

# LIFE ON THE DANGEROUS SIDE

By Markus Dieling, Development Aid Worker from Germany stationed in Nairobi, Kenya  
Photo by Markus Dieling

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The matatu on the right comes closer and closer, there is another one on the left – same distance away! I am in Kenya, and while a matatu is not a wild animal, it is no less dangerous. Matatus are the minibuses that serve as public transport here and in many other African countries.





The drivers of these buses are real "professionals" who work up to 18 hours a day, often under the influence of drugs and alcohol, and who are not scared of anything other than being fast enough to earn the money they need at the end of the day. Like most of the drivers, their vehicles are in really bad condition, and sharing the roads with them every day is for me the most dangerous thing in Nairobi. I have lived here for a year now, and after having experienced these guys and their style of driving I was quite sure that I needed something stronger

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around my family and me than a small saloon car! After four years in Afghanistan, where we were not allowed to drive our own cars, we came here without a car and at first we were thinking of buying a used one on arriving in the country. We spent two weekends checking the car bazaars and found enormously high prices for used cars that never had the original engine, were more like 5th hand instead of first hand as announced, and with tires that should have been changed the previous year. So we decided to investigate the feasibility of importing a new car. Time was of the essence because our rented car was costing us USD 500 per week, so we did not want to wait three months for the arrival of a new car.

Finally we found our car already standing in South Africa via Kjaer Group A/S, ordered it - and it arrived in Nairobi by air transport only 10 days after ordering.

Now we have had the car for almost a year and have driven 15,000 kilometres in it. We are happy with our choice and to explain why, let me start by recounting something that happened two weeks ago when we were on safari in the area around Mount Kenya.

We had booked ourselves into a tent camp in OI Pejeta Conservancy, which is normally easy to reach with a 4WD when you go there in the dry season, but it can be quite tough when you go there after the rains because the 'black-cotton-soil' in

this area is really tricky to drive on when wet or muddy. It had rained shortly before, so the owner of the camp called me in the morning when we were already on our way - four adults and two children. He asked me if we had shovels, towing rope and sand sheets on board, because the last 10 kilometres to the camp would be really rough and difficult driving. He made sure that we had his cell phone number so that we could call for help if we got stuck in the mud.

Well, the last few kilometres were really tough, but we made it without having to use the shovels or other emergency equipment that we always have in the car.

Upon arrival, I greeted the camp owner and said he sounded quite nervous on the phone that we might not make it through, to which he answered: "I didn't know you were driving a Nissan Patrol!"

And he was right; this car seems to be one of the best solutions in countries like Kenya. It is very reliable and without too much complicated technology that probably nobody would be able to repair here, as well as not too many 'nice-to-have' features and accessories in the driver's cabin. The Nissan Patrol was delivered complete with air-conditioner, radio/cassette system, theft alarm, central locking system, power mirrors and power antenna. That is by far enough. Afterwards we decided to fit a bull bar and a roof rack. The bull bar is primarily to protect against damage to the headlights, which would be very expensive to replace. Traffic in Nairobi, as mentioned before, means a fair likelihood of being involved in minor or major accidents.

We also purchased a roof rack because we often travel with up to seven persons and then it is practical to be able to pack the luggage on the roof.



Otherwise, living in Nairobi is wonderful. As an expatriate you can usually afford to live in the lush suburbs, where you do not hear the city traffic. It is a very green city when you know where to look. There are big supermarkets that offer everything you need for a comfortable life and security in Nairobi is not as bad as you sometimes hear. If you observe some basic rules, you can drive around and even walk around safely. There are some parts of the city that you should not go through after dark, some you should not even visit in daylight. Never leave your car in an unprotected location and always lock the doors and close the windows when you drive, especially in traffic jams or at major junctions.

Most new cars have the car's registration number engraved on easy-to-remove parts such as door mirrors, lights, glass and handles. Sometimes even the doors are marked! This makes it difficult for thieves to sell these parts if they steal them from your car. I witnessed once how thieves took off the side mirrors of a Mitsubishi Pajero in only 10 seconds! As the driver of the car, you can only stay inside the car and watch - getting out of the car can prove very dangerous.

What else can happen in traffic? You can have a breakdown with your car at any given time and very quickly hundreds of people will gather round you offering to help - they all want your money! However, we have contracted a security company that sends help in such cases. They organize everything including dealing with the police report, arranging a car hook-up and transporting you to your house or office.

When you are driving, you must concentrate 100% at all times. Often you will have to think for others, be aware of potential dangers and drive accordingly. Two more facts will need your full attention: The roadsides are normally unfortified, so you have a sharp edge with a drop of 15-25 cm directly on your left and the roads are quite narrow and do not have a median, so oncoming drivers will likely drive on part of your half of the road to avoid the unfortified edges on their side.

An issue closely related to traffic and driving is security. Nairobi is not as bad as its reputation would have you believe, but it is still dangerous. Carjacking, robberies and even murders occur every day, so here too you have to be very careful and alert at all times.

We always drive with the doors locked, avoid certain roads and areas after dark and do not travel overland after dusk.

Dangerous places are busy junctions, traffic jams and side streets where there is no police presence at all. The following are just some examples of what can happen: A car thief puts a small piece of paper, perhaps looking like an invoice or receipt, in the rear window wiper while you are busy shopping. Once you sit in your car again, they expect you to see the paper in the mirror and hope that you are curious enough to get out of the car and check what it is. If you leave the engine running and the door open, they will leave with your car while you read the note. These guys are fast and well trained.

Another common occurrence is that car thieves unscrew one of your number plates while you are away from your car. Once you are then driving in the car, they overtake you and show you the number plate through the window while indicating that you lost it on the road and they were kind enough to pick it up and give it back to you. Once you stop to say "thank you" and get your number plate back again, your car is stolen. If you try to resist, your life might be gone as well. One important thing in a situation like this is: Do not try to be a hero. Do everything they ask you to do. Give away everything materialistic you have, cooperate as much as possible to protect the life of yourself, your family and friends. These people do not want to kill you, but they will if they feel they have to. Let them always think that they are in control of the situation.

Despite these challenges, I recommend Nairobi in Kenya as one of the nicest places to be posted within our line of work. The climate is wonderful, there is a wide variety of weekend and holiday activities, the Kenyans are wonderful people with very friendly and open minds, and almost everything you need is available and you can bring relatives and friends in easily for a fantastic holiday.

Karibu Kenya!

