BACK TO KENYA

– and this time I remembered my bras

Susie Kelly

blackbird

If you have read any of my books you'll know I've always loved travelling. There is no feeling quite as tingly as setting off into the unknown, so please hop aboard and come with me.

I had never imagined that I would be going back to Kenya after more than 40 years, and yet in 2015 there I was off to the country where I grew up and which in my heart and soul will always be 'home'. I was pretty sure that would be my final visit.

But no! I'm invited to go back at the end of August 2017 to launch the book I wrote about that visit, *Safari Ants, Baggy Pants & Elephants*. I have to pinch myself very hard to believe it's actually going to happen, and it requires some juggling with other commitments, but my plane tickets duly arrive as promised and all I have to do is catch a train to Paris for my flight.

Remembering what a hash I made of packing for my previous visit, I'm going to make a better job of it this time. There won't be any mistakes. I pack the few clothes needed for a week into a small wheeled suitcase, ensuring that this time I include bras, and trousers that fit. I check and re-check the bras four times just to be certain. The useful Longchamps shoulder bag given to me by my lovely friend Marianne is perfect for carrying those things I want to keep with me for the flight – paperwork, Kindle, camera, computer, make up, spare pair of shoes and lightweight rug (always have a lightweight rug when you're travelling, they are so useful). To reduce the weight I'm leaving behind my laptop and replacing it with a small elderly tablet that lives in the drawer and hasn't been used for two years, and instead of my 'proper' camera I've packed a little pointy-shooty thing with a pancake lens which will be adequate for taking snaps around town, which is all I'll need. I'm pretty pleased with how well organised I am.

There is only one thing I don't enjoy about travelling, and that is having to rush. Galloping along swinging luggage in a panic before the doors close and the wheels turn is not my thing at all, so I have allowed a massive margin between trains and planes in both directions to allow for any unforeseen situations.

When the TGV pulls out of Poitiers en route for Paris I'm sitting next to an Irish/South African girl and her French partner, perpetual nomads travelling around the world, earning their living wherever they find themselves. Our other companion is an American travel agent specialising in adventure diving, who also spends most of his life on the hoof. When you book on the TGV you are allocated a specific seat, and I wonder if whoever or whatever does so had used some extra-sensory perception to put four Anglophones together, or whether it was purely coincidental. Whatever, our lively conversation makes time pass quickly.

All of them are leading their lives as far as possible free from the restrictions of the 21st century, never in one place for long as they travel around exploring the world. Listening to their adventures I envy them in many ways. They are always on the move, never knowing what the next day will bring or where they will be next week; but unlike them I think I do need to have a place to call 'home'. Our American companion tell us some shocking facts: in the United States 100 people die each day from opiate abuse, and annually approximately 360,000 people worldwide drown because they do not know how to swim, although they are mostly people living in areas surrounded by or close to water. Would you not think that teaching them to swim should be a priority?

The nomadic couple are on their way to Los Angeles, where he has secured a short-term contract to build stage scenery. His partner uses local materials to make jewellery to sell. When his work there is finished they're going to buy a camper and drive to South America. They haven't decided where they will go, or for how long, or what they will do when they get there. When I ask if they don't worry about money, they say that wherever you go in the world there are always ways to earn a living if you are prepared to work.

We go our separate ways at the station, and I amble along to Terminal 2, which is a great deal brighter than dreary Terminal 1 where we left from in 2015. With nearly 8 hours to spend before checking in (I did mention that I like to allow plenty of time), I find a comfy chair and a cup of coffee and read for a few hours. I love having time to myself, and I love watching people at stations and airports.

There's a strange thing: I notice many people are walking about laughing or talking to themselves, earnestly and sometimes angrily. It takes a while before I see they all have one thing in common: small things wrapped around their ears enabling them to talk hands-free

into their phones. You don't see much of that where we live in rural France; in fact you don't see it at all.

Another thing I notice is that many passengers heading for Africa are not using conventional suitcases, but those very large reinforced plastic bags that cost and weigh almost nothing. For a few euros you can have your luggage shrink-wrapped in heavy-duty plastic by a machine to protect it from damage and interference. This reduces the squishy plastic bags into compact, light and secure luggage. Some people have brought the cost down by bringing their own giant rolls of plastic and are helping each other with the wrapping process. It definitely takes more than one person to tame the bags while winding the plastic around them. I think what a clever and practical idea this is. Smart monogrammed designer luggage makes a statement, but these plastic-wrapped bundles are less likely to be targets for interference, and it won't matter if they get hurled around.

I have a bite of lunch, roam around a little to stretch my legs, and sit and read some more while I wait for the check-in desk to open. When it announces that it has done so there is a stampede to be first in the queue. Not being much of a stampeder I sit back and wait. And wait. And wait. The early stampeders at the head of the queue become restless, looking at their watches, muttering to each other and peering around. After 45 minutes the desk actually opens. When the queue begins to thin out I tag on the end. Ahead of me is a tiny elderly Somali lady pushing a trolley overloaded with large suitcases, topped by a wooden chair with a chamber pot embedded in the seat. An airport worker draws her out of the queue, and a group of people dismantle the chair, pack it neatly into a bundle, wrap it tightly in plastic, lift it back onto the top of the pile on her trolley and feed her back into the queue. When I finally reach the desk the Ethiopian Airlines personnel are efficient and friendly, and with my suitcase checked in I trundle along to the departure lounge and read until the gate opens. I can see my plane.

On board I am seated in the aisle next to a beautiful Ethiopian lady with two incredibly active little children. She apologises that they will be clambering backwards and forwards for the whole seven-hour flight to Addis Ababa so I will have to keep moving to let them past. I suggest that if I swap with her little boy, who is in the window seat, he won't have to clamber so far, but he is reluctant to relinquish his position and throws a mini-tantrum. A stewardess comes and asks if I'd like to move towards the front, where there are three empty seats abreast and I'll be able to lie down and sleep. Bingo!

