

September 2012

It would be fun to start this blog entry with an account of our rapid arrival in Cana, but that wouldn't be an accurate picture of what the process was like for us. Instead, there were many delays. I think this is a very common part of life on the field. Hurry up and wait, because so much has to be done before you can get on to doing the main thing, which is living with people, starting to learn their language and make friends.

First there was the leaders' conference in May, where we were trained in how to administer the program for our trainees who were coming. That took a week. Then there were several weeks of waiting till our logistics administrator and his wife returned from their home assignment in the USA. While we waited, I took a Swahili refresher class and Colin built the beds for the team.

There were work permit paperwork hassles, the delay of getting a first vehicle for the team which Colin and I could use to do the setup, then getting Colin a driver's license. There was another delay when we went to Kenya for a three-week orientation course to AIM. Although we were seconded to AIM in our previous years in Africa, this was the first time we had come as full members of the organization.

There was a delay in getting our water tanks to the village; there was another delay when we had to attend the yearly Tanzania missionary conference. There was a delay when we were finally free in September to actually go live in the village but our house still had no bathroom.

The hole had to be dug. We contracted a man to do it, and he dug a hole five feet in diameter, a huge pit. How in the world could the man have misunderstood the instructions? Colin bought three oil drums in the nearest large town, took the tops and bottoms out, and used them to line the latrine pit, making it long and skinny. Then the dirt had to be refilled all around them, a cement floor poured, walls built, roof on, toilet box made and toilet seat attached. A drain in the corner of the room let the water from the bucket shower out.

While we built the bathroom, we commuted every day from the nearest large town with a motel. (Let's just call that town Bethany, since we're using Bible names. Bethany was where some of Jesus' best friends lived, and this town became home to dear friends of ours.) It was two and a half hours' drive away. In the morning we bought a hot cup of sweet black tea and a chapatti (like a tortilla) at a little restaurant, then drove half an hour to a large tourist truck-stop on the main highway to Dar Es Salaam, where we used the clean bathrooms.

Then we drove the rest of the way into Cana, spent the day in construction work, and drove back to the same restaurant, where we used the bathroom again before going on to sleep in Bethany. We sometimes ran around town trying to find hardware and goods we would need the next day. Sometimes we got there just at

dark. Then we started drinking water. We drank and drank and drank and used the bathroom at the motel all night long. Five hours of driving, six hours of construction work, and then rehydrating all night long. I couldn't wait to move to Cana, even though I was scared of the neighbor lady who yelled in the car window every day as I sat reading a book, shouting at me as though I was hard of hearing and she was speaking to an idiot.

Going into Cana was like descending underwater, out of one world into another. For one thing, it is off the highway, a 20-mile drive on a dirt road that winds up and down and around the hills until it crests in one magnificent place that reveals the whole panorama of the area ahead: coconut trees by the hundreds in groves through the valleys, mangoes and citrus and farms, hills and green-green-green tropical forest everywhere. A few villages have sprung up along the road, with storefront shops displaying bright goods, but the people live all over. Some homes are accessible only by footpaths that run for miles through the hills. We never crested the highest point on the road and looked down across the panorama of hills and valleys without being moved at the beauty of it. Then down, down, down into the village. And that was the end of cellphone and internet connection till we went out to the highway again, unless we hiked up a high hill behind our house for half an hour and managed to get a signal up there.

It was a relief when we finally got the bathroom finished and moved in. The house had mud walls, plastered with cement. It had a cement floor, screened windows with bars, four rooms and a front porch. The eaves were open. At night the rats would run over the walls and down into the kitchen. They loved my flour but they loved tomatoes even more. I learned to put all the food in a big plastic trunk or in the "bush fridge," a screened cabinet the rodents could not get into, as long as it was latched shut. In time, Colin contracted a man to come fill the eaves in up to the steel roof. Once we did that, we had far fewer critters in the house. There was a weed that grew up through a crack in the bedroom floor and had to be regularly cut. We slept under a mosquito net, as much to keep off the insects and dirt sifting down from the rafters as to keep free of malarial mosquitoes. The weather was cooler than I expected, high 80's in the daytime, but very humid. Sometimes it took 48 hours for laundry to dry.

