

“KALACHA” - *Timeless oasis...*

The sight of three men pushing wheelbarrows, emerging from a stand of desert palms, was slightly incongruous. We had just flown two hours north from the foothills of Mount Kenya, crossing the ochre wilderness of the Kai-sut desert, and then skimming across the white and rust crazy-paving of the Chalbi and somehow, I wasn't quite prepared for wheelbarrows.

Evidently, Rick – our pilot – was.

“Ah – here we go! Here's Abdub and the team. *Jambo! Habari ya Kalacha?*” Abdub and his followers put down their barrows and stepped forward with welcoming smiles. Kalacha – apparently – was ‘*sawa-sawa*’... as it would take roughly three minutes for me to discover.

The contents of the aeroplane were swiftly transferred to the wheelbarrows and trundled towards the beckoning lights of the camp. By now, dusk was closing in, and as we left the plane parked among a grove of doum palms rattling their leaves in the breeze, the sun's last glow sank below the horizon.

Reflections of hurricane lamps hanging inside, danced in dark pools in front of the main building. As we passed by, the plops of a couple of frogs into the water sent orange and black circles rippling across its surface. An indignant chorus of hoarse croaks followed us inside.

The ‘mess’ at Kalacha is a structure that is part dining room, part veranda and part plunge pool. Thatched with local palm roof matting, it opens onto the interlinked ponds that are an extension of the small Kalacha oasis. Into the room from one side, curves a small and enticingly blue pool of water – fresh water, I later learned, that is emptied regularly and refilled from the spring. Scattered on all the chairs and sofas are a colourful profusion of Jane Roberts' cushions decorated with bright camel prints.

In the kitchen, I met the lady who does the cooking at Kalacha. A tall and graceful Gabbra woman, Chukuliza is the most willing of people and seemed delighted at the prospect of looking after us for two days. I explained the contents of the coolboxes to her, the majority of which seemed to be liquid – well, it *was* a desert we'd come to, after all – before returning to find the others had flopped into the piles of cushions.

We discussed our plan for the following morning over dinner. An arrangement had been made with the local Mission to hire their landcruiser for an ‘excursion’. It was to be an early start...

The night was full of the chimes of the frogs and the clattering leaves of the doum palms overhead, as the gentle desert breeze whispered through the camp. The tent-like rooms are also made from palm matting and stay pleasantly cool, despite the heat outside, even at midday. Behind each room is a stone bathroom with loo and shower, fed by water that is the same temperature as your blood, pumped straight from the spring by generator, whenever you need it.

...The lusty roar of a diesel engine announced our vehicle's arrival the next morning. What followed was a bone-shuddering drive over a road hewn out of lava-rock, towards a lone hill some 40 minutes away. We passed herds of camels, goats and even cattle, being shepherded towards water. To begin with, they were moving towards Kalacha. But after a time, we noticed the herds were heading in the same direction we were driving.

To gaze about at the harsh landscape with scant evidence of any vegetation, you wonder how anybody can live in such an inhospitable environment. Water, where it occurs, may be several days' walk from an area suitable for grazing livestock. The Gabbra people who live here are a hardy race. Only their adaptation to a nomadic way of life ensures their survival.

When, with great relief, we eventually stopped at the side of the hill under a stunted acacia tree, we could see herds of livestock advancing on us from all directions – white flecks sparkling against the roasted brown landscape. Leaving the car, we followed Abdub, up to the rim of a crater-like fissure which splits the hill in two, encrusted with rocky overhangs and cliffs, with a glistening pool of murky green water lying at its base.

All around its shores were dozens of people and hundreds of animals. Small boys tending their fathers' goats; women filling water containers to load onto the backs of donkeys; men repairing the wall of a mud-built trough and filling it for camels to drink from. Dogs, panting happily in the damp shade. A group of elders sat under a twisted tree, talking animatedly to each other, their staffs laid at their sides. A cacophony of sounds – shouts, bleats, songs, brays, giggles, barks – rose around us, amplified by the acoustics of the natural amphitheatre.

I felt like a time-traveller. As though somehow, the bumpy journey had jolted me right out of the 21st Century and into another era – a time of shepherds and wise men and kings.