Dinner is served, a main course of perfectly cooked fish and vegetables, an excellent dessert and what a treat, Jacobs Cream Crackers and Cheddar cheese. You may only appreciate this if you are a British expat who seldom sees these. The meal also includes a small bottle of a cheeky, flowery white wine.

I spread out my lightweight blanket and lay me down to sleep until a nice cooked breakfast arrives at horrible o'clock.

When we land Addis Ababa is damp and foggy. Having been warned that it can take a long time to clear immigration there, I'm pleased to find that I sweep through the terminal in no time at all and onto the connecting flight to Nairobi. Breakfast is served, identical to the breakfast I enjoyed at horrible o'clock. Thick cloud makes the flight extremely bumpy. It feels like driving in a car with flat tyres. Discordant, exotic music is interrupted every few minutes by an anguished high-pitched shriek. It sounds as if somebody has switched on the intercom while being savagely attacked. As none of my fellow passengers take any notice I stop worrying.

Two hours later we land smoothly in Nairobi beneath a calm azure sky. I whip through immigration in a few minutes. My suitcase arrives with astonishing speed, checked on the carousel by a tail-wagging brown and white spaniel sniffer dog accompanied by a morose handler. As I walk through the exit into warm Kenyan sunshine Paul, and Herman, both of whom I know from my previous visit, are waiting to take my luggage and usher me into the car. I feel like royalty.

On the way to town vehicles are weaving around Masai herdsmen driving stick-thin cattle along the dusty roadsides in search of grazing. Herman says that the drought has been severe this year and the herdsmen keep searching for food for the cattle. The animals are so thin and weak that it would surely be kinder to have them put to sleep, but to the Masai their

cattle are everything and they will never give up their increasingly futile search to help them survive.

At Karen Blixen Coffee Gardens I enjoy a welcome shower and change of clothes, then sit by the pool with Herman, sipping Earl Grey tea and soaking up the beauty of the trees and the colour and song of the birds.

Karen Blixen Coffee Gardens

I could very easily get used to this. I don't know whether it's the climate, the people or the landscape or the combination of all three. There is something in the air, a magical *je ne sais quoi* that wraps itself around you and just makes you feel good in Kenya.

Vivien returns from a safari, with the guides from our visit in 2015 – Kamara, David and Dedan, and we share an al fresco lunch together before Vivien and I leave to check in to the hallowed halls of Muthaiga Country Club.

It's a shame I can't show you the interior of the club because it is straight out of the 1920s. Bowls of roses, antique furniture, potted palms, oriental rugs, neatly folded English

newspapers on the tables, slick service and a reverent hush only broken by the squeal of footsteps on the mirror polished parquet floor and the delicate clatter of a china tea cup touching the saucer. We all speak in low voices, the way you do when visiting a cathedral or the critically ill in hospital. To protect the privacy of members photography is not permitted, so if the fancy took me I could strip off all my clothes and run naked through the corridors and the outside world would never know. I do love the serenity here and the surreal sense of having travelled back in time to another age.

Vivien and I haven't seen each other for two years so there's much to catch up on and we sit talking well into the night. Next morning we have a lazy Continental breakfast on the terrace – fresh pawpaw, mango, pineapple, strawberries, and something I had never tasted before, tree tomato juice, my new favourite drink; yoghurts, cheeses, fragrant fresh-baked bread and curls of frozen, rock hard butter that shatter when you try to spread them and mangle the toast. Tea comes in china pots and china cups, with cold milk (*mzungu* or white person's tea, unlike African tea which is brewed with the milk and sugar in the same pot). Tiny brilliant honey suckers hover as they sip from blossoms, the leaves on the trees move idly in a warm breeze, and the raucous squawking of the hadeda ibis drowns out any other bird song.

Across the immaculate emerald lawn two men are repairing the roof of a two-storey building. They are wandering all over the pitched roof and right to the edge, no harness, no scaffolding, no helmets. No health and safety!

We go to town to see the venue for the book signing at the Sarit Centre shopping mall. Despite its name, Text Book Centre does not only sell educational material but is also Africa's largest book store offering an eclectic range of books by local authors, international best sellers and coffee table books, as well as office supplies and the latest in photography and computer technology. They are hosting and organising the launch and signing of *Safari Ants, Baggy Pants and Elephants* and have invited us to discuss the arrangements. There's really nothing to discuss – the staff are wonderfully enthusiastic and promise they will do a great promotion if we leave everything with them, and so we do.

Vivien is seduced by a bear at the Sarit Centre

Future jockeys

There's a café opposite the bookshop, where we sit watching some children happily prancing around the mall on mechanical horses. There's nothing like sitting on a willing horse to make you feel a million dollars.

Herman introduces us to one of his friends, a nurse, who tells me that in 1998 her husband was working as an accountant with the American Embassy in Nairobi at the time of the bomb attack that killed more than 200 people. His computer exploded into his face. When it happened she was working many miles from Nairobi, in Kisumu. As news of the attack began filtering through, friends reassured her that her husband would be fine, was fine, but the longer she could not contact him the more certain she was that he was injured or dead. She had travelled to Nairobi and eventually found him, severely injured and permanently blinded. The American Embassy had flown them both to the United States for treatment lasting three years. Once they returned to Kenya, with a new baby, her husband was able to

resume his job with the Embassy, using voice recognition software and Braille computer technology for his work.

Three weeks before we met, their daughter had escaped from a fire at her school that had killed nine pupils. Despite all this she is a bright and cheerful lady, and like many Kenyans a devout Christian who is grateful for her blessings.

From there we go to The Hub, another modern shopping centre where I meet Facebook friend Simon Gisore, a Kenyan working with underprivileged single mothers and orphans. He also writes rather beautiful poetry, and one of his poems is included in my book. Simon is another person who has overcome great adversity and who will inspire you, so if you're on Facebook you can look him up and perhaps support his humanitarian work.

