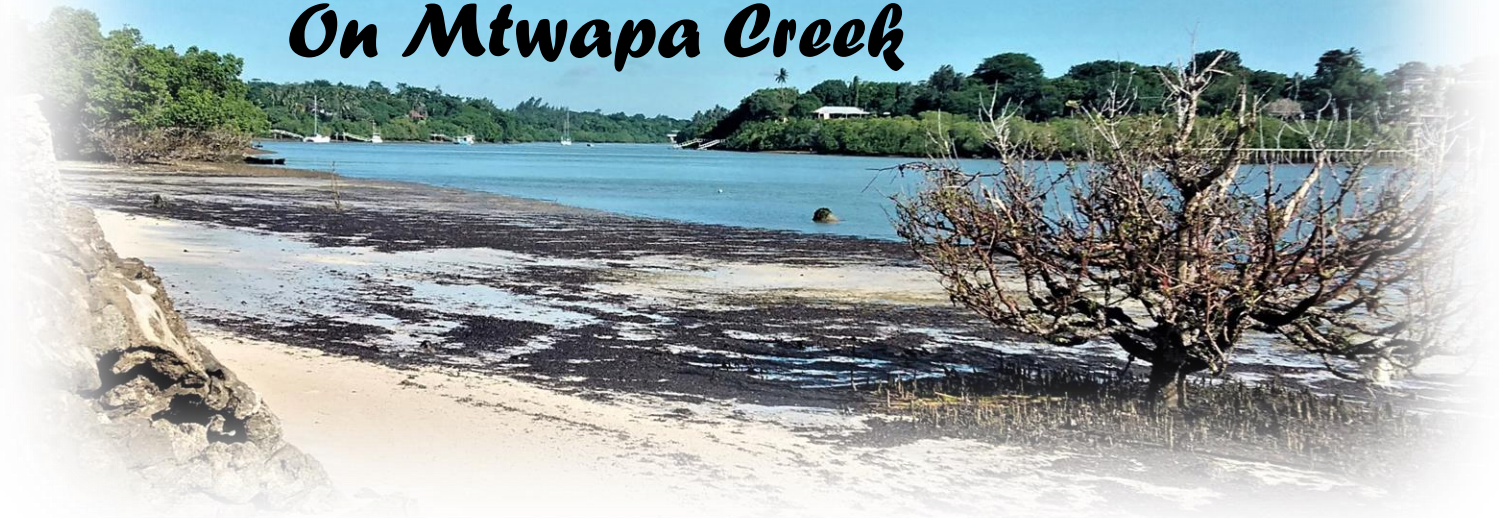


Photo Stories 1

Early Morning On Mtwapa Creek



The winter season on the coast of Kenya comes at the same time of year as Europe's summer heat, but to call it winter is a misnomer; it is still warm – both day and night - compared to anything that Europeans might refer to as *winter*.

Mtwapa Creek snakes inland from the Indian Ocean, its tides rising and falling dramatically from moon to moon. I walk there most mornings, to enliven the spirit and exercises the limbs. It is my secret *Winter Wonderland* ... but now the secret is out.

Mangroves abound here: one of the most valuable plants known to humankind. I love their comradery: they cluster together, working as a community against all the woes that man can bestow. Not aloof, like the spreading tamarind or the tall coconut palms nearby, just a down-to-earth, get-on-with-our-job kind of species that hardly anyone seems to appreciate or value enough.

I admire the way my friend the mangrove reminds me of a frog: brown, yellow, and green, happy under or above water. The beautifully symmetrical bush you see (above) stands up proud above the sand, surrounded by a multitude of air-suckers, but when the tide is high this same young beauty can be totally submerged in the river.



Looking back towards the river mouth the white and grey clouds scud across the sky, hinting of rain later in the afternoon, but for the moment, sunny with shady intervals is the order of the day.

When the tide is out the underwater rocks show their slippery charms and the knee roots of the mangroves are tall and alert, breathing in the air that sustains the roots and the tree above.

