



SPORTING MATTERS

BY PETER JACK

AS you know, this is a column mainly about sport. I have just returned from Kenya where I was attempting to climb Mount Kenya at nearly 5,000 metres.

Before then however, I had the great pleasure and privilege to be with fellow Rotarians and Limavady Interactors for a week on the border between Kenya and Tanzania helping with a few projects.

Hopefully you will forgive me if, this week, I concentrate on those before I can tell you about Mount Kenya next week. Jambo, by the way, is Swahili for hello!

Kenya, of course, is one of the strongest athletic nations in the Olympics and the Olympics start in only a couple of weeks. Everybody is aware of the Maasai Tribe in Kenya, however, there are quite a few Tribes and 90 percent of the athletes of the Kenya team come from the Karijin Tribe based in the west of the country. It was very interesting for us when we were there to discover that the Kenyan Olympic Trials were taking place in Eldoret and basically, if you finish in the top two in the Kenyan Trials, you've got a fairly good chance of a big shiny medal in a few weeks' time.

The Limavady Rotarians (Glenn Reilly, Ivy Reilly, Peter Vamos and honorary Rotarian, Robert Gaile) were joined by Interactors (Rebecca Rainey, Matthew Douglas, Kavan Carlisle, Natasha Gaile, Caoimhe O'Brien, Olivia McIlmoyle and Lee McDonald). We met up at Limavady High School, as did fellow Rotarians who were there to wave us off. I think they were there just to make sure that we got out of the country safely so that their next few Rotary meetings would be fairly quiet!

We soon settled into the Rock 'n' Roll lifestyle luxury of Air Emirates, what's there not to like about your own TV and entertainment screen, great food and free booze?! To make it even better, Peter Vamos and I had scored extra leg room at the emergency aisle seats. There was only one down side, I couldn't sleep no matter what I tried despite three days of about four hours sleep each night as I was just back from Dublin and Galway where I was doing MC and was running on fumes.

We landed about eight hours later in Dubai, a space-age airport terminal completely air-conditioned where you had no idea that the temperature outside was about 40 degrees! It was the middle of Ramadan, where if you were seen drinking water in the streets of Dubai, you would have been arrested for being a bad Muslim - even if you weren't a Muslim. We traded euros for Kenyan shillings, which was a bad idea (the rate in Kenya itself is 25 percent better). The Kenyan shillings are a closed currency (probably a bit like sterling will be after Brexit!). The note showed elephants on one side and a smiling President Kenyatta on the other. The current President is the son of the bloke who founded the State in 1963 when they gained independence from the UK. Some 43 million strong, straddling the equator with no natural resources such as oil or gas and not much water either, we were on our way to help with Project Rombo (not Rambo although superhuman Rambo type strength was required by Elaine Bannan from Dublin who founded the Project).

LIGHT OF MAASAI

Rombo is also known as 'Light of Maasai'. Elaine visited Kenya as a tourist in 2003. She couldn't forget the poverty she saw, so she stayed. She returned to Ireland briefly and gave up her well paid job moved back lock, stock and barrel to a remote region of Kenya on the road to nowhere, or should I say beyond the road to nowhere. It is on the border with Tanzania sandwiched between Kilimanjaro and Mount Kenya.

Elaine learnt quickly that you don't need much to survive, but you need more than a dollar a day which is what most people in that area have. Did you know that one billion (not million) people live on less than a dollar a day? And that people die every minute of every day because they don't have access to clean drinking water? The price of a cup of Starbucks coffee in Limavady could feed a family for a day in downtown Rombo.

We forsook the artificial surreal pleasures of Dubai airport and boarded our next flight to Nairobi, the capital of Kenya. This time the flight was a mere five hours. I must have dosed off because the pilot woke me up to announce that we were ahead of schedule and would be landing soon in our massive Boeing. We shuffled off the plane with brain and legs on autopilot and headed into the Airport to be confronted with a long immigration queue despite the fact that we already had our "E" Visas. Any thought of complaining was knocked out of us when we saw one passenger being frog marched off by a Passport Official into a very small room for intimate questioning... We kept our powder dry and were eventually released outside the terminal after

JAMBO!

being reunited with our baggage i.e. 11 suitcases plus my rucksack. The team had also brought various extra bags stuffed with clothes for the kids in Rombo plus dozens of spectacles from Specsavers and toys which the Interactors brought.