Back at Muthaiga that afternoon I decide to check my emails, and switch on the ancient little tablet. Having been neglected for so long, it is now determined to update itself over a slow and spasmodic Internet connection. So preoccupied is it with this task, it is unable to do anything useful at all. When I ask it to open my email, it responds with a little circle that goes around, and around, and around, very slowly. In the bottom right hand corner an arrow shows that it is downloading one of its many programs. Nothing I can do will stop it. I give up and leave it running overnight. Next morning the little circle is still going around and around and nothing is responsive. I should have brought the laptop. Packing fail.

On Sunday Vivien has a surprise – we are going to visit her land beside Lake Elementeita. Kamara drives us there along the smooth new multi-lane highway that cuts through the surreal red of the soil, passing a cluster of '*kitu kidogo*' cops collecting unofficial taxes from drivers.

Kitu kidogo cops

Beside the road donkeys, bush buck, zebra and eland graze and monkeys scrabble for insects, disdainful of passing traffic. I notice how very much cleaner and tidier the roadsides are since my last visit. All around the little shops and stalls along the way the earth is swept and tidy, where once it was heaped with rubbish. People are gathering up waste and disposing of it, because in August Kenya had introduced draconian laws regarding plastic bags; using them can land you with a fine of up to $40,000, or four years in clink.

A UNESCO World Heritage Site enjoyed by more than 400 species of birds, Elementeita is a paradise for birds and twitchers.

Lake Elementeita from Jacaranda Lodge

We stop for lunch there at Jacaranda Lodge and meet up with my friend, ornithologist and guide Joseph Kodonyo. While we eat in the restaurant we are watched through the window by a pair of inquisitive hornbills; after lunch Joseph takes us to see something special, a nesting Spotted Eagle owl, perfectly camouflaged in the fork of a tree where she is incubating her eggs. Only the tips of her ears against the skyline reveal her presence. Can you see her?

The hidden owl

If I hadn't listened to my own advice to leave my 'proper' camera and lens behind, I would have been able to get a magical close-up shot. With the little pointy-shooty camera and the 14 mm lens I cannot. While it is a very nice wide-angle lens it is too limited. I should have brought my other camera. Second packing fail.

After lunch we drive down to the shores of the lake, which is resplendent with a cloud of flamingos putting on a great display as they high step through the water in perfect synchronisation, before taking flight. From 50 meters away, through the little lens they are just a pink smudge.

The small pink dots are flamingos.

This is a quiet, unspoilt place unmarked by any sign of human life apart from ourselves; no traffic, no buildings, no man-made materials, nothing but the water and the distant hills and the blue sky and pink of the birds, and you can imagine that it has remained unchanged for thousands of years. Being here feeds the soul.

On the way back to Nairobi we stop on the escarpment to visit the tiny church built by Italian prisoners of war, which I've always found very poignant, thinking of those men in a foreign land and separated from their country and family by the war, spending their time creating something beautiful where they could worship.

The Italian Church

Back at the club the the little round circle on the tablet is still patiently whirling, determinedly updating itself. I slam down the lid with all my strength, several times. The desk rocks beneath my assault, and the little circle continues turning through the night.

For much of the week we travel around Nairobi visiting book stores. Since I lived here the town has changed beyond recognition. The rustic little grocery store that I used more than 40 years ago still survives, swamped among a bustle of stalls, handcarts, vendors selling fruit and vegetables, heaps of clothing spread out on the ground. A stick-thin beggar wanders around holding out his hand. It's incredibly noisy and there's a smell of meat roasting. A well dressed man introduces himself as Tony, asking politely whether I would be interested in buying any local products. I've noticed many people wearing wide, colourful and intricate beaded Masai bracelets made by the Maasai in intricate designs, and I'd like to buy one each for Terry and myself.

Tony leads the way down a small neat lane to his shop where he produces a woven basket full of bracelets. I learned during our trip in 2015 that I must have abnormally large hands because none of the rigid bracelets I was persuaded to buy then would pass over my fist. These, however, are a different design, fastening with press studs so I'm optimistic. After all, many large men wear them; they even wear them over their upper arms. I try every bracelet in the basket, and not one will fasten around my wrist. I've almost given up in despair when Tony disappears and returns with another basket which he burrows inside until we finally find one bracelet which is fractionally longer than all the others, and although it will not go around my right wrist it will just fit over the left if he pulls very hard. Result! The price is negligible; I give him an extra few shillings because he's charming and polite and very helpful. Those few shillings will make no difference to my life, but they may make a difference to his.

Nairobi is flyovers and underpasses; skyscrapers and hovels; herds of skeletal cattle driven by their herders along the edge of the highway in search of grazing where there is nothing but dust; a kaleidoscope of broken road surfaces and colourful flowering trees; Louboutins and bare feet; designer clothes and threadbare rags; polished SUVs and unwieldy wooden handcarts; colour, noise; rich red earth and smooth tarmac, donkeys, goats and hens, even a cluster of guinea fowl, and a man lying beneath a bridge who may be dead, drunk or just sleeping. It's roadside hawkers offering sweets and ice-creams, chaotic open air markets, armed soldiers policing the entrances to shopping malls housing gourmet restaurants, and shops selling everything from curios, artwork and luxury goods to high-tech electronics. It's overcrowded, noisy, scruffy, beautiful, and most of all it's vibrant and dynamic, a city erupting like a volcano.

Vivien and Herman have an appointment with a potential distributor of the book, and while they go up to the 4th floor of a commercial building, I stay in the car with driver Paul, watching a demonstration taking place outside the building. Clinical officers are protesting against the Salaries and Remuneration Commission whose offices are on the 6th floor. Their status has been downgraded and they have been reclassified as unskilled health workers, with a consequent lowering of their pay grade. There are about 50-60 people in the demonstration, singing and dancing, waving their hands and swinging their rears, blowing whistles and vuvuzelas, laughing and chatting. An entrepreneur weaves between them selling them soft drinks. I have just remarked to Paul that it's very peaceful and more like a party than a demonstration, when suddenly people begin running in all directions, shouting and screaming, chased by police thrashing them with long batons. Two women fall to the ground in front of our car. Then there are gunshots and we are enveloped in a cloud of smoke.

