

Letters from Kenya

By Naomi Morse '99



Last fall Mary Sargent, our development information support coordinator, began sharing e-mail messages with a group of Putney's faculty and staff. The messages were transcriptions of letters sent by Naomi Morse '99 to her mom, Charlene, from Kenya. (Charlene and Mary are Marlboro, Vermont neighbors.) Naomi, an Oberlin College student at the time, was studying wildlife management in Kenya on a semester abroad program through the School for Field Studies (SFS) in Beverly, Massachusetts.

The letters started out simply interesting and, perhaps due to the lack of cable television up here, became the compelling topic of several lunchtimes per week. We couldn't wait to learn what came next. The letters provided not only a snapshot of daily living in a foreign place, but also a tour of the larger world through the eyes of a recent Putney graduate. As autumn's days grew shorter and the weather colder, the resounding openness and hopefulness of this young woman's experiences buoyed our spirits. We also enjoyed her sense of injustice, sympathy and respect—and probably harbor feelings of ownership for imparting some of that. We've edited the collection lightly, so you can enjoy it as we did.

September 9, 2002

My dear family,

I hope that you are all doing well in lovely Vermont. It seems so far away from here because everything is different—all the trees, birds, animals, people. Everything is amazing, though. And so exciting to learn about all of these exotic species.

Today was a really great day—we went out of our camp for the first time since arriving. It was really refreshing to see more of the people and animals, etc. This morning we

walked to a “boma” near our camp. A boma is a little settlement of Maasai people. They are sometimes just one extended family, but this one had four different family groups in it.

The boma is basically a circle enclosed by a “fence” of brush piles. In the center there is another enclosed circle where the cows stay at night. In between the two circles are the huts (made out of sticks and smeared with cow dung) where they all live. Maasai are herders and move around a lot so they don't build permanent structures. When we arrived, the women and small children (the only ones

there) brought us into the center circle and sang some welcoming songs for us. They all had really colorful clothes on and almost all had babies on their backs. The songs were amazing and really made me want to be able to learn songs from the people here. I'm not sure how many opportunities I will have, but I will try to learn as much as possible. It was definitely weird to all go together into one little boma. But in some ways I feel like they really liked having us there. And this is not the only contact SFS has with them. They were just all so friendly and welcoming. The people here are great.

In the afternoon we went on our first field exercise. We went to an animal sanctuary right next to the camp and saw 14 different species of mammals plus some birds. The most amazing thing was how many of everything there is. Tons and tons of zebra, lots of giraffe, wildebeest, little antelope and . . . elephants!! When I first saw them I felt like I had to pinch my mind into realizing that those were elephants in Africa in the wild. I don't think it has hit me even now. They are just such magnificent animals—I feel like I could watch them forever. On top of all of these animals, living and roaming and eating together, was Mt. Kilimanjaro smiling down on us. It is so amazing to have the mountain so close. The

past few mornings it has been one of the most beautiful things ever. Crystal clear and perfect light. An amazing way to start the day here.

I am also sending you a postcard which might get to you after this. It is very green in the picture, but that is not how it is here. Where we are is a very dry part of Kenya and most of the ground is brown and there is dust everywhere. I just don't want you to think that I am in a lush green landscape.

I love you all very very much and will try to write again soon.

Love, Naomi

September 16, 2002

Jambo!

I've been thinking about you all a lot tonight because it's Yom Kippur. I was MOD today, which stands for Mwanatunzi (Student) of the Day. Besides doing a few little chores during the day, the MOD leads RAP, which is a little meeting we have every night right after dinner. Oh, and have I told you that the food is really good? It is really delicious—a lot of fruit every day (watermelon, pineapple, honeydew, apples, oranges,

Left: The author in repose and looking happy despite a mild case of typhoid.

Below left: "Circle time," Kenya-style with two fellow students.

Below: Naomi's fiddle in the hands of an appreciative young music lover.



papaya) and really yummy other stuff. It is no problem at all eating vegetarian. Which is good because the only meat that they eat here is beef. We eat a lot of bean stuff and lots of veggies too.

Anyway, back to RAP. So since I happened to be MOD on the night of Yom Kippur, I decided to do my presentation on Yom Kippur. The presentations are usually about something in Kenya or having to do with our program. I didn't do much—just talked a little

about what Yom Kippur is and then I played a little bit of Kol Nodre for everyone. I couldn't remember most of it so I just played a little snippet. It was really nice to do a little something. Especially since I totally forgot about Rosh Hashonah. It

just was not on

my mind the first day when we got here after two whole days of travel. I actually didn't remember until I got your card a few days later. It was so nice to get that mail—thanks so much.

