

## Heart of a Lion, Pole Pole

It was a dull, droning noise that woke me. It kept whining back and forth, not loud, but penetrating and, to me, portentous.

I knew what it meant and groaned slightly. My husband, Roger, reached over and put his arms around me, saying, “It’s OK to be slow, darling, but try not to be last.”

It was so dark! On the equator, it is very dark until it is light, and at 5:00 A.M., it was still pitch black. How can that guy up there see where he is going? Stumbling out of bed and getting tangled yet again in the mosquito netting, I went out on the deck to look.

A faint, pale light was just behind the mountains; the African plain in the foreground was fading from black to purple. I could just make out the single-engine plane as it passed overhead again, dipping and swooping low, like a crop-duster. Only this pilot was buzzing animals off the track, animals like elephants, rhinos, and lions. Off the track I was going to run on. Oh, great.

“Just don’t be last,” I kept muttering to myself. I remember laughing so hard the first time I heard that joke about the two guys facing a lion and one said he was going to run for it, and the other said don’t be stupid, you can’t outrun a lion, and the first guy said, I don’t



have to outrun the lion, I only have to outrun *you!* Right, very funny, now the joke’s on me, ha ha.

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How did I get here, in a beautiful outpost on the Lewa Wild-

life Conservancy in Kenya, to run the Safaricom Half-Marathon? Did it start as a teenager when I read *The Snows of Kilimanjaro* or *Out of Africa*? For sure it manifested itself when through broadcasting I got to know Kenyan Ibrahim Hussein, the first African to win the Boston Marathon. Definitely, Kenya later became an essential place to visit when I became friends with the women runners of Kenya who were emerging from this African nation that was producing such great running talent, notably Tegla Loroupe, Catherine Ndereba, and Lornah Kiplagat, three women who became legends in their own time because of running.

There is no doubt: Kenya is a Mecca to our generation of runners, but Africa is not an easy trip for the uninitiated. Our “sometime” visit became “now” when very longtime friends Bruce and Sue Tulloh, who are the race directors for the Safaricom Marathon and Half-Marathon, shamed us into making the effort.

The Tullohs are legends in their own right. Bruce won the 5,000 meters in the 1962 European Championships and later became famous in 1969 when he set a record for running across the USA in 65 days. But it was Sue's intrepidity that struck me as near mythical: She drove the support vehicle on that incredible journey, which was just a tiny Austin sports car with their 7-year old son alongside. Sixty-five days in a two-seater with a 7-year-old? Cooking and sleeping in a tiny trailer with no shower? You've gotta be kidding me.

Wait! That's not all. Back in England after this trip, Bruce and Sue had twins. So now they've got three kids under age 4, two of them infants. And that is when they decided to go live in

Kenya. Bruce would teach, and Sue could raise the kids with some affordable help. All the assistance in the world is not going to make malaria, unsafe water, and all those spiders go away, but Bruce, Sue, and the kids thrived on it. Now they lead an elegant life in the English countryside and go to Kenya once a year to direct this race without so much as a blink of the eye. So you see why I, who am rarely intimidated, was *very* intimidated; I'm talking to crazy people! No, that's not fair. *Exceptional* people. Resilient, intrepid, maybe a little crazy.

It's one thing to visit Kenya and totally another to run a race there, but no runner could go to Kenya and miss an opportunity like this. In the 12



Anthony Maiba

▲ After interviewing her for years, it was a thrill to actually run in the same race with Olympic silver medalist and world champion Catherine Ndereba for the first time, and in *her* country.

years it has been staged, the Safaricom Marathon has become the best race in Kenya and world famous. That's because it is well organized (not easy in Kenya) and unique. Sponsors fly their corporate teams in from all over the world, and travel companies such as Marathon Tours & Travel feature it as an annual fixture.

The event is distinctive because it is held at the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy, 140 miles north of Nairobi, and on only one day a year—race day—are 1,000 people (the race limit) allowed to run. Tusk Trust organizes the race; it is an English-based charitable organization that shares a common goal with Lewa to use wildlife conservation as a catalyst to alleviate poverty, reduce

conflict, and improve education in rural areas. In this race, the money raised has enabled Lewa already to save the white rhino from extinction and protect other endangered species. Perhaps most important, funds are used to educate and train local people in the values of conservation and environmentalism and to give them jobs and pride to work in the field. Creating a better livelihood for people is, for instance, the only real way to combat illegal poaching and its related problems.

