**KEPKILION MONASTERY, Kenya**



Our Lady Of Victories, Kepkilion, Kenya

Every year we took our novices to experience monastic life at Kepkilion Monastery, Our Lady of Victories, near the city of Molo in eastern Kenya.  The monastery was located high up in the mountains of this area, north of the famous Mau National Reserve and south of the Nandi Hills.  Kisumu, which sits on the bay of Lake Victoria, is due east of the monastery, about a two hours drive.  This may mean nothing to the reader, but this information will help if you are following along with a map to get a feel of the area. Kipkelion lies off the main road and is easily seen as a somewhat moderate town in Kenya, but once off the main road, the real driving fun begins.  Depending on the time of the year, which is usually denoted by the rainy seasons, this road is almost impassable at some points, mainly because it gets washed out in many places and repairs are far and few between.  One year our van had to be towed through the mud by the huge monastic farm tractor, which itself almost got stuck.

The main reason our staff likes to bring our novices to visit the monastery is the beauty of the place where it is situated. We certainly don't enjoy getting up at 0300 hours a.m. for Vigils and then after that quietly sitting in the dark until the Mass starts at 0430 hours a.m. when some of the local people join us. Even then breakfast is not until after Morning Prayers which begin at 0630 hours a.m. Notice I keep adding ‘a.m.’ just in case you are not quite awake yourself. Of course, being a monastery, the whole day is filled with prayers.  During the day there are only three short prayer times called, ‘Terce‘, ‘Sext‘, & ‘None‘.  One can see there might be a slight confusion if this is your first time at a monastery.  One of our novices didn’t show up for ‘None’ because he thought there was ‘no’ prayer time, even after we explained it very carefully to all of them.  I wonder what he did during ‘Sext’?



Bananas of Kepkilion

The beauty of visiting the Monastery begins with the road trip, but since this isn’t a travel guide, I will just begin at the city of Kipkelion. Even though the area isn’t the highest in Kenya, Mount Kenyatta in central Kenya takes that honor, it is the highest in the western part. Not surprisingly, the monastery is located near the highest point. The last part of the drive, beginning at Kipkelion, is up, up, up on bad, bad, bad roads. Usually a good driver is not part of enjoying the scenic views that the rest of us delight in, since the road does skirt the ridges with disastrous drop-offs.  Along the way are several villages with open spaces where banana groves are planted wherever there is a mountain stream coming down from the peak.  Even thought we will climb up to eight thousand feet, we are still located near the Equator where the weather is usually warm.  The landscape changes constantly between little mountain streams with banana groves to hilly country sides planted with maize (corn) with little or no thought to contour planning. Unfortunately, the word has not gotten around yet that planting without contour planning, the roads get washed out with half of their fields.

There are also small and large patches of pine tree groves dotting the landscape, but becoming fewer as we climb. Once in a while there will be some smoke coming from the middle of the pine trees where someone is most likely making wood charcoal. I ran into several charcoal mounds on my hike up to the peak that already had the charcoal removed. As we approached the monastic main road, we were driving on the last ridge that leads to a small valley where the monastery was located beneath the main mountain peak. They owned an incredible amount of land in this area, enough to include the peak, but it was mostly inaccessible only twenty years ago.

The panorama of the monastic grounds took in acres of corn fields and grazing fields for their four hundred or more head of milking cows.  The property also boasted a primary school for the children of the monastic families that worked there and the folks living in the surrounding area, an up-to-date clinic, and housing facilities for the monastic families.  Already encroachment was a main problem from the surrounding Kalogen tribe that was reducing the monastic lands year by year.  Because of the tension in the area, it was difficult to remove the families without serious repercussions breaking out from other tribal members.

The government was petitioned numerous times in the past to bring electricity to the monastery in the hope of installing milking machines.  Such a project would greatly increase the income for the monastery that was already struggling by selling the little milk they did produce. One of the main problems that the monastery faced though was bad management of the farm and their finances. Because of in-breeding, their cows were giving less milk with each generation of cows, which were down to almost a liter (quart) a day compared to seven to ten liters a day per cow that they should have been getting!  Imagine the trip down to the local market on the roads that we came up on.  It is no wonder that some milk was lost in transportation. Because of their poor finances, the monastery depended on monies from outside.  Monies from retreats could not be depended on because of the bad roads.  At one point when the electric line was nearing the monastic border, it took a diversion to a rich and popular politician homestead, who was a member of parliament and obviously had connections with the government of President Moi at that time.  The monastery still does not have electric to this day.



