



KTH GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT HUB

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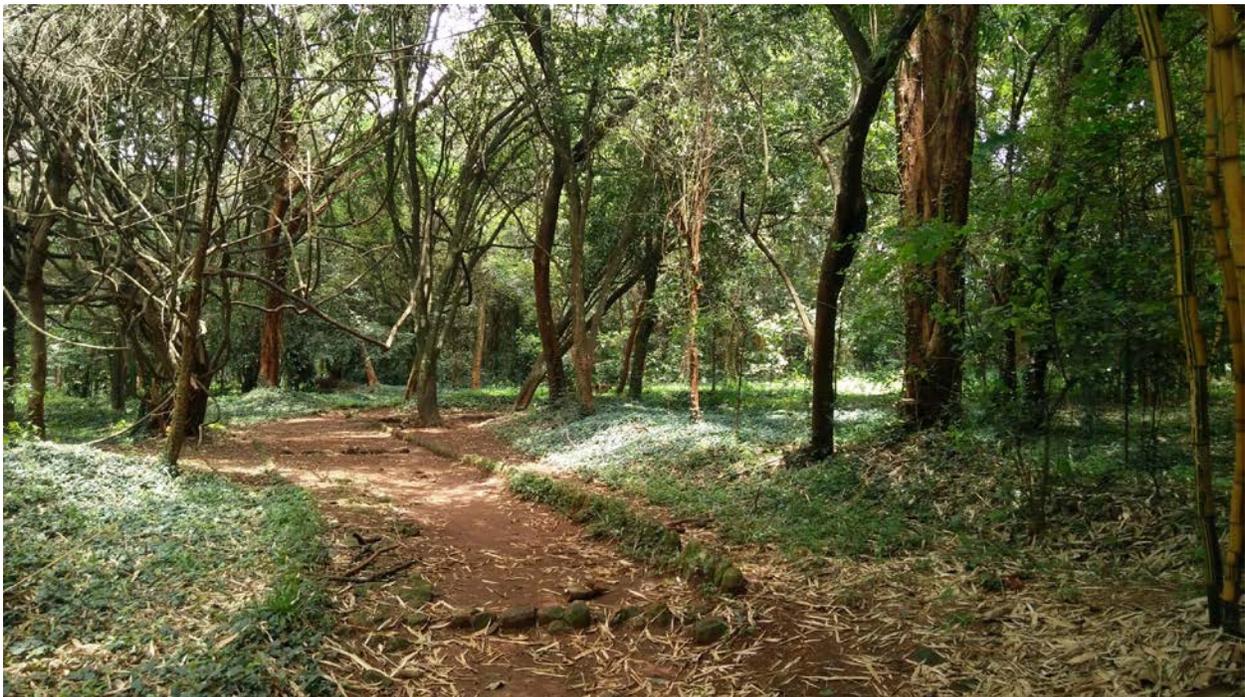
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INTRODUCTION

By the time I even learned that there was such a thing as GDH, I was already in Shanghai reaching the end of my first exchange semester. I was more or less waiting for the universe to present me with an opportunity for a bachelor thesis as I was at the end of my rope with no clue what to do.

For some reason the universe took pity on me, because out of nowhere came an email offering me to apply to an IT project in Nairobi. Not only would I be able to finish my thesis as part of the project, but it would also offer me to work with the intersection between agriculture and IT. I was already pretty biased towards studying abroad already, but sustainable development is very close to my heart so I could scarcely imagine a more appropriate match.

This is of course not always the case. Exchange never comes without complications, and you might not always find that one project, custom tailored to your interests. Seven Swedish KTH students left for Kenya in March 2018. With this report, I hope to give you some insights into what I saw there, what you can expect, and what benefits you might gain from daring to venture beyond this nation's borders.



PRACTICAL INFORMATION

PRE-DEPARTURE

There's always a lot that needs to get done before you go. First of all, write down all questions you might have. And speak to others who also applied. There is always something you haven't thought of yet. Once you know what to ask, get connected with the project managers and coordinators. One very important aspect of foreign exchange is that there are people who really want you to go, and are more than happy to help answering questions and calming the nerves. Don't hesitate to ask.

If you need to rent out your apartment second hand, start looking for tenants asap. There are always other students who need a place to stay so start looking there by asking through your international coordinator. We'll get to accommodations on site later.