Safaricom (a perfect name for a sponsor of a race over safari land) is the mobile-phone company in Kenya, a success story of unprecedented scope: cellular technology has allowed a country that missed the Industrial Revolution



Thom Gilligan, Marathon Tours & Travel

▲ With Mt. Kenya in the background, the air clear and dry, and having just passed a Kenyan runner, I allowed my fears to fade into the joy of running at last in KENYA!

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▲ Now *this* is an awards ceremony! Tribesmen in full regalia—feathers, shields, spears, body paint—lined up for stage performances of native dances that made the age-group awards uncommonly interesting.

to jump into modern times with cellular communications. Virtually everyone in Kenya has a cell phone; even the Maasai herdsmen keep contact with home base and each other with their “handys.”

Distance runners, the original environmentalists, relate to every aspect of this race.

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“I’m spooked by two things,” I said to Bruce over lunch on our first day in Nairobi. “Mosquitoes and altitude.”

“Well, that’s a good combination,” he replied. “Because when you are at altitude like we are, it is cold and malaria mosquitoes don’t live well here. So you don’t really need to take the antimalarial tablets until you go to sea

level. But use insect repellent and your mosquito nets for sure.”

“OK, but I’m worried about running at altitude. I can hardly breathe in Denver at 5,000 feet, and I’m going to be running here at 5,600!”

“Short but often,” was Bruce’s answer. “Run three times a day, but only 10 to 15 minutes at a time. Increase the time like that until the race, and you’ll be fine.” I had to believe him; Bruce may be crazy, but he’s got 30 years of experience at this.

“By the way, what’s Swahili for ‘slowly’? I’ll be using that word a lot.”

“Pole pole,” he smiled. (Note: “Pole” is pronounced “Poh´-lee.”)

We hitched a ride on the Marathon Tours bus to Lewa, overnighting at some of the great tourist stops. It was on this bus ride that I met a ton of crazy—and exceptional—people. It wasn't just Bruce and Sue. These people were so nonchalant about it all; it was just a great adventure to them. Most were going to run the full marathon, and plenty were going on a few days later to climb Mount Kilimanjaro. Now, *that's* altitude. I felt like a wimp, but they inspired me.

They also inspired me with their generosity. Knowing how the young Kenyans desperately needed running gear, I decided I would live for three weeks out of my carry-on bag and fill

a huge duffel with the masses of shirts, jackets, backpacks, and assorted race swag for my checked bag. Then I would give it all away, including the duffel, and travel light. Many of the travelers did the same thing, for when we began unloading, huge suitcases of stuff were piled high on tables. One woman brought 11 pairs of running shoes, and I swear they all looked brand new. Because enough gear is brought to open a store and because there is a lot of graft in Kenya, the race organization has very wisely set up an equitable distribution system for these items.

But there was one hilarious incident with this. The 18-year-old nonrunning son traveling with his running parents



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▲ Did it, by golly, and I'm not the only one proud of finishing. Here young Kenyan girls, in colorful skirts and their race T-shirts, proudly wear their finishers' medals from the 5K kids' run. Handsome Maasai tribesmen in red cloaks marshaled the finish area.

was also inspired by these crazy people and impulsively decided he would run the half-marathon, too. (Yeah, right.) He went to the enormous pile of shoes to find something in his size. He ran. He finished. We were all impressed (ah, youth!), especially his parents, who could never get him off the sofa before. And he dutifully returned the shoes.

The night before the race, we all gathered in the center of the camp to get last-minute race instructions. Hundreds of big tents with national flags and sponsor insignia were pitched in a giant square; I was impressed to see that the back of the British Army team tent was stacked floor to ceiling with cases of beer. *I definitely have been taking myself too seriously*, I thought.

Suddenly, someone was calling my name and rushing over to me. Good heavens, it was twice-Olympic-silver-medalist Catherine Ndereba and her husband, Anthony Maina.

“Omigod, I can’t believe it is *you*,” she squealed. “What on earth are you doing here?”

*I think I’ve joined a band of nutcases*, I thought of saying. Instead I answered, “I know it’s strange, but I’m going to, uh, run the race. Pole pole, of course.”

Handys and cameras appeared, hugs went all around, and then it was my turn.

