

UNDER AFRICAN SKIES

One Family's Journey Into Africa • By Laverne Bissky

"FIVE DOWN, TWO TO GO," my son Devin, 17, declared when we landed on the island of Zanzibar in Tanzania, our first stop in Africa this past July. A few years prior, he had announced that he wanted to visit all seven continents. Being rather intrepid travellers, we committed to try, but this would be no small challenge given that our daughter Kasenya, 14, uses a wheelchair.

Devin had come up with the family motto: "No Ordinary Family, No Ordinary Life, No Ordinary Journey," and the theme has applied to all of our travels.

Africa was not our first major family trip. In 2008, we spent four months in Southeast Asia and did a substantial amount of volunteering there. I wrote about this for *Abilities* (see "No Ordinary Vacation," abilities.ca). This time, we planned to "just" take a holiday since we had only one

month. But the trip would also turn out to be "no ordinary vacation."

Africa is a dark continent shrouded in mystery. It is portrayed in the media as a land of wars and famine, and is still attempting to shake off its colonial history like a cape buffalo trying to shake off a lion's death grip. It held for us some trepidation as we set off to explore parts of Tanzania, Uganda and Egypt. But Africa's beauty and hospitality exceeded all expectations.



Zanzibar, with its white beaches and palm trees, seemed an odd place to find Muslim women in traditional dress. Some wore modern western clothing with headscarves while others wore a full burka and face veil, sometimes with gloves. Having an exaggerated startle reflex, Kasenya, who has cerebral palsy, will recoil and let out a gasp when surprised. In Southeast Asia, she had often been startled by the orange-robed Buddhist monks, but in Africa it was the women dressed entirely in black with only their eyes revealed. Zanzibar would hold other surprises, as well.

We had selected a hotel (from our travel guidebook) because it had an elevator. When we arrived, we were told that the elevator was not working—and apparently hadn't been for years—but would be fixed immediately. The only available rooms were on the second floor, so we hiked Kasenya up the stairs in her wheelchair. The hotel staff was very friendly and willing to help, but we promptly began searching for another hotel for the following evening.

Jet-lagged, we flopped onto our beds that night to the sound of crickets and the drone of the air conditioner. A few hours later, we were awakened by loud thumping music emanating from the disco behind the hotel. The beat continued until three in the morning. Not what we expected in a Muslim area.

Like the other places we visited in Africa, Zanzibar is not very wheelchair friendly. On a few occasions, Kasenya and her caregiver Lacey decided to venture out on their own and were gone for hours at a time. I wondered how they would negotiate the stairs at the entrance of every building. Then one day, I spotted Lacey signalling to the security guard in front of the post office to lift the front of Kasenya's wheelchair so that they could get up the steps. Kasenya had wanted to mail postcards to her grandparents and a few steps weren't going to stand in the way. The guard seemed confused at first, but didn't refuse. A sense of adventure and a willingness to ask for help had served Kasenya and Lacey well.

Kasenya had not wanted to visit Africa, at first. When we asked her why, she responded, "There will be people who beg and things that are big enough to eat me." We couldn't deny either of those scenarios. We promised her that we would be safely inside a vehicle while on safari—but there is no way to protect a child from witnessing abject poverty in Africa. And this is a parent's dilemma—we want our children to know the realities of the world, but not become afraid of them.

Even though our circumstances differ, it is a universal truth that people are more the

Even though our circumstances differ, it is a universal truth that people are more the same than different. Connecting with people serves to humanize the sea of faces that we pass when we travel.

IF YOU GO...

Tanzania is a popular safari destination, since it is safe and features some of the most amazing scenery in Africa, including: Mt. Kilimanjaro, Ngorongoro Crater, Lake Victoria and the Serengeti. It is also home to the Odupai Gorge, where several important archeological discoveries have been made. You can access a safari on Tanzania's "northern circuit" by flying to Kilimanjaro International Airport, which is also a starting point for hiking the peak.

Selecting a safari operator can be a daunting task, as there is a large number of them to choose from. The price depends on the type of accommodation and whether it is a group or private safari. Accommodations range from budget camping to luxury lodge accommodation. None of these are inexpensive—even "budget" camping starts at well over \$100 per person per night. A large portion of the fee covers the cost of licensing the safari operator as well as the daily fees to enter and camp in the national parks.

The Tanzania Association of Tour Operators (tatotz.org) is an excellent place to begin your search. Don't be afraid to ask for pictures of vehicles, details about accommodations and the possibility of customizing the itinerary to suit your needs and preferences. The company's responses to your questions will tell you a lot about how they operate.

