

Can I Get To Kenya?

by N.K. Cameron

"How I spent my summer vacation"—remember that traditional fall assignment? It's not everyone who can talk of scorpions, poisonous snakes and spiders, 110 degree heat, and dining amongst skulls and bones. That was all part of twenty-one year old Kelly Dorcas's experience last summer. Kelly, a fourth year UNB anthropology student from Fredericton, spent six weeks on a field school in Kenya, being instructed in the methods of palaeoanthropology, and learning about the ecology of East Africa.

It all began on Christmas vacation 1989, when Anthropology Professor Moira McLaughlin showed Kelly a poster and asked if she was interested in attending a field school in Kenya. Kelly's written enquiry to Harvard University unleashed a stream of papers — five letters, a flyer, an information package, application forms, insurance forms, invoices, and a schedule — over the next five months. The papers came from the Director of the program, Harry V. Merrick, who had established the field school while doing research in Kenya through Harvard University quite a few years ago. Although Merrick now works at MIT, the program is still run through Harvard, which also provides a lot of the funding.

The students of the Koobi Fora Field School find their accommodations a long way from the manicured lawns of Harvard and its dormitories. Accommodations for the field students range from the Plums Hotel in Nairobi (a brothel), nylon tents at campsites, and the permanent complex of limestone and thatch buildings, called "ban-

das", at the famous Koobi Fora base camp on the shore of Lake Turkana. Kelly recalls the first night of rain on a camping trip, when water seeped through the floor of her tent. Fortunately, drying was easy. "The next morning we tipped our tent over sideways and left it looking like a dead starfish blowing in the wind." The sun had dried the nylon tent by the time the students returned from that day's ecology tour, and Kelly used a plastic groundsheet after that.

There was a constant problem of water underfoot in the hotel bathrooms in Nairobi, too, as none of the shower stalls had curtains. Many windows in the hotel were broken. The sliding glass doors to the balcony (where she and her fellow guests hung their washing to dry) had a hole the size of a football, as if a rock had been thrown through it.

There were other signs of past civil unrest in Nairobi. Kelly says, "Any little area of grass had barbed wire around it, anywhere that people could congregate off the street. I remember reading about the Mau Mau emergencies. They had shot a whole bunch of people in a yard in Nairobi — they were trapped. I wonder if they've left the barbed wire up as a reminder of what happened, or what could happen." Street maps of Nairobi are not only unavailable, but illegal.

Three rough maps were drawn for the students by Marsha Smith, a former field school student herself, and program coordinator and camp manager from 1986 to 1989. Her diagrams enable the students to find their way from the National Museum to the Plums Hotel, to the cafeteria of the USIU (United States International University — Africa), to the City Market and the Open Market, to the Post Office and to shop areas. Exploring downtown Nairobi "kwa miguu" (on foot) is

not difficult, as the business section is relatively concentrated for a city of over a million people. Footpaths lead one to parks, elementary schools, restaurants, bookstores, and



the open daily market.

Outside the city, roads take one to various national parks. Kelly had seen Nairobi National Park on her way in from the airport. The Kenyan taxi driver, a "guardian angel" who made sure he delivered her into the proper hands, had transformed the twenty minute drive into a mini safari, pointing out zebras, impala, and other animals, and purple bougainvillea, yellow cassia, red flame trees, yellow acacias, white jasmine, and other flowering plants.

A five day ecology camping tour revealed many more plant and animal species, and highlighted different ecological niches of East Africa. Lake Naivasha, near Hell's Gate National Park, was the first stop. What a contrast to the Africa Kelly had glimpsed from the plane, dingy brown grass and black trees, with rivers and streams dried up and looking like "little snakes all over the ground." At Naivasha, she found

lush grass and big trees. "It felt just like being home. You didn't feel like you were in Africa." At least in the daytime; at nighttime, she admits, they could hear the grunting of

keeping of a "log" to record observations of wildlife — "us watching them, them watching us". On the open plains of Hell's Gate National

"get down on their knees to eat." She was surprised at the rocking horse gait of hartebeest and the side-to-side swaying of camels.