"Tear gas," says Paul, starting the engine and reversing rapidly. Fortunately the car doors are locked and the windows are closed; in Nairobi that's the norm whether you're driving or stationary. Police signal us over to one side while they chase and beat the scattering crowd. There's a fire hydrant near us where people are desperately splashing water into their eyes. It has all happened so fast. Paul's phone rings, and it is Vivien upstairs, checking that we are

both safe. A lady comes down to the car to 'rescue' me and take me up to the office. All around people are dabbing at their faces and moaning. The air stings our eyes. There's little sympathy for the protesters upstairs in the office, because their noise disrupts the working day and makes phone conversations difficult, while the protesters' target two floors higher up can't hear it.

By the time we return to the car the tear gas and the police and the demonstrators have all dispersed. As we are driving through town I'm startled when a cyclist smashes his hand against the car window. He bends forward and shouts "*Funga malango!*" (Shut the door!) The passenger door on my side has a small strip of seal protruding, and from the outside it looks as if the door is not properly closed.

"It is locked," Paul tells him, winding down his window. "It's locked. Don't worry."

"OK boss," says the cyclist as he pedals away.

Our next meeting is with the permanent secretary to the Minister of Tourism. He receives us enthusiastically, accepts a copy of the book which I sign, and immediately invites Vivien and myself to a gala dinner the following evening, a celebration of World Tourism Day to be hosted by the Minister. While we are naturally delighted, we are also thrown into a panic as I don't have anything suitable to wear, having only come with a handful of casual clothes. I should have packed something smart. My clever packing plan lies in ruins. Wrong computer, wrong camera, wrong clothes. Almost total packing fail – although I do at least have bras and make up.

Vivien says we must rush out and buy me a smart outfit and shoes, because Kenyans really do dress up for these events and we don't want me to arrive looking like a wreck. I suggest we wait for the promised written invitation before we go on a shopping spree, but we do arrange to have our hair done next morning. Back at the club I rummage through my clothes to try to find something glamorous. A pair of black velvet trousers could work, but there's nothing that really goes with them. I don't know why I packed them. As a last resort I suppose I could drape myself in a kitenge – the East African version of a sarong – and go as an eccentric writer.

The following morning we go the hairdresser, a small busy salon where Gabriel gives me an expert shampoo and blow dry. I wish I could do it like that myself.

Hairdresser Gabriel

As the hours tick away there is no sign of the invitation, and by 5.00 pm we know that we won't be going to the dinner, so we stand down and relax. An apologetic text message arrives saying that unfortunately it was just not possible to fit us in at such short notice. With a mixture of regret and relief l shove the jumbled clothes back into the cupboard and we go and have a meal beside the pool.

Next morning I spend a few peaceful and interesting hours alone exploring the Village Market. This is not as the name may imply a simple marketplace, but a large modern commercial and entertainment hub with designer shops and a wide choice of restaurants set amongst ornamental gardens and some imaginative artwork.







Village Market Shopping Centre

Muthaiga Club has very kindly organised an impromptu book signing at tea time. Vivien and I lay out a pile of books next to the table that is set with selections of neat sandwiches, fruit tartlets, gâteaux, pastries and scones with whipped cream and jam. It's all very English and rather fun. A few members wander over, pick up a book, turn it over and put it back down without looking at us. Two very nice ladies come and buy copies, and join us for tea.

Saturday arrives, the day of the book signing. It doesn't seem possible that a week has gone so quickly.

I can't decide what to wear for the signing. The very first book reading/signing I did was at a small club in the Charente. It went very well, the audience were kind and bought lots of books, but as I was walking to the car park I heard one lady saying to another: "I did enjoy that. She's lovely, although I didn't think she really *looked* like an author." That comment has always stuck in my mind. I'd worn a conventional skirt and blouse. What is an author expected to look like? Should I instead have worn something flamboyant, like Molly Parkin, with a jewel-encrusted turban and flowing velvet robe? I'm not a flamboyant person and I have always preferred to dress down rather than up. I can't pretend to be something I'm not. I try on various outfits. The one I've brought with me to wear today suddenly doesn't look right, so I peck around amongst the other oddments in the cupboard, settling on something that as soon as we reach the venue I realise doesn't suit me at all.

Paul and Kamara collect us to drive to the Sarit Centre. There are no words to describe how nervous I feel, alternately hot and cold, trembling then rigid, my stomach churning and head aching. The palms of my hands are sticky with sweat and my mouth is dry as dust. I am always on edge at public appearances, but this is far worse than usual because so many people have gone to a great deal of effort and expense to bring me here for this event and I'm so worried that I'll disappoint.

Signings and book fairs can be fun or not fun at all. I remember long ago sitting for one whole Sunday in a very draughty hall in a small French village with a group of other authors, both French and English. People wandered in and out, mostly to shelter from the rain. It was so cold that I turned blue and began shaking. A friend who came to buy the single book I sold that day lent me her fleece and came back later with a flask of hot soup. Between seven of us we sold four books but we had fun consoling each other and sharing coffee.

All the authors I know are friendly and supportive of each other. We are all in the same game, whichever genre we write in. We expose ourselves to the wide world and all have our shares of highs and lows which bind us together. One successful author friend hired a room in a town hall in a large city in England to do a reading from his latest book. The event had been widely advertised in the local press, and he had organised refreshments. When the appointed time came only one person arrived, an elderly lady laden festooned with shopping bags, who sat at the back of the hall. Once he realised that nobody else was coming, he gamely began his reading, and when he had finished he went to speak to the old lady and found her dozing. He gave her a cup of tea and some biscuits and asked if she had enjoyed listening to him. She replied that she hadn't been listening, she had come in to get out of the rain and rest her legs, and had nodded off in the warmth of the room. In retrospect he found it very funny; at the time it was an author's nightmare.

The Text Book Centre have lived up to their promise and the entire bookshop window is filled with copies of the book and the table in the entrance is also piled high. A few are upside down. Outside the entrance they've set up a table dressed in royal blue and red, and bearing a pretty floral display. But will anybody come? I think I'm going to be sick.

