



KTH Global Development Hub TRAVEL REPORT

Name: JONATHAN RINTALA

KTH Programme: CINEK15

GDH Project theme: East Africa - IT Project

Partner University: Strathmore University

Dates of Exchange: March – July 2018

Note: please include pictures if available

INTRODUCTION

I found the GDH project course in a shared post on Facebook. It looked like a totally unique opportunity, combining IT with the exotic city of Nairobi; a place considered by many the Silicon Valley of East Africa. We also wanted to find an interesting field for our bachelor thesis and doing it in a new country and context seemed like a fun challenge. The project course focusing on IT would also allow to further develop skills in programming and work in an inter-cultural team, which I deemed valuable skills to acquire and improve.

PRACTICAL INFORMATION

Pre-Departure: Before departure, me and my partner for the bachelor-thesis discussed possible subjects for our KEX, what topics we were the most interested in, etc. We also attended the GDH preparation meetings, where we got to meet Kenyan students currently studying at KTH via the equivalent project course; they told us about living in Nairobi, attending Strathmore University, and would come to be good friends that we met continuously throughout our stay. In addition, we talked with relevant course directors at KTH, in order to arrange the two classes that we couldn't attend due to our exchange. In one of the classes we presented all the labs before departure. In the other class we arranged to have our final exam at the Swedish School in Nairobi. Before leaving, we also looked into getting a Kenyan motorcycle driving license.

Accommodation: The accommodation was very conveniently arranged through KTH and we lived in a gated community in Kileleshwa, Nairobi. The neighbors were not only expats, but rather mixed of both Kenyan families and foreigners. Me and my partner for KEX shared a big apartment with balcony and we could see the other KTH students' apartment complex from our kitchen window. Living close meant we could have dinners all together, watch Melodifestivalen, cheer for Sweden in the World Cup, and spend time together. We also came to be good friends with our guards at the gate and our very kind housekeeper Moses. It was also walking distance to Westlands with lots of clubs, gym, supermarkets and restaurants.

Transport: Regarding transport, we used both Uber, Taxify and local taxis quite frequently in the beginning. There are other options like Boda Boda (motorcycle taxi) and Matatus, but it's

convenient not having to constantly negotiate about price as a Mzungu (~foreigner). However, me and my KEX partner decided to go ahead with the motorcycle license and managed to get them after about a month which made traveling so much more convenient, but most importantly, so much fun. It was total freedom, being able to do excursions outside Nairobi and experience downtown on a bike, ride together with the Boda Boda guys, get a genuine feel for the city, get lost and have to ask for directions, all of this made the exchange so much more fun.

Cost: There is a wide range of available alternatives when it comes to restaurants, groceries, home deliveries and so on; followingly, also many different price ranges. Since we lived in an expensive area of town, the cost of living and eating was about the same as in Stockholm. Also groceries, were surprisingly expensive, partly due to the fact that we often did grocery shopping in some of the large nearby malls. You can order proper food for about 80-100SEK from Jumia directly to the apartment as well, with meals like KFC chicken, Domino's pizza, Thai-style dishes, Ethiopian, etc. Eating in school on the other hand, was super cheap, with meals ranging from 10-30SEK, but it was more basic food, such as beans, vegetables, rice, chapatti etc. We also found a cheap restaurant in Westlands for 20SEK per meal, but with local food. So, if you want to eat "regular" non-Kenyan meals it is pretty much the same price level as Sweden. Worth mentioning is that gym memberships are expensive, since it is considered more of a luxury expat convenience. For phone calls and mobile data, you can use a regular SIM-card from ex. Safaricom. The prices of data are similar to those in Sweden and the reception/coverage is generally good within the city. Ubers are considerably less expensive than Sweden.

