

# Visit to High Altitude Training Centre, Iten, Kenya

Martin Grey

## Why did I go?

I have held Kenyan middle on long distance runners in high esteem since I was young watching their athletes compete at the Olympics and Commonwealth games, such early day icons as Kip Keino and Mike Boit.

When I found I could run those distances in my early teenage years I wondered how they and other athletes could run so fast and learnt a bit from documentaries kindling a thought that I might want to know more and perhaps visit where they trained. However, this was the other side of the world and would be very expensive.

Many years later I was following Matt Rees, The Welsh Runner, on Strava and found he posted VLOGS on YouTube. One such VLOG covered his sponsored visit to the HATC. It looked fantastic and he got to meet elite athletes. However, it still felt a little remote to me and potentially very expensive. However, within the VLOG was a link which I tentatively clicked on to find out more. To my surprise and delight I found that these events are held around 4 times a year for 2 weeks, were open to runners of all abilities and as well as providing an opportunity to train like elites gave a broader experience of Kenyan living and was relatively affordable (£1200 for 2 weeks accommodation, food, training, coaching, travel to tracks and opportunity to meet and talk to elites. Flights were extra but return flights could be as little as £650 return including the internal flight from Nairobi to Eldoret).

After a conversation with Carol the visit was now a reality. I applied on-line through the link from Matt Rees [HATC – High Altitude Training Centre \(hatc-iten.com\)](https://www.hatc-iten.com) in August 2022 and paid a refundable £100 deposit. I also opted at that time to do the Lake Nakuru Safari at an additional cost of £150.

## Getting there

Having applied on-line I was sent a message with a detailed information pack about what was required which was simple. First, to be able to make the best on the opportunity it was suggested that those attending should have done some preparatory training. Second to allow enough time to be processed to apply for a Visa. Third what clothing and equipment was suggested to take. Finally and not least a request to consider taking clothing and equipment to help the local schools and runners.

I waited to apply for the Visa until I have confirmation that I had a place at the beginning of January which was approved in 2 weeks, The confirmation I received included a link and information to make the application and an invoice for the remaining cost noting this was now only 8 weeks from actually going.

Originally, I had intended to travel to Heathrow by train then fly out to Nairobi. However, the uncertainty about train timetables meant that I flew from Newcastle to Heathrow which turned out to be the best option.

Information from the “Running Trips” team help with organising flights to Kenya and then on to Eldoret. Other than the UK internal flights. One piece of advice from me is to book flights from Newcastle to Nairobi which removes the stress of having to pick up bags and sprint across Heathrow to recheck and go through security. That was a little stressful on outbound and return flights.

I found out that people on the same Centre booking as I had all chosen different options and the international flights do not connect well with the internal Eldoret flights. Some chose flights late into Nairobi and slept in the airport, others stayed over at a local hotel (my choice) and others travelled as part of a longer Kenyan visit.

My trip was an early flight from Newcastle to Heathrow, then on the Nairobi followed by a longish wait before flying to Eldoret. As it happened most of the people in my group were all in the same boat at Nairobi. I met Max Drubba a German working and living in Amsterdam in Nairobi airport, and we had a good crack before flying out.

As promised, we were met by “The Kenya Experience” staff at the Eldoret airport who did an attendance check and then showed us to the minibuses where we packed our luggage into one and then squeezed into another 2 to make the 40-to-50-minute trip to the centre in Iten.

I was surprised as we motored along to see farmland as far as the eye could see and village after village with mostly shops lining the main road with red dust tracks leading off into the countryside and people everywhere. No jungle or forest in sight.

