

1. On Safari in the Serengeti

“We are going on Safari! We are going on Safari! Can you believe it? We are going on Safari!” Pinch pinch. Every time Myrtle and I got together for the two months prior to our trip to Africa, we always had to spend about ten minutes just squealing and shrieking at each other and reassuring ourselves that we actually were going to go on a safari. We wanted to go to the Serengeti, so we chose to go to Tanzania. Our arms were already a bit bruised even before the trip because we kept pinching each other and shrieking, “Safari! Can you believe it? We are going on safari!” And with some embarrassment I tell you, dear gentle reader, that when we came back from this trip we both had black and blue marks on our arms from all the pinching!

“Look, JoJo! A giraffe! Ooohhh! How tall he is!” Pinch pinch. “Myrtle, quick, look over there, a baby Elephant, and her mama is trying to hide her from us!” Pinch pinch. “Oh, JoJo! Baby lions! Oh, they are just so cute!” Pinch pinch pinch. “Wow, Myrtle! Look at that Ostrich! I think he is taller than our jeep!” Pinch pinch.

And you get the picture. One time when I pinched her again because I wanted her to notice this magnificent Wildebeest looking straight at us, she got annoyed and gave me such a hard pinch that I gasped and slapped her hand. And of course she slapped me right back, snorting, “JoJo, we have seen about 10,000 of those critters! Can you please stop pinching me for those critters that you persist in calling Wildebeests?! Once and for all, they are Gnus.”

“Yes, they are definitely news no matter how many times we see them!”

“Their NAME is Gnu, dodo, G N U, Gnu.”

“G N U new? Myrtle, I am NOT coming back from this trip telling people I saw a million news, I just am not, so there! They are Wildebeests! Now and forever! Hmmp.” She conveniently forgot that she kept pinching me every time we saw her favorite little Grant’s Gazelle. “Oooohhhh, look at that sweet little rump! All dressed up in those adorable tuxedo pants! Oh, he is just so, so handsome! I just want to give him a big hug!”

Well, despite all the bruising, our safari was all we could have wished for and more, starting with accommodations and food, especially food! Armies travel on their bellies, right?



The flight to Kilimanjaro Airport was a tad bit long for sure, coming in at just over 27 hours, and the one-hour drive to Arusha and Mama Wilson’s Lodge got a little long, but we were so psyched to be in Africa that we endured it all happily. To my surprise, our beds at the Lodge were heavenly. The first night, however, my sigh of pleasure as I stretched out on my comfy mattress was interrupted by a muffled wail from Myrtle’s bed. “Oh, No! JoJo, JoJo! What am I going to do? Somehow a mosquito got in under the mesh around my bed and now it bit me! Oh, JoJo! What am I going to do? What if that mosquito was carrying malaria! Oh, NO!”

“Myrtle, hush!” I whispered sternly. “I have an anti-malarial tablet I will give you and you will be fine.” She calmed down. I dutifully left my oh-so-comfortable little nest and rooted around in my backpack until I found my bottle of Vitamin C and I gave her one. Now you and I, dear reader, know that Vitamin C is not strictly speaking an anti-malarial pill, but let’s not tell Myrtle. All I was interested in was something to shut her up so I could crawl back into that little nest of mine.



The next morning both we and the weather were bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, especially after a delicious full breakfast (eggs and bacon and waffles in Africa – who knew?) In short order the twelve people in our group were loaded onto three jeeps with three drivers and three guides. In our jeep the guide started to lecture about Tanzania and where we were going first. As I listened, I was fascinated by the way the people along the sides of the road were transporting things, and I took photos through the jeep windows.



“A teacher here earns about \$150 per month,” said our guide, “a laborer earns about \$40, a doctor \$1500, and a pilot more. Gas costs \$5 a gallon. Most cars run on diesel. Most of the cars in Tanzania are made in Japan, with special suspension and construction for the bad roads. Our first stop this morning is going to be Mama Anna’s Cheese Factory.” Soon the roads got so bad the guide stopped speaking and just hung on to the jeep support as we jounced and bounced over holes and ruts.



As we drove to our first stop, the Cheese Factory, the road indeed was the worst I’ve ever been on. We were bounced around so badly my wonderful breakfast threatened to make a repeat appearance, but before that happened, we suddenly arrived at Mama Anna’s place and someone shouted, “Look! Mount Kilimanjaro! We are lucky! It is so hard to see Mount Kilimanjaro because it is always covered with clouds!” I jumped out of our jeep and took this snapshot, and sure enough, in five minutes the cloud cover moved back in, and we could no longer see

Mount Kilimanjaro. “JoJo!” squealed Myrtle happily. “This is a good omen! We will have a great

safari!” OK, whatever. I was just happy she would no longer go on and on about her fear of getting malaria.