I really like having my fiddle here. It's like having an old friend with me. I realize that I know the instrument so well and, in such an unfamiliar place, it's very comforting to be able to play some fiddle. I also feel like it's such a big part of my life that I would be really sad if I couldn't share it with people.

By the way, I really wish that I brought my Birkenstock shoes. We have to wear closed-toe shoes every night and I kick myself for not bringing them. Oh well—too late to change that.

I also have not seen a mosquito once since I've been here. It's extremely dry right now so it makes sense that there are not any mosquitoes. They should pop out when the rains start, though. Although at that time, I'll probably

be up at Nairobi National Park where there aren't very many malaria-transmitting mosquitoes. That's good.

We went to Amboseli National Park today and counted animals. It was really exciting because there are a bunch of swamps in the park and that attracts tons of animals. There were hundreds and hundreds of wildebeest and zebra. We also saw lots of elephants, Thompson's gazelles and Grant's gazelles and giraffes and many more. Counting them was really fun at first but it got old fast. It's a little overwhelming when you look in binoculars and start counting a few wildebeest and then look beyond them and see hundreds and hundreds more. There was a lot of estimation going on. . . .

. . . Yesterday we went to Loitokitok market—it is right near the border with Tanzania. It was really fun although I hate being such a tourist. I also really want to have pictures of the market later, but I don't want to take pictures while I am there. I asked a few people if I could take their pictures and they all said no. It's just such a weird dynamic and so hard to figure out how to balance the two sides. Just by being white, I am such an outsider—I don't want to flounce my wealth around anymore than I have to. Anyway, I am sure that I will get some good pictures.

Please share this letter with anyone and everyone. I would love to be writing more letters but the time escapes me. I love you all so much and think about you often.

Love always and everywhere, Naomi

September 2002

To Erica—

The weather here has been pretty crazy lately. It hasn't been hot at all in the past few days. In fact, I've been wearing my wool sweater quite a bit. When the sun is out, it's very hot and strong, but it rained a few days ago and that cooled things off quite a bit. It's always windy quite a bit which is really really nice.



Maasai men playing a familiar board game.

So the weather is a little bit like fall but everything else is completely different. A lot of the trees around here lose their leaves in the dry season and look like they do during winter at home. Definitely no colorful trees here right now. The rainy season isn't supposed to start until the middle of October, but they think it might be longer this year. There are usually long rains from March–May, but they didn't really happen this year (it only rained for a week). Anyway, we'll just have to wait and see what happens.

Today is a non-program day, which means that there are no classes! We also got to sleep in a bit (breakfast at 8:00 instead of 7:30). This afternoon we are going to a gorge with a waterfall right on the Tanzania border. It should be fun.

LATER—There was no water in the gorge, but it was still a fun little trip. It was right on the slopes of Mt. Kilimanjaro so there was a lot more vegetation than there is here at the camp. And in the riverbed there was a bunch of dead leaves that really reminded me of fall. That was really nice.

To Joanna—

I got your letter yesterday. Thanks so much. It was really wonderful to hear from you. I'm sure that mom and dad told you that I called them on my birthday. I hadn't gotten mail for a while when I talked to them. And then when I came back to the chumba after talking to them, there was mail! Oh, the chumba is the main building here—we have lectures and eat and hang out there. And the library and computer room are attached. It's the only communal space so we spend a lot of time there. The buildings all have a concrete base and wood siding and thatched roofs. We live in bandas, four people each. My banda-mates are nice—all of the students are nice in fact. I'm not sure I'll have lasting relationships with anyone, but I am having a good time with people. This morning we went on a field exercise for environmental policy class.

We went to a swamp near here that has been choked up with agriculture. That's a real problem here because the swamps used to be shared by wildlife and livestock and people—but now with agriculture there is no way to share the resources. And all of the water is getting used up because there is too much agriculture in this area for the amount of water available. Most of the land around here is incredibly dry and there is no way that it could support farming—so the land around the swamps and rivers is getting cultivated away. It's all very complicated. And the government is incredibly corrupt here so any money that is made from wildlife is never seen by most people. It's just so hard to figure out answers when a lot of the problem is the government—and there isn't any way that we can change that. But I guess we just need to start small which is the whole reason we are here. It just often feels like the problems are so huge that we can't really make a difference. I just need to remember to stay positive.

