

## 2. African Culture and Maasai Land

After a delicious lunch of roasted chicken, liver in sauce, chopped beef in sauce, potatoes, fried plantains, spinach, assorted veggies, water, and bananas for dessert, we went back to the market and visited a local pottery business run by a man. “In Africa it is mostly women who do the pottery,” said our guide. “This owner is unusual. From 1982-1992 he was part of a group of pottery makers, but the group collapsed, and he developed his own business. The special clay he uses is from 4-5 km away. The clay stays for 6-8 weeks in a curing area.” We watched the man knead the clay, like you knead bread dough. He took a 5 kg chunk of clay to make a large vase. “I use a piece of board to make a nice collar on my vases and a trimming tool to finish them,” he said. “A finished piece takes 10-14 days to dry. The firing furnace gets up to 700-900 C and then the pots take 24 hours to cure.”

As we watched and listened, I was aware that Myrtle had somehow disappeared.



Suddenly the fly wheel where the man was working started to turn. He leaped back with a fist against his heart and a small alarmed “Aaii.” Then Myrtle’s head popped up from under the table with a giggle, and he understood that she had engaged the kick wheel that he uses to make larger pieces. He was a good sport about it and finished his little speech quickly; but I hissed at Myrtle, “That was mean! You’d better buy something from him after embarrassing him like that.”



“Buy something?” she said incredulously. “And just where in my limited luggage do you suggest I put it? Are you willing to pack it in YOUR suitcase?” “Go figure it out,” I said a bit nastily as I tried to decide if my chagrin were acute enough to demand that I also buy something. But then Myrtle surprised me once again: she selected an exquisite (and expensive) little clay pot with a perfectly fitting lid. When she presented it to the pottery maker with her credit card, he beamed at her with such high wattage that I almost wanted to buy something expensive just to see him look at me that way. Almost. My rational brain came to the rescue by reminding me that there was literally not one corner in my suitcase not crammed to the gills already.

We were back at our home base at Mama Wilson’s by 5:00 and met outside by a bonfire at 6:30 for our briefing for tomorrow, which would be a busy day driving through Arusha, visiting the Cultural Center, and then driving to our new digs, the Lake Burunge Tented Lodge. Once again, the dinner was delicious, beef and chicken on pasta, with fried bananas for dessert.



The next day our wake-up call was at 7:00 and we were on the jeeps by 8:30. I was surprised by the amount of traffic in downtown Arusha, especially on the main street, Independence Street, where the vehicles shared the road with men pushing heavy wheelbarrows or pulling carts of lumber or riding bicycles. The women mostly carried things on their heads, and I was in awe of the loads they could carry that way. The Cultural Center was full of gorgeous wooden carvings with smooth glass-



like finishes. Of course, I fell in love with a large rosewood elephant until Myrtle, as usual, burst my happy balloon by showing me the price tag, \$9500. She also smirked, “In addition, do you really think this large elephant will fit in your suitcase?” “Rosewood!” I murmured forlornly as I walked away. “When will I ever have the opportunity to buy an elephant carved in rosewood?”





There were two drummers at the entrance to the Cultural Center, and they invited us to try out the drums. We did, and it was so much fun I almost got over my mourning. Our guide told us that all the hundreds of carvings in the Center are done by one tribe in the southern part of Tanzania, the Mkonde, who are considered expert carvers. Myrtle and I were awed by the way the carvers managed to create long thin legs and necks and trunks without the wood breaking.



Then we drove into Masai country, which will always in my memory be tagged as “Africa.” I took lots of photos through the car windows of Maasai huts within their bomas, the fantastically shaped baobab trees, the ever-present acacia trees (there are 4000 varieties of acacia trees,) termite mounds, Maasai men walking and herding their cattle and goats and donkeys along the road. Then we left the main road and drove forever on a badly rutted dirt road and then on a dirt path to the Lake Burunge Tented Lodge, arriving about 1:20 pm.







We drove through so much dust that we saw true dust devils stirred up on the landscape. “It’s the end of the dry season,” said our guide. “Everything is brown right now, and it will all turn green when the rains come.” We were coated with reddish dust, and Myrtle quipped, “I think I have swallowed so much African soil that if I keep drinking water and we keep bouncing around on these roads, I will have a nice blob of clay in my belly, just perfect for that potter.” “And,” I followed up jauntily, “it is so

hot right now that it will probably bake right in your belly!” Our jeep mates happily joined us, making jokes about the dust and heat, and by the time we arrived at camp, we were a merry lot.



At camp we were met with cold wash cloths and a drink of icy-cold juice, pure heaven, and shown to our cabins that again have running water and flush toilets! Yayy! “Everything here is powered by solar cells, using fluorescent bulbs,” said our guide. Our lunch on this wide, covered veranda was again delicious: vegetable quiche, fried fish, and several salads, with beer and tea. “They really know how to keep our bellies happy on safari,” chortled one of the men as he helped himself to his fourth piece of fried fish. “He will need two naps to digest all of

that,” whispered Myrtle with a giggle. And indeed, after lunch all the group disappeared to their cabins to rest and sleep. The cabins were blessedly free of dust, and the beds were generously equipped with mosquito nets, but the mattresses were quite hard. I sat on mine and commented on



how I really prefer a softer mattress, and Myrtle scoffed, “Oh, stop whining! Look where we are, JoJo! We are in Africa! On safari!”



She was right, of course, and while most of our travel mates snoozed happily during the heat of the afternoon, Myrtle and I took another cold beer and sat on this covered veranda, sipping our beers, listening to the stillness all around us and the wind in the acacia trees, and pinching each other as we tried to refrain from squealing, “We are on safari in Africa! Can you believe it? On safari in Africa!”



To be continued . . .