The visa is also a good idea to start with early. The best option is usually to actually go yourself to the embassy and speak to them. Make sure to get a clear list on what you will need. In the case of Kenya, you can't apply for the student visa yourself. So all you need to start is the visitors visa. It will always help if you explain what you intend to do fully. You never know what might be okay to omit in the right circumstances.

The group I was traveling with got in touch with the Kenyan embassy and managed to skip return tickets and contact information to our hosts in Kenya. Actually issuing the visa usually just takes a week, but in practice you should start early and get KIH involved to help if that's an option. You also have the option to apply for the visa at the airport in Nairobi, but it's much better to just get it done before departure.

As for what to pack, the weather is of course much warmer than Sweden year round. It will get humid and rain a lot but you can leave your winter boots at home. Unless of course, you plan to climb Mt Kenya in July.

There's a ton of nature so some good outdoorsy trekking gear might be a good idea. Nairobi can get windy and colder at night, so bring a sweater or two. But no need for the padded down feather jacket. Bring a small umbrella and perhaps a rain jacket with some wind stopper. Another useful note is that they use the British standard in power plugs, so get an adaptor. Sunscreen and other hygiene stuff can just as well be bought in Sweden as the cost usually isn't any lower in Kenya. Especially if you have certain brands you like.

Then there is of course the vaccines. Hepatitis, Yellow fever, Cholera and Meningococcal vaccines are recommended for medium to longer stays where you might travel around the

countryside. Don't forget to buy malaria pills as well. It's no problem buying the cheaper off-brand kind. But chose the ones you consume daily. The side effects from the weekly pill seemed pretty nasty. All malaria medicines can give you pretty weird nightmares, as several people experienced, but that's about the only issue anyone I spoke to had.

ACCOMODATIONS

In my case, GDH supported all KIH students with the full housing cost as a part of our scholarship. This was very welcome of course, but not at all what I expected and I would advise that you not assume this will be true for you in every case. There are lots of scholarships to apply for though. And if you start searching early you might land a motherload of money. If you are a foreign student already, I would look at the scholarships that KIH hands out to well performing students. Europeans can check out Erasmus etc. There is a virtual ton of money. Apart from that, CSN has many generous extra loans you can take to compensate for any increased costs you might be facing.

For me, finding the actual apartment was also handled by KIH. This worked out mostly well. Due to circumstances better explained by someone else the apartment hunt got very rushed and not all of us enjoyed the housing we eventually got. Basically, things can always hit the fan, so make sure you are involved in the process even though your school is kind enough to carry the expenses. Finding an apartment is not too difficult once you are in Nairobi, but doing it from outside Kenya will be impossible without an intermediary. If you have to solve the situation by yourself, I would recommend using airbnb or just a hotel and then start looking on your own once you're there. Every other house will have apartments on offer.



The quality of the apartments come from complete hovels to luxurious estates. For my stay, we lived in Westlands which is fairly common among expats. Depending on where you will spend your days I would suggest finding something close to that. Traffic is a complete mess in Kenya. We'll get to that in more detail later, but let's just say you'll want to avoid a long commute if you can.

Infrastructure leaves a few things to be desired in Kenya. If you can, try to see what the state is on water in any prospective apartment. In my case, the water company turned off the supply almost every weekend, while some of the other students I traveled with had no such issue.

Landlords in Kenya will most often be reasonable people. You'll have to trust your gut feeling, just try not to bind yourself into a contract you can't get out of in case the apartment you choose turns out to be a bad option. Also keep in mind that if KIH is paying the bill, Swedish bureaucracy might slow the actual payment to a halt, so be sure to get them started as soon as possible. If you are able, it will make your life easier to just pay yourself at first and then have KIH reimburse you.

Lastly, cleaning staff almost always come with the apartment. It will add to the total cost and will probably not be optional. I would say you won't need to worry at all about theft, but depending on how much of a neat freak you are, there might be some irritation involved. They will do things a certain way and there is usually not much point in getting them to change. In my experience they had a tendency to burn through cleaning supply like wildfire. At the same time, the contract usually mentions something about what chores they actually take care of, and if you want them to do more you can always make a simple deal with them directly.

TRANSPORTATION

I almost invariably used on-demand taxi services like Uber and Taxify for my entire stay. In the city regions, there is plenty of available taxis when you need one. Taxify is the largest service, with Uber in tow. Some cities only offer one of them, a majority of all the cities in the country still have neither. If getting your own car or motorcycle is not an option, the second most reliable option is taking a taxi. The price is very affordable compared to its western counterparts and many a good conversation can be had with the taxi drivers. Just don't take a ride with the motorcycle taxis. They drive like crazy and won't stick around if they crash and break your legs.