Luggage: I'm so glad I brought my autumn jacket from home. Nairobi gets really cold during the June and July, which actually are their coldest months. It was 10-12 °C at night in July and the houses are not very good isolated for cold weather like in Sweden. So, bring warm clothes. For the first months, it was also quite warm, and we could use the pool at the other KTH students' apartment, so swim gear is a given as well. Even though there is not a lot of mosquitoes in Nairobi, there is quite a bit at the coast and countryside, so bring Malaria pills for when you want to travel outside Nairobi at least. I did not bring any, so I had to get prophylaxis from my Swedish friends. There are many fake brands in the pharmacies in Nairobi so if you need to buy any malaria pills while you are there I would recommend a top tier hospital like the Nairobi Hospital. I did only use it when traveling to Mombasa and Zanzibar.

Study Experience:

The GDH project revolved around a challenge-driven model, where we together with a number of stakeholders defined a project proposition, which then was evaluated and iteratively improved until we could produce a prototype that met the needs of the stakeholders. We were three Kenyan students and two Swedish ones in my group, and we decided to do a project within the transport sector, since transport is a huge challenge in Nairobi. Our main stakeholders came to be students at Strathmore University and we eventually decided to develop a ridesharing application to meet their needs. We developed a native Android prototype with a functioning backend in Django and PostgreSQL for adding users, trips, etc. Thus, it was a great opportunity for us to improve on technical programming skills, as well as to work within a new culture and team, where all of us had slightly different experiences and education. We also practiced working in a challenge-driven way, where the problem definition comes at a fairly late stage, after really finding the root of the problem by working closely with relevant stakeholders. However, our KEX was eventually done separately from the project course, so we ended up with two projects, which was fine by us.

Three of us attended an additional class in Artificial Neural Networks and Pattern Recognition at Strathmore, which was a solid class (similar to 'DD2421 Maskinl rning' at KTH). It was good to have some continuous classes throughout the week, but they were also very flexible and understanding when we wanted to travel.

Personally, I developed a lot within programming during the exchange. Maybe not only due to the actual classes we did, but a lot thanks to being able to code together with the IT students from KTH, and have time to do some projects on our own during the stay. The experience of not only visiting, but living in East Africa, is a truly unique experience and I'm glad to have had it this early on. There are a lot of exciting things happening in the tech world of Nairobi and it's also valuable to get an insight in these types of economies which leap-frog over many stages we have had to go through. I think it is definitely an interesting place for a future startup, and getting the experience of how the culture and society works is unique. I think I also grew a lot from having to solve different problems coming up in the Nairobi everyday and interact with many different people. Doing a project in a country like Kenya comes with a lot of challenges and I think you must be prepared for some friction, but it is so worth it and it usually works out somehow at the end.

Cultural Activities/Travel:

We had some time to travel around and outside Nairobi. We did a trip together with all KTH students to Mombasa with the train for a few days of tanning, swimming and sightseeing. Then I did a solo trip to Zanzibar, Tanzania where I met up with two of the KTH students during some of the days. In Zanzibar I got my Open Water PADI diving certification which was amazing.

There are some solid clubs and good nightlife in Nairobi, with a variety of genres ranging from hip-hop and dancehall to techno and house. For example, we went to a Rick Ross outdoors concert which was a pretty insane experience. Finally, we did a lot of sightseeing around Nairobi, especially since we had the bikes. We visited a Giraffe Centre, tea plantage, schools, did some smaller safaris, hiked in the Karura forest, played golf, and also took our bikes up over the Ngong Hills. So, Nairobi has some pretty awesome scenery and nature to offer as well. The people in Kenya are generally super nice, friendly and helpful; it is always easy to ask for directions or small talk with someone on the street. Everyone smiles!

Video from my daily bike commute to Strathmore University: <https://youtu.be/GTzqY4cnF3A>

Conclusion:

I have traveled a lot, but there is nothing like what I have experienced in East Africa. It is something about it. Even though, it all seems chaotic and you might not appreciate all of it while you are there, there is something that keeps me wanting to go back. The freedom and opportunities there are quite special. I will most definitely be back some day.















