

## London & Kenya 2021

### December 3 & 4

We met at the C&J Bus Station in Portsmouth for a 3 o'clock bus ride to Logan Airport. With 3 or 4 hours to wait we ate dinner. The flight across the Atlantic was bumpy but fast. At Heathrow Airport we had covid tests that Christy had made appointments for and all were negative.

It took three subway changes to get to the hotel, lugging our suitcases and backpacks. We couldn't check into the Paddington Hilton because it was only 10AM there, so after taking photos of Liam and Gracie with the requisite Paddington Bear statue in the lobby, we walked through Kensington Gardens to the London Eye, the huge ferris wheel by the Thames. We could see Big Ben in the distance but it had scaffolding all around it, so wasn't spectacular. Our covid tests we needed for Kenya were preordered, so we were happy to be able to skip the long lines waiting for them to be administered, and watch boys doing amazing acrobatics off the walls near there, pick up our kits, then continue on our walk. My legs cramped during the walk (5.88 miles that day) and I grazed my knee, but drank lots of water and never had a problem again on the trip. We had fish and chips, then took a taxi back to the hotel where we still had quite a long wait. Needless to say, we were all pretty tired! I had warned the kids that the first day was NOT the best on any trip, so I don't think they were surprised or discouraged by the jet lagged black cloud! We went to the hotel tea room and had tea and desserts after asking the front desk to find the tired looking group and let us know when our rooms were ready.

I shared a room with Gracie- me with a king sized bed and she with a single at the foot of it. Christy and John had a queen with Liam in the single. We talked about switching the next day so they could have the larger bed, but it seemed too much effort to move all our baggage, so we stayed that way for the three nights. We showered and went to bed! After walking 5.88 miles in the day, we deserved a rest!

### December 5, Sunday

We woke up around noon and did our covid tests. Brunch was burgers at a restaurant near the hotel, then John delivered our covid tests while we went to the Museum of Natural History, where he met us later. We all liked seeing the skeletons of early man and dinosaurs and their great mineral collection. Then we went to the Victoria and Albert Museum next door to see sculpture, leaded windows, and their costume gallery which included a storm trooper and costumes worn by Fred Astair, and from Wicked, The Lion King, and Kink Boots to name a few. Next to the Museum was a small fair with carousel and a skating rink- all lit up festively. It was magical!

We ate outside at a creperie with hot chocolate to ward off the cold. It was rainy on and off all day but didn't interfere with what we were doing. We took a cab to Picadilly Circus and loved all the beautiful Christmas decorations swathing the streets. After we walked to Buckingham Palace (where all the guards seemed to be in out of the cold) and took photos by the Victoria Fountain.

Another cab ride took us back to the hotel where we ate in a nearby pub. We were back at the hotel again around 10, happy to be calling it a night after walking 5.7 miles in the day!

### **December 6, Monday**

It rained on and off, but was okay on the whole. We took the tube to Tower Hill, but the Tower of London was closed for the day. So we went to the British Museum- high on everyone's list. We saw the Egyptian wing with mummies- even of cats. The North American wing had totem poles and American Indian artifacts and clothing. In the British section we saw Sutton Hoo- a buried ship and its riches and the Mildenhall Treasure- silver dishes dug up in a farmer's field in my old stomping grounds. We also saw the Lewis Chessmen, 12th century chessmen made of walrus ivory that were found on the Island of Lewis off the coast of Scotland.

Gracie mistakenly thought we were ahead of her when we reached the rotunda at the front of the museum and raced off. Christy and the rest of the family went down the stairs to the African exhibit and I stayed to find Gracie. The center was filled with gift shops, so, instead of going in one direction and missing her coming in the other, I waited by the entry. But by the time Christy came back up, there had been no sign of her, though I asked people to be on the lookout for her. So Christy went one way around the circle and I went the other. We spotted her up in the Information Booth. She had very sensibly told them she had lost her family and described them so that the guides in the museum were on the lookout for us. It was a great relief to spot her there!

We walked through Covent Gardens and had fun watching a very funny juggler who was entertaining the crowd, juggling torches and knives. After that we went to the Covent Garden Hotel where John had reserved a high English tea- Christy's greatest wish. We had elegant little sandwiches and cakes with a choice of good English teas, of course.

We walked to Trafalgar Square enjoying the Christmas lights and store windows with animated animals, then took a taxi back to the hotel. We found that all our covid tests had come back negative, showered, packed and got ready to head to Kenya in the morning. We had walked 4.5 miles that day!

### **December 7, Tuesday**

By 6:00 we were walking through the back hotel door directly into the train station where we caught the express train to Heathrow Airport. Check in and security went fine. For breakfast we had blueberry pancakes at the Gordon Ramsey restaurant while we waited for our flight to Nairobi. John and I sat in single seats while Christy sat with the kids for the 7+ hour flight. My neighbor was a nurse from Kenya who worked at a hospital in London and was going home for a month with family. They offered us lots of food and drinks and I watched *Unpregnant* (great!) and *Let Them All Talk* with Meryl Streep.