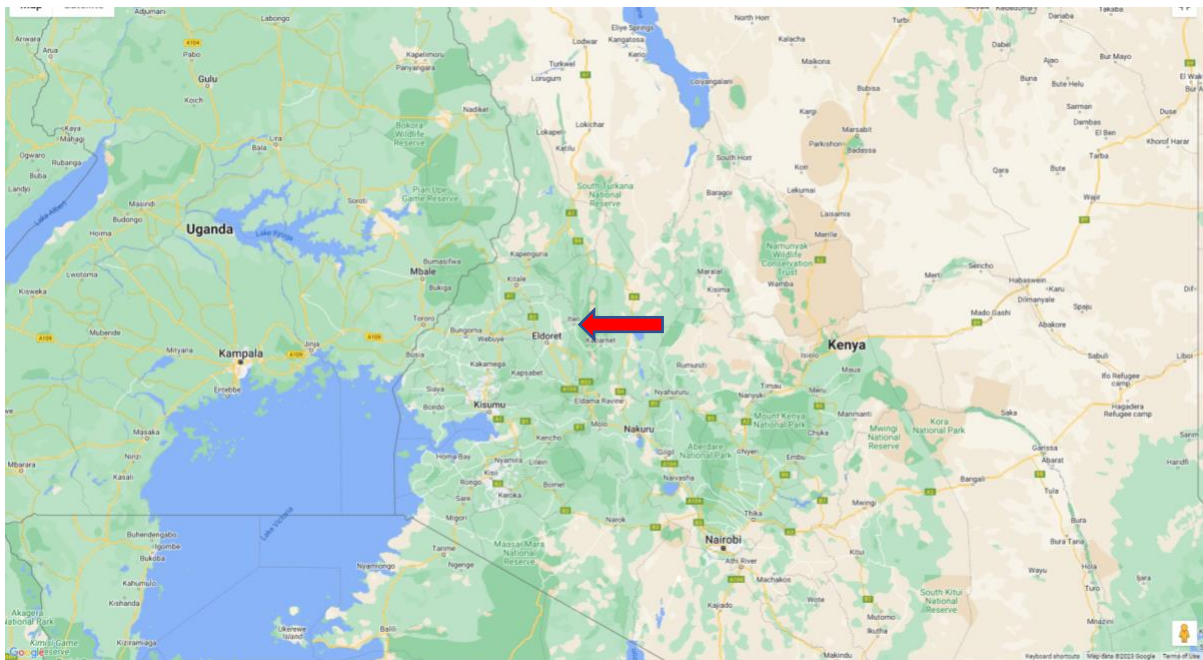
### What and where is the Training Centre?

The High-Altitude Training Centre was founded in 1999 by Lornah Kiplagat. Lornah Kiplagat is 4 times World Champion. She has held World records over 5 K, 10 Mile, 20 K and Half Marathon and competed for the Netherlands in the Athens (2004), Beijing (2008), and London (2012) Olympics. She also won the World Championships Cross Country in Mombasa in 2007 and competed in the 2003 World Championships track. More can be found out on this link [About HATC – HATC \(hatc-iten.com\)](http://hatc-iten.com).



The HATC is in a town called Iten know as “The Home of Champions. It is located towards the western border of Kenya with Uganda and looks over the Great Rift Valley.

Running Dominates the town both in terms of what you see which includes, new and used running equipment shops and various training camps, and the people you meet, both locals and those who have travelled from the 4 corners of the world.



### What happened when we arrived?

The bus I was in on the journey to Iten was full of energy with us all chatting the whole way. It was somewhat of a surprise then when the bus pulled off the road down a narrow track and then I was excited when in 100 metres or so we came across some gates with signs indicating we had arrived.

None of us had any preconceptions about what the centre would be like despite the information and photographs on the website, but we delighted to come across what seemed like the gates we could see a pill looked like an administration accommodation block, wooden structure (which library) and down a slight we were to find out was a suite and sauna. The gym is core exercise sessions. This was



an oasis. As we pulled through box with a security guard, what swimming pool, large glassed turned out to be a lounge and slope a modern building which well-equipped gym, exercise where we later took part in the all surrounded by trees.



As we were bundle out of the buses, we were welcomed by the lead Willy Songok and his wider team, allocated our

shared rooms, and asked to attend the welcome meeting.

As we made our way to the allocated rooms, we saw an expanse of lawned area, further accommodation and what was to be one of our most favourite places the restaurant/ eating facility.