At Lake Nakuru National Park, the campsite was in a wooded area with trails, and vervet monkeys in the trees. From the security of a lookout building on a cliff, Kelly and the others viewed clouds of pink flamingoes and pelicans on the lake, and waterbuck and reedbuck on the shore. It was here that she saw "so many impala that whenever I closed my eyes I saw impala!" Her log is filled with sightings of dozens of birds, animals and reptiles, with exotic names like lilac breasted roller, crowned lapwing, rock hyrax, steenbok, and gecko.

Living creatures are not the only material which the students of the field school have to learn about. They share the tables of the dining banda at Koobi Fora with a large assortment of skeletal pieces. Kelly relates, "As you walked along, there were leg bones, then skulls, then avian bones, next a "mystery box" of unidentified fragments, then a

hippos grazing between their tents. Hippos were just one of many African creatures Kelly was intro-

Park, she learned to recognize the Grevy's zebra ("pin striped, with Mickey Mouse ears"), and she jot-



duced to. One of the exercises required of the field students was the

ted down in her log that Tommies "Thomson's Gazelle" have a "hy-peractive tail", and that warhogs

human skeleton, a baboon skeleton, and an overflow of skulls on the

biostratigraphical studies. What was it like? Kelly sums it up, "It was ter-

ing." A Kenyan field assistant detached her from the thorn bush. A

floor under one table." The students must learn to identify every bone (name of bone, name of species, which side of body, condition of bone).

This enables them to identify tooth and bone fragments in the field, and to recognize pieces which may be of great significance. The students of the June-July session (just preceding Kelly's session) had found a piece of an *Australopithecine boisei* skull (circa 1 - 2.5 million years old)! This piece has been designated KNMER 22933, and will join its counterparts in the "Cast Catalogue of the National Museums of Kenya", from which one can order plaster or (neutral or natural color) fibreglass casts of hominid, hominoid, or cercopithecoid fossils, or of lithic tools, or of 3.7 million year old hominid footprints. Prices range from \$5 - \$450 (US).

There is more to palaeoanthropology than picking up pieces of bone off the ground. The students have to learn how to do field mapping, city surveying, palaeontological surveying, excavating, and

rible!" She told about four of them going out into the pitch black of night with two lanterns and a flashlight, to remeasure the distance between pegs, and having to go under a land-Rover that had been parked in the way. Even less thrilling was "wet-screening" in Allia Bay — filtering dirt away from tiny artifacts through a fine mesh bag, in water ripe with crocodile "doo-doo". (They didn't have to worry too much about the crocodiles, as lake crocodiles eat fish. It's river crocodiles that eat people.) She recounts walking across the sagging, rickety catwalk at one prehistoric site, where the heat was overwhelming, "I was hungry, I was hot, I was dehydrated, and I almost passed out." Perhaps the worst experience for Kelly and her roommate, Shauna, was one of the geology tours. Kelly explains, "An acacia (thorn) bush caught my arm. When I tried to get it off, it caught all of me. It was in my skin, in my arms and my legs, and I couldn't move. I was standing there, spread-eagled over this tree, scream-

few moments later, her roommate grabbed an overhanging ledge to get her balance on a cliff-side trail, and the piece came off in her hand, scaring a scream out of her. It was



a question of "which one of us was going to die first, her or me," as Kelly puts it.

How much does all this excitement and adventure cost? Well, to begin with you need a certificate of good health from a physician. Transportation costs between your home and Nairobi are your responsibility. The bill from Harvard Summer School lists a \$25 application fee, a \$50 mandatory medical insurance fee, and \$3100 (all in US funds) for the course itself. This covers room and board, and local transportation, and instruction by a multidisciplinary staff of published experts, including one lecture by Richard Leakey, former Director and Chief Executive of the National Museums of Kenya, and new Director of Wildlife in the Ministry of Wildlife and Tourism. You stand to earn eight credits towards your undergraduate degree.

Would she do it all again? Yes, says Kelly. She can't wait to get

back to Africa. She has ordered a Kiswahili language kit from Prestige Bookstore in Nairobi; she got to know the owner of that bookstore while she was there. She also be-

came friends with some women in the market, where she bought native skirts, and batik wall hangings, and hand-carved statues, and a big panga (a machete-like knife). As her university graduation draws near, she is checking out Canadian agencies which have ties with Africa. In the meantime, she looks forward to a proposed reunion of the field school participants this spring, in Harry Merrick's home in Connecticut. Here, experiences and memories of Africa will come alive again, and perhaps she will feel that much closer to the land that has captured her heart.