

How Elaine Bannon's Kenyan holiday changed her life

Rejecting materialism, she moved there as a volunteer to help the Masai tribes, writes Karen Coleman

WHEN Irish woman Elaine Bannon flew to Kenya for her 40th birthday in 2002, she expected a stress-free holiday photographing wildlife in Kenya's safari parks and relaxing on Mombasa's palm-fringed white beaches. But instead, her holiday turned into a life-changing journey that catapulted Elaine from the middle-class comfort of her Dublin life to the insecurity of the dusty African bush working with the Masai tribes.

"I realised that going to work every day I was really stressed which I didn't like. And I became tired of what I saw around me. Everybody wants more money, more DVDs, more material things. And I had just come from a place where I saw the poverty. You can see it with your naked eye," explains Elaine in her modest two-bedroom bungalow in Rombo, southern Kenya.

Bannon was no different from many midlifers who reflect on their past and question their future. But unlike the majority, the feisty redhead acted on her instincts and exchanged rush-hour Dublin for the dirt paths of the bush where the only gridlock is the odd goat or cow ambling across the plains.



Elaine Bannon at a recently constructed water well and with her Masai partner, Elijah

After resigning from her job with a Dublin lighting firm, Elaine headed off to Mombasa where she started work as a volunteer on local projects.

Four-and-a-half years on Elaine has integrated into Kenya, living in Rombo near the Tanzanian border. The majestic Mount Kilimanjaro overlooks her village, where the weekly Friday market is thronged with colourful Masai warrior men and women dressed in vivid purple, red and white costumes.

Bannon works as an independent volunteer helping the Masai tribes by raising funds for essential necessities like water wells, school classrooms and medical clinics. She badgers friends and family in Ireland to provide school fees for Masai children unable to afford a basic education. She is also involved in educational programmes that encourage the

Masai to abandon their brutal tradition of female circumcision.

The Masai, who live mainly in Kenya and Tanzania, are one of the few remaining tribes in Africa who continue to live by their culture and tradition. They live in huts made of cow dung and mud. Masai warriors pride themselves on their ability to kill lions and fend off dangerous wildlife from their villages.

They are nomadic farmers surviving on a diet of meat and milk

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from their cattle, goats and sheep. But life has got tougher for them with recent droughts and diseases bringing considerable hardship. Thousands of their animals died of starvation in 2006 when Kenya experienced one of the worst droughts in recent memory. This year, a disease known as rift valley fever killed more of their animals.

"When I go home and when I look around me, you know what I think? That this world is unfair. I see people with mobile phones that can do the most amazing things. And I'm living where people have no water. And to me it just seems like the world is upside-down," says Elaine, unable to hide her frustration at the stark differences between life in Kenya and Dublin.

She admits it is tough making ends meet. She gets money for her projects by cajoling friends

and family back home to donate funds. Generous donations from rotary clubs in Ireland have helped Elaine to bring clean water and new classrooms to Masai villages. A small stipend from the Dublin-based Kedington group helps to keep her going.

"I don't really worry about me and my life because I see my life as being OK. I know it's very, very basic. But it's not a bad life. I eat every day. I have everything I need. I'm comfortable. So I don't worry about the lack of the luxuries at home. To be honest, I'm happier here now than I was in the last 10 years in Ireland."

Elaine has found love as well as fulfilment in Rombo. She lives with her partner, Elijah, who is from a local Masai tribe and who was lucky enough to get an education. He now works with Elaine on her projects. Although he is 10 years younger than her, Elijah plans to marry Elaine some day.

The couple have also taken three children under their wing, whom they say they rescued from abusive backgrounds. They are paying for the children to go to boarding schools in the hope they can escape the debilitating poverty of their backgrounds.

"I can't see myself going back permanently to the other lifestyle. I just can't. I just love these people. They are just so beautiful and so kind and so needy."

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Karen Coleman presents the Wide Angle on Newstalk every Sunday morning from 10am-1pm