When we got to the Nairobi airport we had a bit of a covid protocols snafu as rules were rapidly changing. But Christy was able to scan our records with her phone and we were soon on our way. When we got our luggage, we found Ndoko, our Gate 1 guide standing outside waiting for us. We found that only four others would be on the safari trip with us. There was a huge amount of road construction (thanks to Chinese loans) on the way to the hotel. But amazingly, we saw a small herd of zebras by the road! The kids were thrilled.

The Movenpick Hotel was lively, all lit up for Christmas. We had to pass through the gates, have our temperature and luggage scanned and then checked in with Ndoko handling it for us. I have my own room next to John and Liam's. Christy and Grace are two floor up. We needed to use our room keys to get into the floor when you got off the elevator- another security feature. John and Liam ordered food, but Christy and Grace just went upstairs to bed. I had crackers and nuts, wrote to Dick and called it a night. Off to a really good start!

### **December 8, Wednesday**

I was still sleeping when Liam knocked on my door, so I hurried and dressed and met them at the breakfast buffet. Back in the room, I wrote to Dick, showered and did a little hand washing. John made reservations for a six o'clock dinner at the rotating restaurant on top of the hotel. In the lobby we were met by Francis, the Gate1 tour manager and we ended up booking him for a half day tour.

First we went to a very modern shopping center. We had our temperatures checked again to get in. I bought two beautiful glass rounds- blue and green- from the birthday money Chris gave me. Liam and Gracie both got their names engraved on a single grain of rice, then put into a bracelet and necklace. It was amazing intricate work.

We drove through very congested traffic to Nairobi National Park. We saw giraffes, gazelles, wart hogs, hartebeests, Vervet monkeys, baboons and three female Lions. Everybody was thrilled with the drive, but, unfortunately it was too late for our reserved dinner, so we went to the regular restaurant and had pizza. Liam and Gracie told funny stories about school- things even their parents didn't know. It was a fun way to end a good day. Wrote to Dick, showered and went to bed!

### **December 9, Thursday**

By 6:30 we were packed and ready for breakfast before 7. In the elevator we met Rocky (Raquel) who was very happy to meet someone else from the tour and adopted us as family. We ate, then got our things together and went down for the Gate 1 meeting. The others in the group were Mike, Shelley, and their daughter-in-law Juliana who's Brazilian. Then Gate 1 gave us hats, Masai style blankets, wallets and covid safety kits. A woman took our payments for our covid tests to be done 24 hours before our flights back.

We drove down into the Great Rift Valley- a little too exciting for the kids with the steep drop offs in places. There were lots of herds of domestic animals, sheep, goats, and cows as well as donkeys pulling carts. The wild animals included zebras and baboons. We made a pit stop at a tourist sales place where Christy felt they were charging too much for the animal figures she wanted and I kept putting off the guy who followed me and didn't buy anything.

Our lodging for the night was Sunbird Lodge where we all had individual (or duplex) cabins overlooking Lake Elementaita. My cabin was named Yellowbill for the Yellowbill Stork that was in a painting on my wall. The cabin was very pretty and Liam and Gracie were very amused by the rock hyraxes that played in the areas in front of the cabins.

A man from the hotel took us on a nature walk and some saw dik diks that quickly ran for cover. I found a couple of pieces of volcanic glass and took a photo of a neat beetle. The guide demonstrated for Mike how he climbs down the face of the very steep cliff to the lake below, but it was tough to even watch him start the descent.

We had chicken, tilapia, or spaghetti for lunch and ice cream for dessert. I talked a lot with Mike, and we found that all of us share liberal views and were a very compatible group! After lunch we went back to our cabins to rest until the first safari drive at 4.

The drive took us down by the lake where we saw lots of zebra, waterbucks, Thompson's gazelles, crested cranes, silver backed jackals, and a few dikdiks. Gracie and Liam made up songs about the animals as we drove back to our lodge.

Dinner was pepper steaks and good conversation with nice people. Back in my cabin, I wrote to Dick and showered. When I got under the sheets, I was happily surprised to find a hot water bottle stashed there!

### **December 10, Friday**

After breakfast we left for Masai Mara, a long four hour drive but with nice valley scenery and farm animals in and around the road. We passed through busy cities with many people selling wares (such as tree tomatoes, potatoes and onions) lining the road everywhere. John and I got money at an ATM where you went in a locked cubby with an armed guard outside. We stopped at a gift shop where I got wooden teaspoons and a malachite lion. But as we drove along and I saw gas station price signs, I slowly began to realize that I had been charged ten times as much as I thought I was paying. The man who glommed on to me, had given prices in two digits, then tacked on another zero at

the end when I was paying. He also didn't take my purchases to the cashier, so he had no idea what the real amount should be! When we got to the Lodge, I explained to Francis and Ndoko and they called the gift stop and arranged for me to return the items and get my purchase cancelled when we drove back out.

We drove through the Masai Mara to our lodge- the Mara Leisure Lodge. We had to walk over a wooden bridge with people washing clothes and swimming in the river below. Masai people also brought their herds down to the water for the day and you could hear the mooing from your tent. The rooms are half tents with a normal tiled looking bathroom at the back. Mine is J1 for Jambo. I got my clothes organized into dirty, tomorrow's clothes and travel clothes for the trip back.