Traffic is all in all awful. It's a good idea to avoid having to make long trips everyday. It might take a while to learn which routes are faster at what times. It will require a bit of puzzling, but as things become more familiar it will become a natural part of everyday life.



There is a public transportation option called Matatu, which is very cheap, and once you get used to it can work fairly well. There is, however, no such thing as a timetable. The cars tend to be very old, the chauffeurs drive aggressively, and many traffic incidents, at least in Nairobi, involve a matatu. It's basically a poorly functioning bus network. Some of the cars are extremely pimped out and the experience can be incredibly charming. It would be advisable to be careful though. And don't take your first trip without the company of a local. If you want to travel a bit further, Matatu is likely a very good option, and you will find them everywhere. Just stop someone in the street and ask for the nearest stop.

Then there is walking, which is very pleasant. Wherever you go, there is lots of beautiful nature. Kenya is a country of stark contrasts and the cities are full of interesting characters. You will experience things much better on foot sometimes. Remember that some parts of Nairobi or the rest of the country are not completely safe, especially for a lone European. Get well acquainted with your surroundings and avoid moving by yourself at night. That said, in the daytime you mostly just need to keep an eye on your wallet. Just be sure to talk to other local students and people you meet about what places might be better to avoid and when.



By walking you will also learn your way around which will help you greatly when you need to direct a taxi driver, or stop the driver from taking an unnecessarily long route. Not to mention the benefit of not getting stuck in traffic. Plenty of Kenyans walk several miles everyday on their way to work and you get lots of good exercise. Just be sure to bring an umbrella.

COSTS



Not being a big food guy myself, I didn't care much about the food at all. There was generally plenty of it. Loads of restaurants and modern shopping malls once you had a look around. The cheaper the food, the more careful you should be though. Hygiene can be pretty lacking. You will find people selling roasted maize and meat on the street for next to no money at all. Don't eat that unless you want to torture yourself. There are restaurants in shacks all over which should also be skipped. Apart from that, you can find plenty of restaurants with cheap prices. As a group, we managed to eat and drink well for around 2000 SEK at several occasions.

Food stores will generally be about the same prices as in Sweden. Flour, rice and many fruits will be very cheap. Milk and meat is crazy expensive. You can barely even find cheese and when you do it will cost you your soul. An avocado the size of a football will cost you a few SEK, while a liter of yoghurt might be three times as expensive as Swedish stores. In total, once you find your way, your monthly food cost might go down, but don't expect any massive changes.

Imported products are insanely expensive in Kenya. Electronics especially, if you want brand names. There are however many cheap Chinese goods on the market which can be bought for very affordable prices. You can make good bargains at many markets. You can essentially find anything at places like Toi Market for instance. If you go to a mall you will mostly find prices comparable to Swedish ones, or incredibly ugly products. Bargaining is also possible at the markets, and sometimes in the stores as well, so give it a go if you're up to that sort of thing.

Internet is readily available with 4G speeds in all the large cities. There are subscription services like you will find here, but not nearly as cheap. Dataplans are instead almost always sold in bundles and the cost per megabyte is pretty high. If you consume a lot of data, costs might get away from you. Wifi is often a bit spotty, but most homes have a stable connection. There are two major service providers. Safaricom, which by far is the largest, and Airtel.

Myself and the other students all used Safaricom and we were all happy with our experience. Your service provider is the one setting you up with Mpesa, which is a service very close to Swish. It is very practical, and sometimes the only accepted form of payment. I almost exclusively used my mastercard instead though. AIMS charge a fairly high fee for foreign accounts and the usefulness of Mpesa is rarely higher than card payments. You should definitely get an account however.

Entertainment can often be pretty cheap. Bars and clubs are cheap to get into, and often alcohol will be cheap as well. Parties, concerts and other events mostly come with a small entrance fee. If you want to see a movie you'll often only have to pay around 50 SEK for a perfectly good cinema experience. They claim to have IMAX theatres in Nairobi though. This is not accurate so aficionados beware.

STUDY EXPERIENCE

EXPERIENCE IN GDH PROJECT

Like I mentioned, exchange studies don't always end up the way you'd hoped. You should always go into the experience with a problem solving mindset. Chances are you might have to do some creative wizardry to make things come together. The courses we were promised by KIH were actually offered, which is not always the case, but the content didn't exactly match the poster. The people involved on Strathmore's end hadn't quite grasped the concept and the Kenyan students weren't especially motivated.

