

The Time Is Running Out

. . . Descendants Of Settlers In Kenya See Beginning Of End

By CHARLES T. POWERS
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MALINDI, Kenya — The prow of a fisherman's boat, varnished and beached in concrete, forms a part of the bar in a small resort on the Kenyan coast. It carries an inscription declaring that one day a man named Ian Pritchard "in this boat" sailed "into this cove," liked what he saw and decided to stay.

There was nothing on the beach when Pritchard arrived, just a strip of dazzling white sand and the blue-water cove. In time, he built a bar and a restaurant, and a road was finally cut through seven miles of coastal bush. In a modest way, he prospered. Then he broke his back in a water-skiing accident. He spent the rest of his life paralyzed from the neck down.

dwindling in number — that his time, and theirs, is running out.

"We're about the last of the Mohicans here," said Christopher Nicholas, who bought the resort, called Ocean Sports, in 1966, six years before Pritchard died. "We get smaller every year."

For the English settlers, some of whom took out Kenyan citizenship after independence in 1963, it is traditional to head for the shores of the Indian Ocean around the holiday season, boarding the train in Nairobi for the overnight journey to Mombasa laden with children and trunks and nursemaids.

The railroad is a remnant of the colonial period. The rails were laid from Mombasa to Lake Victoria and the line was finished in 1901 with the help of labor from India. The line was responsible, along the way, for

they say, it is where the "Kenya cowboys" go.

Kenya cowboy is a term that is vaguely pejorative, though only to the degree that one accepts the vestigial distinctions of the British class system. In American terms, a Kenya cowboy would be a recognizable cousin to the "good ol' boy" familiar through the South from Georgia to Texas, a fellow with a taste for beer, well-tuned cars and wide-open spaces.

Kenya cowboys are all over the country, but they can be spotted in concentration at, say, the motorcycle racetrack on the outskirts of Nairobi on weekends. They are predominantly blond youths with pale blue eyes, mud-spattered, grease under their fingernails, roaring off in a cloud of blue smoke and red dirt. They turn up, on Saturday afternoons, at the Lord Delamere Bar at

when the minimum plot size in the suburb of Karen was 20 acres, when it was not necessary to lock their front doors in Nairobi or when the train to Mombasa was cleaner and maybe faster.

"Every year I think will be our last," a woman visiting the coast with her family said. She and her husband, both English, have lived in Kenya for 17 years.

Her husband was talking politics with old friends, leaning on the prow of Ian Pritchard's boat. The politics they discussed was speculation — how the division in the country's powerful Kikuyu tribe might or might not be repaired — not the inside stuff that their forerunners here might have had access to. There was talk, too, of corruption and inefficiency, the sometimes nonsensical and counterproductive

"kikoi" cloth — a mode of coastal dress that seemed to separate the tourists from the Kenyan residents. He had come down from Nairobi with three of his friends for the traditional holiday reunion and blowout.

"Over the holidays," Destro said, "we're all Kenya cowboys, I suppose. It's quite good fun, actually. You see people you haven't seen for a long time. This place will be packed on New Year's. I know of whole carloads of people who are coming down from Nairobi just for the day."

It is not particularly easy to think of a polite young Oxford student as a Kenya cowboy and, indeed, whatever rough edges might adhere to a Kenyan upbringing have been pretty well rubbed off Destro after years of an English public school education. ("Yes, it's difficult going to school in England at

nlions said. "If you come from Africa, they think you live in a mud hut and have one black parent.")

But overseas education has become the norm for white Kenyan youths, as more and more parents, if they can afford it, send their children out of the country for high school and college (commonly to South Africa and England). They believe that schools in Kenya have deteriorated. The practice is also a hedge against the future.

"I'm sending my boy to school in England," said Frank Guiry, a Nairobi insurance man who had brought his family to Ocean Sports for the holidays. "because I'm not sure what future there is for him here. If he wants to come back, fine. But if he doesn't, I think an education in the U.K. will stand him in good stead."

A tough outdoorsman who had never been inclined toward art on contemplation, Pritchard took up painting, and turned out lovely work with a paint brush held between his teeth. He died at the age of 45. It is said that during the 13 years of his paralysis, he never once complained of the bad luck that had befallen him.