At the welcome meeting we had the opportunity of introducing ourselves and goals for the visit. Willy gave us all a shirt (no choice in size which was a laugh) and an itinerary for the 2 weeks. He also

explained that some of the things we were used to at home would not be the same e.g., Wi-Fi explaining that they are not problems just different experiences. We were also told that the itinerary was not mandatory and if anyone had problems with what was planned that it could be varied to make sure everyone got the best experience they could. It was explained that we might initially struggle with sleeping, for some walking and most when running at altitude. We were also advised that we would be accompanied on our runs by pacers whose role was to run with us and make sure we were OK and seeking help if required not to make us go faster than we might be comfortable with. We were given an information pack introducing the team, the training programme, HATC, Iten and area which was very helpful throughout the 2 weeks. We were also advised to have at hand a notebook for the coaching sessions. As it happened everyone had planned to diarise their experiences and spent some time every day collecting their thoughts on what they had seen and learned which turned out to be quite therapeutic.

The advice we were given was that it was imperative that we rested and ate well between the training sessions and suggested we sleep whenever we could. I managed to sleep only once during the day on the first full day at the centre whilst most slept at least once during the day to recover from the physical effort.

### What was the training like?

Runs were scheduled for every day at 6:30 am except the middle Sunday which is a rest day for all Kenyans (including elite runners) to allow them to attend church and be with their families some of whom live many miles from Iten.

The first week is designed to allow adaption to the altitude with a focus on “easier shorter” runs. The general theme throughout was to test the body and allow recovery. Each run was sandwiched with warm up runs or dynamic exercises and stretching. The post run stretches after the first few runs were led by the lead Coach Richard. Who also made sure we stretched after every run but left us to do our own thing. Some of the stretching was as challenging as the running and was designed to be part of the overall fitness regime to help with coordination as well as muscle conditioning.

We went to the local dirt having done a 40-to-70-metre strides having run trail. All abilities found this



running track on the second full day, minute easy run on day 1, to do 100m there easily returning the on the same tough.

The following day we did a progressive run. As we learned, progressive does not necessarily mean a run where you go faster as it progresses especially when on undulating routes, we experienced around Iten. It's about raising the effort level and hence heart rate.

Day 3 we really came face to face with the real Kenyan training when we joined about 200 local and visiting athletes to do a 10k Fartlek session on undulating trails. We jogged there and back. These runs helped the altitude adaption but were at a slower pace that we would do at sea level. To see the faster runners, disappear into the distance was both awe inspiring and a measure of the huge difference in capability. Throughout the week pacers were allocated to us according to the mixed abilities. It seemed that they had already done a session and in speaking to them this was true and they were planning another in the afternoon after some food and a sleep.



We go to know the pacers quite well with their friendly welcoming attitude. What did become clear is that whilst these people were pacers to earn some money, they were in fact superb runners and at various stages in their careers. Some were hoping to become professional runners whilst others had already travelled the world or were now reliant on pacing and other supporting activities such as sports massage to help supplement their family income. What became evident though was that these happy people have very little in term of possessions, access to modern facilities or money. Most have been reasonably well educated and can managed their lives (unlike some of the locals) but are at risk of losing what they have if they become ill or injured. Their clothes are old and either well-worn or worn out.

We were also introduced to running drills designed to help improve co-ordination, running efficiency and add to strength. These are designed predominantly help prepare your body for an intense training session or a race as well as good running form within a training session. We did the drills twice over the 2 weeks once at the centre and once at the Edna Kiplagat Stadium which was available for our use for free for staying at the Centre.



That week I covered about 70km; others who were doing different training covered up to 90km for those preparing for marathons to 30km for those who had not run much.

Some of the more advanced runners seemed to adapt within 3 days, for others 5 days seemed to be the norm. For myself whilst I felt quite good after 5 days, I found the undulating runs to be a challenge throughout the visit and as a result was always running a lot

slower than at home. Several of those who were not routinely training to compete in races continued to adapt throughout the 2 weeks.

The second week we followed the same schedule as the locals. The volume and intensity increased.