A lot of people are sick right now. Nine people have typhoid (including me!), three people have malaria and there's one person each who has hookworms, intestinal worms, and amoebas. Most of us aren't very sick though—I never even felt sick—I just had mild diarrhea, and now that I'm taking medication I'm totally better. They are trying to figure out how we all got it since there's so many of us who are sick. We all have to take stool samples often, so there's lots of talk about poop. Yum. . . . Speaking of yummy, the food is really good here. A lot of beans and rice and potatoes and maize. They make a maize-meal mush-type thing called ugali which is really good. We also have fruit a lot—yum, yum, yum. Another really yummy food is chapati (a flat bread). There's an alternating student cook crew that makes breakfast every day and hired cooks that make lunch and dinner. The animals, birds and plants are really amazing here—and so different from home. About half the plants are different kinds of acacia trees/bushes. And they all have thorns—AAAH! There are so many neat

birds and there are Vervet monkeys that live right near our camp. They're pretty cute.

Nakupenda kama nyama chama! (I love you like roast meat—the highest form of praise in Swahili.)

September 28, 2002

Dear Mom and Dad,

I hope that you are both doing well. I am still having a great time. I am sure that Erica and/or Joanna told you that I got typhoid. I was never really very sick—only mild diarrhea about once a day and then, once I got on medication, I was totally better. I think that since I was vaccinated, the symptoms were suppressed a lot—which is good. A lot of people have gotten sick—we're all going to be experts at getting stool samples by the time we come home.

A few days ago, we went to a cultural manyatta, which is basically a boma that is set up near a national park for tourist purposes. When you arrive, a whole bunch of women and men come out and sing and dance a lot. They do a traditional wedding song/dance. After the "performance," one of them talked to us about Maasai culture and traditions. It was pretty weird because it was so geared towards tourists and some of the facts they told us are not true at all. It is definitely a performance and weird for us to see since we have been here for three weeks and seen a lot more of the culture than most tourists ever see. Even though it is partly a false representation of the culture, it is a good way to get some of the tourist money to the local people—which doesn't happen much since the government is so corrupt. After the manyatta, we went to a lodge at Amboseli National Park, had lunch and went swimming in their pool. A pretty gross scene—a lot of money everywhere and tons of green. They water all around the lodge, so it's a bit like a rainforest in the middle of a desert. I feel like I have more culture shock going to a place like that

than going to the town near our camp where all the stores are little shacks and there are goats running all over the street. In a few days, we are going on an expedition—to Tsavo National Park for about five days. We are going to be camping out with the lions! Pretty exciting! It is a pretty large national park so there will probably be a lot of animals there. I'm not exactly sure what we are going to do, but will tell you all about it when we get back.

Today is a non-program day—which means no classes. And we're not really doing anything else either. It's really nice to have a relaxing day.

Love always and everywhere, Naomi

October 2002

Dear Mom and Dad,

Isn't this card cool? It's made out of zebra poo! Sendin' you a little piece of Africa.

Tonight is the last night of expedition. Tsavo National Park is really great—much more natural than Amboseli. It is really big—Tsavo West (where we are) is ~8,000 km² and Tsavo East is ~13,000 km². Amboseli is really small and the vegetation has all been destroyed by elephants so it's mostly grassland. Since Tsavo is so big, the elephants aren't as concentrated and the vegetation is much thicker as a result. We actually haven't seen all that many animals—because there is lots of land and we can't see very far all the time because of the vegetation. But it's been really nice being here. We are staying in a campsite in the middle of the park—without a fence around it!! People heard some lions roaring a couple of nights ago, but I slept through it. Oh well.

We've gone hiking a few times here which has been nice. This area has really recent volcanic activity (~500 years ago) that result in the Chyulu Hills. They are more than hills though—they are about 3,000 meters tall at the tallest. The first full day that we were here,

we hiked up a lava cone, which is basically a big hill of little lava stones. It was a lot like snow to climb around on because it was not really solid at all.

I am back at camp but I will just continue where I left off. The last full day that we were in Tsavo we went to the Chyulu Hills and drove up a really, really steep and BUMPY road to about 2,400 meters and then hiked up to the top of one of the hills. I'm not sure how tall that one is. It was SSSOOOO beautiful up there. At times, the hills looked a lot like New England, but they usually didn't have enough trees on them. Since the hills were formed so recently, the soil is still very rocky and plants have a hard time growing. The weather up there was also very fall-like. Since we were so high up, there was a very cool breeze—a nice change from down in Tsavo which is pretty hot most of the time. . . .

