

Kilimanjaro Diary October 2009

By Gavin McCormick

Wednesday 21st October

After a wee lie-in I got up & dressed in my Kili t-shirt, and closed up my 2 rucksacks, a small one for a day pack and a large one for an overnight bag. Bit worried about the weight of the large one – fine for the airlines, but maybe a bit heavy for the porters? Someone said they will only carry 15kg? Took a picture of me in my t-shirt with my 2 bags and posted it on facebook!!

Mum & Dad picked me up & dropped me down to the City Airport. Quite a few people were already there. I had already checked in the 'wee' team (Paul, Sonya and myself), so we went straight to bag drop. Nice flight to LHR, after which we went over to terminal 3 & checked in for our Virgin Atlantic flight to Nairobi. The girls enjoyed a bit of shopping, then we had a burger at TGI Fridays followed by a Starbucks ☺. Before long it was time to board – as we were boarding some guy went berserk shouting 'get me off this f***ing plane' at the top of his voice over and over again. Turns out he was a criminal being deported. After a few minutes he shut up and was quiet for the rest of the flight (he was restrained and had 2 large bouncers either side of him!).

Thursday 22nd October

Didn't sleep much on the flight (no surprise there then as I never do on planes). Decent dinner provided but 'breakfast' was poor (a mushroom wrap or something, should really have been quite nice but wasn't). After arriving in Nairobi we got our visas (down in price to \$25 yay!!!) and were required to fill in a questionnaire on swine flu, which no one ever looked at! Weather was pleasant, cloudy and 16°. Anyway we collected our bags and were met by our guides, led by Joe and Joseph. Said goodbye to the team going to the sanctuary and boarded the bus. What followed was a 6½ hour drive across African 'roads'! At least half of the journey was on gravel or unpaved roads, never been shaken up so much in my life!!! Crossed the border into Tanzania at Namanga, where we had to pay for a Tanzanian visa (up in price to \$50 – oh well, you win some, you lose some!). Had to stop twice – once to exit Kenya and once to enter Tanzania. There is a sort of 'no mans land' in between where apparently some dodgy dealing goes on! Stopped for a 'comfort break' in the middle of nowhere, but with a big mountain directly ahead. We all thought this was Kili & photographed it, but it now seems unlikely that it was Kili.



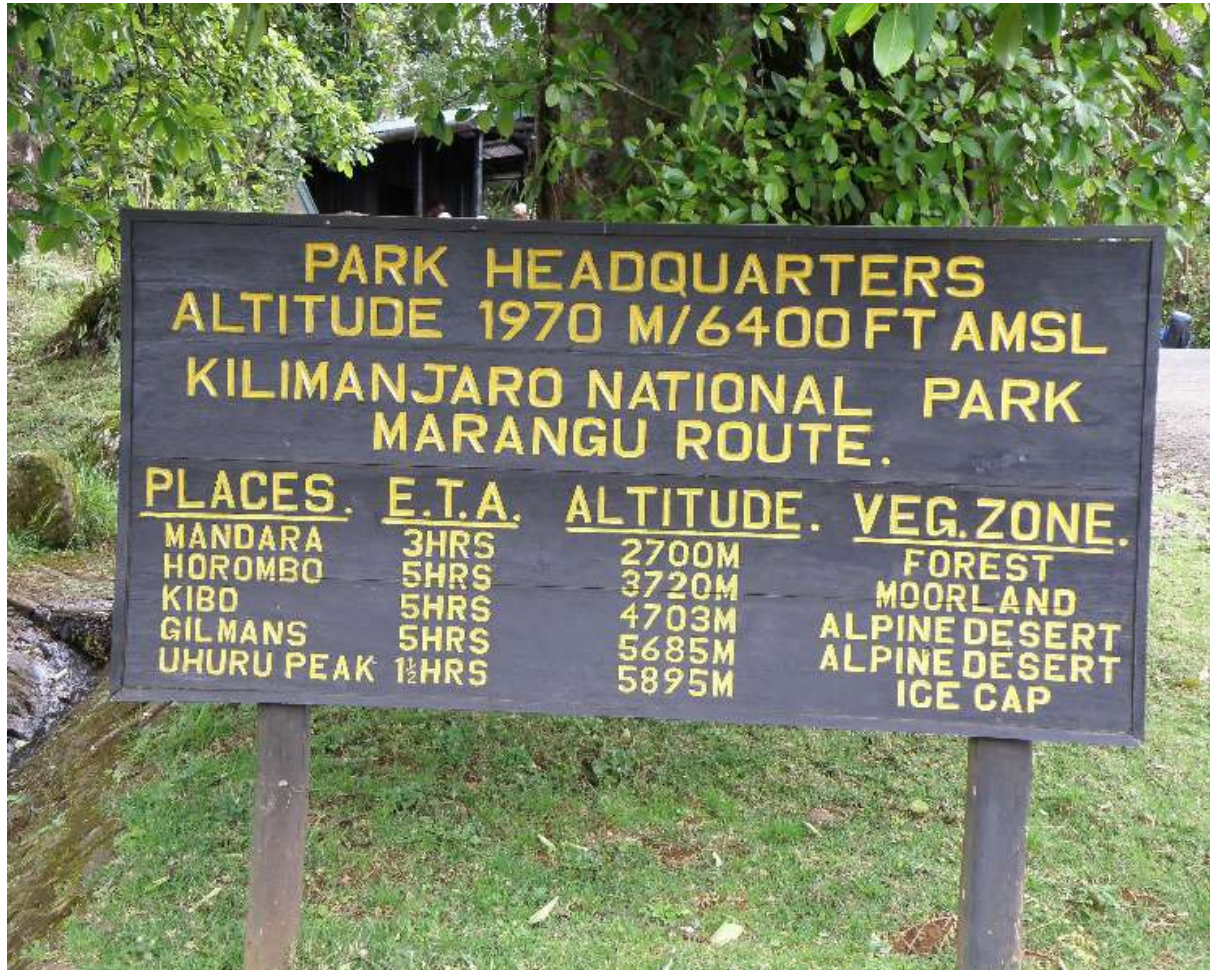
On arrival at the Tourist Centre Hotel in Arusha, we checked in (I shared a twin room with Pastor David). Then had a late lunch, followed by a wee sleep and dinner, after which Joe gave us a quick brief about the plans for the next day. Nothing we didn't already know – a good thing since we don't want any surprises at this stage!