Monday was double run day with an easy 40-70 minutes in the morning and 15 minutes of continuous hill sprints sandwiched by 2km easy running late afternoon.

Tuesday was another highlight when we were taken by bus to the Kipchoge Stadium in Eldoret. This is not named after Eliud Kipchoge but Kipchoge (Kip) Keino. We entered a building site gate to be faced with a partially refurbished stadium and car park full of busses and cars and more coming through the gates after us. Those of you who commented on the Ben Felton (Ben is running) YouTube coverage may have seen the video. It appears to be a funding dispute between local and national politicians has affected completion. When we rounded the corner into the stadium the track emerged, and an amazing sight came into view. What seemed like several hundred people in the throes of warming up, cooling down, preparing to run, or pounding their way at great pace around the synthetic track. Several the more informed members of our group noticed elite athletes from Kenya, South America, and other countries already well into their training regimes. We were all hoping the Eliud Kipchoge had decided to train that day but were mildly disappointed he was not there that day.



We made our way into the centre of the track trying to avoid the runners and took some time to marvel at what we were seeing and trying to capture pictures and videos.

Coach Richard gathered us around and announced it was our turn having a choice of doing 10 times 1 km or 10 times 400m

with 200 metre or 100 metre recovery jogs. We were advised to use lane 3 which we were happy to do as we did not want to get in the way of the speedsters. Like most of the group I was not quite sure if I was ready to do the full session and so set off to see how things went. It was clear to me that after 2 reps I would struggle to do the full 10 1km repeats at altitude and consigned myself to doing 6. At this time, I was joined by one of the pacers, Emmanuel who accompanied me on most of my runs.

Although we were only scheduled to do one core session with the Running Trips team, we were also invited to consider joining the elite core sessions which are held Monday Wednesday and Friday but warned that attending additional cores sessions could lead to overtraining. As it happened everyone wanted to attempt at least one elite session and opted out of others. Several elite runners attended, and I posted pictures on Facebook of some of the ladies on international women's day. Even the sessions for our group were tough lasting from 45 to 60 minutes, very few people could do all the exercises throughout the session having to take short breaks. Each session was led by a coach and was regimented. Technique and completion were paramount with each exercise being demonstrated by the coach beforehand.

As was usual the day after a tough session we were invited to rest or do an easy run. Most elected to run. Those who were training for marathons not only ran at the scheduled time but also ran for longer and added another easy run in later in the day.

The fourth week 2 run took us to one of the local roads running venues. We were promised Moiben Road but were taken to another parallel road as it was decided the traffic on Moiben made it too dangerous that day. The idea was to run at race pace over several potential distances from 10km to 25km of choice for everyone to choose. There was an even split with one third choosing 25km, one third 20km and the remainder 10km. As it happened despite the split most ended up running on their own as our race paces were so different. Everyone agreed this was one of the toughest runs they had ever done. Despite the advice we received that the route was flat it was at best undulating with some slopes continuing for up to 1km or more. This was the peak of our planned training runs with the remaining runs being easy. Max who I have met in Nairobi Airport wanted to run 100km for the week which he had not done before so finished the week running a bit further than planned on the final day before we left the centre.

In summary the training gave us an insight into what professionals do and allowed us to experience it at our own level. The training remained challenging throughout the 2 weeks taking place over a range of different terrains, training types and paces. This was by design, as Willy and Richard kept reminding us, “no pain no gain”. They also qualified this by telling us to listen to our bodies and not pushing to hard such that we became injured.

## Coaching

Each week we had several classroom coaching sessions arranged where could learn from coaches and some of the runners.

Our first session led by Willy introduced us to Kenya, Iten, the history of Kenya and the 43 tribes. This was by way of pointing towards and discussing why Kenyans seem to produce such good middle to long distance runners. In Willy’s view this is contributed to be several factors; genetics, physiology, cultural, social, geographical (altitude) and economic pointing out that the unique combination of these within the Kalenjin tribe has brought many World, Olympic, Commonwealth and East African champions. For example, and we heard this several times from different people, he had to run 8km barefoot to and from school each day until he inherited a shoe from his bother. He suggested that their training is not unique. Kenya’s middle to long distance running communities who want to be elites gravitate to the area around Iten with Eldoret being called the Town of Champions, Iten the Home of Champions and as we heard later in our experience from Brother Colm O’Connor St Patricks High School, in Iten, is the Kitchen of Champions.



