

Ol Ari Nyero/Gallmann nature conservancy- Write up

I drove up to the Gallmann Nature Conservancy in the Laikipia region of North West Kenya. I was not entirely sure what to expect, I knew about Kuki Gallmann and how she had moved to Kenya, fell in love with the country and bought an enormous piece of land there, I also knew that for the few months before I arrived there had been political instability between the Pokot tribe and the Laikipia residents (more on that later). After a treacherous five-hour drive on Kenya's famously chaotic roads I arrived at the 88,000 hectare piece of land that I would be living on for the next month. I know Africa very well and have travelled it extensively, therefore I thought there were not many landscapes that could still take my breath away, I was very mistaken. Ol Ari Nyero conservancy sits with the Great African Rift Valley to the west and a great expanse of hills, valleys and rivers to the east. The view from the top of the Rift looking down into it is magnificent with Lake Baringo in plain view on the valley floor.

I always knew I would take a gap year and the thought of incorporating my home continent of Africa in some way enticed me. When the opportunity to go to Kenya and work on a wild life conservation arose I couldn't miss it, not only would it give me invaluable life experiences but it would enable me to be thoroughly involved with two of my strongest passions. Africa and Animals. That was originally my incentive, however looking back there was a whole spectrum of interests on offer that I never even thought about.

The political situation was very volatile before I arrived and while I was there. Over the last year or so the Pokot tribe had moved north from their home territories bringing their thousands of cattle with them. Once in Laikipia they needed land to graze their stock and therefore started attacking ranches and breaking fences to feed their cattle. The Pokot believed it was their rightful land and in an effort to drive the land owners away they turned to guerrilla tactics and violence. On the Gallmann conservancy there have numerous shootings on security leading to fatal casualties on both sides. Kuki

Gallmann was herself shot in an ambush in April. This has led to a semi permanent GSU (Kenyan Special Forces) division staying on the conservancy. However I felt that this motivated me more as it made me feel like my presence on the conservancy would be genuinely useful as many employees had fled in fear. I wanted to feel like I would be making a difference and this seemed like the perfect opportunity.

From day one the work was full on. After a quick tour around the conservancy and an introduction to some of the staff (most of whom spoke very little English) I was sent to the Mckenna Lodges in a tractor which took a little over three hours. Once I arrived I was faced with a beautiful lodge which in its current state, was just a shell of what it could be. All the furniture had been removed, all the surfaces were dusty and as the lodges were used as a GSU camp, the wooden floors had all been scratched and dented by gun barrels. My job was to, in just three days, get it restored to its former glory to lodge some potential American donors who were flying in by helicopter. I was in a small team of three other Kenyan workers and despite all six lodges needing restoration we somehow managed to get it looking how it was originally imagined to look like.



The reason it was so essential to impress the donors was because of the recent attacks many donors and sponsors had pulled out as they did not want to risk their investments. However luckily on this occasion both sets of donors agreed to support some of conservancies

projects, such as school for local children and an acrobatics team made up of Pokot and Turkanana children.

Whilst up at the lodges which are spectacularly located right on the edge of the Rift valley there was still the feeling that something could

kick off at any minute. There was a small team of Police living at the lodges who were on guard. Yet on the third day here was an attempted attack when the Pokot ignited some dry grass below the lodges in the hope it would spread and engulf the buildings. Fortunately for us based there it had rained recently and so the fire was contained.

During the month, I was often called along with Pete the general manager, to go and survey wildlife populations at each of the main dams and to generally asses the conservancy. Due to so many animals being killed by the Pokot in recent months a main goal of the conservancy is to try and re-establish a thriving wildlife population. Unfortunately, the once substantial lion, leopard and elephant numbers have rapidly declined due to the poisoning of many of the major dams by the Pokot. This was an attempt to protect their cattle from being hunted whilst illegally grazing on the Gallman's land.

However on one of the days I received an urgent call from Pete asking me to pick up a group of workers and go and fill as many sand bags as we could. He didn't explain what they were for but I was to find that out later. I arrived at Kuki Gallman's house in a further north region of the conservancy to find a group of about twenty guys staring confusedly into a concrete water hole. On closer inspection I saw that inside the water hole was a very angry, very big, bull Buffalo. He had managed to fall in during the night and with the walls being taller than him, he had no way of getting out. So our plan was to back the car up the waterhole and throw sandbags into a pile by the wall to attempt to make a ladder of sorts. The challenge of this task was that every time a bag was thrown in, a set of very large horns would be charging



you.

Luckily after much taunting and shouting to try and get the Buffalo to see the steps he did eventually climb out, and then immediately charged everyone he could.

Much of my work was involved with building and construction of infrastructure. The first task was, with a group of about ten of us, some bricks and a shovel we were told to build a look out tower to provide a viewing point over the conservancy boundary. This was so the security could spot herds of cattle and see anyone who was attempting to cut through the fence. We were given no machinery and few tools. Instead we had to use rudimentary methods. A plum line and a spirit level were all we had to ensure the walls, and pillars were straight and would line up. The tower took about 10 days of working in 35 degree + heat. However, once it was completed it has fulfilled an essential task. As there is now a spotlight fitted it can be manned 24/7 and along with five others provide clear views along all four boundaries.

The other construction undertaking that I was asked to manage was the building of a warehouse to store charcoal made in the recently started 'soulcoal' operation. This was started by Nigel (Svevva Gallmanns partner). Because of the amount of Leleshwa shrub- A tree which grows and spreads incredibly quickly reaching full growth in about five years. As it covers about 80% of the it makes for the perfect renewable energy programme. One area is cornered off and all Leleshwa in the area is cut down with the wood being burnt in Kilns to make charcoal. Then that area is left for 10 years, which by then will have completely regrown.

Currently the programme makes about 50 tonnes per month (all moved and loaded by hand). However Nigel has planned on the figure to grow exponentially and therefore commissioned me and a team to build a new warehouse using once again very rudimentary methods.

The first problem was that just under the surface was a layer of rock, which when being dug through using spades and picks took us nearly

three days to dig all eight holes. And because of the remoteness of the location no large machinery could be brought up. So, we welded all the pieces together down in the workshops and brought them up piece by piece on a trailer.

The biggest challenge for me was being put in charge of such a large project. The team consisted of five of us, three of whom spoke barely any English. Yet despite this it became clear in the first couple of days who possessed what skills and eventually we were working like a well-oiled machine and in a little over a week the warehouse was completed.

My month working in Kenya was amazing for me in a number of ways and I know I will go back as soon as possible as it was such a fulfilling experience. The friendliness and acceptance of the local workers and incredible landscape are something I will never forget.