We sat on the crater-rim, and watched the spectacle below us. The young boys stared back at us with undisguised fascination. Some of the women modestly pulled their filmy shawls around their heads as they fetched water in large plastic '*debes*', while others smiled shyly and waved. Donkeys trying to get down to the water's edge to drink were beaten back onto the rocks to wait, while avalanches of goats tumbled shoulder-deep into the water to drink.

We had been warned not to take photographs of the people, and in a way, I was glad for the restriction. It meant we just sat and watched and absorbed every detail of the scene before us. I can't remember the last time I spent three hours just sitting and watching people, but four of us did that day...

The sun was overhead when we finally tore ourselves away. But, before leaving, we went to look at some wonderful examples of rock art along a ridge of the hill. There were clear engravings of loping giraffes, oryx with scimitar horns and knobbly-kneed ostrich. Apparently, the drawings are estimated to be between 500-3,000 years old. I couldn't help but wonder how different the scene we'd just witnessed at the water's edge below us would have been all those years ago?

On our drive back, we stopped off at the village. Amid a cluster of traditional Gabbra huts that spread out on either side of the road, we drew up alongside the Kalacha Catholic Church.

From the outside, the church is a small, unimposing building, with a neat shady courtyard in front. But step inside and you'll want to rub your eyes in disbelief. Lining each wall of the interior are vibrant frescos from Ethiopia – painted in the fabulous style of the Coptic churches. Every scene from the Bible seems to be depicted there – look for, and you will find, Joseph being given his special coat by Jacob; Moses carrying the tablets of the Ten Commandments; Noah sailing away on an ark loaded to the gunnels with animals – in the brightest colours imaginable. The caretaker allowed us to take photographs and we left a token of our appreciation in the collection box.

We spent the rest of our time either on the veranda or in the pool, watching the comings and goings around us. The camp was developed as a result of the combined initiative of four parties – the Kalacha community; John Sutton, who regularly visited the area on safari; Brian Heath who at the time was working with Farm Africa; and Jamie Roberts of Tropic Air, who organised the construction of the camp, and now manages Kalacha reservations. Like the Samburu and Masai group ranches further south, the area had appeal for tourists and – close to the spring – a perfect location to build a small camp.

The spring that feeds the oasis is a natural artesian well, with a constant subterranean pressure pumping water to the surface. About five years ago, an enterprising NGO built a long narrow trough leading from the well across the desert to a shady area a few hundred metres away. Now, not only do the local residents grow chillies, tobacco and pawpaw trees in small *shambas*, but livestock can come and drink along the length of the trough, rather than having to crowd into one small area. So all day long, relays of camels and goats and donkeys wander to and fro to drink.

Although there isn't much in the way of wildlife at Kalacha, there was one species we had come to see, and we saved it till our last morning. After our coffee, we went and crouched among the fan-shaped leaves of a clump of doum palms near the spring.

Sitting ever so still, we waited until we first saw and then heard small flocks of sandgrouse high in the sky above, flying towards us. Wheeling in over the palms – golden bellies catching the sun and black wings outspread – they fluttered down to the shore, rapidly sipping at the water, sometimes dipping their heads right under the surface. Males waddled a step or two deeper, fluffing their chest feathers to trap water for their chicks. In seconds, each flock would rise again, as one, in a flurry of water droplets, to whirl away on the wind, their chuckling calls following behind... Humbling to think that these valiant little birds fly miles across the desert each day to a tiny puddle of water to drink and fetch water for their young. Indeed, they really were the only evidence of warm-blooded wildlife that we saw.

But worth every second of the short time we had to watch them.

Book through Tropic Air on telephone: 062 32890/32891 or fax: 062 32787.
Write to Tropic Air Ltd, P O Box 161, NANYUKI or email: tropic@africaonline.co.ke

2004 Accommodation Rates –

Locals and Guides (self catering only):	1,200/- pp per day.
Children between 5 and 12 years:	600/- pp per day.
Non-Residents (self catering):	\$110.00 pp per day.
Non-Residents with food and drinks:	\$165.00 pp per day.

Getting there –

Contact Tropic Air for charter advice and rates.

By road, allow a minimum of 2 days, travelling via Marsabit (rainy season) or Maralal (dry season)

There is a camp pick-up available for short drives, but longer excursions should be done in clients' own vehicle or perhaps by arrangement with the Mission if it is possible.