We heard from Collins Kibet who was an international 800m runner and Emmanuel Kipruto who has competed abroad both of whom talked about the economic benefits to themselves and family from being successful runners providing their main motivation to achieve success through being signed by sports equipment companies. Winners share their spoils with immediate and wider family on returning home which acts as a

further motivation to family to do the same. They talked about being aware they there are people

who try to exploit them. Collins talked about his sisters, Sylvia and Hilda marathon success being a catalyst for others. His advice was to be simple and humble

Emmanuel talked about his heritage adding to Willy's point about genetics who was a messenger for colonial powers running to stations as far apart as 140km in 4 days. He also as Collins did talk about his running success at School and later being on TV running from 400m to 10km and the fact that David Rudisha (current world record holder) beat him at the 800m nationals. Both also talked about the ruthlessness of the system where if you are 3<sup>rd</sup> no one wants to know and how important education is to allow alternative income sources to be sought.

Both Collins and Emmanuel have college degrees Collins from gaining a scholarship in Texas and Emmanuel in Kenya.

Our second session was led by Coach Richard Mukche and ex marathon runner and part of the Turkish national team coaching. He was very clear on what he believed to be the recipe for success:

- Coordination – This built from pretraining and drills to build strength and flexibility that enable athletes to run efficiently. In any block of training this is what is done first with limited easy running to help prevent injury when subjecting the body to the forces impacted on the body when running.
- Rhythm – Is built from running easily allowing the development of more efficient running styles. Both Richard and Willy said that due to what the children must do to get back and forward to school everyday this builds a natural efficient way of running which leads on to the third factor Mileage.
- Mileage – You must teach your body to be able to sustain running over extended periods of time to build the muscular and neurological pathways through running many miles (according to what distance you want to race at) most of which (80% although it was noted that Eliud Kipchoge's easy runs could be 85% to 90% of his running volume) should be easy, at conversational pace. Most Kenyan's do not have the technology we have so "run to feel". When starting a training block, he advised easy running only in combination with strength and mobility. Once a fitness base has been established should other running be introduced to build speed and endurance.
- Speed (and endurance) – Richard advised no more than 20% of running volume should be at speed whether that be Tempo (around your Half Marathon (HM) pace), Intervals (1km to HM pace depending on the duration of time or distance), Fartlek, progression runs or hills. Each training block will use each of these options depending on the races being trained for and the experiences from previous races that identify weakness. It was observed that when emerging runners attend the various social training events that happen every week they try to keep up with the faster runners and in the first few weeks and months do not last long but eventually find they become faster and faster. However, this could lead to injury and would not be recommended.
- Rest, recovery, easy runs, sleep, and nutrition - These are fundamental to being able to train consistently and hence reach the heights the elites achieve. These components contribute to allow the body to adapt to the training and muscular and neurological pathways to be built hence helping to make a better athlete. Rest means rest and not running easy, we observed that the Kenyan athletes in particular do rest, they do not rush around and spend a lot of time either talking, reading, thinking etc. Running easy must be easy, you must be able to hold a full conversation. Sleep is the main part of the regimes that helps the body repair and rest properly along with eating the right foods. Those who are training intensely could be

sleeping twice during a day. Food for us was very simple but tasty with fresh ingredients every day. No processed foods at all we made available at the centre. All the fruit and vegetables were picked fresh and served that day. Local favourites are Ugali corn maize patties which all westerners found too bland but contain a lot of the required healthy carbohydrates and minerals. Many of us chose to supplement with fresh fruit and vegetables from nearby market stalls which were very cheap despite the quantities being provided being plentiful it allowed some variation from what a pretty standard menu was.

Richard's final piece of advice was in relation to a question about how many weeks to focus on achieving a Personal best time. He suggested that it should be around 7 weeks, assuming initial preparations as described above had been done, but advised it appropriate to get specific advice from a coach.