Spent some time with Pastor David sorting out what could be removed from my rucksacks and left at the hotel. Had a quick shower & hit the sack.

Friday 23rd October

Slept like a log! Was wakened by the mosque across the road, but had to get up anyway. Nice breakfast, after which the guides got us all loaded onto the bus. Now I thought this was gonna be a quick run, but it took 2½-3 hours, going first to Moshi and then on to the Marangu Gate. Arriving at about 12.00, we signed in at reception.



Before you go anywhere you are met with a tirade of signposts, many giving dire warnings about what could happen if you are not properly fit & prepared for the climb!



After a group photo....



.....we started off up the first stage of the trail. It's an easy 3 hour hike for the first day, through the rain forest at the bottom of the mountain. The slope is fairly gentle, reaching the Mandara huts at 9000ft amsl (the Marangu Gate is at 6400ft amsl).



Half way we stopped for lunch – a packed lunch was provided, with bread, banana, egg, buns, and a sausage! All food provided was carefully planned to give us energy etc, and to replace fluids and salts lost through sweat.



We met a Canadian guy called Jim over lunch, turned out he would be sharing our accommodation throughout the expedition. He works in the Canadian Embassy in Nairobi but is likely to be going home to Canada before too long, so wanted to climb Kili before then. The weather today started nice, cloudy & cool, which was really good since I had envisaged us tramping through the rain forest in 30° heat and 100% humidity, with wet weather gear on! After lunch it was threatening rain, so I put my waterproof over-trousers on as a precaution. Turned out they weren't needed – the rain stayed off, which was a real bonus. Reached the Mandara Huts and entered the cloud layer at about 3.00 & signed in – a snack (popcorn) & coffee was provided at 4.00, followed by dinner at 6.30.



Dinner was excellent – gorgeous soup followed by some sort of rice dish. Had seconds! After dinner we got together in the girls' hut for a time of worship, Colin brought a few thoughts & Ernie led the singing. After which we all turned in for the night.



Saturday 24th October

Since I was taking diamox for altitude sickness, I wasn't surprised to experience a couple of its side effects: (i) tingly fingers/toes at times and (ii) needing to pee a lot! (it's a diuretic). Waking at 4am, I didn't fancy the lengthy walk to the outside toilet (especially with all sorts of weird noises coming from the trees!) so was naughty and did a sneaky one behind the hut. During which I happened to look up at the sky – WOW!!! The cloud had cleared and in the absence of any other light sources the sky was filled with a huge number of stars, all of which appeared far brighter than I had ever seen them before! I just stared in amazement for a few moments!! Anyway waking up next morning to glorious sunshine, bowls of water were left out for us to wash.