Eventually Colin built a platform and put the water tank on it. He guttered the roof and made the rainwater flow into the tank. He then piped the water from the tank into the bathroom. Ta-da! Running water in the house. During the initial weeks, since it was dry season, willing neighbor kids hauled water for me by the bucket from the nearest well. They charged me about ten cents for a 20-liter bucket of slightly cloudy water. We filtered it.

Colin also bought a solar panel and installed it on the roof, wiring in a couple of lights and a way to charge our computer. I loved it when we had some electricity at night and no longer had to use kerosene lanterns.

Where to put things? We'd bought a couple of plastic picnic tables and numerous plastic chairs, and we had the six trunks we'd brought all our stuff in. Otherwise dishes were piled in a large washtub, buckets were holding water, a two-burner gas cookstove heated our food. Little by little we acquired furniture. A table here, a hanging canvas closet there. The living room was always full of construction supplies. Boards, cement, oil drums, ladders, tools.

The house was in downtown Cana. Small shops lined the main road and one street that junctioned the center of town in a T. Down the road that ran in front of our house were four bars. This was a surprise to us, since Islam frowns on the use of alcohol. Every day the various men who regularly frequented the bars would stop by to greet or harass us, depending on how drunk they were. None of them were violent or angry; all of them were loud and obnoxious. I shrank from them and would stay in the house while Colin patiently greeted and talked with them.

Nothing about the culture seemed inviting to me at first. When I would shop for flour, tea, salt, tomatoes, an onion, flashlight batteries the young men would all call to me and try to flirt. People pointed, stared, talked about me as I walked by. Eventually I began to converse with women, and one day a kind shopkeeper offered me a cup of tea and asked me pityingly if I did not know how to wear a khanga? She tactfully let me know woman my age was scandalously undressed if she walked around town in just an ankle-length skirt and blouse. No, she should wrap her hair in a scarf and cover her skirt with a brightly-colored cloth called a khanga, and if possible she should also wear a shawl around her shoulders. Once I started covering up more, I received much less unwanted attention from the young men.

We had four or five days in the house, as I recall, and then our "advance work team" arrived to stay with us for six months. But that's the next part of the story.



Colin and I borrowed a car for our first trip together to the village.



Top: A cup of hot black tea at a small outdoor restaurant before hitting the road to the village.

Right: How in the world could they have dug such a huge latrine pit? Colin engineered a solution. (The lady on his left bowled me over with loud, friendly conversation till Colin finally gave her a job hauling water for the work crew.)





Top: view of our first Cana house from the yard below. We hoped to attach a bathroom that would lead directly into the house, a new concept for the local people.

Left: Colin smoothed the cement floor himself. You can see the small latrine hole lined with a white bucket, and the standing pipe for the vent.



Left: Installing the solar panel on the back side of the roof.

Below: Sending and receiving emails was quite a process. First we climbed the hill for half an hour. Then we tried to get a phone signal. Then we connected to Bluetooth. Then we sat for another half hour (at least) while the emails came and went. Sometimes I took a book to read.





Top: the view of our valley from "Internet Hill."

Left: Food and supplies in boxes in our kitchen when we arrived. Colin built me the low stool to sit on, since so much of my work was done on the floor.



Top: More kitchen setup. The gas cooker is on a board so it doesn't melt the plastic table.
Bottom: Drinking coconut water from a young coconut. A gift of a green coconut was a very common friendly welcome to us.



I learned to cover my head and wear a khanga over my skirt to look properly and modestly dressed when I went shopping in the village.



The day came when we had finished the bathroom and could move into the house. A few days later our setup crew of three men arrived to stay for six months.