The Textbook Centre, Sarit Centre, Nairobi

On the stroke of 11.00 am the first visitors arrive, fabulous friendly people who live permanently in Kenya and whom I have only known previously through Facebook. They calm my nerves (thank you so much Pat and Richard Carrington). They are followed by many others, so I can stop worrying and really enjoy myself meeting and making new friends. Kenyans of all colours have always been known for their generosity and hospitality, and one lady arrives with exotic milk shakes for all of us (thank you Sarah Orr). Susie Allan, author of *Letilet's Tales: The Vanishing World of a Hunter-Gatherer* comes to chat. Susie spent eight years creating her book recording in words and superb photos the unique culture and timeless wisdom of a traditional Masai tribesman in the 21st century. The effort and love that has been put into this project has created a book that is simply sublime.

Politicians and local dignitaries stop to talk and pose for photos, and I am especially touched to see how many 'ordinary' working Kenyans buy the book, because for anybody on a modest salary it isn't cheap. They all want their copies signed, and print out their names to make sure I spell them correctly.

One of Vivien's Kenyan friends who I met at Elementeita visits us. He is a very funny man. There are four of us European ladies on the stand at the time, and Vivien asks him whether he knows all of us. With a dead straight face he replies: "You white people all look the same to me."

Paul and Kamara stay with us all day. Both of them feature in the book, and are asked to sign copies. The pile of books on the table diminishes quickly, and the book shop manager comes to say how pleased they are, as sales are far in excess of expectations. We are kept busy, and each time there seems to be a lull and we prepare to have some lunch, more and more people arrive. It's five hours since we started and it feels like ten minutes. Time really does fly when you're having fun. Just as we are about to eat a few hastily grabbed sandwiches Vivien leaps up, nearly knocking over the table and alarming us all.

"My flight!" she wails. "I haven't even packed and I should be on my way to the airport."

We spring into action, scraping up our belongings, taking a hurried leave of the book shop and galloping in an undignified manner back to the car and to the club, where I'm fascinated watching Vivien prepare for her departure. Her enormous amount of luggage is meticulously packed, every item carefully folded and put in its place, and she's dressed and made up as if she's going to an important business meeting. So unlike my own method of rolling all my clothing into a sausage and jamming it into the smallest possible case, and wearing loose casual clothes and no make up. When I mention this she replies that if you want to be treated well, you have to look the part. One day I'll have to try that.

After she has left for the airport I pack in preparation for my own departure the next evening. How quickly this week has passed, how much we have seen and done; how incredibly happy I have been to be back in Kenya once again, and how relieved and delighted I am that the book signing has gone so well.

This time tomorrow I'll be on the way to Addis Ababa. I stand at the window listening to the crickets and looking into the dark for a long, long time, before tucking myself beneath the mosquito net and falling asleep.

Sunday morning I'm having a solitary breakfast on the empty terrace, sipping tree tomato juice, softening the frozen butter curls over my cup of tea so I can enjoy some toast and marmalade, and reading my Kindle.

"Excuse me Madame," says a waiter very quietly. "I am sorry, but it is not permitted to read while you are having breakfast. Not even Kindle." I drop it in my bag. It's strange in this most English of clubs, because traditionally we have always read over breakfast. Still, rules are rules.

As my flight home doesn't leave until the evening, Kamara is taking me to the Nairobi Game Park for the day. While I'm waiting for him I wander around the grounds taking photos of the plants. A lady wrapped in a bath robe passes, wagging her finger and giving me a cheerful wink; I've no idea why until a security guard appears and tells me to put away the camera. I hadn't realised that the photography ban extended to the plants.

With picnic boxes Vivien has ordered from the club kitchen, Kamara and I set off for the park on an overcast and pleasantly mild morning. Funnily enough the very first animal we see as we drive through the gates into the park is a grey domestic cat sitting beside the track, calmly washing itself.

Following the long drought the park is arid, the ground uniformly brown, yet the herds of gazelle and antelope look plump and healthy. So do the zebra, but the buffalo are not doing so well. Like the cattle they are suffering from lack of grazing. The hippos are also in trouble, says Kamara. They are having to rely on the aquatic plants in and around the dam, but they are grazers and their main diet is grass, and there is none here. Although there is plenty of water for the animals in the large dam, there is not enough food, and despite tantalisingly grey skies, no rain is forecast.

From a casual glance at the withered landscape it seems there is nothing there but common antelopes like the kongoni, impala, Grant gazelle, the majestic eland and herds of zebra. However, when Kamara picks up his binoculars you know he has spotted something, and over the next few hours we see a sleeping lion, a rare black rhino, elusive giraffe. A lioness with six cubs crosses the road beside us. Standing on a slight incline, silhouetted against the

sky is a trio of rhino. A proud pair of ostrich herd their 16 chicks, fluffy and spotted, through the scrub, stopping to peck at the soil to dig up insects.

I curse myself again for not bringing a suitable camera with me.

Among a herd of impala the dominant male has selected a particular lady for his attentions. However, the lady says "No!" He chases her; she runs, and she outruns him, taking giant leaps over bushes, jinking left and right, scattering the rest of the herd as she weaves between them. We watch for a long time, as he snorts and grunts and stamps his feet, and he can't catch her. The rest of the herd watch in astonishment. Finally the male gives up with an irritable bellow and the female returns to the herd with a triumphant waggle of her tail. Kamara laughs. "I have never seen that behaviour before," he says.

We pull up to watch a couple of lions beneath an acacia tree a short distance away. There is a large carcass of some kind close by. One of the lions keeps walking backwards and forwards to it. A vulture circles above. Another vehicle pulls up 20 metres in front of us, and to our amazement out climbs a Chinese gentleman who calmly walks towards us. He begins talking in Chinese to Kamara, who does not understand Chinese, but replies in English that it is not safe to be walking around near lions, and it is forbidden to get out of the car. The Chinese gentleman persists, and by means of gestures and mimes explains that he wants to borrow Kamara's binoculars to have a closer look at the lions. I can't help having evil thoughts and wondering how fast the lions could cover the distance, and how fast the Chinese gentleman could run if he had to. With a slight shake of his head Kamara hands over his binoculars, and the Chinese gentleman stands and watches the lions for a few minutes before handing back the binoculars with a small bow and some Chinese words.

