



THE WORLD ON A STRING

KENYA

A day making jewellery with Maasai tribes women in Kenya teaches Eugene Yiga some valuable lessons about life.

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The long drive from Nairobi to the heart of Maasai country, through what feels like endless traffic until we reach the stunning Ngong Hills along the Great Rift Valley was worth it for what I discovered at the end.

“This is how they welcome us,” Solomon, the guide from our tour company, explains of the Maasai tribe women’s singing and dancing. “They’re happy to have you and want you to feel at home.”

After learning more about me, and expressing amusement and surprise to discover a tourist who isn’t White, I’m eager to learn more about them. And the best way for that to happen is through the shared activity of making jewellery, which they sell as a way to support themselves.

“She’s going to teach us how to make one of the wristbands,” Solomon says as he ushers me to a seat next to Peris, one of the tribe women. “I hope you’ll be interested in doing that.”

I sit down and take a look at the colourful products before me. Solomon shows me an example of a finished wristband before giving me one that’s partially complete.

“They’ve already done part of it for us so we just have to put the beads in,” he says. “It’s not hard and we’re going to enjoy doing it.”

The first step is to choose a colour for the main wristband so I go with dark blue. Then I have to choose three colours for the beads. Black, white, and sky blue seemed right so I go with those, even though there’s initial indecision about the order in which I should arrange them.

Then comes the needle and thread to pick up each individual bead (about the size of a single lentil) from a giant bowl of several different colours and sew them into the wristband. Peris shows me the process, which I realise isn’t hard but requires a great deal of control – control of your breathing so your hands stop shaking and control of your mind so it doesn’t get distracted or bored.

“Just like they welcome their visitors with a song, they like to sing and tell stories as they work,” Solomon says. “This makes it even more wonderful. I’m teaching them a song from my tribe but they’re struggling to get it, just like I’m struggling to get theirs. We have to come down to a common language but we’re getting it.”

As a typical westerner so focused on the task at hand, I can’t think of luxuries like ‘enjoyment’. All I care about is getting the job done. Indeed, I’m confident that I have it all figured out so I carry on working by myself. But then I pause in a panic when I discover that something isn’t

right. Peris takes one look and unravels my work. I have to start again.

“When we take it fast, we blunder,” Solomon laughs as my creation falls to pieces. A part of me wishes I had just kept going as if everything was okay, mostly so I could finish and move on to something else. But I know that this is for the best. I have to take time to do it properly if I want the results to come out right in the end.

My second attempt is better because I’m not as cocky. Yes, it’s slow. And yes, a part of me wishes it would hurry up and be over, just like in the cooking shows where they whip out another version of the dish with the phrase “and here’s one we prepared earlier”. But this isn’t the time for instant gratification. I have to be patient. I have to stay mindful of my thoughts and my emotions. I have to stay focused on the present and appreciate the process for what it is.

Then my patience is put to the test when disaster strikes. A sudden burst of wind topples the basket of beads, which get scattered all over the ground. The colours are everywhere and I just want to quit. And yet nobody else seems to be upset.

“It happens, it happens!” Solomon laughs as he crouches down to help pick up the beads. It doesn’t take

long before everyone carries on as before, with more singing to keep their spirits up.

So I keep calm and carry on, even as the wind continues to howl and threaten to spoil things yet again, making me tense my shoulders and my jaw. But soon I find myself getting more and more focused, with an encouraging “you’ve got it!” from Solomon and a maternal “BEADS!” from Peris, using what little English she knows to make sure I get the order of the threading right. She’s working three times faster than I am but I know there’s no point in getting into comparisons. I’m happy to just focus on myself.

And now the end is in sight! I’m nervous and excited but doing my best to stay calm until it’s done, at which point I breathe a sigh of relief and beam like I’ve just painted the Sistine Chapel. Peris wraps the finished band around my wrist and we pose for a photo.

In a world where so much of what we have comes from other people, it’s satisfying to have something I made myself. How nice to know that we’re capable of a lot more than we realise, especially with a little patience; if we apply our minds and exercise our creativity to do something new. ■