“Omigod, it’s Paul Tergat, I can’t believe it’s *you!*” I squealed. Really, Ndereba *and* Tergat? Maybe the race is over and I died and went to heaven. I had interviewed these former marathon

world record holders many times. But run in the same race? Breathed the same air? Never.

That night in bed, I whispered to Roger, maybe we’ll hear the lion roar in the night, you know, like Hemingway and all those guys write about.

\* \* \*

“Just don’t be last,” I muttered into the shower. I figured a shower with lavender soap and perfume would make me smell absolutely repulsive to an animal. Hell, if it keeps the deer away in our garden, maybe it will discourage a lion.

It was cold outside; it felt almost frosty, but as soon as the sun was out, it would be blazing hot. With a race start at 7, it would be hot by 8 and very hot by 9. Thank God I’m not running the marathon.

I put on a favorite red monogrammed sweatshirt of my mother’s that we had given to her one Christmas; I cherish a joyous photo of her in it from that happy family holiday. I didn’t have the heart to give the shirt away after she died, but every time I saw it hanging in my closet, it made me sad. Giving it away to someone who really needed it would please Mom, and so today was the day.

There were thousands of people in the start and finish area—modest local people, watching everything with big eyes. They must have walked all night to get here at this hour. They were strangely silent, even the children. The only people whooping it up were the runners, and it was great to see Tergat and Ndereba relaxed and laughing with everyone.

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The first horn blew for the 5K kids' race—and boy, did they fly. Then it was our turn. I pulled off the sweat-shirt and turned to see a weary but not defeated-looking 40ish woman watching me. Perfect. I handed her the shirt with a smile, and we were off on the adventure.

It was cumbersome running for those who had mostly trained on roads because the course was a four-wheel-drive track that had two wheel ruts that were quite deep with dust and sand, and on the sides and in the middle of the track was very prickly scrub brush. Starting very slowly, as I did, meant it was difficult to find passing room. But this was just for a few miles, and then even us slowpokes began to space out. And look up. And see the most glorious landscape of rolling beige and cream-colored African savannah with the occasional giraffe or elephant in the distance. Above the low-hanging dust clouds we kicked up around us, the air was so unpolluted and clear that Mount Kenya, 50 miles away, dominated the far skyline. “Just don't be last” faded into “*I am running in Kenya!*”

The aid stations were marvelous. With their tents and canopies, they reminded me of those rugged English desert outposts we see in the movies, only with cheering sections. There was plenty of bottled water—a relief, as the sun was out and it was piercing. I dumped water all over me, which immediately turned me into a mud puddle. Perhaps most reassuring, there were portable toilets at the aid stations. I say reassuring, as a universal and oft-discussed worry here

was having to make a pit stop. Nobody dared step into the trackside scrub brush, with thorns, scorpions, snakes, and maybe a sleeping lion.

On the long, open stretches, the animal-buzz plane would occasionally swoop past, the whine now romantic, as I imagined the pilot being some kind of Denys Finch Hatton/Robert Redford character. Romance aside, what made this race appealing was also what made it risky; there really was no physical barrier between the animals and us. The pilot had a skillful and responsible job, and I admired him, too.

The course is two half-marathon loops, and it is not easy, as there is a steady 7K climb in the middle of each. “You get it back on the descent at the finish,” said Bruce encouragingly. Problem is, it's 7K of climbing at altitude versus a 2K drop that is very steep, rough, and rocky, and Bruce is a mountain goat in disguise. I was coming up the last steep rise around a curve in the track with my head down when I crashed softly into a beautiful, buxom race volunteer in a low-cut singlet who also had her head down while picking up paper cups. She must have been 6 feet tall, so you know just where my face landed. We both laughed, and as I ran on I thought, *Eat your heart out, Bruce; this would never happen at your nimble pace.*

Altitude is weird. I was OK in the race just by dialing back and running slower, but the last mile seemed endless, and I was suddenly extremely tired, as if I could barely pick up my feet. So what else is new? You feel like that near

the end of every race, right? This was different; I was running but felt like I just wasn't going anywhere.

When it came at last, the finish was wonderful. There was so much color and African music, and dust was even thicker than out on the course. I had never been so dirty or happy in my life. Catherine Ndereba and Paul Tergat finished an hour in front of me, but I was far from last. Handsome Maasai tribesmen in red cloaks marshaled the finish area, and other tribes in full regalia—feathers, shields, spears, body paint—lined up for stage performances of native dances. We sat on hay bales in the shade, watching the performances and telling war stories, like we always do. Only this was different—it was *Kenya*.