Mama Anna was a happy, exuberant woman. She and her helpers greeted us with big smiles and singing and clapping as they gave us each a friendship shawl and sang Kumbaya Karibu. Our guide explained that Mama Anna founded the Cheese Factory in 1992 with the help of Heifer International, an aid organization that worked through African churches. She received her first six cows and invited ten ladies to help her take care of the cows and sell the milk. They were successful. Within a year they received more cows. Some of the women took a few cows and started their own businesses.

In 1993 Mama Anna went to Arusha to find a market where she could sell the milk. She hired a man with a wheelbarrow to take her milk 9 km to the main road. Soon she found out that a middleman was watering down her milk to make more profit, giving her business a bad name. She decided that if she sold cheese instead of milk, nobody could tamper with her product. She met another organization from Holland and in 1997 sent a young man to Holland to learn to make cheese. She invited other women to come and learn how to make cheese and start businesses, forming the Agape Women’s Group. As their businesses became profitable, they began renovating and building two schools. Six women and their families did all this work.



In her curing room we saw fresh Mozzarella and Cheddar cheese. With our guide interpreting, Mama Anna explained how they make cheese. “Ghee makes cooking oil. Every day we heat milk to 65 degrees C (149 F) then put it into cold water to 30 degrees C (86 F.) Mix in the culture, stir, and wait 5 minutes. We use Rennet. Then add vinegar, mix, and cover for 25 minutes. Cut into pieces and cover for 20 minutes. Boil water to 100 C, (212 F) and mix for 30 minutes, then put cheese into the mold, put wood on top. The stone presses the cheese for 8 hours, then it sits for 24 hours in salt water. Then lastly it is cured on the racks for several months. They also make butter in their churn. It takes about six hours.”

Then Mama Anna proudly showed us their Stingless Bees. “These bees,” she said, with our guide interpreting, “eat the killer bees. These are shy bees. The honey we get from them is a little like alcohol, with a very distinct taste. Every six months we get about five liters of honey.”

One of the helpers brought out a tray of little beans that Mama Anna told us are coffee beans. “They need to be picked one by one for best flavor,” she said. “Then the beans are hulled and pounded to get rid of the second shell. After that they are roasted for ten minutes.” We were invited to help with the roasting. The beans were put into a heavy cast iron pot over an open fire and stirred continuously for ten minutes.



After roasting the coffee beans, we pounded them in a small wooden barrel using round-headed wooden bats. Then the beans were sifted and cooked into a strong, flavorful coffee, which we were invited to sample, along with small round donut balls and cheese.



Mama Anna demonstrated how to carry a heavy hand of bananas on her head, and she invited us to try it, but each person who lifted the hand was taken aback at how heavy it was, and there were no takers. She showed us how she dries her corn, and the wooden wheelbarrow used on the farm.





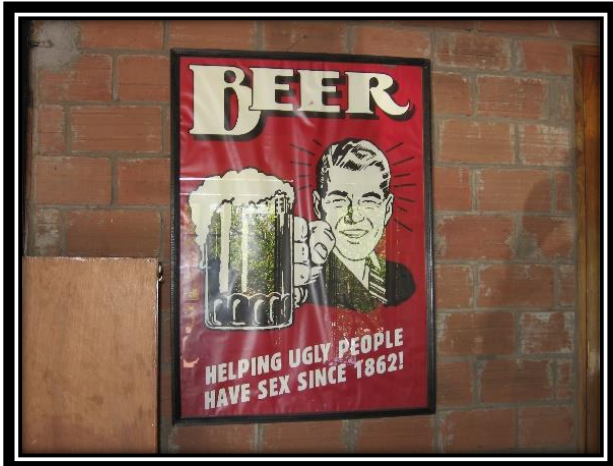
She fed banana leaves to the cows and goats and invited us to help feed them. I fell in love with this cow and I fed her so many banana leaves that she mooed a long mournful moo as we left.

Then we were back on the road again, navigating a traffic jam where a truck had broken down and traffic had to use one lane. There was a bit of shouting when some impatient drivers did not want to wait their turns. I noticed that the local people did allow our jeeps precedence, and I hoped that meant that our tourist dollars were reaching them.



Our next stop was a local open-air market where we wandered among the offerings, which included all kinds of vegetables and fruits, basket after basket of dried smelts, clothing and textiles, shoes, household items, charcoal burners, umbrellas, gardening and farming implements, used goods, and much more. Our guides bought oranges for us. All the goods were piled on rough blankets on the ground or just laid out on the dirt. Myrtle's comment was, "I guess they don't have a market on

rainy days?” I was too busy looking at everything and taking photos to pay much attention to her until I suddenly heard an unmistakable raucous hoot followed by some loud laughter. Yes, Myrtle had found this sign and had soon attracted most of our group, who gathered in a circle around her, tittering and giggling. The men in our group were poking each other and laughing and miming lifting a tankard, quite infantile really, I thought. But then I chided myself. The sign really WAS funny, you have to admit.





As I watched the school children walking home for lunch, our guide happened by and said, “We will be visiting a school in a few days, a school that your travel organization helps to support.”

To be continued . . .