

**PROPERTY CARETAKER PROFILE****Going Wild!**

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Interests: travel, cooking, reading, cycling, hiking, kayaking, yoga, and writing

Quote: "The world is a book and those who do not travel, read only one page"



*Marcel and Aleta relaxing on the party deck*

I remember that morning so well. It was November 2019. We had been home for about two weeks, after our last five-month housesitting assignment in Southwest France, and a month touring Northern Spain, Portugal, France and finally visiting family in England. Back home in the USA, with plans for Panama, and Italy the following year, we sat drinking our morning coffee and reading emails and news. *The Caretaker Gazette* landed in the inbox and we clicked it open. As we read about Olepangi Farm in Kenya, we knew we had to apply for it:

**KENYA**

**OLEPANGI FARM.** In the foothills of Mount Kenya, East Africa sits a little piece of paradise: an award-winning safari lodge bordering millions of acres of wild space; a haven for elephants, giraffe, zebra and all the wildlife of Kenya. Olepangi Farm is looking for a mature couple, cheerful, fun, competent, handy, practical and well-travelled to help host and manage guests from around the world and assist with farm management for a three to six month placement. Lovely accommodation and fabulous food included. The farm at 6,800 feet elevation, experiences some of the best year-round weather in the world and is close to many of the best game reserves in Kenya. Please contact us at ...

What an opportunity; several months in the foothills of Mount Kenya, hosting guests at a lodge on a horse farm, taking care of the dogs when the owner was out of town, and generally making sure the guests were having a good time – we could do that! There were no set dates, but we were flexible with the Panama trip, but not so much with the Italy assignment that we had committed to. Nevertheless we needed to apply and find out more.

I immediately answered the advertisement, careful to address everything they had asked for, and telling them a little about ourselves. I sent a short concise bio, and within 24 hours we had a response and an invitation for a Skype call. We set up

the call for a few days ahead and received a link to the farm website and made our list of questions for the owner. As it happened, they required someone as soon as possible – December! We had already booked Christmas with our daughters and granddaughters in California, and after being away for six months or more, we felt we could not cancel at this late stage. Undeterred, we went ahead with the Skype call and found out that they needed someone for three-month assignments for the next couple of years, until they retired. As we had plans for the next nine months, they were happy for us to reserve our slot in advance and we decided we could do six months, December 2020 – May 2021. The interview process went very smoothly, we had our list of questions ready and the owner answered our queries. We had a short video tour of the gardens, and a brief description of our duties. Lodging and food was included, all we needed to do was book our airline tickets. We had an agreement! We were going to Africa! First Note: if you see something you are very interested in, respond as quickly as possible. There are many opportunities out there but there are also many applicants. You won't know everything about the position, but unless you apply you won't be able to ask the many questions you need to ask, before taking the position.

And so, we enjoyed our Christmas in California, where we were also lucky enough to pick up a house sit and stay an extra three weeks close to our daughter. Being retired, and having no commitments meant that we were very flexible with our time and could take any opportunity that came along. We arrived back in Florida in January 2020 and started to prepare for our month-long trip to Panama and our three month assignment in Italy during the summer, taking care of a vacation villa, and finally Kenya in December! We were excited! Then COVID-19 hit like a punch in the gut, and all our plans were blasted up into the air. Lockdowns started to kick in throughout the world and Panama closed its airport. That trip would have to wait for another time. We were still hopeful for Italy, but by the end of May, it was obvious this pandemic was not going away any time soon. The guests who had booked vacations for Italy, and who we would be assisting, all cancelled. We were disappointed but were asked to postpone until 2021; hopefully this will still happen. Second Note: If you are looking for a rent-free lifestyle, you need to be flexible and adaptable. Things change, events happen, on both sides. Be understanding, don't make it stressful; accept that it is out of your control and move on to the next option.