I think that's all for now. I love you mucho mucho. Naomi

October 21, 2002

Dear Mom, Dad, Erica and Everyone,

Let me tell you about Mt. Kenya.

On our way to the mountain, we stopped at a supermarket in Nairobi to buy food for our trip. The Kilimanjaro Bush Camp (KBC) is in a really rural area and after being there for so long, it was major culture shock to be in a big city and go to this HUGE store with everything in it. However, it was also nice to get some food that isn't available in most places in Kenya (like a chocolate croissant!!) Anyway, we got our food and drove to the Transit Motel in Chogoria (about a three-hour drive). The drive was really amazing because there was an incredible change in vegetation—from fields of dry grass to a rainforest. The area around Mt. Kenya is REALLY beautiful and has lots of agriculture because there is a lot of rain. There are really steep hills with fields of tea on them all over the place—a beautiful sight.



On the reverse of a handmade postcard Naomi sent home to her family is the following message:

This original handcraft was made by a local Maasai group on the Kuku Group Ranch in SE Kenya. Please recognize that many in this group have never used things like scissors, glue or rulers before in their lives. While this may lead to occasional minor flaws, it also ensures that every card is unique.

The card is made of genuine zebra dung and recycled materials. Proceeds from your purchase remain in the Maasai community.

Nobody doesn't like juice. The author and a young friend.

So the first night we stayed at the motel and had a really good night's sleep so that we were ready to start our journey up the mountain the next morning. This journey started in a teal Land Rover—all our packs got tied on the top and we squeezed 13 people inside the car and our porters were hanging off the back because there was no more room inside. When we were all finally packed in the car, we thought that was an adventure in itself, but we had no idea what we were about to experience. The road that went up to the National Park gate was full of the biggest ruts I have ever seen—two feet deep literally! And sometimes we were basically going through a river. There were multiple times when we had to get out of the car because the road was too steep or the mud was too deep or we were about to tip over. It definitely felt like we were about to tip over many, many times—and the driver laughed during a lot of the drive! Quite an exciting adventure.

So, after four hours of that drive, we arrived at the Mt. Kenya National Park, had lunch and started going up. That day and the next we basically went up and up and up and up and up. It rained both afternoons and, as we kept going up, it got colder and colder. We started hiking at around 10,000 feet and our second campsite was at around 14,000 feet. The views during our hikes were absolutely gorgeous—there's basically lots of rolling and rocky hills that eventually become the summit.

Our second campsite was absolutely freezing. We all had on all the clothes we had brought and were still really cold as we made dinner in the rain and sleet. That night we were all in bed at about 6:00. The next morning we got up at 2:00 so we could get to the summit by sunrise. It wasn't raining anymore (luckily) but our tents were all frozen. The moon was almost full so we could see the silhouette of the mountain we were about to be on top of—both intimidating and exciting.

We went up pretty slowly—it was steep and we were at 14,000 feet and rising. The worst altitude sickness that I got was a headache and shortness of breath—I felt really lucky

because many people were nauseous and had really bad headaches.

As we started getting closer to the top, the sun started to come out and we could see how high we actually were. It was so amazing and beautiful—we were above a layer of clouds and it just felt SO high. For the last hour or so of the hike, it was really steep climbing, but the adrenaline was also kicking in at that point because of the excitement of getting to the top.

When we finally got to the top, it was the most amazing and powerful feeling I have ever had. I cannot describe what it was like in words—I never could have imagined what it would feel like to be so high up. It's amazing to be so high up and to actually have climbed all that way (as opposed to being in a plane). Going down from the summit was just as beautiful as going up (without the sunrise). That day we went all the way down the mountain—almost 18 miles! It was a REALLY long day and we were all exhausted by the time we got back to the hotel where we were able to take hot showers—a first since we've been in Kenya!

All in all, the trip was so so wonderful—and now I want to climb more high peaks. There might be a picture of me on the mountain on the SFS website in *News from the Field*—check it out!

We are now at the site near Nairobi National Park and getting back into the academic swing of things. It's a little weird to be so close to the big city—planes fly over our site all day and night. The staff is really wonderful here as they were at the other site—but it will take a little while to get used to all the new faces.

Politics are very exciting in Kenya right now—there are presidential elections in December. Since independence in 1963 there have only been two presidents—and the son of the first president is running and the people don't like him. However, all the opposition parties have united and formed a super alliance and they just announced their single



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presidential candidate. So, there is hope! And exciting news every day.