After this we had a cooked breakfast & prepared to move on (re-packing our rucksacks). Clair wasn't feeling so good but was able to continue. Paul also had some sort of bug, but was also able to continue. A guide took his day sack for the first hour or so (he was very reluctant to give it up though!). The trek today was about 5-6 hours, fairly quickly leaving the rain forest behind and entering the moorland vegetation zone.



Again this was a fairly undemanding walk up a reasonably gentle slope to the Horombo huts at 12400ft. Joe set the pace, which once again was 'pole pole' – "slowly slowly"! We stopped for a packed lunch at a conveniently placed picnic site – lunch was similar to yesterday but with chicken replacing the sausage. Again we reached our destination around mid afternoon and were provided with peanuts & tea/coffee, followed by dinner at 6.30.



Our enthusiasm was cut short however when one of the first sights at Horombo was of two 'casualties', presumably of altitude sickness, being stretchered down the mountain. On this route we

come down the same way as we go up, so maybe it shouldn't have been a surprise to see this. Anyway back to dinner - soup again was excellent!! The hut was a little bigger than at Mandara – slept 6 instead of 4, and had glass windows at the front. Sunset was spectacular, looking over the edge with the cloud layer now below us. After dinner we had a sing-song and went to bed.



Sunday 25th October

Well I didn't sleep especially well, two nocturnal visits to the 'wee' room, and somebody's snoring being a problem once I got back and tried to get back to sleep! But no use in complaining (even though I really wanted to sleep well on the mountain as I knew I would need the rest!). After a sunrise which was if anything even more spectacular than the previous night's sunset, and a decent breakfast, we packed up for our trek. Clair was now feeling better, and Paul was ok, I think! However it was Sonya's turn to experience a bit of a bug, and Colin took a touch of the cold later in the day. Now this was a day of acclimatisation to the increasingly high altitude. Something which I may have already been experiencing the effects of – walking quickly from the dining hut to our sleeping hut, I got a bit out of breath. With 7000ft still to go, how was I going to manage? It was becoming just a little scary! Anyway we walked up to about 13500ft, reaching more picnic tables.



After a quick break we made the return journey back to Horombo for a cooked lunch. Weather was warm & sunny, got a little sunburn on my ears! Joe was apparently quite pleased that we had all coped with the walk to this altitude without any problems. At 2.00 local time we had a breaking of bread service, coinciding with the Sunday morning meeting at Whitewell (11.00 UK time). After dinner we had an early night!

Monday 26th October

Well today was the beginning of the tough bit of the expedition. Thankfully I slept well through to 4.00, had a pee break and went back to bed, and getting a little bit more sleep before having to get up about 6.30. The weather wasn't so good – it was drizzling at dawn, but this had passed by the time we had finished breakfast. So we set off for the 5 hour trek to Kibo huts at 15520ft (Sonya was still feeling a little icky but I think this passed as we were walking). There were further light drizzly showers on the way, but nothing too serious. I had a day of loo visits!!! Peeing no less than 4 times on the 5 hour hike! Everyone coped well with the altitude until the last half hour or so before Kibo, whereupon most of us began to feel out of breath and mild headaches began.



Now it still wasn't especially cold in the sunshine, but as we approached Kibo some cloud moved in, and on arrival at Kibo the cloud produced not rain, but hail followed by sleet and wet snow, some of which lay on the roof of the hut and froze after dark.



The accommodation at Kibo is much more basic, and we all had to share the same large room. Bunk beds were provided, which we used after having a packed lunch.



I didn't sleep too well, perhaps due to the altitude, perhaps also due to the apprehension over the summit attempt which was coming later tonight. Anyway we were up for a cooked dinner at 7.00, whereafter we had some more shut-eye before being wakened at 11.00 to prepare for the summit. We had a final quick bowl of their wonderful soup before setting off!



Tuesday 27th October

It was midnight all in before we were ready to go. My waterproof rucksack cover was missing, and after much frustration I had to go without it. It was cold as we set off, but when walking I was ok with 4 layers – merino top, micro fleece, fleece & goretex jacket. On the bottom, merino leggings, walking trousers, and waterproof over-trousers. Two pairs of gloves, and a winter hat – cosy ☺. And my rucksack on my back, with little in it other than water and my emergency bivi bag and self-heating meal! For lighting we had head torches and glow sticks.



