



URBAN SWARAS RUNNING CLUB

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Hello Swaras,

It is great to see Swaras have hit the 2019 roads hard, going by the impressive mileage haul on the Swara Garmin leaderboard.

Some of us, however, are content to stay in the shadows and take it easy, like Millicent Maina, who graces this issue as the main feature.

But if toning down is not your thing, that's alright, different strokes.

Most of us have been putting in the hard work in preparation for Kilimanjaro Marathon coming up on 3rd March. Kili is now an annual Swara pilgrimage, which will be overrun by more than 70 Swaras this year. To the Kili bound Swaras, go well, run well and be sure to enjoy comely Moshi.

Out East we'll have Felicita, Avani, Rebecca and Davis representing in Tokyo, may the speeds be with you.

As we wait for a busy running weekend, here is a little running collection for you.

Cheruiyot,

USRC Newsletter.

From the patron

Dear fellow Swaras,

It is with great pleasure that I make my maiden appearance on this platform as patron of this great club!

Foremost, thank you for granting me the honourable privilege of being your 2nd patron. My predecessor, the outgoing patron Mr. Surinder Dhadiala, whose patronage has seen the club grow from strength to strength has left me big shoes to fit in, it is only right we appreciate him and what he has done for the club.

We have witnessed a lot of interest in Urban Swaras, both locally and internationally, making us the club of choice for many, including those on short vacations in Kenya. We wouldn't have achieved this without you and the selfless sacrifice of our Committee of Routes and Events (CRE) under the able leadership of Chairman Ajaa Olubayi.

In the recreational runners' frontier, Urban Swaras club is not only transforming the lives of its members but is also playing a great deal in promoting social and recreational running in this country. A lot of our domestic tourism running cannot go unnoticed in the various counties we have covered so far.



As we approach the club's 10th anniversary, let us all rally together by taking part in the club's upcoming runs and by inviting new members to join our great club.

I wish all Urban Swaras a happy and exciting experience running through the year 2019. Let us continue living up to our mantra: running is living! Let us build on the transformational experiences in our running lifestyle; one of the most interesting parts, when we get together, is when we share these experiences.

Keep running!

Regards,

Wahome. ■

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Running is living!

Millicent Wanjiru Maina



You can't miss her, she is that Swara with greying hair and motherly air. She cuts the picture of one who would look upon a warring faction and there would be peace. We approached Millicent to pry into her running, and being the nice person she is, she obliged.

So who is she?

Millicent describes herself as a Wife, Mother and Grandma.

Her running epitomizes the no-pressure-feel-good kind of runner, an accurate representation of the term 'recreational runner'. A term that is a little uncomfortable being associated with the growing crop of aggressive, PB chasing, mileage pushing, Stats crazed breed of 'recreational' runners...

Millicent is 58 years old. Swaras have this growing ritual of running one's age (or a multiple thereof) on their birthdays. Millicent, to commemorate turning 58, made her own rules and ran half her age, 29 km, no pressure. She started running just for the fun of it, no particular reason. She's grown to love running and is thankful she's always enjoyed good health.

58 years old or not, she is also quite active on the Swara social platforms of Facebook and WhatsApp. Where she generally gives any controversies a wide berth.

Running History

Millicent ran as a young girl in primary and high school, representing her schools in relays and short races. She hated cross country and therefore retired after high school. And so we fast forward to 2013. And she says;

"My journey of running started by run-walking the 2013 StanChart half marathon. In 2014 I enrolled for the 1st beyond zero marathon. On my way to the venue, a lady asked me for a lift. The lady was in crutches (due to an injury and couldn't drive). As we engaged in talk she told me how at 50 she had started running, that she runs with a club by the name of Urban Swaras. She told me how to join and I signed up only to register my son George whose page the laptop was in. I later signed myself up and we started running together. After I joined I came to know her as 'Tata' Joyce Nduku. I owe my running to her for it wouldn't have known this unique club."

It almost goes without saying that Millicent is not a PB mercenary, the thought of her going for a PB seems a little far-fetched.

Running Schedule

Before joining Swaras Millicent didn't run much, participating in StanChart and Beyond Zero half marathons with no training. She used to go to the gym though, where she would find it difficult to run for 5 minutes on the treadmill.