I went outside the terminal to meet Kevin who was to be one of our two drivers. The airport complex however was on lockdown as the President had just flown in from Botswana and a brass band was still out there to serenade him and welcome him home. With an election next year, it did the current President no harm to look, well, Presidential. I had earlier met a girl in Dubai Airport who worked for a Public Health Project in South Sudan (if possible, even poorer than parts of Kenya). She was there to help eradicate guinea worm in the locals. One day one of her colleagues thought they had a case of Polio and phoned the World Health Organisation who had an expert on the ground in less than two hours to confirm that it wasn't! Rotary International is passionately concerned with the eradication of Polio (a disease that affected President Roosevelt and the singer Ian Drury amongst others). There are now just two countries in the world where it is still endemic; Pakistan and Afghanistan. Every day of the week public health workers risk their life to inoculate children when the Taliban want to take them out instead. President Glenn Reilly bumped into a fellow Rotarian just before we disembarked. Throw a stick anywhere in the world and it will probably end up on a Rotarian's head.

After one hour of moving less than a kilometre, we eventually got going and we drove for four hours non-stop in a straight line on a major highway. We saw giraffes, zebra and wildebeest by the side of the road (who needs to go to a game reserve?). At one stage we were over taking traffic on the inside as well as the outside. Later when we were overtaking one juggernaut it started to pass another juggernaut and we were confronted with another juggernaut steaming down towards us from the other direction, all of course on a one lane highway! It reminded me of a car journey in Sri Lanka where the driver wasn't insured, but what you did for reassurance was go to a local temple and say a few prayers before you set off.

I asked our driver, Kevin, to stop at a road side bar to I could buy my first Tusker (the local brew) as some dutch courage was definitely needed for the rest of the journey. Eventually we headed off the major highway for a quieter road and then we saw the sign - Rombo20K! Back home it would take less than fifteen minutes, here it took nearly an hour thanks to the bone shattering qualities of the "road". The road was a bit like Silk-Cut cigarettes - not enough tar on it, in fact it didn't have any tar on it, in fact it wasn't a road, it was a brown dusty track full of holes, rocks, lumps and ravines. Our driver should have been in the World Rally Championship because he had managed to get us and our luggage to our destination in one piece. I was very impressed by our Interactors who obviously are seasoned travellers because no one threw up. Elaine was there to greet us at the Light of Maasai with a lovely meal. After a much needed shower (30 hours of travel) and a gaze in wonder at the awesome southern hemisphere night sky, we retreated to our rooms for the sleep, if not the just, then of the semi unconscious.

LOCAL SCHOOLS

One of the things that distinguishes Africa from anywhere else in the world is the light. It seems clearer, purer, more vivid than elsewhere and so it proved to be the next morning as we walked for over 3 hours to visit 3 local schools - Nursery, Primary and Secondary.

No school discipline problems here. Every pupil wanted to learn as a way out of the poverty trap in which they were caught. We are fortunate enough to be born in a democratic country with liberal values, natural resources and a National Health Service and a Social Security System... in Kenya there is no safety net for health or wealth. In the schools there were 50 four year olds in a tin shack with one black board and one very busy teacher. No school books of course.

Perhaps, it wouldn't do our teachers over here any harm to spend a month or so in Kenya to see what people can do with limited if not completely non-existent resources. The kids sang for us and then we sang for them ("If you're happy and you know it clap your hands"), led by the indefatigable Ivy Reilly. Karen, Robert and Matthew gave out bubble making containers and balloons and balls and I had no doubt that some lives would be temporarily cheered up by these very thoughtful gifts.