David Marus is a successful coach working across the world with a range of athletes. He invited us all to meet in a room we all want to visit. This caused some uncomfortable feelings and some wild guesses when we could not work out what he was talking about until he revealed it was the room for improvement. No matter what stage we are at there is always room for improvement even if it is a second that should be celebrated as if it were a new record. He was of course introducing the first factors in his advice about running better and they are:

- Mindset – he believes that most of the improvement comes from having the right mindset he described as being passionate about and celebrating every improvement and generally having a positive attitude.
- Mileage – Finding the right mix of long endurance runs, recovery, easy aerobic, speedwork including long speed especially important for longer distances e.g., 4X5km with 1 km easy.
- Food – Eating the right food, fresh food and vegetables avoiding food you are not used to especially when preparing for a race. Plenty of lean protein e.g., lentils, beans and carbs from Ugali and Chapati. Natural sources of energy including honey and banana. Other good foods he advised include Yoghurt and Millet for Calcium. Foods high in Iron being important for women when they have their period. When asked what type of food he explained that small pieces of liver are part of the programme but when pressed also confirmed vegetarian foods such as spinach, kale and cabbage are good but large quantities may be needed to help.
- Build up your training – initially work on balance and strength, practice running straight and the right posture. Increase mileage and intensity gradually
- Use the right equipment. Find the gear and shoes that fit and feel comfortable they will serve you well.
- Train and run as a team. If one succeeds you all succeed.
- Recovery – sleep with no disturbances and rest properly.
- Do speed work – alternate the sessions and use distances relevant to your race. When doing long intervals take longer recoveries, short faster session followed by shorter recovery/rest.
- Learn to manage pain through the speedwork and core exercises focussing on the ultimate goal of improvement through be disciplined.

- Map your improvement over training and races.

Although not a coach Abel Kirui was our star guest one afternoon and offered good advice from his 20-year top class career. Twice world marathon champion, silver medallist at the 2012 London Olympics with a long list of achievements representing Kenya. Whilst he now owns and runs a school, he still trains hard with his last competitive marathon at Barcelona finishing 8th in 2:07:25 in 2022. Abel was equally convinced about inherited capability recounting his great-grandfather's stories about chasing antelope. Also, about how his tough childhood and belief that God had given him a talent helped him. Notwithstanding the commitment to train and train hard.



His training regimes were identical to those we had already heard about. When I asked him what not to do, after some thought he said he would not travel, especially long haul using the example of being on a flight for 8 to 10 hours. In his experience this predominantly affected his back which took some time to recover even with exercises and stretching.

### What did we eat?

Our diet was identical to that of the athletes. Fresh vegetables and fruit and twice a week we got meat, either beef or chicken as part of the main course and soup.

A typical breakfast could be a combination of the following: porridge, pancakes, bananas (available every day), omelette, a sort of rectangular doughnut, bread, honey, jam, peanut butter, mango juice, water and a choice of Kenyan tea (the best tea I and a lot of others at the camp have ever tasted) or instant coffee. On occasion we supplemented with avocado, and mango bought at local stall.

Lunch and dinner were very similar comprising combinations of one type of soup (vegetable, beef, or chicken) rice (plain or with vegetables), pasta with vegetables, salad, different vegetable each day with lentils and beans being a staple, watermelon, Ugali (Kenyans consumed several in one sitting). Whilst these were simply prepared that were tasty with plenty of onion and garlic use in the cooking. The same hot drinks were available as was water.

Twice a day snacks were made available between meals to give much needed energy. Options included bread, those doughnuts, honey, jam and peanut butter and the usual hot drinks and water.

For me this food was sufficient, but a number of people craved sugary or fatty foods and hence succumbed to eating on occasion at the local restaurant which provided a very nice plate of different foods for around £3 to £6. The coffee was great as was the African Guinness.