Speedy Days, 3rd position

Main Feature

After joining Swaras, Millicent would rarely run on weekdays, her staple runs being the normal Saturday Swara runs where she would do either the 15 or 20 km distances. Never feeling the need to graduate to the longer distances or up her weekly mileage. However, this has changed as she has lately joined a group of Swaras who run in Ngong;

"I've now joined the Ngong Tuesday and Thursday group who have made running easier for me by their patience and encouragement". The group, however, seems to have infected her with the PB madness and she may soon start working on a good time. Running in Ngong effectively increased her weekly mileage haul to up to about 40km.

She has also been fired up by a ladies mileage challenge created by someone she refers to as "The Amazing Avani", this challenge has kept Millicent on the run in February and she is excited to have run 163.3 km in 21 days.

Running exploits

Millicent enjoys Swaras runs, mostly the out of Nairobi outings with happy and fun loving Swaras.

"I'm this kind of a runner who comes out of nowhere and decides to run. No earlier training and that's what happened last year (2018) when I decided to run the 45km Mt. Kenya Ultra. Being my 1st full marathon distance, I was so determined to finish and get that medal (which I still have to pick)."

And just like that, the Half Marathon lost one of its most stubborn adherents. She is not committing to full marathons though but says it could happen.

Before the 45km Mt. Kenya Ultra, Millicent's longest distances were a 37 km at the 2nd Mt. Kenya Ultra and a 31 km solo run on the 31st of December 2017 to close the year.

Favourite Swara Runs

KEFRI
Ngong-Kahara

Favourite running Event

Naivasha Relay

Most Dreaded Run

Eco Lodge

Races Participated (all Half marathons)

- Stanchart 3 times
- Kilimanjaro 3 times
- Ndakaini once
- Menengai trail run
- Mutuini Half Marathon
- Beyond Zero 2 times (DNF'd once)
- Naivasha Relay 2 times
- Old Moses Classic Half Marathon twice (DNF'd once)
- Run for the Bibleless



Cooling of heels in Flourspar



Flight mode, Naivasha Relay



Muddy at Mt. Kenya

Fun times at Naivasha

Toughest experiences

"In my runs, the worst experience was during the 2nd Mt. Kenya ultra. This was really tough because it was very muddy, I had two muscle pulls on both legs at different times all alone in the forest, I fell in the mud, got lost and used a route where I got stuck in the mud, no water or sight of anyone. I'm used to running alone because I'm a slow runner/jogger but this was different, you can imagine how relieved I felt when finally I saw a Shopping Centre where I gulped down a Fanta. I finally found my way to the finish."

"Another painful experience was the 2nd Beyond Zero marathon where at only 2 km I couldn't move due to pain. I suspected it was due to physio the previous day. That is the day I knew how it feels to drop out while everyone else is running. All the reason elites crawl to the finish regardless of the pain."

"Another episode is at Fluorspar which was so difficult I couldn't go beyond 22 km. I wanted to hop into a car and some Swaras assured me the finish point "no vaa" (just around the corner). I had to take a Boda Boda as I'm told Swaras don't sit down but keep on moving!"

On Injury

"I once had Plantar Fasciitis, sometimes I experience knee pains when running downhill. Nothing that physio has not been able to take care of. A few weeks ago I started feeling some sharp pains under my left toes which I thought is because of my increased mileage."

