

CHAT Volunteer Stories

As written by Alistair Bestow

Hello Family and Friends,

In early December it was confirmed by the Director of Communities Health Africa Trust (CHAT www.chatafrica.org), a small family planning and health agency, that they would be sending out a camel caravan of staff and medical supplies in mid January. I had discussed participating in the safari with the Director, and I was invited to go.

CHAT is a small Trust/CBO that enables families, and particularly women to have more choice over the number of children they have. Women in rural areas of Kenya have a tough time here, because not only do they fetch water, cook, build the houses (Pokot people at least) and clean, they also raise numerous children, often having another one less than 12 months since the last. Women can spend most of their fertile lives pregnant, -and significantly, they have little choice.

CHAT in conjunction with aid organisations, and the Kenya Government, enable women to have an IMPLANON implant in their arm, which provides contraception for either 3 years or 5 years. - it provides them with some options. I have been surprised sometimes by the little time it takes a woman to decide to have such an implant. A 5 - 10 minute discussion informing them, and then that afternoon, they arrive at our campsite ready for the service, and depending on their choice of method, a minor procedure.

The reduction in the number of children, hopefully enables families to educate all of their children, improves the lives of families, (women in particular) and reduces pressure on the local environment.

The safari crew is 10 Kenyans, including two health and information officers, a nurse who administers the implant, and some other medications as requested, seven other crew, mostly, camelleers and cooks, and myself. And 12 camels.

The general plan is that upon arrival at a chosen site, that the information officers contact the local chief, and then as many local people as possible advising them of CHAT and their work. During the subsequent day or two that we stay at a camp site, the local people are able to visit one of our tents, set up as a clinic to either have an implant, or a box of condoms, or an HIV test (all free), or the administration of some other medications \$US1 or \$US0.50 if available for certain ailments which we request - if they can afford it, or a small contribution e.g milk, eggs - this to show the donor that the communities are also trying in their small way to contribute.

We then usually move on after a couple of days about 6 km or so and set up a new camp site. We started about 70 km NW of Nanyuki, and have headed in a north west direction, and then south west toward Lake Baringo.

The team of people I am with are terrific to get along with - there is a gut deal of merriment at meal times, and during the process of loading the camels, the walk and then the unloading too.

There are 4 or 5 tents, - one for each of the health information officers, the nurse, myself and the medical tent - each is only 2m x 2m square including the medical tent. The other staff either share a larger tent, or doss down under a large tarpaulin. The camels are brought in from feeding late in the afternoon, and doss down among the tents.

The food supplied is a combination of cabbage, goat, potatoes, beans and maize, occasionally rice and lots of ugali (a fairly tasteless dough made from maize). There are two meals a day, supplemented by a few biscuits and lots of milky tea.

The weather has been dry and quite warm say in the low 30s each day, and sometimes windy at night.

During the first week we did see wild animals, reticulated giraffe, Grants Gazelle, Thomson's Gazelle, elephants, ostriches, buffalo, and Eland. Hyenas and lions could be heard at night. During the second week however, these were not seen, although birdlife abounds.

It has been a great experience, to see indirect conservation in action, by enabling people to reduce their family size if they wish, thereby reducing some of the pressure on their immediate environment. The people have been terrific along the way, both the crew and the people I have met in their homes as I walk the local area with the health information officers.

And there are still a couple of weeks to go.

Having fun

Alistair