In a few days at this lovely place, amid the tamarisk trees and the white cottages and the purple blaze of the bougainvillea, a visitor can hear the story repeated several times. Finally, one realizes that the story is a valuable keepsake, almost a tangible object, to those who tell it. They never leave out the essential elements: That Pritchard made something out of nothing, that he painted those pictures with his teeth, that he never complained.

And a visitor realizes, also, that those attributes of resourcefulness, courage and forbearance have such strong accents in the story because there is a palpable sense among the people doing the telling that the opportunities for displaying those qualities here are vanishing, that Ian Pritchard was a spiritual ancestor of sort and that his descendants are

the development of Nairobi, the capital city.

In years past, many of those who made the trip rented houses along the coast between Mombasa and Malindi, or they decamped at the big hotels. But now many of those houses seem to be owned by people who do not give them up at the prime time of the year, and most of the big hotels have gone over to the tourist business, catering to charter tour operators who haul hundreds of Germans and Italians and Scandinavians down for a quick sunburn and a glimpse of wildlife before they return to their European winters.

Ocean Sports is one of the few places left on the coast north of Mombasa that still caters to "the locals." This is good for Chris Nicholas: his 15 cottages are booked for a year in advance. But it adds to a feeling among his guests that their territory is shrinking.

Ocean Sports has a reputation, at least during the holiday season, for being a fairly wild and woolly place. The reputation is not entirely deserved. Ocean Sports is in fact a family resort, crowded with children and, for most of the day, an almost somnolent spot. Still,

Nairobi's Norfolk Hotel, where they drink their beer standing up, the crowd expanding rank by rank outward from the bar as the day wears on.

Many of them were born in Kenya and learned to speak Swahili, or maybe Kikuyu, from their African nurses before they learned English.

They know the country as their own — which for a long time is how they regarded it. They have it mapped in their minds. They know the trails through the bush and where they come out, where to find petrol in the Northern Frontier District.

Their mothers and daughters know how to obtain white wheat flour at those times, like the present, when certain commodities seem to vanish from the marketplace. They know when to buy cheese by the wheel and butter in five-kilo lots to store in the freezer. They seem to be connected to the rhythms, currents and undercurrents by which the country lives, day to day, year to year.

Among many of them though, the mingled sense of nostalgia and diminished influence runs in the direction of pessimism. They remember when there were never shortages of cheese,

By any account, the lives of Kenya's whites are comfortable. Most maintain fine homes with servants to cook and clean. They belong to country clubs, frequent the best restaurants and movie houses and now and then take in a production of the local professional theater group, which plays to nearly all-white audiences. In no way can their lives be considered to have anything in common with those of the majority of the 15 million Africans in Kenya, whose existence is plain and poor and who must suffer the real brunt of hard times when they come, as they seem to be coming now.

Still, change is taking place, however slowly it may seem to African or White Kenyan. To longtime white residents — whether they are Kenyan citizens or foreigners who renew their residency permits from year to year — the change seems no doubt to be faster.

"I think there are fewer of us here every year," said Malcolm Destro, a 19-year-old student at Oxford who was born in Kenya and who was back home for the holidays. He was standing in the sand under the trees at Ocean Sports surveying a crowd that might almost be considered family. Around his waist, like a skirt, he wore a bright, woven

first," one of Destro's compa-

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Kenya—

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"Quite a good number who go away to university do not come back," Destro said. "When I look around here now, I see that the people who were our age five years ago are no longer here. I don't know where they are. In the U.K., I suppose. But they're not here."

Chris Nicholas, with his booming, hearty cowboy laugh and his seemingly perpetually buoyant spirits, is outwardly as optimistic as a person can get about the future of his chosen country. It has treated him well.

"I'd say the sky is the limit," he said as he ate his dinner in a dining room he built himself. But when he was asked whether his two sons ("They adore Kenya, think it's the only place in the world") would find a niche as comfortable as his, he seemed unable to avoid the frown. "It's very difficult to tell," he said. "Who can say?"

For Malcolm Destro — whose father is a hunter and takes safaris to Sudan now that Kenya is closed to hunting — the future is equally uncertain. As a Kenyan by birth, he holds dual citizenship in Kenya and the United Kingdom, but by law he must make a choice of nationalities by the time he is 23. He is not sure now, he said, but he supposed that the choice, when it came, would be for British citizenship. When he was asked why, his reply had the grace of being regretful but un sentimental.

"I think we've had our day," he said.