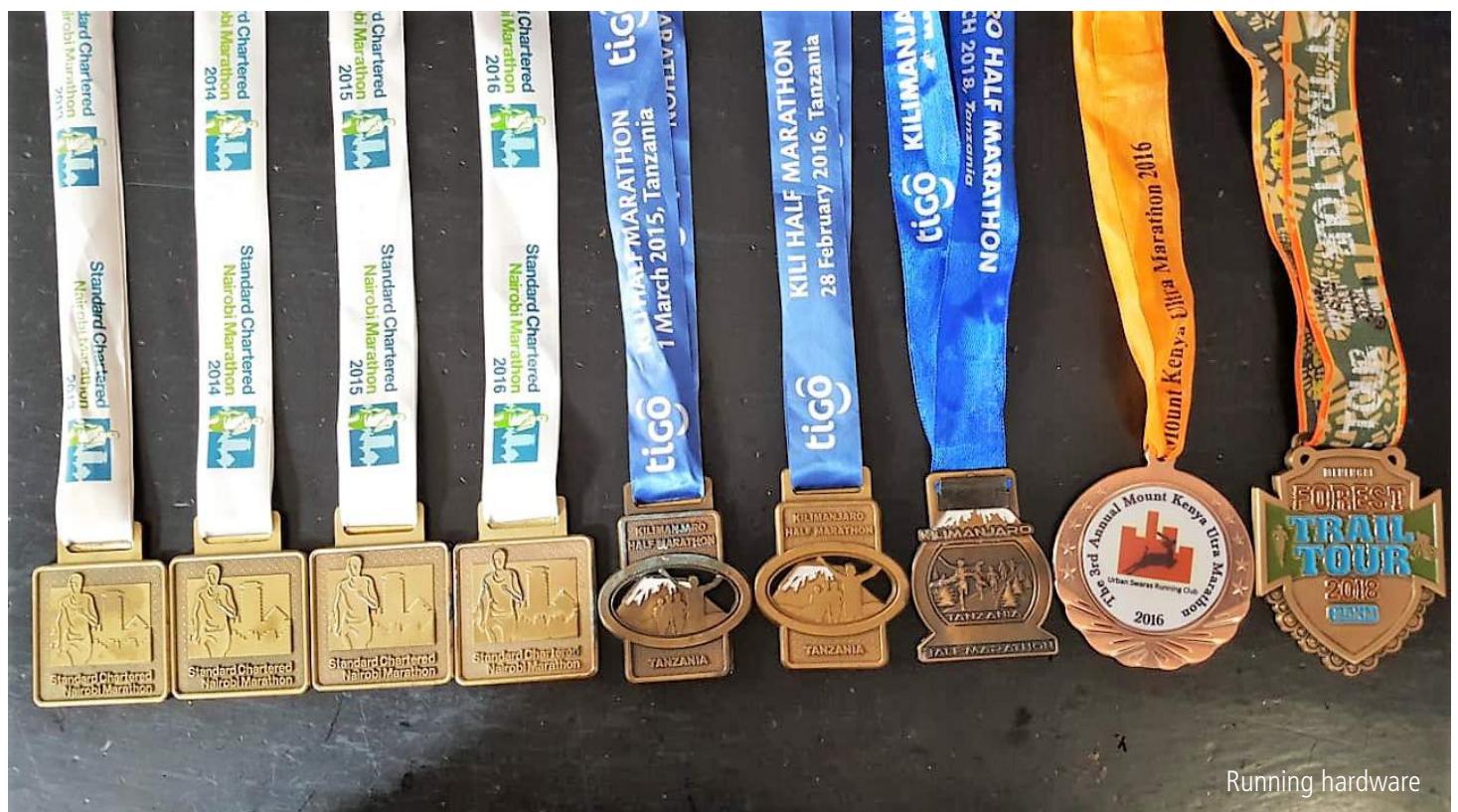
On Family

Millicent's family is happy and supportive of my runs. "My Husband especially, and so I experience no Visa denial on the out of town runs". Millicent has introduced her sister Lucy to Swaras, her husband is not left behind and he too can be spotted in some Swara runs.

Running is one of the best things that has happened to me, keeps me fit and happy and stressless. I tend to feel light and active, makes me forget my age sometimes. ■



Millicent, Sister, Son and Mister



Running hardware

Why I sweat it out in wild nature; you should try it too

by Charity Kamunya

Musings



The sun does not scorch, and there is little dust



It's heaven defined for an introvert



The terrain is flat here and steeps there, good for cardio, resilience and balance



The heart responds to silence, chirping birds and insect noises



The air is suffused with oxygen



There's always a moment to meditate and pray



Everyone around is busy doing their thing: praying, jogging, walking their dog or sharing a deep moment with a friend



The fluffy grass is ideal for stretches



You can choose a new route every time and Actual cycling may be an available option



It minds the pocket



Morning? Afternoon? Evening? Have your take any day without breaking any schedule



A friend can always join you



When it's time to take a break, you can sit on a log, smell the flowers, wonder at the gigantic trees or soak in some vitamin D



Brilliant ideas flow through, and stress takes flight



You won't want to leave, and when you do you'll be looking forward to the next experience. A beautiful addiction.

