the complex rising to five or six floors. A variety of other appealing hotel-apartment complexes have also sprung up just north of the main beach precinct, adding a choice of short and long stay options for visitors.

But when I stumbled on the place a few years back, Serena Beach was still very much in the doldrums, and though we had stopped outside what my brain equated to a rustic little spot in the backstreets of Naples, on closer inspection I could see that that it, and the area around it, had seen better days. The receptionist was charming, and the room she showed us enormous, with not one, but two adjoining balconies. A bit of peeling paint and a few chipped tiles, but who cares when the price is less than 20% of the trendy places down the road.

Thus, *Sonia Hotel and Apartments* became my home away from home whenever work took me to Mombasa. I always insisted on the same room that was shown to me on that very first visit, which I discovered was in fact by far, the best room available.

Over three or four years I came to know the people well. Liz the receptionist, whom I met on the first day, became a good friend and my housekeeper some years later, when I bought an apartment nearby and after Sonia had descended though poor repair, to closure. James the barman, along with housekeeper Vivienne were also firm favourites. But perhaps more intriguing was my coming to know the owner, a Kenyan who seemed to have made a total mess of running the place since day one.

It all started one morning over breakfast in the courtyard, when Liz happened to mention that the hotel was in receivership. The small guy with ill-fitting clothes and a sickly grin, who I assumed as the manager, was in truth employed by the bank as

their overseer in situ. Liz later confided that that any profits went into this guy's pocket and from their paid for his addiction to drink, drugs, and young ladies. There was thus no hope of the business ever returning a profit and it seemed very likely that receivership would convert to bargain price resale, in the not-too-distant future. My long-smouldering entrepreneurial instincts were fascinated by this; I could imagine developing my very own, Italian-style boutique hotel, out of what was fast becoming the decrepit ruins of Sonia.

On a subsequent visit, learning that the owner was in the building, I arranged to see him. His office turned out to be a large room next to the kitchen, better decorated and equipped than all the other rooms I had seen to that point in time. Facing him across his voluminous, mahogany coloured desk, I began to wonder if he was the major reason for Sonia's fall from grace, or whether he was a victim of the times and circumstance of the moment. The fact that he had concreted over the swimming pool to make a large underground water tank, I felt, had probably not helped matters.

We met four or five times over the next few months, and I went to see the receiver manager, plus the bank, in Nairobi. After that I invited Norbert, a German friend - and builder-electrician by trade - to take a closer look at the place. We stayed in adjoining rooms and partied every night, but during the day I was out doing my work, while he was firmly fixed on uncovering Sonia's closely guarded secrets. He took a full three days and came up at the end of it all with a long list of items that required fixing: rust encrusted water pipes, leaking rooves and failed electrics; these and many, many more were all there. The potential cost of renovation came in at a massive 25 million Kenya shillings (about \$US 250,000) which pointed me towards placing an offer on the table of about half the asking price. This was rejected out-of-hand, which in glorious technicolour hindsight was probably extremely fortunate, as I would have had to go into enormous debt, and that, plus the oncoming Covid-19 pandemic just around the corner, would have meant probable ruin ... both for Sonia and for me!

Interestingly, the bank did accept a similar offer from another (Kenyan) buyer and I suspected underhand dealings, between the owner and the responsible bank officer, enabled this to take place. Perhaps a year later the hotel was sold on yet again, for

not much more than half the price I had offered - something less than land value – and today, at the end of this corona virus year, Sonia sits in a half-renovated state, boarded up behind rusting iron sheets and looking distinctly forlorn.

However, I would hesitate to see this as the end of Sonia. A massive hotel development (mentioned above) is well underway, almost opposite, on the beachside, with hundreds of rooms and plans for extravagant convention facilities. This venture is assured success, assuming the owner remains amongst the high echelon of politics, with shoehorn connections to large ministry and parastatal conferences, which translates to thousands upon thousands of convention goers and hotel guests: a guaranteed income into eternity. The conflicts of interest of course are enormous, but par for the course in Kenya, where many billion-dollar businesses are run by politicians and enabled by politics.