Of course, it's best if you have the recommendation of someone that has used the company. We went with Real Adventures Safaris (realadventuresafaris.com). This is an amazing little company, owned by Tanzanians and operated with great integrity. As with all of their staff, our guide (Fadhil) was knowledgeable, attentive to our needs and meticulous about obeying the rules.

Have fun and be safe!

same than different. Connecting with people serves to humanize the sea of faces that we pass when we travel. As experienced travellers, we knew that the more we could connect with people on a personal level, the deeper and more rewarding the experience would be.

So, in addition to visiting Tanzania, we planned a side trip to Uganda to visit a project that is sponsored by the Rotary Club to which I belong. My husband, David, and I both studied agriculture, so we were thrilled to be able to visit this project, which is operated by an organization called Kulika (Kulika.org) that trains farmers to improve their productivity without using artificial fertilizers or pesticides.

We also asked our Rotarian hosts if there were any schools for children with disabilities that we could visit. We were taken to see the Kampala School for the Physically Handicapped (KSPH). This is a boarding school. Children alternate between living at the school and living at home—a common scenario in Uganda. This is not to be confused with an orphanage, or what is referred to in Uganda as a "Babies Home." To attend KSPH, a child must have a family.

The school is a collection of buildings built on a grassy slope. On the day that we visited, some of the students gathered in a building with huge open windows. A guest was showing them how to make chapattis (flat bread). Other children worked in their classrooms. In one, we met Olivia who, like Kasenya, is 14 and has cerebral palsy. Olivia was attempting to write on a slate with a piece of chalk. She raised her arms over her head, which is the sign that she had developed for saying hello.

The older students at KSPH are taught skills and make items such as coloured clay-bead necklaces and hand-painted fabrics. We are planning to have some of the beads shipped to Canada in order to sell them. The project will raise awareness, and the profits will be split between KSPH and a program that Kasenya is part of (www.conductive-education.ca) for children with cerebral palsy in Calgary.

While visiting Kulika and KSPH, we got to see both urban and rural Uganda. Although the Ugandan countryside is hilly and lush, the capital city of Kampala is choked with traffic and people. "You might want to close your window," our driver warns us as we stop at a red light in Kampala. "Someone could reach inside and steal your camera." Despite the risk of having our property stolen, we felt no fear for our personal safety in any of the places that we visited.

From Uganda, we returned to Tanzania in order to do a safari. (Visiting the Serengeti was on my "bucket list.") A safari

is a rugged experience. July is the height of the dry season—and also the best time to view wildlife even though dust fills the air. We travelled in a safari vehicle with open windows over bumpy dirt roads that had been potholed or washed away during the rainy season by rivers and streams that had since disappeared.

Temperatures were extreme, soaring into the low 30s on the plains during the day and dropping to single digits during the night at higher elevations. But any inconveniences that we endured were overshadowed by the reward of stunning landscapes and the opportunity to witness large numbers of exotic animals in their natural habitat.

We chose a private budget safari, which means that we had our own driver and vehicle, but we tented instead of staying in lodges. We also had a cook to prepare our meals. No one on the safari team seemed fazed by Kasenya's wheelchair. We developed a three-person system for transferring her into the vehicle, and the staff strapped the folded wheelchair onto the roof with the other luggage. A carry bag would have been a good idea because the swirling red dust coated the wheelchair...but a dirty wheelchair has better stories to tell.

Despite the abundant wildlife, Kasenya was spared from seeing a lion until the third day of the safari. As the lion strode by our vehicle, Kasenya responded with a predictable gasp. But in the end, she conquered her fears, sleeping soundly in the middle of the Serengeti in a campground that was not protected by a fence.

Fear is a common response to surprises. One evening in the city, a man appeared from nowhere while we waited in the semi-darkness for a cab to take us back to the hotel. (It wasn't that the hotel was far, only that the traffic made it too dangerous to walk at night.) "Who is the mother of this child?" he asked. Then, he shared the story of how his daughter had become disabled when, as a toddler, she had fallen from the third floor. He envied that we were able to travel with Kasenya, because he had wanted to visit his native India, but felt this was not possible due to his daughter's condition.

We could offer him nothing, and he wanted nothing from us—only a brief opportunity to be connected by the common life circumstance of disability. We wished each other well, and he vanished into the darkness. I was reminded again that life is no ordinary journey.

LAVERNE BISSKY *Laverne Bissky is a Calgary-based writer and a speaker on the topic of living with purpose and joy (bissky.com). For more about her travels, visit noordinaryjourney.com.*



Previous page: The Bissky-Dziadyk family in the Serengeti. This page from top to bottom: Kasenya gets a lift from her dad while shopping near the pyramids in Egypt; on safari in Tanzania; children at the Kampala School for the Physically Disabled learn to make chapatti (flatbread).