"Crazy people," say Kamara.

After that excitement we drive up to an observation point which gives a panoramic view over the park and shows how far the city is encroaching into it. It is a strange sight to see so many wild animals standing such a short distance from the skyscrapers and suburbs. We open our picnic boxes, and to be honest they are not very nice. We each have several cold samosas, an apple and a tomato, I have a hard boiled egg, and Kamara has a piece of chicken. "How do you eat this?" he asks, handing me half a cucumber wrapped in cling film. Neither of us have any means of peeling or slicing it and we cannot think of any way it can be eaten other than lollipop style, which neither of us fancy, so after removing the cling film it goes over the wall for the benefit of the monkeys watching from the nearby bushes. As we walk

back to the car two eagles swoop low over our heads to snatch up some discarded meat and bones left by a previous visitor.

I remark to Kamara that we haven't managed to see any giraffe except through the binoculars. They were once so common, and are now threatened with extinction. People actually kill these majestic, harmless, peaceful creatures for fun. Kamara gazes around for a moment, and then drives towards some woods. Turning onto a track we come across a pair of giraffe standing just a few metres away, looking down on us with their slightly imperious expression. At last I can capture something recognisable!

Look – giraffe!

By the time we have to head to the airport I'm certain we have explored every square inch of the park and seen every living creature in it.

The outskirts of the airport terminal buildings are spectacular, with life-sized sculptures of wildlife grazing and galloping on emerald green grass. I wish I'd taken some photos. Maybe I'll go back one day to do just that.

Strict security means that not only are all vehicles searched before entering the perimeter, but all passengers have to dismount and walk through a small building and wait on the other side of the barriers for the vehicles to pass inspection. After Kamara has dropped me at the terminal, passing through baggage check and immigration is quick and straightforward, although the escalator up to the first floor departure area is broken.

It's two hours before my flight is due to depart, so there's plenty of time to relax. Every step of my journey has gone without a hitch – not counting the tear gas incident, which didn't really amount to much anyway – so I am anticipating that the return journey will be equally smooth.

I sit and read until check-in is announced. This is a very slow process and involves several ladies peering into a computer, conferring, and printing out long furls of paper, then checking back in the computer, and turning passports back to front and upside down, but I suppose they are just doing their job the best way they know how. With departure time less than half an hour away I am still in a long queue waiting to check in. By the time I make it into the lounge where passengers are sitting quietly reading, dozing or chatting on their phones, it is obvious the flight will not be leaving on time. There is no announcement, no sign of a plane, and no information boards. With my recent history at home in France of going to the wrong airport to collect a visiting friend, I have a sudden panic attack – I'm probably in the wrong place. I ask the man sitting next to me if he is waiting for the flight to Addis, and he nods. I'm not sure he understood me, so I find somebody else and ask him. Yes, he says, this is the right lounge for the Addis flight, and no, he's no idea what time it is will depart. Nobody seems concerned, except for me, and the reason I'm concerned is because there isn't a huge margin in Addis to catch the connecting flight to Paris.

Fifty minutes after the scheduled departure time we are boarded and I'm sitting beside a friendly gentleman from Western Kenya, who is an IT manager currently working in Sweden. There is no point in us listening to the cabin announcements, nor the lady demonstrating safety procedures because they are in a language that I think is Amharic, which neither of us understands.

Once we are airborne my neighbour starts chatting. He tells me that his name is Lumumba, and he's surprised that I know that was the name of the first Prime Minister of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Patrice Lumumba, who was assassinated. Yes, he says, in my generation many of us were given the names of African independence leaders. He is working in Stockholm on a two-year contract, and returns to Kenya four times a year to visit his wife and children who have stayed behind, as his wife has a good job and their children are doing well in school.

I ask him what he thinks about the forthcoming re-run of the Kenya elections. He tells me that he is from the Luhya tribe and will vote for the defeated Odinga, and his wife, who is Kikuyu, will vote for the incumbent Kenyatta. This does not cause any marital discord, he laughs, as they each vote according to their tribal loyalties, but the only thing they are interested in is getting on with their lives, earning their living, educating their children and that Kenya should continue to be a peaceful country. They are really not bothered who wins.

We are served a good dinner, with a small bottle of wine, and the short hop to Addis passes quickly. As soon as we land we both hasten to catch our onward flights as we are already almost an hour behind schedule.

Having cleared the airport so quickly on my incoming flight from Paris, I am under the foolish illusion that I will pass through equally swiftly on the way back. I scurry down the long corridor, continually shoving the Longchamp bag up onto my shoulder, where it instantly slides down to my wrist. It's rather heavy as I've stuffed in all my electronic equipment, a spare pair of shoes, the blanket and a large, heavy cookery book given to me as a gift.

Standing at the end of the corridor is a small woman, and beyond her a scene reminiscent of the last flight out of Hanoi when the Americans were leaving Vietnam. Hundreds of people are crushed into labyrinths of canvas straps, three or four abreast, looking anxiously at their watches, standing on tiptoe to see what is happening ahead, peering around corners. Condensed anxiety. The small woman looks at my ticket and signals me into the longest and thickest queue. The Paris flight is leaving in just over an hour. I shuffle forward an inch every five minutes. A tall man is grunting and stamping from one foot to the other, a pale sweating girl is moaning and fanning herself with her ticket and an elderly lady needs the lavatory.

The people in the queue for Rome on our right are suddenly swept away. I don't know what happens to them. They just vanish.

There's a man in a uniform and I clutch at him as he goes past, and tell him my flight is leaving in 50 minutes, waving my hand at the horde ahead of me. Don't worry, he says, there's plenty of time.