Amazing Graceland

by Claire Baker

The title for this write-up actually came to me on kilometre 37, with two of my favourite running buddies beside me, with a blister burgeoning on the side of my left foot, and the remnants of a handful of marshmallows leaving their residual, and somewhat comforting, stickiness and powderiness on my palms. I think the reason this phenomenal pun hadn't come to me in years gone by was that we'd never done an Ultra Marathon at Graceland. We'd never had quite such a fantastic turnout, and we'd certainly never yet reached the EIGHTH EDITION of this legendary out-of-town run. For this reason, this 8th edition brought things and thoughts out of us that we didn't know we had in us.

As always, busloads and carloads of Swaras, casual runners, Hashers, and visiting schools arrived at ungodly hours between Friday and Saturday. A lucky bunch of 60 of us made it in time for the abundant Friday night banquet laid on by our host, Wachira, and his resplendent daughter Grace, and wife Mary. The carbs were plenty, overflowing with taste, quantity and warmth, and the same can be said for the several bottles of whisky on offer. It seems we were being good boys and girls though, for after the live band regaled us with some dulcet tones and registration was complete, everyone trundled off to their respective beds and tents, cradling full bellies and pre-race jitters, leaving the bottles still half full.

**8th EDITION
290+ RUNNERS**

I was one of the foolhardy Swaras who undertook the inaugural Graceland Ultra, so there was no time to enjoy the beauty of a brisk Graceland morning, as it was assembly at 7 am sharp, with our very own Patron flagging us off (almost) on time. It was clear that the vast majority of Graceland runners were sticking to the safer distances, but the small cohort of bandy-legged athletes with varying degrees of preparedness was raring to go and in high spirits (I had scoffed a banana, some had skipped breakfast, and some were carrying all the supplies they would need for the journey).

The most daunting thing about the Graceland Upcountry run is the start. The first 500 m brings you face-to-face with what feels like a sheer vertical wall of cobblestone driveway to climb up and with every step it felt like we were slipping backwards. Thankfully, the next 44.5 km were a comparative walk in the park (that's a slight exaggeration, but you'll allow it I'm sure, kind reader). I fell into a comfortable pace with my long-time rival and running buddy, Michael Chemonges, and Thomas Bond, who will never get over me overtaking him once, and only once (never to happen again). We kept each other company, telling each other stories of yesteryear (mostly non-running related and some not fit for public consumption), and keeping each other in check when one of us started to get a bit too feisty or, on the opposite end of the spectrum, started to lose a bit of momentum.

The support for the 45km runners was exemplary. I discovered the magic of marshmallows. What I thought was the preserve of children and camp fires turned out to be the rocket-up-the-bum I needed to keep going, after every 7 or 8 km. Sodas, fruits, plenty of water, and these marshmallows, were on hand whenever we needed them, thanks to Wachira, Grace and their able assistants.

I have it on good authority that every single one of the 290+ people who ran, be it the 15, 25 or 45 km, had a great time, were proud of themselves and their peers, and got that fist-bump feeling at the finish line, especially those that got individual cheers from the watching crowd as they arrived whilst the medal ceremony was ongoing! Graceland is a run for all, and for the benefit of young women who hold the key to their own futures and those of their communities. We were able to take to the stage to address them and give them some words of encouragement, and this just after some of them had occupied the stage with their awe-inspiring presence, voices, and dance moves.

As usual, the prize giving was a lavish affair, with speeches, dignitaries, prizes, and...sadly, rain! This didn't dampen our spirits though, and Nyokabi braved the rain to photograph and video every single person that took to the stage. Congratulations to all the winners, especially our own Ruth Macharia, who presented stiff competition to the standing champion, Mary Mwaniki, hats off to the both of them! Some incredible trailblazing athletes (non-Swaras, imagine) dominated in the men's category and gave our boys a good run for their money.

The rain was about as unstoppable as a typical Swara, and so the traditional post-run lunch was decamped from the riverside to the house, with everyone cosying up for warmth and space, or perhaps that was just an excuse.