My dog is also alert: to the fauna around, particularly the countless crabs that inhabit the mangrove environment under water, then can be found burrowed deep in the sand when the shore becomes dry.



The tangle of leaves and roots make it almost impossible in places, to walk through the thicket to the water; though there are mysterious tracks through the undergrowth, which seem to talk of others that have been before.

An industrious crab sits high above the ground in its new home.





Occasionally, it is quite possible to meet larger adversaries, though they really are quite harmless ... just curious as to who is coming along to disturb their territory. The camels often sleep on the sand at night, depending on the tide, but are gone an hour or two after dawn. Sometimes though, it is possible to find them relaxing, even after that.

These camels have come all the way from Somalia to carry tourists along the beaches in Kenya. They graze and sleep around *Mtwapa Creek* during the night, then are led off by their Somali-drivers to work the beaches during the day. It's not unusual to be startled by camel's eyes in the headlight glare, shining like cat's eyes in the dark.



Walking on, I spot another marvellous example of the mangrove root habitat, which provides such a glorious playground for the multitude of tropical fish, when it is submerged in the water.

In the background can be seen blue and white coloured fishermen's nets and ropes, lying on an upturned fishing boat; an indication of what is to come a little bit further along the waterfront.



Local fishermen are here every day. Their traditional boats have been hollowed out from baobab trees which grow along the banks of the creek. They fish the river and sometimes out to sea (which comes with its very own dangers in rough waters: two men drowning, a few days after this photo was taken). But the river is quite safe; their nets strung out in a long line, or U-shape, to catch the fish as they ride back with the tide.

The men spend a lot of time between the actual fishing expeditions, cleaning and mending their nets, ready for the next time out on the water. They usually go two to a boat, but sometimes more, and even at times on their own. Certain people obviously prefer working together, others alone.



The nets, snagged on the rocks, or fish fins, or underwater debris, need constant fixing, to ensure the fish ensnared cannot escape. These men are by no means rich, so each fish caught means a little extra money.



A fisherman's life the world over reflects the rhythm of life, dependent on the seasons and on the tides. The Kenyan coast is no different. These men are dependent on a healthy environment to maintain the fish stocks, and the riverside mangrove forest is an integral part of that.



The burning of the boats ceremony! Coming across this one morning I wondered why a serviceable boat should be fueling a bonfire. But then it was all explained to me that the fire, lit with dried leaves from trees nearby, was simply an easy and effective means of getting rid of any growth or dirt on the outer side of the hull. The extremely hard baobab wood is not affected at all, but the boat will travel more smoothly through the water.

I walk on, past *Lion Rock*, and not much further along, see a piece of massive driftwood masquerading as a person reclining on the beach. Then I sit alongside my favourite *Teddy Bear Tree* and notice a giant spider in the middle of a giant web, waiting I presume, in hope that a giant fly might happen by.



Light is the one element that makes this area so magical. Light shade and colour might be a better description. The sun's rays bounce off *Lion Rock*, adding colour to its mane, then reflect from the spider and its web in front of a verdant camouflage. Light and shade almost gives quality of life to the teddy bear and the old man at rest on the beach.



It is quite amazing, the stories this *Mtwapa Creek* landscape has to tell!



I call this spot *Rock and Roots*. This is about as far as I go along the river on most days and a great place to sit and take in the beautiful surroundings. My dog also likes to swim in the water here ... and dig for crabs of course. I don't see the point really, she just plays with anything that emerges, until it homes its way back to water; petrified, I guess, if crabs can be petrified. From here too, I can look back to see the morning sun glistening on the waters of the river mouth ... quite exhilarating!



So, we wander back, past the *Leaning Baobab* and on past the fishermen, still mending their nets. Finally, we reach *The Marina*, for a well earned rest, where we share a delicious *mahamri* and chai and chat with owner, Kassim, looking out across the water to those wonderful mangroves.