Inch by inch we make our way to the security barrier. There we must remove our jackets, belts and shoes and watches and put them in a tray with our hand luggage, having first removed from that any electronic equipment and liquids, walk through a scanner, collect our tray, carry it to over to the single conveyor and watch it pass through the X-ray machine. Looking at my watch I see there are 12 minutes before my flight leaves, but I'm almost through security. Then the conveyor stops.
I know that earlier I said I don't like being rushed when I travel, but in a perverse way I do actually enjoy the adrenaline hit that comes when things start to go pear shaped.

The operator drags off the conveyor the bag belonging to the man in front of me, and opens it. He removes a large metal cube with tubes coming out of it, and looking very stern calls the owner round to the other side of the conveyor. I hop up and down impatiently, but he doesn't take any notice. The owner of the object is explaining something about being an engineer, and he has an identity badge and some papers that the scanner operator examines. Everything seems to be happening in slow motion and I'm sure the plane will have gone before I get through here.

Questions run through my head: If the flight goes without me, is somebody responsible for arranging overnight accommodation? I think that's unlikely, so the next thought is, will there be somewhere quiet, comfortable and warm in the airport where I can catch a few hours sleep? That also seems unlikely. Is there anywhere to eat at the airport, and will it be suitable for a vegetarian? Somehow I doubt it. I do have a cold samosas left over from lunch, wrapped in a napkin in my bag, but it won't exactly make a decent meal. What about my ticket for the TGV – will I be able to change it, or have to buy a new one? And without a phone, how will I let Terry know that I'm delayed?

After what seems a very long time while I am mentally preparing for the worst, the conveyor jerks into life again. The owner of the mystery object stands dejectedly to one side as my bag and tray glide through. I drag my shoes and jacket on, stuffing all the bits and pieces into my bag and starting to scamper, and then stop because there is no indication at all of where to scamper to. People are swirling around in every direction with wild eyes, like lost souls. I find a man who looks official and flap my ticket at him. He points to some stairs and says that is the way to go, so that's where I go.

At the bottom of the stairs is a small woman similar to the small woman upstairs. It may even be the same woman. She looks at my ticket and directs me to queue 5C. My ticket says the correct departure gate is 2A. I show her the ticket and point with my finger at where it says 2A, but she points at 5C and tells me to go there. There are about 40 people loosely clustered around 5C, all looking uncertain. I ask a man standing next to me where he's flying to, and he says Paris. I ask if he thinks we're in the right queue, and he says he doesn't know. We begin asking everybody within reach and nobody knows.

About 10 minutes later a man appears and ushers us through a door and into some light drizzle and onto a bus, which lurches violently almost knocking us all off our feet. When we finally board our plane I slump down into my seat. Unfortunately there are no empty seats on this flight, and I'm sitting next to a man spreader, not only of his large thighs but also his

large arms and elbows which claim command of the armrest for the entire flight. Somebody behind me seems to be trying to dismantle my seat as it keeps being hauled backwards and then banged forwards. I turn round and glare.

All aboard and buckled in, there is an announcement in English. Due to a local epidemic of a virulent form of malaria, for our protection the plane is going be thoroughly fumigated and we will all be fumigated too. We need not be alarmed because the World Health Organisation say it's perfectly safe. I pull my jacket over my face and squeeze my eyes shut as the cabin crew walk up and down spraying us.

It's almost 1.00 am by the time dinner is served. It's the same dinner I had a earlier on the flight from Nairobi, with an identical little bottle of wine, which I knock back before trying to get comfortable in the narrow space left by the man spreader, and after a few futile attempts to claim a small part of the armrest I give up, wrap myself up in my rug and fold my arms. At least he doesn't snore, and he doesn't use my shoulder as a pillow, so I forgive him, and manage to sleep for a couple of hours before breakfast arrives at 4.10 am. It's a rather nice egg thing, I don't know how they make it but I wouldn't mind having the recipe. The coffee is good, too.

We land in Paris shortly after 6.00 am on a cold grey day exactly like the cold grey day of my departure nine days earlier. I sit and wait to let the masses disembark first, and entertain myself watching passengers trying to take with them the colourful little airline blankets. Some have knotted them jauntily around their necks like scarves. Others have rolled them neatly and tucked them under their arms. Some are wearing them fetchingly draped over their shoulders. There are bits peeking out of bags and deep pockets. The cabin crew stand in the aisles, smiling and capturing the blankets, and I only see one person who manages to keep hers, as she has used it to strap her sleeping baby to her back.

Once disembarked we are funnelled into a narrow corridor where a cluster of armed police are checking documents. An oriental couple are turned back and stand miserably watching as we edge slowly forwards. An American lady next to me suddenly gasps and runs back the way she has come, onto the plane. She returns a few minutes later wearing a funny little square hat made of raffia, a souvenir, she says, of a fantastic trip to Madagascar. Most people pass the gendarmes fairly quickly; a few have their documents taken away and are told to wait to one side. I'm waved through and move onto the next area, passport control, where there are long queues. A fierce looking woman points me on to the end of the longest and slowest queue, where I stand obediently, reading my Kindle, for about ten minutes. Then I

notice the queue I'm in is for non-EU people, and at the moment with my British passport I'm still part of the EU, so I wave it at a man in a uniform, and he opens a strap and ushers me through to the head of the EU queue, where I go through and quickly retrieve the small wheeled suitcase from the baggage area.

It's 7.30 am, five hours before my train leaves. I stretch my legs roaming around the terminal for an hour. The suitcase and shoulder bag become heavy, so I go to find a coffee at McDonalds where the slowest girl in the world is grappling helplessly with the coffee machine. She looks about 12 and is on her first day in the job. The long queue is sympathetic and patient. Two American men in front of me say they ordered coffee with their breakfast which they had finished eating 15 minutes earlier, but you can't rush a good coffee. The orders pile up and there is an assortment of cups and jugs on the counter but no coffee. I ask for a hot chocolate which appears in a few seconds, then I find a quiet corner and settle down to read. Every ten minutes there is an announcement in English and French, asking the owner of the blue backpack left outside one of the shops to please claim it.

