



My Magical Olkimitare School Visit Thursday September 4th 2008

It was a hot, still Kenyan afternoon and I was nearing the end of my trip on Exodus' Classic Kenya Safari. The Kicheche Camp Manager Williams had arranged a driver to take us across the plains on the thirty minute journey to Aitong Village. Aitong is home to many Masai families whose relatives work within the Mara camps such as Kicheche. Aitong is a small village with a few local shops and a water pump serving people who are up to 10km away. There is one government funded school further outside the village but it's over subscribed and there are no plans to build and fund a new school.

In 2004 the Kicheche Community Trust was set up by guests visiting the Mara. KCT fund and support many on-going projects in the Aitong Village region and one of them is Olkimitare School Project. The Aitong School Project has developed over the years and now has the support of Exodus and Friends of Conservation too. Over the past few years Exodus has helped to build an entirely new school building consisting of 2 classrooms and an office. As we approach the village in our jeep Williams and our driver (unfortunately I didn't catch his name) proudly point out the shiny new building in the distance which is set within a large field with football posts for recreation time. School starts early and finishes after lunch so I am only expecting to meet a few pupils and the Head-Samuel- since it's about 2.30 in the afternoon. I am walking through a gate, onto the field and towards an open classroom door. Windows are wide open and I strain to catch a glimpse but it's too high! Samuel sees me approach and comes to greet me warmly and openly. He is genuinely delighted to see me and me him.

Following him into the classroom, to my absolute joy the classroom is packed with the reception class (ages 4-6). There must be about 30 children all sitting quietly, wide eyed with expectancy, behind their wooden desks. I had forgotten how small everything else feels when all those around you reach only just above knee height! I am overwhelmed as the children sing me their welcome song complete with shy claps here and there. Samuel explains that he asked them all to stay behind for a special visit. I feel honored. Some of the 104 children the school teaches walk up to 7km daily each way to be here. I hear quiet little voices whispering around the room-they have seen my camera and some are giggling and pointing. Samuel is all smiles keen to tell me as much as I want to hear about the school. He is clearly a proud, kind and talented young man. I follow

Samuel out of the classroom leaving the enchanting children in the company of a fellow Exodus traveller who had joined me on the visit...

I am showed a small school office-which Samuel shares with the 3 other teachers Mercy, Veronica and Jonathan-and the supplies cupboard which has been built up from scratch and is now looking quite full with stationary and books. He explains that many of the books and the stationary are carried out here by travellers visiting Kicheche camp and I am pleased that I too made the effort to bring out several dozen exercise books and packets of pens. Any Exodus traveller on any one of the Kenya trips they run which visit this region can visit the school and indeed bring out some much needed supplies (Speak to your Exodus consultant at the time of booking if you need further details about what you can bring out with you). My eye wanders around the room and I notice a school bell, handwritten timetables and photos on the wall- I am reminded that this is a real working school and I feel compassionately compelled to support them. Olkimitare School is not recognised by the government and runs entirely on donations and school fees. The Masai people and supporters are dedicated to improving education in this region as well as improving local peoples' welfare through initiatives such as this.

I am back in the main classroom nearing the end of my visit and the children buzz with excitement, having overcome their former shyness! They are as touchingly affectionate and inquisitive about me and my fellow Exodus traveller as we are about them. Their English is great considering their ages and many of the less shy are keen to chatter away with the familiar 'my name is' and 'I speak English' phrases. They are also pretty good at identifying animals from the posters on the wall and I hope that as they grow up they too can benefit from the beauty of the region they live in and see some of these awesome animals in the wild on a safari drive. My visit draws to a close and I have made many many friends-all keen to touch the camera's lens and get as close to the digital display as possible to see the phenomenon which is themselves! My parting gift to the school is a series of Polaroid shots. Samuel helps me to organise everyone into a huddle outside so I can capture them on Polaroid. I take a few and hand them out and leave the children in awe as they watch their images developing on the paper before their very eyes...

Amelia Shepherd