The pace was now even more 'pole pole' as we started the anticipated 6 hour climb up the crater. After 2 hours we stopped at a cave and were provided with hot tea! And I had one of Paul's many Mars bars! On the next leg there were a number of interruptions. First of all Mark decided he had had enough at 5000m (16500ft) – don't think this was anything to do with the altitude. It was a little upsetting to lose a team member since we had all hoped that everyone would make it to the top. Then Ernie complained about losing all feeling in his toe. After some attention, he was happy to continue, but I was temporarily worried that we were going to lose a second team member. The interruptions too were a concern for me – I started to get a little cold and worried that if there was too much delay before starting off again it might jeopardise my own chances of getting to the top. But I bit my tongue and said nothing, as I genuinely wanted the whole team, or as many as possible, to make it. About 30 minutes from the top of the crater, the sun began to rise and I looked back. OH. WOW. Behind me was pretty much the most spectacular view I had ever seen. In the distance was Mawenzi Peak with a covering of fresh snow; below this was a layer of cloud. Below this could clearly be seen the Kibo huts, and in the very foreground of the scene was the crater edge with fresh snow and the zig-zag path clearly visible. I SOOOOOO wanted to get my camera out and take a picture, but we were still moving and I remembered my primary objective of getting to the top. I planned to take the picture on getting to the top, but as it turned out the mist & cloud had rolled in by then ☹. As we neared the top Paul suddenly experienced something like hyperventilation – I told him to try to breathe long and slow, not sure if this helped but it did pass after a few minutes. Every

time this kinda thing happened I felt the pain that we may lose another team member and prayed hard that the person would be ok – in Paul's case he was. Literally 10ft from the peak at Gillman's Point (where one is officially deemed to have climbed the mountain), Lesley vomited. But moments later she was able to make it to Gillman's Point. As all of the remaining team members arrived at Gillman's Point the relief and emotion took over, tears were shed – I'm not normally like this, it just came on suddenly, the realisation that every penny spent, every Saturday training up the Mournes, was completely worth it just for that one moment at the top of the Kibo crater.



For a while we enjoyed the moment, we had finally made it, we had climbed Kili!!



After this each person had to make a decision as to whether to go on to Uhuru Peak, the 'true' summit and the highest point in Africa. This was 1½ hours walk further, with an additional climb of about 200 metres. Me & Sonya were feeling good so immediately decided we wanted to go (Uhuru was always our goal anyway). Paul also decided he wanted to go, and Colin & Pastor David went too. The rest of the team decided that Gillman's Point was enough and elected to go down. Now I don't know why, but I thought for some mad reason that Uhuru wouldn't really be 1½ hrs away, so I set off enthusiastically. After walking a short while, we caught sight of the Rehimann Glacier as the mist cleared. WOW again, here we were standing in the middle of Africa with snow falling and glaciers. It was truly amazing and yet another view I will never ever forget.



I had to change the batteries in my camera here which was a real struggle in the cold, snow, and with gloves on! Now every time we thought we were almost at Uhuru we saw another peak appearing out of the mist, another higher peak! Tiredness began to set in, even though I appeared to be setting the fastest pace of the group, incredible given that we were at 19000ft! Finally I began to feel a bit nauseous, which dented my confidence of reaching the Uhuru Peak. It didn't help that Sonya appeared at that same time, asking me to get nuts & raisins out of Colin's rucksack as she didn't think she could go on without food! I didn't know whether I should have some or not (couldn't decide which option was more likely to make me more sick!). Also I had no motivation for opening Colin's rucksack to get the food, all I wanted to was get to the peak so that we could go down! But I said nothing and got the food out for Sonya, not taking any myself. I was also aware that there was a long day still ahead descending to Kibo and THEN all the way to Horombo!! This made me seriously question whether I really wanted to go on. But then the guide told me that we were nearly there and that if it wasn't for the mist we would be able to see the sign. That was the motivation I needed. And literally 30 seconds' walk later I saw the sign at the Uhuru Peak appear through the mist. Soon all 5 of us (plus guides) were there, with photos duly taken, and more tears shed (roll eyes). Unfortunately snow got on my camera lens, so I didn't get the best photos at Uhuru, but Paul got some good'uns on his camera.



