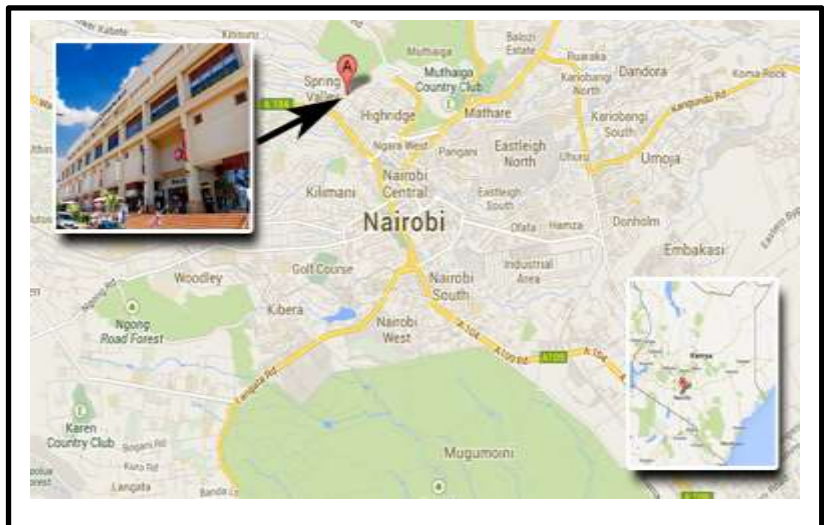




A shopping experience!

Even now, whenever a door slams, I jump, thinking ... gunshot!? Every day I recall my *'shopping experience'* at The Westgate Mall, in Nairobi, Kenya. I wonder when these startled jumps and crazy thoughts will go away. Time heals all they say.

Two loud cracks from a gun ... perhaps ten or twenty metres away! I am crouched behind a counter, yelling into my phone.



"Hey, this is scary! I'm in Westgate and there's some sort of gunfight going on! Sounds like a robbery."

Another ear-shattering bang! I pocket the phone and start to run; bent over, head down, towards the rear of the store.

I had entered Westgate at 11.44 a.m. (the time and date stamped on my parking card). The uniformed guard frisked me with his metal detector. I smiled back, thinking *"What a*

useless exercise”, before strolling up the ramp to the ground floor, surrounded by gushing waterfalls, and piped music: it could have been Dubai.

In the supermarket hardware section I check my watch, just as the lights went down; twelve noon exactly. Power failure occurs regularly here; you simply wait for the generator, then business resumes. The lights come back quickly; then dark again. I ask one of the staff *“What’s up?”* He mumbles something about faulty generators. Five minutes and the lights are on again. I grab my basket of items and move to the first floor. Up there I check out bags in the back corner, then head for the cashier.

Walking towards the down escalator I’m jostled by a group of youngsters running past. Riding down the stairway, I look back to see faces peering through the glass banister, staring down towards the check-out desks.

At ground level people seem confused. *“Is there a problem?”* I ask.

That’s when I first hear the gunshots!

Worried now, I shelter behind a glass counter, and – as described earlier – phone home. Then the noise from guns and grenades becomes too loud.

The gravity of the situation finally dawns, and I start to run in earnest, past a meats counter, bewildered people running beside me. We find staff beckoning us to an escape route: the goods entrance from the basement. Slowing to a jog we pass through double doors to reach the sanctuary of a corridor, then a stairwell to the goods store. I see others already embedded behind bags of flour and sugar and other trench-like items. I help a traumatized Indian family with kids to construct a protective screen, then retreat to build and watch from behind my own ramparts; also terrified but trying desperately not to show it.

We stay there for perhaps forty minutes; fifty people or more, listening to rapid gunfire from the floor above; petrified. At times there would be a lull in the noise; causing a move

towards the exit, a large truck-delivery doorway; then the fearsome rat-tat-tat sound resumes, and we scurry back to our home-made bunkers.

Thankfully the time comes when everything remains quiet for a while. We are given instructions by staff that everyone has been waiting to hear: *“Move, move ...quickly, quickly!!”* And so we run: three or four abreast; mothers carrying screaming toddlers, down the side of the main building and out to a world of freedom!

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.... and now in glorious hindsight:

Perhaps if I had known I was by chance, a witness to one of the most daring terrorist attacks in history, I might have acted differently. I never even looked to see those masked men slaughtering cashiers and customers as they stormed into the store; I turned and ran, to save my own skin! If I had looked back after I passed the meats counter, I might have seen others being shot, because later I was shown a photo of a pile of bloodied bodies in front of that counter. I had escaped by minutes, perhaps even seconds! Should I have turned to help them, or earlier to help the cashiers. That thought still haunts me.

What happened on that balmy Spring Day in Nairobi was illuminating for me, and instructive for Kenya. In the aftermath, the new Westgate became an impenetrable fortress, as did many prime hotels around town. And yet ... and yet, other deadly attacks were to take place, one incredibly similar in methodology, being the assault on The DucitD2 Hotel (just a short drive from Westgate), five years later.

For me, and nine years after the event, questions still abound concerning Westgate:

- ❖ **The goods store that myself and others took refuge in.** Just a few hours later the same space was shown on CCTV being used by the Al-Shabaab terrorists. If staff new about the store, why weren't the terrorists apprehended there?*
- ❖ **People involved were not questioned.** I knew exact times, and volunteered as a witness, but authorities were not interested. A close friend in 'Art Cafe' (opposite the supermarket), escaped grenades, but again no one wanted to listen.*
- ❖ **Broader questions, e.g.:** who knew about the assault before it happened, why was the crack RECCE squad not left to do the job it was trained to do, and what was the somewhat dubious involvement of the KDF in the whole saga.*

On a personal note, one of the most intriguing (but perhaps expected) aspects of this event is the way in which it is forever in my memory. Traumatic happenings I can only assume, have a similar effect for everyone. We don't remember most of what we did yesterday, but there only has to be a tiny trigger – such as a door slamming in my case – and those memories of one-off events come flooding back.

That's life, I guess.

Duncan Gregory