Nandi Hills of Kenya

Our stay there this trip was peaceful and quiet.  We took many walks around the property, especially up to the peak where one could see for miles around.  Along the way many different types of flowers could be spotted, even those not indigenous to the area, but may have been brought in by the English or Dutch monks.  I remember spotting a beautiful wild gladiola and wondering how it had gotten here in the middle of Africa?  In some of the glens and groves where the numerous mountain streams passed were several groves of fig trees and banana trees.  Of course, banana trees were everywhere, but at least five different varieties!  The monastic grounds were well kept with a few small flower gardens here and there where the old monks from Europe still kept them up.  In the court yard of the enclosure, closed to the public, were the best of the gardens.  The monks kept a small but exquisite gold fish pond.  Several times a hale storm that is common in the area almost killed the fish due to the quick temperature drop in the water.

One day I was resting under a kibanda (a thatched roof shelter for sitting).  Not far from the kibanda, was a sturdy split rail fence where the monastery kept their two breeding bulls. They were huge animals, the likes this city boy has never seen before!  I noticed one of the bulls was missing.  I was planning on spending several hours in the kibanda reading and writing, I was able to find out what happened to it.  I saw a young man in his twenties, large and powerful as his bulls, slowly leading the delinquent bull back to his pen.  The bull had escaped and had wandered over to where the young females were kept, hoping to get in a few unauthorized visits until he was caught.  The sight was very impressive.  Here was this huge bull humbly walking behind with his head down, being led back to his pen by the man, who was walking in front of it, straight and tall without any fear.  The bull could have easily horned the man in front of him and gone back to the females to continue his escapades.

I guess I better talk about the monks before I close, since that is the reason we went to the monastery in the first place.  I have to admit, my favorite prayer time of the day was the Vigil Prayer in the middle of the night.  Even though it was an ungodly hour, at least for us, a loud clanging bell wakes the monks at 0300 hours. It was an almost mystical non-time where half-awake from our sleep, we move like zombies towards the large church which connects the other three sides of the monastery to form a square, enclosing the courtyard.

We have to cross the courtyard which is open to the stars above, getting a glimpse of the heavens, so clear this night and open to so many uncountable stars that they confuse the consolations. Another novice bumped into me, a reminder to move on.  Across the courtyard we enter the dark, silent church and try to find out way to the choir where the Vigil chants will be sung.  If you can imagine the large rectangular floor of the church, one third at the front of the building is an area for the congregation, another third in the middle of the church with the floor raised above by several steps, is the sanctuary and large enough to accommodate about fifty people. The last third, the choir with the floor sitting below the sanctuary, is itself divided in half where three tiers of prayer stalls holding ten monks each are located on each side of the wall facing each other.

The only light in the building this night is a candle, but some of the monks enter with their own flashlights, like a scene out of Star Wars.   Eventually two small gas mantle lanterns are lit that surprisingly give off quite a bit of light.  Eventually they will get florescent lights lit by solar.  One monk begins the chants from one of three books in front of us.  Fortunately we know the routine by now, otherwise a newly arrived visitor would have a difficult time negotiating the books, and in the dark.  The Vigil Prayer time lasts over an hour, and at the end we sit in the dark for half an hour until the bell for Mass is rung.  We don’t have any choice, since the building is dark and any movement is discouraged except for those preparing for the next service. The monks sing in a clear Gregorian chant with a prayer leader for the day, usually someone who knows the chant.  Some of the voices are strange to us, or I should say.  The English is difficult for the African tongue to pronounce and sing at the same time.

When the post-election violence broke out after President Kibaki’s election for a second term, the monastery had sheltered non-Kalogen people from tribes not friendly with them or who are traditional enemies.  Their neighbors almost burnt it down!  Conditions became so bad that the monks had to find safe haven in Uganda at another monastery.  The monastery and land was eventually sold to another religious order.

We will miss this wonderful place that holds many good memories, but we have learned that eventually everything changes with time here in Africa.