As always, with Swaras, the competition is with yourself, and with pushing yourself to always do better, whilst having a bloomin' good time (see what I did with the 'bloomin'' there? we got roses at the end...), as a community, and for a good cause! Bring on the 9th edition, where who knows what awaits us! ■



Ultra-Marathon



Swaras probably wondering what was taking so long for the race to start



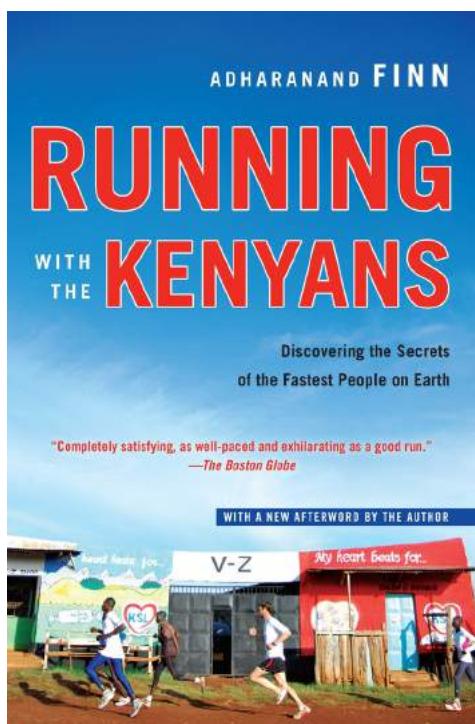
Some of the ladies in their element



The men following the ladies closely

Runner's Library

A review by Jerusha Nzembi



What exactly makes Kenyans (well, the elite) the greatest long-distance runners? Upsetting world records and all? This question has baffled so many people the world over as they watch the magnificent runners effortlessly beat the pants off the rest of the world in most running events.

That is the question that saw Adharanad Finn ship his family from England to Kenya to learn what it is that makes Kenyans so damn good!

Running with the Kenyans presents an account of his six months stay in Iten, living and training with the best of the best in a bid to understand why Kenyans dominate long-distance running. Through his training, and thereafter participation in the Lewa Marathon, he learns and shares invaluable lessons about running - and about life.

This book is an easy read for anyone with a passion for running. Happy reading! ■

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Running is a brutal and emotional sport. It's also a simple, primal sport. As humans, on a most basic level, we get hungry, we sleep, we yearn for love, we run. -

Adharanand FINN.

Tidbits

RUNNING TRIVIA ...'Non-illegal' Doping

Early endurance running had many cases of athletes using drugs (which were not banned back then). Interestingly doping was first banned in horse races before moving to humans in the neighborhoods of 1928 .

1904 Olympic Marathon:

The winner, Thomas Hicks, used small amounts of Sulphate of Strychnine and Brandy during the race. His trainer said they had decided "to inject him with a milligram of sulphate of strychnine and to make him drink a large glass brimming with brandy". Hicks then "set off again as best he could". But one hit was not enough. "He needed another injection four miles from the end to give him a semblance of speed and to get him to the finish." Hicks collapsed after finishing the race and was too weak to collect his medal. He never raced again.

1908 Olympic Marathon in London:

Dorando Pietri was handed Strychnine (diluted in wine) and atropine during the race. Dorando, however collapsed towards the end of the race and was helped across the finish line. Which led to his disqualification. The Queen, however, was impressed by his heroics and awarded him a Gold Cup.



Thomas Hicks assisted by his handlers



Dorando Pietri close to finishing

2019 Wrap-up: January and February

Running Events

MARATHONS

5 gold label marathons have been run so far - 6 Ethiopian winners, 3 Kenyans, 1 Belarusian.

1. Xiamen Marathon, January 5th: The first Gold Label marathon of 2019. It is famous for its scenic coastal course. 2019 was dominated by Ethiopians.

- Male Winner: Dejene Debela, 2:09:26
- Female Winner: Medina Deme Armino, 2:27:25

2. Dubai Marathon, January 25th: Promoted by the organizers as the 'fastest marathon' in the world, they are keen to have fast times posted on the course and world records set there. 2019 saw new course records for both men and women.