After a few minutes at Uhuru we began the trek back to Gillman's. The snow was getting worse, so we didn't hang about. Me & Sonya went ahead with one guide as we were faster, but part way along we lost him in the mist & snow. Worse still, the path ahead forked – which way to go??!! We couldn't see anyone behind either. For a few moments I envisaged us wrapped up in our emergency blankets and bivi bag, eating our emergency self-heating meals and hoping someone would rescue us!! But soon a figure appeared up ahead – it was the guide. I'm still not sure if he walked back or if

the mist just cleared, but either way he was a welcome sight. Kinda scary for a moment though! Anyway I was wrecked by the time I got back to Gillman's, and with a fairly brisk pace my heart was pounding in the thin air. I needed a rest. After a short rest we began the descent of the crater, radioing back to Kibo that we would be down in a couple of hours. About then I discovered another problem – my hydration pack was frozen solid. I noticed it begin to freeze on the way up, but took a sip at regular intervals to prevent the hose completely freezing. But now it was too late and I ended up having no water for the crater descent other than a couple of sips from someone's bottle, which itself was largely frozen. The descent was much quicker as we didn't stick to the zig-zag path, instead just ploughing down through the scree. After what seemed like ages we reached the cave where we had had tea on the way up. We were still above the freezing level and snow was still falling. I sat down on the first rock I could find and in what ended up as no more than a 5-minute break I fell asleep twice, being wakened with a start as I fell backwards! I was soooooo tired and very very hungry (the nausea started to go away as I descended, so I think that was due to altitude). I remember saying that I could make Kibo but almost certainly not Horombo today. As would become clear later, I surprised myself! Anyway off we went again, finally arriving at Kibo around 1pm where we were given pineapple juice – just what I needed as I was parched!! After a quick bite of lunch we were told that we had to go down to Horombo that night and sign in in order to get our certificates. Well must be a great master so after just an hour's sleep off we went. And surprisingly easy it was!! Now my coat and a few other bits were quite wet after a night on the snowy mountain, but they began to dry on the way, and I did find my waterproof rucksack cover.



Unfortunately before we reached the half way point of the 14km hike it began to rain again. And it became quite heavy. My coat was soaked through by the time we got to Horombo, other clothing was also a little wet including my socks (boots leaking slightly?) which I changed. All of the wet gear was hung up to dry which left the hut damp, cold and unpleasant – glad this hadn't happened on the

way up!!! Only 4 of us went to dinner that night, the others decided to go straight to sleep. After dinner, which for me included 4 bowls of soup (equalling Colin's record!), I hit the sack and went straight to sleep. Now we had stopped taking diamox just before the summit attempt, but I still needed a loo break in the middle of the night, which wasn't a pleasant experience as it was cold and drizzly outside. But this was still the best night's sleep I got on the mountain, by far.

Wednesday 28th October

We set off early for our last day on the mountain – a 20km hike all the way back down to the Marangu Gate where it all began. The weather was much better, mostly cloudy and cool. It was good to lose a layer or two, although I had to work around the stuff that was still wet or damp. The hike itself was quite pleasant, we saw a monkey properly for the first time when we stopped at Mandara.



But in the latter stages we thought Marangu was never coming! Finally we reached the end, celebrating with a group hug! And signed in at reception, after which the guides made us a cooked lunch. Just what I needed as I was starving!! There was a little awkwardness afterwards as the guides wanted their tip, but they were told they would get it at the hotel where there would also be a presentation of certificates.



After 2½ hrs' drive we got back to the hotel where there was another problem – they had no room for me! They wanted either for me to share a double room, or to put me up in the hotel next door, both of which we said were unacceptable. Eventually they moved someone else to the hotel next door and I got a double room to myself 😊. Dinner that night was a celebration of our achievement, with the full works – starter, steaks all round, desserts, and tea/coffee. After this we had a wee time of worship in one of the rooms, with Tim bringing a few thoughts. Finally I went back to the room, had a shower, and thought about what I would say the following night (as Pastor D had asked me to bring a few thoughts – eek!). It was about 2am before I hit the sack, but slept like a log.

Thursday 29th October

After breakfast we waited for our transport to Nairobi. And waited. And waited. Turned out the guides had absconded with the tip and wanted \$300 more to take us to Nairobi – a taste of some African corruption! Colin and Pastor D went down to the police station and returned an hour and a half later saying that it was all sorted out. And we ended up getting a much better coach with plenty of free seats for us to make ourselves comfortable. Anyway there followed a very bumpy 6½ hr bus ride which was the reverse of the journey taken exactly a week earlier.