*Olepangi Farm Cottages and Garden*



*Marcel and Aleta ready to work, Olepangi Farm Gardens*

What about Africa? We were keeping our eyes on the African news and staying in touch with the owner via email. It was a ‘wait and see’ summer; we were becoming very bored and frustrated, with thoughts of ‘we should have been in Italy now’. So we hopped in the car, filled it with food, masks, sanitizer and Clorox wipes and enjoyed a five-week road trip out to California and back to Florida, via the five National Parks in Utah and The Rockies in Colorado. We don’t sit still well! In August, Kenya opened up its international airport, welcoming visitors once again, obviously with restrictions. We were encouraged and spoke to the owner again. She had bookings for December and January and still needed us there, so we immediately booked our flights, applied for visas and started to gather clothing and equipment. As the days drew closer to our departure date, each one was filled with a little anxiety, as the COVID-19 pandemic was still rampant worldwide, but we were determined to do whatever it took to get to Olepangi Farm, Kenya, masked up, sanitized and ready for adventure!

And then the day arrived and with quarantines, lockdowns and COVID tests all behind us we boarded the plane to Nairobi. This would be our first time in Kenya and we really didn’t know what to expect. We found the security at the airport and hotel to be tighter than expected, but the people were full of smiles and very friendly. Our stay overnight at the airport hotel overlooked Nairobi National Park and we had our first sighting of zebras, giraffes and impala, while eating breakfast on the terrace.

We were looking forward to our four hour journey to Olepangi Farm and our driver, Wilfred, arrived on time. We headed out through the Nairobi suburbs and drank in the hustle and bustle of Kenyan daily life. There were roadside stands selling all kinds of fruit, timber, rice, plants and even beds and iron gates. Sofas and mattresses for sale were set upon the red dusty earth and we even saw a three-seater sofa being transported on a moped! Everyone was busy, buying and selling, bargaining and walking with their purchases along the dusty track alongside the road. Herders grazed their cows on the grass verge, alongside children playing with sticks and string, laughing and running without a care. It seemed everything was made from scratch; the iron beds and gates, bricks for the buildings and wooden tables and chairs, and all outside on the dusty verge alongside the main road from Nairobi to Nanyuki, which was the largest town close to Olepangi Farm.

The scenery became more lush and green as we headed towards Mount Kenya. We peered out the car windows to see our first glimpse of her, but the clouds were heavy and hanging

low, so we would have to wait. We stopped for a break and bought a couple of locally crafted items. The local communities had been hit hard through lack of tourism this year, so we paid a little more than usual for a couple of hand painted dishes and a small basket. I’m sure they would come in useful.

After four hours of driving along a two-way road, where everyone was edging into the middle to overtake, we saw Mount Kenya, rising high, her twin peaks shining in the afternoon sun. We vowed to do some hiking on this beautiful mountain during our stay. As we continued to head north, we passed through rural communities where humps in the middle of the road forced the driver to slow down. As he slowed, young people and children approached the van, trying to sell their wares. We were anxious to get to our destination so did not stop to buy anything further, but would certainly visit the local towns, once we had settled in.

We finally made our turn-off to Olepangi Farm. The dirt track was deeply rutted and after a twenty-minute, very bouncy ride we arrived at the gate. We were welcomed by smiling faces, warm greetings, hot towels and freshly squeezed passion fruit juice. The sun was shining, there were elephants on the ridge across from the pool house and we sighed in relief. We were here; in Kenya eager to settle in and begin another adventure.

We have been here a few months now! How time flies! We have settled into our safari tent, and have a few creature comforts; a comfortable bed, sofa and two chairs, coffee table and hot water! No electricity in the tent, but we are outside most of the time, or in the communal areas where we can take advantage of charging phones and computers. We have seen some amazing wildlife, right outside our tent!

We have been busy with guests, coming and going over the Christmas season. The days are long, starting at 7:00am, supervising staff for breakfast set up, liaising with the guests to ensure their days are planned well, checking in new guests and saying goodbye to those leaving. We then entertain in the evenings with sundowners and finally dinner. We fall into bed at the end of the day, exhausted but feeling very blessed to be meeting such amazing people from all walks of life, and we are frequently treated to sights of zebras and giraffes on the hill opposite our tent. Watching the young elephants chase each other and the matriarchs trumpeting their warnings, is a sight we will cherish. Once the lodge is quiet we are planning a safari in Samburu, a trip to Nairobi and the Masai Mara, a visit to Ol Pejeta to see the last two remaining Northern White Rhinos and a hike on Mount Kenya. We weren’t sure we would make it but .....here we are!



*View of elephants from our tent*