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As we were packing up the next morning, I said to Roger that my only disappointment on the trip was that we didn't hear the lions roar in the night. Then we went to the dining room for breakfast. There was quite a hubbub going on; the serving staff were whispering excitedly and gesticulating among themselves.

"What's up?" I asked Sue, who was calmly drinking her tea.

"Oh, in the night, the lions came and ripped up all the cushions on the pool furniture."

"The pool is right outside our bedroom window," I said, trying not to scream.

"Yes, dear," she answered.

## Tips for Running a Race in Kenya

Well in advance of your trip, go to a travel doctor who has been to Africa to get advice and the full cocktail of immunizations that you need. There are a lot of them. You may or may not have a reaction to the drugs, and for sure your arm will be sore. You want time after this to settle before you run a hard race.

This same doctor can also sell you an emergency kit of medications (for things like dysentery) and antibiotics that can be essential if you are far away from medical services, and almost everywhere is far in Kenya. Carry your own packaged, sterilized needle. Don't let anyone put a needle into you unless you are absolutely certain that it is sterile.

Despite what Bruce says, consider taking malaria tablets. There are cheap ones that often give people an adverse reaction and very expensive ones that don't (\$10 for a one-a-day tablet). I used insect repellent copiously and was scrupulous about my mosquito netting, but I took the tablets only

when I was at sea level. That was only nine days with three beforehand, so I took the expensive ones for a total of \$120, an affordable precaution.

Bring insect repellent. Ask the doctor about what kind; I got “serious” stuff from my travel doctor.

Buy travel insurance. If you are hurt, you will likely need a plane to fly you to Nairobi, and they won’t take you unless you can pay.

Train at home on trails and hills and in heat.

Don’t even *think* about renting and driving a car in Kenya. There are roadblocks set up all along the highways with armed police, or men posing as police. You don’t know who is legit and who is a bandit. This is where a tour group vehicle or authorized native driver is essential.

Save up your money and add a safari trip after the race. The small plane rides, the hotel, and the guides add up, but it is worth every penny. Note: It’s cheaper, easier, and more fun to do a package deal with a company that arranges all of this for you.



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▲ As you can tell by the somewhat terrified expressions on our faces, this image is not Photoshopped. My husband, Roger Robinson, and I took a post-race safari trip; it was heart-stoppingly wondrous and worth every penny.

The US dollar rules in Kenya. You will need more cash than you expected. Figure out how to carry it safely. Don't overbuy Kenyan schillings; you can't exchange them back in the USA. Hotels and many restaurants take credit cards, but it takes time as there is often no phone circuit for the cards and proprietors need to call in the card number on their handys. Don't check out of the hotel at the last minute because all this takes time.

Wear or carry on the plane everything you can't live without in Kenya. If your luggage is lost, you can't buy stuff there to replace it. Wear your running shoes and watch. If you think you are going to find Body Glide, Gatorade, or Speed laces, forget about it, so bring your own.

Drink only bottled water, and carry your own electrolyte-replacement product in powder packets. Bring extra, as at altitude and in arid conditions, you'll find it handy for day-to-day use.

Bring a camera, extra memory stick, charger, and adapter plug. Also, sunglasses, sunblock, a hat with a big brim, a hat to run in, a bandanna to tie over your nose and mouth to keep the dust out during the race, and breathable (cotton or very thin wool is best) tourist clothes. A jacket or heavy sweater is essential at night or for predawn safari trips. Also, always, a rain jacket with a hood. Bring something warm that you can wear on race morning and then toss.

Consider bringing individually packaged saline eye drops. I found the dust, sun, and dryness very irritating and was glad to have drops like Refresh to irrigate my eyes.

Clear out your drawers and closets of all that running stuff you don't wear; it will have a happy home in Kenya. Also bring pencils, pens, notepaper, crayons, and any books you can carry to give to schools. The country schools in particular have almost nothing.

Get a good guidebook—from a source like Lonely Planet—and read thoroughly about where you are going.

Bedtime reading: My number one choice is Isak Dinesen's *Out of Africa*. A nice trip is to visit Karen Blixson's house just outside of Nairobi; in fact, the suburb there is now called "Karen." Sure, rent the movie, too, but the book is the real item.

Google some of the bios on the great Kenyan runners. Be inspired.