

# In the field with Communities Health Africa Trust – July 2018

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“What have you been doing there?” I have regularly heard this question from family, friends and colleagues and I have always felt a bit awkward providing a proper answer. The truth is, volunteering is less about “doing” and more about “living”.

The articles that follow are therefore a tentative to articulate what I lived last July while accompanying Communities Health Africa Trust (CHAT) in the field; I hope this may encourage those who are still hesitating to take the leap.

## Part 1

This first part recounts our journey from Laikipia to Samburu Central and the camp installation.

### From Laikipia to Samburu Central

Early on a cool July morning, I found myself standing on the red earth road of Milima Tatu, waiting for CHAT’s staff to finish loading the two Land Rovers that would drive us northwards. CHAT’s camel mobile had left Mpala clinic in June for two months and we were going to restock it midway in the highlands of Samburu Central. After a few days spent at Milima Tatu, generating statistical plots of CHAT’s activities while keeping an eye on the nearby fauna (mostly giraffes this time), I was super excited to go out in the field for about ten days.

I already knew some members of the team. Our little expedition was led by Sharon (“Shanni”), CHAT’s founder, who has welcomed me within her organization a few weeks a year for the past three years. A strong character, Shanni was driving our first Land Rover. Demoriah (“Demo”) and Paula, who I knew from Nanyuki’s office, were accompanying Shanni to supervise, monitor and evaluate CHAT’s grassroots activities. Amedeo, with whom I had been walking Shanni’s dogs Moto and Kitu a few times, was involved in assisting with all aspects related to logistics and camp life. Peter, with whom I had travelled two years ago on my first mobile clinic and was delighted to travel again since he is the most cheerful and thoughtful person I have ever met, was our second driver, also a recognized master in all aspects related to logistics and camp life.

The members of the team that were going to spend the second month out with the camel mobile were quite new to me. Samburu Morans [*young warriors*] Leparis and Naro were involved in assisting with all aspects related to logistics and camp life, and more specifically with the cooking. I had glimpsed Leparis a few times while at Milima Tatu, but he was so discreet that I never had the time to exchange a few words with him. Joseph, who came from the highlands of Nakuru County and had been working with CHAT for a long time as a Community-Owned Resource Person (CORP), was involved in mobilizing the communities visited by the camel mobile about Family Planning (FP). Doctor Edward, who joined us on the way at Mpala ranch clinic, had recently retired from a hospital run by the Kenyan Ministry of Health, but was eager to continue his practice with CHAT.

While Amedeo, Peter and Leparis were loading the last luggage, Mwenge, the housemaid who made sure my cottage was welcoming and clean every day and sometimes called me “mtoto wangu” [*my child*], slipped me a bottle of water that I had forgotten. “Twende!” [*Let’s go*] Already the engines were humming. I jumped into the front seat next to Peter and, through the open window, waved my hand at Mwenge and those who were staying at Milima Tatu. The cars slowly followed the red trail that snaked to the gate. We drove through and reached the waterhole at the crossing with the main road.

The atmosphere in Peter’s car was cheerful. My Swahili was not fluent enough for me to actively take part in the conversation, in part also because Peter was mixing his Swahili with kikuyu words and bursts of laughter, but at least I was able to follow the main topics that were discussed, from debating about the Kenyan education system to teasing Paula who had to get out of the car several times to close the back door that was banging.

On the way, we passed several conservation areas where herds of elephants, Grevy’s zebras, giraffes, impalas, kudus and tiny dik-diks could be spotted. After having left the Ewaso Ng’iro River, we began climbing up. In some places, the heavy rains had dug gullies in the road, but Shanni and Peter skilfully avoided them. From Kirimon, we reached a vast open plain where livestock and zebras were grazing together. After a few kilometres on a road still under construction, which was apparently built by a Chinese firm as I had already observed elsewhere in East Africa, we arrived in Maralal, the headquarters of Samburu County. There, we enjoyed a late lunch consisting of masala chai [*Kenyan mixed-spice tea*], chapati and mandazi [*Kenyan doughnut*] at the “Sunbird Lodge”, before filling up the gas tank of the Land Rovers. Stomach and tank full, we drove further north up to a lush green escarpment of the Rift Valley for two more hours before reaching our destination.

### Camp installation

We set up our encampment in a meadow overlooking an emerald dam reservoir. While the men were unloading box after box of supplies from the Land Rovers, I helped put up the mess and individual tents. As I was looking for a hammer to drive the pegs of the mess tent in a soil that was much harder than I had expected, a young Moran who had stopped by out of curiosity lent me his rungu [*wooden throwing club*]. I felt somehow honoured that he let me have it, since I knew it was an important emblem of the warrior status. The carving of the wood was so beautiful that I was worried about marking it and I must confess my efficiency at driving the tent pegs did not really improve... My own tent was put up under a tall tree which offered some privacy and on which geese and herons used to perch, fiercely fighting for the best branches early in the morning. The tent door was opening on the west side offering a lovely view of the sparkling waters at sunset.

Groups of men, women and children who were walking back home were looking at us with curiosity. Some children dared to get closer, probably made adventurous by the presence of Wazungus [*white people*] in this remote place. We were almost done with setting up the tents when the Samburu elder who owned this meadow came down from the hill to greet us, scolding the children who were still hiding behind a thick bush and fled with loud cries. He was soon joined by a younger Samburu, who, as I later learnt, was called Saitoti. A conversation in Swahili began between Shanni and the elder. After the usual greetings, Shanni presented CHAT’s mobile clinic activities and explained that we were planning to stay for about ten days to wait for the camel mobile and restock it. It was decided that CHAT would hire the elder to ensure the security of the camp while Saitoti would provide us with staple food such as maize and milk when necessary. As I have often observed in my travels in Sub-Saharan Africa, involving the local community in the security and life camp is a common and sensible thing to do.



Meanwhile, men had finished gathering wood to make a fire and water was already boiling for chai. Amedeo, Leparis, Naro and Peter were cooking ugali [*stiff porridge made from maize flour*] with a stew of vegetables, that Paula had helped to prepare, and meat. I knew that Peter, who is vegetarian, would later cook githeri [*boiled maize and beans*], his favourite meal. As I was enjoying a cup of chai, Shanni explained me that she had camped there in her childhood, when these hills used to be covered by a primary forest as magnificent as the one that still covers Mount Nyiro, a sacred mountain to the Samburu people further north. Nowadays, tall trees were scattered and the landscape was fragmented with maize shambas [*fields*], which surprised me a bit since Samburu people are pastors who mostly raise livestock. As I was sharing my surprise with Shanni, she explained me that some Samburu men had Kikuyu wives, who are known to be keen farmers. Since CHAT's FP programme integrates a strong component of ecological awareness and sensitization, Shanni discussed this aspect with the Samburu elder. He was indeed aware of the pressure on the environment due to human activities and was trying to preserve the place, avoiding cutting too much trees.

As we were eating, rolling our lump of ugali into balls that were then dipped into the stew, Rose and Alice, the local CORPs who were going to assist Joseph in mobilizing the communities with the camel mobile reached our camp on a boda boda [*taxi-motorbike*]. Their driver was a young Pokot called Lepareng, who would also accompany the camel mobile. They did not stay long with us that day, since they had friends who lived nearby and could accommodate them for the night. As the darkness settled in, the temperatures progressively dropped, and I went to my tent quite early, exhausted by this long and busy day and I let myself gratefully fall on the comfortable mattress before slipping into my sleeping bag and soon into a restful sleep.