

STAR TRAVEL & TOURS takes you to Magical Kenya

Letter from Pearlie Hemdane

Atlanta, Georgia

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As a child growing up in rural Mississippi, I had always dreamed of traveling to Africa. My mother and father used to tell my siblings and me about how our ancestors came from there long ago. I wanted to visit that distant place from which our ancestors were stolen. Books and films did not satisfy me. I wanted to see Africa with my own eyes.

This past May, I finally got the chance. My niece, Farah Stockman, had founded Jitegemee, a nonprofit organization aimed at giving street children in Kenya an education. This year was the 10th anniversary of her school in Machakos, Kenya, and she invited me and 19 other family members and friends to come.

The journey was more rewarding than I could have imagined.

We flew from Atlanta to Amsterdam, where we converged with cousins, sisters, nephews and family friends for the 8-hour flight to Nairobi. Most of us had never been to Africa before. Some of us had never left the United States.

From the moment our plane touched down in Nairobi, we were met by a whirlwind of colors and sounds. We visited the Maasai market – a vast, bustling place of exchange. Then we went to the Go Down, a community of artists in Nairobi's industrial area where we saw sculptures, paintings and dancers. We also met Jitegemee's children and teachers there for the first time. They had made the hour's journey on a school bus from the rural town of Machakos for a day of art activities.

I was so impressed with the children, who painted and acted out short dramas based on their interpretations of the art around them. They seemed to hang on to every bit of instruction, their bodies often leaning forward so as not to miss a single word.

The next day, we fed giraffes at a nature sanctuary and explored a glittering colony of glass blowers on the edge of Nairobi, with its three-story kiln rising over the savannah like a giant termite hill. The artists there transformed colored glass from broken bottles into chandeliers, dragons, and stained glass tiles with outstretched paws.

The next day, we set off in Star Travel vans for the town of Machakos, where Jitegemee's new school was waiting for us.

The children welcomed us with clapping, singing and dancing! I was overwhelmed.

Inside the school building, the youth in vocational training assembled and we shared greetings and information about our



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Jitegemee students display their art drawings

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lives in America. The children stood to yell in their names and the trails they were learning.



Students of Jitengee in Kenya

Their faces shone with enthusiasm as they vied for our attention. They filled my heart. These youth had not been as fortunate as many other children, yet they were eager to share all their best with us. I felt so welcome.

Later in the day, we set off for town to see the shops where the students trained in dressmaking, hairdressing, knitting, cabinet making, furniture making and mechanics.

But I had grown tired and had begun to lag behind the group. Immediately, a tall slender girl closed her pace and looked back at me. "You are tired," she said. "I will help you." She linked her arm with mine and entwined our fingers as we trudged up the little hill leading from the school. Suddenly I no longer felt tired. This is how I met Cecelia, a student dressmaker. Moments like that defined this trip for me.

The next day was the long-awaited celebration. Everyone seemed bright and shiny as we gathered for breakfast. There was a bush about the school. A giant seat had been erected in the schoolyard with chairs underneath. In the back, mothers and guardians of Jitengee children had prepared enormous pots of stew for lunch.

The children arrived in colorful new Jitengee shirts they had been given the day before. We were joined by a group of children from an orphanage near Mount Kenya and nearby visitors from the Children Children's Fund. As more children and guests arrived, the bush gave way to an air of excitement and anticipation.

Mike Kimani, the program director, and Terry Muriuki, the chair of our advisory board, soon took the microphone, introducing the day. Teachers Alex and Elizabeth led the children in poems, songs and dances. Local dances danced

beaded black outfits, pounding drums and singing songs that called each one of us out to dance. I took the microphone with my two sisters and our brother to sing an old gospel song that we used to sing in church when we were children. We sang one verse in Swahili. The crowd fell silent with listening.



Masai Mara game reserve.

We spent our final days in Masai Mara, the wildlife reserve where you can observe elephants parenting their young from 10 feet away, when giraffe startle you by crossing the road in front of your van. We ate wonderful buffets in the garden of the Mara Sotava Tented Camp, listening to the birds, watching tiny anoles creep near us and talking about the pride of sleeping baby cheetahs that we had seen on our safari drive that morning.

A few days later, a plane lifted us out of Africa, back to all the American cities that we came from, back to our ordinary jobs and ordinary lives. But I had finally made it to Africa, and I knew that I had left behind the spirits of my ancestors who had now traveled, full circle, back home.

Other sites of interest



Kitengela Glass Factory, a community of artistic glass makers outside of Nairobi.