I hope you are all doing well, I think about you often.

Love, Naomi

November 3, 2002

Hi Everyone,

...Yesterday we got back from an expedition in the Maasai Mara. It was really, really amazing! We saw soooooo many animals and the mara is just really beautiful in general. On our first game drive on the first day, about ten minutes away from our campsite, we saw two cheetahs! (The only cheetahs I have seen here.) We sat and watched them for a while—they were just sitting and walking a little bit and sitting some more. And then . . . they killed a Thomson's gazelle!!!! It was so so exciting. It happened so fast—all of a sudden they were running really really fast and then they weren't. After they caught the Tommy, they didn't kill it right away. They played with

it for a while—letting it run around and then pinning it down again. Once they had killed it, they took turns eating it while the other one stood on the lookout for other predators that might come and steal their kill. If lions came, they might even kill one of the cheetahs while they were stealing the Tommy. One of our professors (who was in my car), said that that was the first cheetah kill he had ever seen—we are really really lucky to have been able to witness that.

While we were in the Mara, we saw lots of lions! They are such beautiful creatures—and we saw a bunch of cubs, also, that were just soo cute. One of the groups of lions that we saw was guarding a wildebeest carcass. There were two jackals that wanted to eat it but they were too scared to go in close.

Another amazing thing that we saw was the end of the wildebeest migrations—thousands and thousands of wildebeest everywhere you look. We also saw a really large buffalo herd. I'm always amazed at how big the buffalo are—and they all stopped to look at the car as we drove past.

The Mara is a national reserve as opposed to a park—which means that it is managed by the local government rather than the Kenyan Wildlife Service (KWS), a federal organization. The Mara also has the most



Kenyan guides poking a little good-natured fun at the tourists.

foreign tourists out of all of the “parks” in Kenya. We saw tons of tourists driving around all the time. And many of them drive off-road to get closer to the animals and end up harassing them a lot of the time. This is very frustrating to watch because there is no enforce-

ment of the laws in the park—as a result of poor management.

Anyway, despite the frustrating moments, it was an amazing few days.

Love to everyone, Naomi

November 27, 2002

Hi to Everyone,

Classes ended a while ago. Exams were okay and, ever since then, we've been doing Directed Research (DR). I don't remember if I ever told you what DR I am doing, so I will tell you now. I'm doing the wildlife management DR, which is assessing the age and sex composition of large herbivores in Nairobi National Park (NNP). The fieldwork was really fun—we went into the park for seven days and counted all the animals we saw and tried to age and sex them. Most days we split up into two groups and each did a section of the park (there are four sections). It was fun to learn more about all the animals—I can age and sex a giraffe just by looking at the hair on its horns!! There are no elephants in the park, but all the other animals were wonderful too. I really like giraffes now—they are so cute. Especially the little ones because they have lots of hair on their horns and it sticks straight up.

The first two days that we had fieldwork it rained A LOT and we got totally soaked because we were game driving in the rain. The second day, the other car got stuck and my car went to help them get out and in the process we got stuck too. We were on this pretty steep hill that was totally slippery and slidy with mud. It was quite an ordeal and a huge tractor had to come and pull us all out. I'll tell you more about it when I see you because I don't think it will come out very well on paper. The other days that we were in the field were really gorgeous—not too hot and not rainy either—perfect for game driving. The last day that we were in the field we saw . . . 14 lions, a cheetah mom and five cubs, eight black rhinos and a 4–5 foot python that crossed the road right in front of us. It was pretty exciting to see all those animals—and the day before we had seen ten lions! Some of the lions were pretty close to us too, which was really neat.

So since fieldwork, we have been doing a lot of data analysis which is pretty tedious (a lot of statistics), but necessary. All that is done now (PHEW!) and now we are all writing our papers. It shouldn't be too bad—a lot of work, but manageable. It's sort of weird to have the last few weeks of our time here devoted to writing a paper because we are at the site all day long and it's really easy to forget that we are in Kenya.

Anyway—we went to a boma a few days ago and it was so fun—we played with kids a lot of the time that we were there and it was so nice to have some interaction with the community. It makes me want to have a home-stay so much—and I feel like it would be possible to stay with families for a week or even less. I am definitely going to tell them to try and start that up. One good thing, though, is that there are a bunch of locals who play soccer every day and I've gone up for the past few days—not to play soccer, but just to hang out. It's really nice to be able to talk with everyone—they are all so nice. I'm going to try to go up there as much as possible for the rest of our time here.

Love to everyone, Naomi 