### Accommodation

We all shared a bedroom that had its own bathroom. The bed had a mosquito net, some in various state of disrepair. Although there were very few Compared to what we are used to the functional in that it was somewhere to sleep



The lounge and library were a good place to when not enjoying the warm sunshine, pool or place for Wi-Fi which was still patchy.

The dining room was functional. Each table was provided with a range of spices. There was also a small fridge and a cubby hole for each room to store food. The staff were

reports of insect bites. accommodation was basic but and clean up.

congregate and catch up gym. It was also the best

provided with a range of

very friendly and accommodating preparing any additional food stuff brought in and when vegetarian options were limited cooking an additional option for those who did not eat meat.

## Trips

We went on 2 walking tours, one through the town of Iten and one to a local waterfall which was dried up. Both were guided pointing out areas of interest. Both allowed us to look out over the great rift valley which is as deep as the Grand Canyon and certainly wider. Apparently, there is a race from the top to bottom covering the full marathon distance.

We visited the home of Sylvia Kibet and met her family including her sister Hilda. Both are accomplished marathon runners. They had similar experiences of training and describing how they dealt with postpartum. They had similar training strategies as they preferred and responded opposed to trying to use someone else's strength work build back in



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We were also taken by bus to the Gathimba Edwards Foundation charity who talked to us about how they help local people and took us to a newly build collection of 6 houses which are slightly bigger than an ISO freight container and build of wood. There is a main living area with 2 or 3 bedrooms and an outside area with cooking area and somewhere to store materials of for some a workshop to earn money. Each has a small garden. The houses are built by volunteers comprising locals and some who have travelled especially from other countries and each, including the solar panels cost around £6,000 to build. There is not running water although a well was being dug. Otherwise fresh water has to be carried in down a long bumpy track.



We were

invited to plant a mango tree in the common ground. I, as the oldest and Kai from Texas, the youngest were chosen to plant the tree which I got emotional about and felt was a great honour. The tree had come from the garden on one of the volunteers who showed us around.



I had already contacted the foundation before leaving for Kenya. As a result of my experience, I returned to their office in Iten and offered to sponsor a child's education. This was accepted and I now pay £35 a month which covers their education, uniform, and food whilst at school

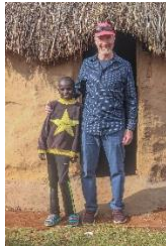
which will take a huge financial burden off the family as well as making sure the child gets at least one good meal a day.

A trip to Kenya is not complete unless you go on safari. The trip took us to Lake Nakuru where we saw many animals including Baboon, Monkey, Hippo, Black Rhino, Giraffe, Zebra to name a few.

Sadly, as it is dry season, we did not see any Lion. It was a great experience enjoyed by all.



On my last day home. This is a palm leaf roof two with a small cooking as they sound. At night they the bed to



I managed to arrange a visit to the child we chose's round mud hut about 12 feet in diameter with with a small flap to open when cooking. It is split in curtain with a bed one side and 2 armchairs and area. The bed and armchairs and not comfortable. During the day all their clothing is piled on the bed. used the 2 cushions from the armchairs as well as sleep on for all 5 of the family members. A shower was pointed out outside the hut which comprised on 3 side bamboo canes and a bucket. The whole family work the fields and were called in when we arrived.

## People

All the people we met were very friendly and spoke English, some better than others. As foreigners we were known affectionately as Mzungas being greeted as we passed with "jambo rafiki", hello friend.

All of us felt comfortable to walk around on our own. There were no warnings from our hosts about being careful as I have experienced on previous trips.

Our pacers were fantastic, some inviting us to their homes. All were basic with no modern amenities such as running water, main electricity etc.

Their need was, in our eyes, so great that several our group bought a range of items to help from running shoes, school uniforms, a mattress, food and in one family's case a couple of bikes for the children.

We also all contributed some substantial amounts (in Kenyans terms) in tips.

## Summary

This trip was so much more than I could have imagined. I, we, made friendships that will last. We have a WhatsApp group where we all correspond, mostly about running.

Running at altitude in Kenya is something I will treasure forever.

I have seen the reality of a hard life which has affected me immensely.

I plan to return to help and experience more.