Sonia, being just across the road, could benefit handsomely, because it is well known that politicians and ministry personnel will often take the option of bedding down at a reduced rate, if they can pocket the balance. As well as this, they may wish to seek out night-time pursuits, such as bars and clubs, that may not be attainable on the inside, but are very much available on the outside, in the immediate vicinity.

Not long after the failed bid for Sonia, and hotel ownership stardom - or downfall - I began to feel so much at home in the area, that I decided to buy a small place just a kilometre or so away from the main village: one of several apartments which surrounded a communal pool. I was drawn to the place because it was encircled and camouflaged by tall *Neem* trees and exotic palms. To add to this, my apartment to be was on the first floor and had a larger-than-normal terrace (which I later expanded even further). I loved the district and the outdoor living style had great appeal. An additional bonus was that the ground floor was owned by a couple who visited for Xmas holidays for just one month of each year; for the other eleven I was in effect living in a two-story house, with a vacant ground floor.

One of the advantages of my new beachside home is that it is situated towards the centre of a small peninsula, just a few minutes walk from ocean going beaches on

one side and the beautiful mangroves of *Mtwapa Creek* on the other. A small cluster of fisherfolk work on the banks of the creek, so fresh *Taffy* fish is plentiful, while at low tide I can wander down to the sea beach and walk along to the Serena village, for my everyday needs. It has been a few years now, but I still love and very much appreciate the relaxed environment. And by design or coincidence this, my most recent residence, has given me distance and protection from the corona virus, which may not have been possible had I been living in Europe.

But there again it probably pays not to get too carried away by this situation of environmental bliss; for every silver cloud there is a darker lining. I have just described a world that viewed through rose-coloured glasses appears to be a calm and clear millpond, but closer inspection reveals an underbelly of discord which comes largely as the result of disparities in income between the rich - which includes myself - and the abjectly poor. The rich live in gated communities, behind high walls, electric fences and razor wire and drive out in their Prados and Land Cruisers; the cars alarmed and the occupants unseen behind tinted glass. In stark contrast the poor live in squalor and exist for a month on what the rich consume in a day. Many of the poor live in a world of drugs and prostitution, and of course, a world of crime.

And it is the world of crime which impacts – or has potential to impact – on my own existence in the area. So far nothing serious has happened, apart from minor theft, but I am always very aware that with my white skin and hairy legs I stand out like a flashing beacon to anyone from a nearby slum who might wish to fund their never-ending cocaine habit. Not long ago a good friend of mine was accosted in his bedroom by machete wielding thieves, intent on stealing his worldly goods. While at a lower level, I know that I am fair game for the corrupt policeman who wishes to add to his daily allowance, by catching the *mzungu* (white man) on a technical issue, while other drivers flash past, breaking road rules in all directions.

I guess what I am trying to say is that life is seldom perfect; there is almost always a risk factor. I appreciate my current lifestyle in Kenya, which I know comes with built in risks, but on balance it is for me, better than the alternative.

“And what is the alternative?” I hear you ask.

“Well,” I would have to say, “The alternative is to return to those places I have inhabited in the past: The UK, where I was born, or Australia, where I lived out a large, central chunk of my life.”

“Quite frankly, these alternatives would both be possible, but they both frighten me. Last time in Australia I was driving in the city, on a very broad, virtually car-free dual carriageway, where 10 or 20 cars flowed along, exactly on the speed limit and in waves that accorded with the previous traffic light. Everything - the road, the cars, the speed limit, the timing – everything was perfect. That’s what scared me: Utopia! Give me a bit of Kenyan chaos anytime (but perhaps just not too much!).”

“The other element of release in Kenya is that even though I am now into my seventies, I can still conduct business as though I am a middle-aged stripling. I drive out to cafes and shops, or the beach in the daytime and attend a bar at night, amongst an age range of people, both black and white and all skin tones in between. I have seen the alternative of segregated old age in the West, which also frightens me. I am lucky, I know, to have the choice. Some day of course my choice might all come crashing down. That I guess, is the risk!”

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