We then travelled on another dirt road to the Colin Davis School named after a bishop from the UK where we were welcomed as we were everywhere else like heroes. When we eventually got back home, Peter and I went for a short stroll down the back lane where we had great views of that magnificent mountain, Kilimanjaro just across the border in Tanzania. Although I have climbed it in the past, I didn't recognise it because there seemed to be two peaks! The first one was jagged, it was a mere 17,000 feet high! The one behind (Kibu) was the one etched in my memory bank. My DK guide book showed the top completely covered in snow and ice. The sad reality in 2016 is that there is only snow at Stella Point, at one end of the summit plateau and a glacier at the other end where the peak (Uhuru i.e. freedom) is at a mighty 5,895 metres. Global warming has done for all the other vestiges of snow and ice. When the glacier eventually disappears there will be no streams and rivers down the mountain to enable local guides to cook for tourist climbers and no tourists means Tanzania's economy going down the pan. The other main threat to the tourist industry in Tanzania and Kenya is al-Shabaab, the terrorist organisation emanating from Somalia, Kenya's northern neighbour. They have already caused mayhem on a global scale in a shopping mall in Nairobi (West Gate) and in various tourist resorts. Their violent Jihadist nihilism scares off tourists and drives the local economy into penury making thousands more angry young men available to listen to their claptrap.

If we thought we had nothing to worry about, the next day we went to visit a Maasai village and we had a quiet shadow of a jeep with six soldiers in it armed with AK47's, whose sole job was to ensure that there was no bad news trickling back to the Northern Constitution...

Colin Davis is a boarding school where 101 youngsters sleep over in a room quite frankly you wouldn't keep dogs in. The teachers slept in a tin hut. Many of the kids didn't go home at the end of the term because they had no home to go to. Every pupil knew there was only two ways out of the trap into which they had been born; academic success or being an athlete, usually a track runner. If you win the trials, you get a Passport, you go to Rio, you win Gold and you come back home and you have won the lottery and a ticket out. Ronaldo and Serena Williams by the way both have built Schools and Hospitals in Kenya. This is a desperately friendly country - which needs friends desperately. The Limavady Interact Group after some magnificent fundraising were able to leave nearly £3000 with the Light of Maasai.

We saw elephant tracks on our way to a Maasai village. When we arrived we were greeted with the Maasai dance and taken into a home built of cow dung. In this tiny claustrophobic hole, they had a fire and the smoke was meant to disappear not through a chimney but through a small hole in the wall. The word poverty doesn't begin to do it justice.

OFF TO THE MARKET

That afternoon we walked half an hour into a town, past a Mosque (although most of the country is Christian) to the market to buy trinkets and presents.

When we made it home, I managed a 22 minute run on a dusty highway where I realised I was running on a country with more sub thirty minute 10K runners than anywhere else in the world! I don't think I was going to get an invite to the Kenyan Olympic Trials! It felt great to be running on the trails of Africa. I have a marathon in October so it's time I was putting one foot in front of the other.

The Mission where we stayed had a wee outside gym, which reminded me of a makeshift gym I made in a jungle in Borneo a few years ago. I was joined there by Ciara, one of Elaine's foster kids. Ciara is so famous that she has a Rotary Project named after her! Abandoned at two years old when she was still at her birth weight, Ciara is now a smiling happy, healthy, beautiful, confident eight year old with the best thing of all... a future. Elaine Bannan has changed - and saved more lives than any person could ever hope to. She is the Irish/Kenyan equivalent of Oscar Schindler.

In a few days' time, I would hopefully be ready to tackle Africa's second highest peak. In the meantime, I was acclimatising at 1,400 metres getting used to the heat, the height and the dust. Mount Kenya better be ready for a Rotary flag to be planted on top! On the day we were due to do our impersonation of Michelangelo (painting in a school) I