I did however get to dive deep into a subject I care very much about. I got to visit small scale farmers and interview them for hours in the beautiful Kenyan countryside. I got to see so much awesome shit and in many respects were given very free reigns to take the situation where I needed it to go. In terms of formal academics, the course itself fell flat and became more of a joke than anything else. In practice, we had to write our theses separately, but that was hardly a problem.

In coming years, the course content will likely improve greatly. Despite that, things will ALWAYS get a little nuts when you study abroad. When preparing for your trips, perhaps don't take all the assurances completely literally. No one at KTH controls all the moving parts and can't make all those promises anyway. Focus instead and making sure you know who to talk to when things go off sideways. Learning to deal with it is just part of the value.

COURSES OUTSIDE OF PROJECT

Apart from the project-specific course, the KTH students were supposed to take an additional cultural course. The quality of the lectures was sadly very low, and most of us just stopped attending. Some of the KTH students also took a artificial network course that apparently was quite good. Strathmore is a small university, and has several interesting courses. There are also incubators and start-ups operating on campus. In our interaction we just accidentally missed the mark on all of them. This is a bit unfortunate, and if anything the one thing I would say I regret the most. If I were to do it again, I would perhaps focus my attention more on the incubators, but you can't know that until you've tried.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

For myself, I went pretty far off my field of study during my time in Kenya. I got to practice teamwork, project management and had the opportunity to try design thinking, a method I will definitely carry with me in the future. Even though the IT aspect was very conceptual with regards to the project, I am also interested in product development and many business aspects of running a project. It was incredibly interesting to interview economists or people in the agricultural sector and just pick their brains as much I could.

Primarily, the project did offer very practical work with important problems. We were encouraged to contact businesses, governments and everything in between to understand the context and work towards a solution. The more serious we took the assignment, the better.

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

For me, professional and personal development is the same thing. The things that make me more complete, or broaden my perspectives make me both a better person and a better professional. Kenya is like I said, a country of extreme contrasts. You will see absurd levels of poverty across the road from ridiculous wealth. More than anything else, I feel a place like this will teach us what people have in common, rather than how we are different, which is a infinitely valuable lesson. As a closing statement, I would like to say that you can't possibly come here without growing up considerably. And that will be true regardless of whether you got the amount of credits you may have been hoping for or not.



There is just so much to do in Kenya. For nature you can find a national park in every little nook of the country. Tsavo, Masai Mara, Hells gate, Mt Longonot, Ngong Hills and Nairobi national park to mention a few. There are several within a days ride from Nairobi, and then there are organized trips going to almost all of them from the city. Usually, the more people you can gather, the cheaper it will become.

There's always the possibility of joining a motley crew of strangers for a safari as well. Most travel agencies organize those kinds of things. I say travel agency only as a point of comparison. These are just people who own a car big enough to fit 10 people. There are tons of them. Lots of people have an aunt or cousin who operates that kind of business. Just ask around and try to get a estimate.



Many times they will charge in dollars for some reason. Sometimes they will ask for dollars but accept Kenyan Shillings. My colleagues and I never managed to get student prices, but be sure to try nonetheless. Generally, student prices are only for domestic students, but sometimes that detail can slip by unnoticed.

Nairobi, Mombasa and Kisumu are the three largest cities in the countries and are all worth a visit. The list of things to do in any one of them is enormous. Facebook and whatsapp are diligently used by people to spread news of events and things are constantly going on. In Nairobi, where I spent most my time, a few of the golden nuggets are KI, BauBox, Fogo Caucho, Toi Market, The Hub, Talisman and the Elephant Orphanage.





A visit to a trip advisor would be a good start. As long as you have funds for it, you'll never run out of stuff to do. The national parks can be really expensive for foreigners sadly. Other than that, most entertainment and culture is affordable and though slow, traveling within the country isn't too bad. You can always take a trip to Tanzania as well. Or Zanzibar.

Just keep in mind that diseases and other problems can plague some areas. Malaria for instance is basically an issue as soon as you leave Nairobi. Plenty of nasty stuff creeps around in Kenya. So whenever you head out, make sure you've done your homework.

IN CONCLUSION

Kenya is packed with cool stuff. And the people are getting up to some really awesome things. There is no need to make this a lengthy epitaph. If you ever get the opportunity to take your studies to Kenya, you should go. It will never be what you expect, but there will be a thousand ways to make the visit extremely valuable. And there will be monkeys.



So don't be an asshole, get going.