- Male Winner: Getaneh Mola, Ethiopian, 2:03:34. Sixth fastest marathon time
- Female Winner: Ruth Chepngetich, Kenyan, 2:17:08. Third fastest women's marathon time.

Swaras too were represented by Wachira Nderitu, Raoul Kamadjeu and Alix

3. Mumbai marathon, January 20th: The largest marathon and biggest mass participation sporting event in India.

- Male Winner: Cosmas Lagat, 2:09:15, Kenyan
- Female Winner: Worknesh Alemu, 2:25:45

4. Hong Kong Marathon February 17th

- Male Winner: Barnabas Kiptum 2:09:20, Kenyan
- Female Winner: Volha Mazuronak 2:26:13, Belarusian

5. Seville Marathon, February 17th: The flattest course in Europe and therefore a good location for PBs.

- Male Winner: Ayana Tsedat, 2:06:36, Ethiopian
- Female Winner: Guteni Shone, 2:24:29, Ethiopian

ULTRAMARATHONS

Two ultras stand out in the first 2 months of 2019

1. Yukon Arctic Ultra: 3rd Feb 2019

- Location: Canada
- Touted as the world's Coldest and toughest ultra, temperature dipping to -40°C
- Distances: 430 miles (12 out of 40 entrants finished), 300 miles (3 finishers 6 entrants), 100 miles (1entrants 6 finishers), Marathon
- It is a self-supported race and the mandatory requirements look something like this:

Just to show how serious this ultra is, mandatory gear reads like;

- Head torch, 2 sets of outdoor matches in waterproof container, fire starter (paste or similar – to help you start your wood fire quickly), Winter sleeping mat, Sleeping bag rated down to -45 or lower extreme zone, expedition down jacket with at least 400 g down fill (size large), Bivouac bag or tent, Emergency whistle, Compass, Personal first aid kit including blister dressings, space blanket, hot shots, anti-nausea pills, anti-diarrhoea pills, vaseline or similar, anti-bacterial agent, dressings for cuts, expedition type multi-fuel stove and fuel to melt snow and prepare meals, 1 pot (with at least 1 litre volume), 1 cup and bowl with spoon, Enough emergency food provisions to last 48 hours, Small saw, Vacuum insulated stainless steel bottles with total volume of at least 3 litres, GPS, Crampons, Avalanche shovel

Oh, and one has to be able to communicate in English. The race rules read like a book and for good reason.

2. Montane Spine race, 12th January 2019

- Location: The UK
- Distance: 268 miles
- This is the race where Jasmin Paris came up top finisher overall, beating the entire field including male participants, setting the course record in the process. Still a breastfeeding mother to her 14 month old daughter, she had to express milk frequently during the race. ■

What I think About When I Don't Think About Running

by Ndungu Kahihu

Have you ever wondered what I do when I am not running? Drinking of course, but that is not exercise. Well, wonder no more. I am about to tell you. I do two things (a) I pace the Worlds airports. I have paced so many that I can describe a typical airport with my eyes closed. In fact if you ever want to design an airport, talk to me. I'll do it for you. (b) I pick massive fights with bureaucrats of all kinds from anywhere on Earth and beyond. I suspect St Peter and I will have a mighty dust up when I finally show up, late as usual, at the pearly gates. For sure I'll have none of that 'sorry your file is missing, check the other place' nonsense. Sometimes these two pastimes collide, with almost tragic consequences. Read on.

After more than 25 years of traipsing around the world, I always knew it was bound to happen one day. With hundreds of borders crossed and what feels like a million years wasted in Airport departure halls, it was simply a matter of time. It simply had to happen. Too bad it was Somalia that got the dubious honor. At one point I had thought Sudan would take it, or maybe one of the post communist Eastern European countries, whose border guards it seemed, assumed that any foreigner who dared to show up in their country was automatically a spy, unless he could prove he wasn't.

You might know that feeling, often the stuff of nightmares. You are in a taxi heading to the airport. You are late for a flight. You are mentally willing the driver to go faster. But he doesn't seem to get the memo. After an agonizingly slow drive you arrive at the airport curbside, only to find out that you forgot to bring your passport. Your flight is already boarding. That announcer lady is calling your name, in that accusing tone that guarantees you will be the least popular passenger when you finally board. Why do they always use women for such dirty jobs? Then you mercifully wake up and realize it was all a dream.