started off by joining a goat herder and his goats brandishing his stick. We had gone over to the nearby girls' secondary school with several hundred giggling school girls who were very keen to be photographed with Kavan Carlisle! After we dragged Kavan away from his fan club, we were on the rocky road, not to Dubai, but to our school where we were met by enthusiastic pupils so that we could help paint the dormitory. The Principal, Jackson, was a principled fellow. He stayed over seven days a week to look after his charges. Devotion beyond the call of duty doesn't even begin to describe it! We had a lot of fun transforming a grey drab room into a blue and white yellow room (coincidentally the colours of Rotary and Interact). Elaine brought us out japatis for lunch which were eagerly consumed mercifully. I also got a cup of coffee as without caffeine I cannot function! We were then on our way via the usual dirt and boulder strain road to Voyager a 30,000 acre safari park which just happened to be annexed by President Kenyatta in 1963. Funnily enough, his son also now President owns it, and whenever he wants to be there, mere tourists aren't allowed to visit it. Weirdly it was free, but to get there you had to undergo the worst seven kilometres of your life. Pot holes that you could lose vehicles in, tree branches sticking through your windows etc. When the President arrives, he flies into his own airstrip, of course.

Stephen, our Maasai warrior guide took us on the most extraordinary tour where we travelled two hundred thousand years back in time when animals still ruled the earth. We were in a zoo - but we were the exhibits. One hundred crocs and sixty five hippos were all around us. We had Gefo, an armed guard with us to ensure that if an angry hippo charged, Gefo would fire a shot to warn it off. You don't get between a hippo and its river, or between a hippo and its infant (which weighs 50 kilos at birth and gets to 2? tons if male or a mere 1? tons if female). I could not believe how close we were to the crocs who thankfully seemed to have eaten lunch and therefore weren't interested in twelve skinny Limavady morsels. This was nature in the raw, red in tooth and claw. This was the way it was when dinosaurs ruled the earth. We were merely intruding on their patch, they were the rulers, and we were the ruled. We also saw monkeys, zebras, wildebeest and all manner of exotic birds. A refreshing bottle of beer called Elephant Beer was consumed in a chair overlooking the lake (infested with crocs obviously) and was most welcome. I had to laugh at the smoking zone, it was on the other side of the chain beside the water's edge. If smoking there didn't kill you, the crocs might! We had to endure a nightmarish two hour journey where you weren't merely carsick, but practically sea sick. Twelve hours down time left us ready for more painting the next morning.

COOING, CACKLING AND CROWING

We were woken up as usual by the cooing of pigeons, the cackling of chickens and the crowing of roosters (who really did seem to have their alarm clock set two hours before dawn).

They were accompanied by the barking of our two night time guard dogs. They sat beside the Maasai warrior beside the gate armed only with a five foot spear and a warrior attitude! We handed over thirty shirts to the pupils at the boy's Secondary School which Robert and Natasha had gathered from helpful Northwest Cricket Clubs. There are now a lot of Kenyan guys in the bush running about with Eglinton Cricket tops! We made really good progress with more painting. After some quick down time at "home", we were off on a secret mission to enter another country illegally! Thanks to Elaine and our two guides, we fought our way along the rat route to cross into Tanzania, Kenya's southern neighbour, without passports or the fifty dollar Visa fee! This was a part of the world that used to be familiar to me when I climbed Kili. I saw a taxi with the word "moshi" on it and which is one of the main gateway towns before you start the climb of Africa's biggest mountain - and the world's largest free standing mountain. The only thing of note for sale in the town where we were was a wooden bowl, which I thought might look well in my sun-room. Cost - 4,000 Tanzanian shillings i.e. 200 Kenya shillings, i.e. 2 euros. I didn't even try to bargain the seller down. I then enjoyed an eponymous beer on the foot hills of Kilimanjaro. The last time I was here I didn't want to taste it until I had successfully stood on the summit. This time I had no karma like that to hold me back! Later on, when I went for my twenty minute run, I would say "Jambo" to anyone I met. Some stood in their tin shacks looking out at the mad mezunjo (foreigner). I held my hand out to high five a six year old wide eyed girl dressed in a faded skirt and a pair of beaten up shoes... instead of high fiving me, she grabbed my hand and ran with me perhaps to escape her surroundings. I'm not sure if my heart broke, but it certainly melted.

Join me next week for the end of our Light of Maasai trip - on the start of the trip to the top of Mount Kenya!