Time trickles past very, very slowly and I'm trying to stay awake. I order a coffee from the little girl who has by now mastered her job, but it doesn't help and I simply have to close my eyes for a few minutes. I don't know how long I sleep before I become aware of a sudden rush of movement around me and hear a voice telling me to wake up. When I open my eyes there is a machine gun a few inches from my face, wielded by a policeman ordering everybody to evacuate the terminal immediately. People are hastily swigging their coffee and scraping up their belongings as the police usher us out onto the pavement into the damp morning. I suppose we have the elusive owner of the blue backpack to thank.

We are corralled into a section of the pavement with an armed policeman at either end, and I'm impressed by the way everybody is good-humoured, relaxed, chatting and fiddling with their phones as if this is an every day occurrence. I'm wondering whether I'll miss my train, but within a quarter of an hour we are freed, by which time it's almost 12.00 so I make my way to the train station.

Unlike the quick outward trip on the non-stop TGV, the homeward journey will take five hours and involve three trains.

On the first leg to Le Mans my designated seat is upstairs. The wheeled suitcase seems to have gained weight on our travels, and is really quite heavy when I try to lift it onto on a rack. In doing so the Longchamps bag on my shoulder swings around and knocks a gentleman off

balance so he bumps into the door. Although I am mortified, he's very gallant and stows the case for me. At the next station there's a long delay due to an unspecified incident. Checking my ticket I see there is only 14 minutes at Le Mans to catch the train for Tours and we've been stuck at this station for at least 20 minutes. Hoping the train will be able to make up the lost time, I decide to go down the stairs and wait by the doors so that I can make a swift exit. As I drag the suitcase off the rack and down the narrow stairs the Longchamp bag slides off my shoulder, and as I've forgotten to zip it up it empties my spare shoes, blanket, camera, Kindle, wallet, tablet, assorted rubbish and a bag of sweets all over the floor.

While I am picking them up a huge man with a giant camouflage-patterned duffle bag thumps down the stairs and squashes into the limited space beside me, standing on my bag of sweets. The train starts to slow as it approaches the station, and he asks me for a time check. It's two minutes after the scheduled departure of the next train.

"*Putain*," he yells, "*putain*!" (Rude French word.) He punches the door and keeps hissing '*putains*.'

An announcement pings on: The train to Tours will be leaving in two minutes. Passengers should hurry if they wish to catch it.

The moment the doors open the gigantic man is out and running for his life, leaping onto the waiting train. I trot behind him and the little wheeled case decides to twist itself over, and the shoulder bag slips down for the umpteenth time and I hesitate as I reach the train. My friend and fellow Blackbird author Diana Morgan-Hill lost both legs in a horrifying accident when she fell between a train and the platform because her backpack caught against the door. She wrote about it in her book *Love and Justice*, and her story has left me with a terror of stepping on and off trains, especially as there always seems to be such a large gap between the platform and the step. A friendly hand pulls me up safely and I settle down and close my eyes for the two hour journey to Tours.

I snap awake as the train slows, collect my bags and climb down onto the platform. The station seems much smaller than I remember from the last time I was there, but I'm tired and don't give it too much thought until I go to check the departure board. The earlier and later trains are showing, but there's no mention of my train to Poitiers, so I find a man in a uniform and ask him if the train has been cancelled, or delayed. He studies my ticket for a few seconds, and says: "But your ticket is from Tours. You are not in Tours. You are in St Pierre de Corps." There's a train standing at the platform, just about to leave. He shouts at

the man who is responsible for signalling the departure, which gives me enough time to reach it. "This train will get you to Tours in time to catch your next train," he says, handing me and my bags up into it.

In the last 36 hours I've had about 4 hours sleep, and sleep deprivation can have a similar effect on the body to alcohol, which is probably why I feel slightly drunk and uncoordinated and have got off at the wrong station.

It's only a five minute ride to the majestic station of Tours, where I find my final train. Instead of man-handling the suitcase and shoulder bag down the narrow aisle I decide to sit on a little fold-down seat near the door, and settle down once again. Two minutes later a man climbs on with a bicycle and points to a contraption above my head where he wants to hang the bike. I move along to the next little seat, and more men with bikes arrive and they need all the available hooks for their bikes.

The Hanging Bicycles of SNCF

With nowhere else left to sit I move into the main compartment which is packed with commuters, many of them standing. There is just one vacant seat and I ask the woman sitting opposite if it is taken and when she shakes her head I flop down onto it. An hour later as we pass Futuroscope, just moments from Poitiers station I stand up, and that's when I realise why the seat was vacant. My backside is soaked.

Despite, and because of all the little incidents I've enjoyed every single minute of my journey, even those that didn't go according to plan. They are part of what for me makes travelling such fun. Equally it is a real joy to arrive and see Terry waiting on the platform to take control of the luggage. In 50 minutes, I'll be home, returning with new friendships, happy memories, rubbish photos and a hand-crafted Kenyan bracelet that actually fits. :)

For many years we were lucky enough to travel in great comfort and stay in luxury resorts all over the world, and yet those times and places have left only vague impressions. Yes, the weather was great. The food was delicious. The hotel was de luxe. Lovely scenery. The names ring a bell but my recollections are faded. It's always the times and places when things went a little skew whiff that still bring smiles when I look back and think, yes, I remember that, it was fun. Like the time we found ourselves spending the night in a brothel. But that's another story.

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Typical Kenyan road scenes taken from the car:

Boda boda motorbike taxis

Car wash

The soil really is that red

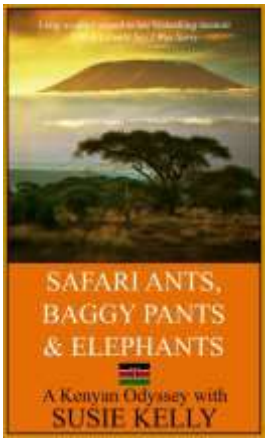
Plant nursery

The new highway

Plant nursery

Roadside tea shop

Plants and trees



To read Chapter 1 of *Safari Ants, Baggy Pants & Elephants*, click the book cover.
For more information about Susie Kelly's current and forthcoming 2018 titles, published by Blackbird Digital Books in ebook and paperback, follow this link.

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