Except it wasn't. I lived this nightmare on a visit to Mogadishu last year. It was my second legal entry into Somalia ever. I am sure those booze smuggling trips through Liboi and Mandera, back in my younger days, don't count. The websites I had consulted were clear enough. "It is possible to get a visa on arrival in Mogadishu" they said. Followed quickly by the rider "Don't go, Mogadishu is the most dangerous city on Earth."

What they didn't say was that, to get a visa on arrival, you had to hold a Western country passport. Kenya is not a Western country. So I became a victim of our African' beggar thy neighbor' policies that treat our own worse than we treat strangers.

An airline representative was later to explain this policy in blunt language. Somalia treats Kenyans the way Kenya treats Somali people. It is true that all your neighbors allow you visa free entry but you have not extended that courtesy to your eastern neighbor. So there! "Meza wembe," he nearly added.

The import of all this is, I land in Mogadishu bearing the wrong country passport and without either a visa or an entry permit (they are different, you need a permit in order to get a visa). The fresh faced immigration officer I meet is not amused. He speaks in a thin, offended voice. The kind you would use if you discovered that your old man had just stolen your goat and sold it. You are not happy but there is little you can do about it. Except sulk.

He speaks: "You have to tell your host to call here and get you a permit."

So I call Ben, the driver who was to meet me at Abdi Dulle airport on arrival. It does not go well.

"Good morning. Do you have a permit?" Ben asks me.

"No. But I have an invitation letter," I add, hopefully.

"You have to have a permit first, then an invitation letter. Where are you now?"

"Stuck on the wrong side of immigration. That is where I am! I am beginning to get a bit testy." Ben should know I woke up at 4.00am to catch a flight.

"Can you lift up your hand?" He asks. So I do.

"OK. Let me call the office and see if there is anything we can do."

About ten minutes later Ben calls back. His voice is sounding even more mournful than before.

"Are you sure you don't have even a visa for Somalia?"

Away from Running

"Not even a small piece," Ben

A long deep mournful sigh comes floating through the ether. Ben is not having a good morning.

"OK, I call you back."

Thirty minutes later Ben's colleague shows up and introduces himself.

"I am from SKP. I need your passport," he says, imperiously.

I silently point to the fresh faced Immigration officer who still has my papers with him. SKP approaches Immigration and says something in Somali.

Suddenly a dramatic altercation ensues. The young officer is shouting in Somali and waving his hands around. I can't tell what he is saying, but I know I am the subject because he keeps pointing at me. It seems my visa-less arrival has upset some mysterious bureaucratic superstructure and now threatens to bring down the entire Somali nation. My, would be savior shrinks from this onslaught. He starts walking backwards in fear. He is shaking his head from side to side. The next time I see him, he is sprinting away from the arrivals hall, into a much smaller office near the corner. Not to be seen again, I assume. But I am wrong.

I pride myself on being a veteran of many bureaucratic wars. Some won but many lost. But the sudden display of anger by the young Immigration officer has shaken me up. I begin to do some morbid contemplation:

"What is the worst that could happen to me here," I ask myself? "Deportation? Jail? The firing squad?" Of course none of these options appeal to me.

So I walk to the far back of the hall, so far I that am almost spilling onto the airport runway. I sit on a bench and compose the most innocent looking, Zen like face, I can come up with. Every time the young officer looks my way I pretend to be busy examining my finger nails or reading my phone or admiring the brand new Airport. Two Turkish fellow travellers have joined me. It seems they are in the same boat as I am. You would have thought that Turkey gifting Somalia with a brand new airport would have saved her citizens from the anger of bureaucrats, but no.

I reach for my tried and tested weapon against bureaucracy. No, not a bribe - although that comes in handy sometimes. Waiting. Not that waiting always works, but I have some pretty solid experience. I once waited 15 years for a new generation ID card in Kenya. So, waiting is how the next two hours slowly drift by.

But to wait well, you have to be a good waiter. That I am not. After 3 hours waiting in Somalia I find myself losing my cool, Zen or no Zen.

"I may have made a mistake but surely this is no way to treat a visitor," I say to myself.