We had very good Nile Perch for lunch (and dinner if we chose) and the kids got a quick swim in the pool, alongside the resident monkeys. Our game drive was at 4. We saw zebras (which weren't exciting the kids as much by now), topi (with blue jeans and yellow socks as Francis told us), humping lions and a cheetah eating its kill, elephants, a hippo, jackals, warthogs, and wildebeests. The skyline was covered with grazing animals. The countryside was very dry, but there were some areas animals could congregate in and find food for grazing. At 6:30 we were back at the lodge and had dinner with Rocky. I wrote to Dick and showered back at the tent. The two lodges had solar water heaters and, while it took a good time for the hot water to arrive, you could get a very nice shower. Christy was worried that the covid tests weren't going to be timed right for our flight home which was leaving at 1 AM technically the next day from what you'd expect, but Francis said the lab had all our flight info and would time the results accordingly. We went to bed listening to the many and varied animal noises outside our tents.

### **December 11, Saturday**

I woke early for a change and went to breakfast before our second safari. Francis had us get out of the vehicle to get a photo with a herd of giraffes in the background. It was a very welcome stop! We saw a lot of the animals we had already seen, then we drove to a stream where there were crocodiles sunning on the rock ledge and lots of hippos in the water around them. We got out and had a good long time to watch them all. But while we were watching a curious tribe of baboons kept getting closer and closer. Francis told us that that was because people picnicked there frequently and the baboons were hoping for handouts. The pair of lions we saw were as "frisky" as the ones from yesterday.

My safe had been closed and locked, so a man came and fixed it for me. And the staff didn't have an extra key for the padlock used to lock the three zipper tabs together, so I left the tent open for them to do their work.

Back at the lodge we had a more interesting lunch than usual when a monkey came into the dining room and stole food from Rocky's plate. After lunch we waited a long time for the covid tester to come and do all our tests. In the meantime we visited the gift shop and I told the kids they could buy gifts and I'd pay for them. Gracie got a necklace and Liam got earrings for Christy and beaded coasters for the family. I got a T-shirt for myself and some wooden animal spoons for Chris.

Once our covid tests were on their way back to Nairobi, we left for the afternoon safari. We saw some of the animals that by now were becoming commonplace, though the kids still enjoyed singing their songs about each one. We saw a large herd of Cape buffalo and of elephants. Francis tried hard to find us a leopard, driving close to lots of small outcroppings of bushes, but we had no luck. So we saw six of the Big Seven- good enough for us!

At dinner Rocky sat with us and it was a good time with good conversation. I wrote to Dick from the main lodge, showered, packed to leave, and went to bed. There were still plenty of noises including what Francis told us was a bush baby, sounding much like a crying human baby.

December 12, Saturday

I was awake early and got my suitcases out to be picked up by the staff. Breakfast was British bacon and pancakes, a big breakfast for me! It was sad crossing the wooden bridge for the last time. We rode for about two hours and saw topi, Thompson's gazelles, wildebeests, baboons and zebras.

We stopped at the gift store that overcharged me and got it refunded. Then we drove on to another modern shopping center where we ate lunch with Rocky. A troop of acrobats were performing and, after they came around to us and Liam and Gracie got their photos taken with them. We visited the Karen Blixen house and had a tour with a guide named Kepha, but too young to be the guide we had years ago. Karen had tried to introduce tobacco farming to Kenya but the climate and soil were unsuited. The local people loved her and she felt the same about them.

The big stop was the Giraffe Center where Liam and Gracie loved feeding the Rothschild's giraffes, putting a food pellet on their long tongues. Christy got some great videos. We spent quite a while there, with the babies being the favorites. The center breeds this endangered species and sends the young ones back out into the wilds when they're old enough to fend for themselves.

Back at the Movenpick Hotel, we were given three rooms to relax in before meeting Francis at 9 for our ride to the airport. I showered, wrote to Dick and saw the many videos Christy had already posted on Facebook. Our covid test results were scheduled to come in between 5 & 6 and Christy had them printed out in the hotel business center. They all came in negative.

We ate a small dinner at the hotel restaurant. Francus was there at 9 and we checked out and headed for the airport. We saw zebras by the road again.

At the airport we went through 3 different security checks- one at the gate we were leaving from. Unfortunately we had ordered smoothies from a restaurant upstairs when they called our flight over two hours ahead of time. John waited and brought them down, but then they wouldn't let us bring them through to the waiting room. We had to throw them away and everyone was a bit disgruntled as we set up for our long wait.

December 13, Monday

There were lots of crying babies on our 1AM 8.5 hour flight to London. I think I slept some. The transfer at Heathrow was easy, but entailed a long bus ride to change terminals. I felt more awake in the sunlight as we went. Watching Crazy, Stupid Love and The Greatest Showman kept me amused. At Logan we caught our bus after about a half hour wait. Dick was at the station and got hugs from Gracie and Christy. Liam was asleep after sleeping through the bus ride. I was in bed by 7!!