We didn't get to leave Arusha until around 12.00, so arrived at the Silver Springs Hotel in Nairobi at nightfall. After checking in we had a very nice buffet dinner (nice hotel by the way). After this we had a time of worship and I brought my wee thoughts, which were centred around the achievements of the trip, how it had brought me significantly out of my personal comfort zone, and how I had needed complete faith in the Lord to achieve the goal that I had set many months before. Now I'm a sound man and certainly no speaker, but I think others identified with and appreciated the thoughts. After this we turned in for the night, was sharing a twin room with Ernie.

Friday 30th October

Another bus ride awaited – this time to the Metropolitan Sanctuary for Sick Children in Nyeri, 3 hours to the north. A less comfortable ride too, in a much smaller bus. But the roads were much better. And what an amazing experience arriving at the sanctuary – there were people everywhere.



Sadly the containers hadn't yet arrived so we couldn't distribute the stuff. We had a bite to eat at the sanctuary and then returned to the Greenhills hotel, where we had dinner and a time of worship and testimonies afterwards. The Kili team were asked to stand up and were presented with a cake! Nice to see Fiona again too!! After dinner Terri announced that the containers should be there in the morning 😊.

Saturday 31st October

Well we went down to the sanctuary but no containers had arrived. So the people were brought in in batches, and we had a time of praise & worship, with Terri and Pastor David McClure speaking. I ended up doing sound for Trevor's video as we did interviews with members of the Kili team and with Pastors Irwin Rea and David McClure. During this time some local kids came over to see what we were doing. They had really nothing but were still happy. One of them said I looked like Arnold Schwarzenegger – I can honestly say I've never been told that before, and almost certainly never will be again!! Anyway the revised estimate for the containers' arrival was late afternoon, but it gradually became clear that this was unlikely. At lunch time 6 of us went off to the Treetops (an odd little hotel where the Queen had stayed in 1952 when her father died and she became Queen). First we had a very nice lunch at the Outspan Hotel, then we were bussed 17km out to the Treetops. A strange place, not particularly attractive from the outside, but built around a natural watering hole for wild animals.



We had a 2½ hr jeep safari that afternoon, but the number of animals we saw was a little disappointing. We saw water buffalo, warthogs, hyenas, elephants, monkeys, and loads of birds.



Back at the Treetops we had a very nice dinner, after which we turned in. There is a switch in the room which if selected will provide an alarm if an animal comes to the watering hole, but despite it being left switched on, nothing happened all night (either that or we slept through it).

Sunday 1st November

We had been asked to be back in time for church (which began at 8.30!!). So we got the 7.00 bus back to Outspan and walked to Greenhills where we had breakfast. Sonya wasn't feeling well and ended up spending the whole day in bed ☹. Anyway the bus to take us to church was late and we ended up being late anyway!!! But what an experience! We went to Living Faith Nyeri, where the worship was awesome – they could teach us a thing or two!!



Pastor David Murray brought the word as a guest speaker. After church we went home and got changed, since the containers had arrived and we had to unload them. This started at the General Hospital, where the stuff was sorted – some to go to the hospital, some for the Outspan Hospital, and some for our sanctuary. There were maybe 40 people there, but it was still a full afternoon's work.



The smaller 20ft container was left at the church – we had to empty it, offload it, and re-load it!! But there was no crane to offload the container, so they tied it to a second container which had been sent out last year, and drove the lorry forward to drag the container off!!



During this effort the cables broke several times, and the tailgate of the lorry was badly damaged. As darkness fell I got a lift up to the sanctuary standing on the rear bumper of a pickup, something you could never get away with at home! But I forgot about the blasted speed bumps, so had to hang on for dear life! Uncomfortable, but fun!! Food in the hotel tonight was dreadful, but we had an early night in preparation for our early departure.

Monday 2nd November

Got up at 4.00, had a quick breakfast and departed at 5.00 or so. Over 4 hours on the bus to Nairobi Airport!! After which we checked in for our flight and did a bit of shopping. The flight itself was pleasant – since it was mostly a day flight I didn't sleep, but instead watched a couple of movies.



We arrived in London at around 7pm local time, and since this was too late to catch a connection to Belfast, we stayed over in the Sheraton Heathrow. The hotel provided a separate room for us with a very nice buffet dinner which was very welcome!

Tuesday 3rd November

A leisurely morning as I got up about 7.30, got washed & shaved and had breakfast about 9.00. We didn't leave the hotel until about 11.00 – at least some of us didn't (we were on a number of different flights to Belfast). Me, Sonya, Paul, Colin & Pastor D were on the 1.20 to Belfast City. On arrival my Mum & Dad met me and took me home, after which we had a wee look at some of my photos 😊.