"But what about that firing squad?," I counter.

"No one will ever spend a whole day dying! To be a man is to be a man!"

Not my words, I wish they were. That was my Grandfather; from many years back when I was barely 5, yelling at me anytime I showed some sign of weakness.

So I stand up straight, gather any vestiges of courage around me and march to the immigration desk. I make a thundering arrival and to my relief, find that the young visa officer has gone for lunch. The two new fellows who have replaced him look more amenable to reason, or so I think to myself.

"I have a return ticket for Nairobi" I am trying to use my most commanding voice here. "Since you will not let me into your country, I demand to be allowed into the departures lounge so that I can check in for the return flight."

This is when everything changes. The two fellows listen politely. Then they point to their boss and ask me to go speak to him. I march over to the boss and repeat my demand. I even show him my return ticket.

"That is OK," he says immediately. "Where is your passport?"

"Your people took it," I return accusingly. Maybe I could exact some revenge on the obdurate visa officer. You know, get him into some trouble. It doesn't work. The boss is all professional.

"All right, gam with me."

So I go with him. He retrieves my passport. Then he hands me over to that rare phenomenon, a

smiling immigration officer. His name is Liban, at least that is what the badge on him claims. The boss gives Liban a rapid set of orders. The only words I can hear are airbot, visa, debarture and debort. From this I gather Liban is to ensure I have passed the departure side of the airport.

For the first time in my traveling life, I am being deported.

Liban first takes me to the airline check in desk. It is not open yet. So he delivers me to an airline rep a few offices down the hall and explains the situation. The rep looks worried. He breaks into Kiswahili in an attempt to find how I managed to arrive in Somalia visaless and permitless. I can understand his worry. In most cases his airline would be fined by the Government for letting me board without all travel documents. Luckily for him, the Government rep of the day is Liban. He either has no clue or doesn't care. Turns out he is a very popular fellow and he has already drifted away to say hello to some of his many female fans.

The short of it is that the airline rep first extracts a verbal promise from me that I will not blame them for my mishap. I am quite happy to oblige. I'll promise anything as long as there is no mention of firing squads or dungeons. Then he asks Liban to deposit me at the departure hall and promises to make sure I board the return flight.

That should have been enough adventure for one day, but for two other events:

Before he leaves me, Liban has to explain the situation to his immigration colleagues at the departure hall, so that they don't arrest me when I show up without an entry stamp or visa. But he is not bothered to go to where they are and decides to address them from across the hall. This reminds that Somali men have probably the loudest voices ever made. I think God was half deaf when he created them. And they are not afraid to use them. Two Somali men will hold a detailed conversation across a football field, with no inhibitions at all. I can't tell what Liban is shouting but I can easily guess. Every Somali speaker in the hall has stopped what they are doing. They are all looking at me: "What? You are being deported?" If I was a Mzungu I am sure my face would have turned a brilliant red.

Luckily, at about this time my savior from back in the morning, the one we last saw sprinting away at the arrivals hall, shows up. It turns out his name

is Ahmed and he has been working hard to save me from the consequences of my folly. He has even secured a permit in my name. He wants to know if I need to get the visa now so that I can go for my meeting. I tell him it is too late to go. He asks if I want to take a tour of Mogadishu before I travel back. I politely decline. I have had enough Mogadishu to last a whole year.

From this point on, Ahmed takes over. He ensures I am checked in and even delivers me through the departure immigration gauntlet. The passport control officers quickly wave us through when he explains the situation and shows them my brand new permit.

"You are not being deported," he says with a wink and an impish smile. "After all, now you have the right documents to enter Somalia. In fact you can use this permit when you come back next time. It is valid for one month."

"Thank you very much, Ahmed. How much do I owe you for all this?" He looks at me strangely. I begin to wonder if I have said something wrong. Then he makes a quick call to Ben.

"You don't owe anything. Since you, technically, did not enter Somalia, you don't have to pay for visa. But when you come next time, you show this permit and pay 60 dollar. And if you have any trouble I be here." He proudly shows me his 'all points' airport access pass.

With those words Ahmed waves a quick goodbye and takes off. He may not know it but he has just earned his nation and people a lifelong fan. I will certainly be back in Somalia. ■