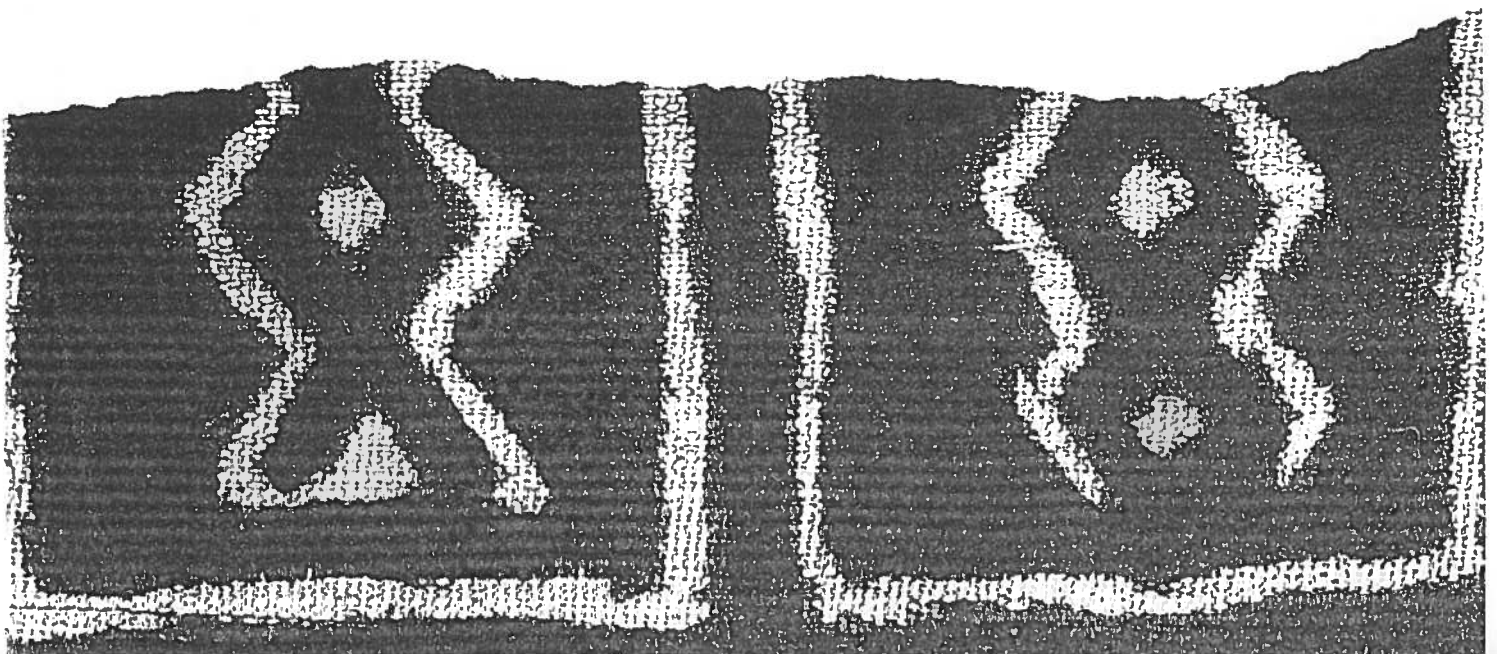


*MUSEUM DOCUMENTATION  
IN (AND OUT OF) AFRICA*

Annual Conference of CIDOC  
International Committee for Documentation of ICOM  
National Museums of Kenya

Nairobi

24th - 28th September 1996





# Conference Report

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February 1997

CIDOC, the International Committee for Documentation of ICOM, held its annual conference from 23 to 28 September 1996 in Nairobi, hosted by the National Museums of Kenya. The conference was attended by some 120 delegates from Africa, the Americas, Asia and Europe.

Who were these people meeting in Nairobi to discuss museum documentation? They are called: documentalists, curators, directors, system analysts, librarians, information experts, registrars. They are also: natural scientists, art historians, archaeologists, anthropologists... On top of that, they can also have experience in managing large or small automation projects in museums. And all of them are interested in the applicability of the newest communications technologies for documentation in museums and cultural heritage institutions.

CIDOC delegates are a very busy crowd who appreciate the CIDOC conferences for the friendly atmosphere in which they can meet colleagues from all over the world and take some distance from a hectic day-to-day schedule.

Some CIDOC members take the opportunity to meet in Working Groups. These important groups represent a continuous involvement in different aspects of museum documentation. CIDOC has working groups on a number of topics, including:

- archaeological sites
- iconography
- data standards
- museum libraries and information centres
- CIDOC services
- the Internet

During the conference, two Working Groups announced new publications: the Ethno WG presented their documentation standard and the Multimedia WG presented a report on multimedia in museums. The publications were presented to the Minister of Home Affairs and Heritage, to the Assistant Minister for Research, Technical Training and Technology, as well as to the Director of the National Museums of Kenya. The Archaeological Sites WG announced that the standard they developed has now been accepted as a standard by the Council of Europe.

The CIDOC annual conference was supported by a number of organizations. The Getty Grant Program generously assisted in the participation costs of 25 colleagues from developing countries. Simultaneous translation throughout the conference was provided through another important grant, from the Rockefeller Foundation. The CIDOC-Newsletter production, as well as the Internet site during the conference have only been possible thanks to the Getty Information Institute. The AFRICOM programme assured the presence of members of the AFRICOM Coordinating Committee, Inventory Working Group and Internet Working Group. And of course the input from individual museums and related institutions that send delegates is what makes CIDOC meetings possible.

# Conference sessions

During the opening session, Mr Manyando Mukela, vice-president of ICOM, gave an interesting overview of developments in African museum documentation.

One of the themes dealt with during previous CIDOC conferences was the fight against illicit traffic. So being in Africa, where illicit traffic and looting of cultural property is a major problem, this item took our attention on the first day. Recent publications and different workshops organized during the past years have illustrated that the protection of cultural property remains one of ICOM's main concerns. The AFRICOM Handbook of Standards is a major tool in the fight against illicit traffic. CIDOC's former chair and vice-chair have both been heavily involved in the production of this publication, which was launched during the conference.

In Nairobi, CIDOC started the discussion of what is so far (lacking a better term) called 'documentation of non-material culture'. Africa was regarded a proper place to start this discussion among museum information specialists, as so much of Africa's cultural heritage can be found in the context of rituals, dances, story-telling, etc. The special session on this topic included reports from African museologists on documentation of dances and rituals in an open air museum (Tanzania) and on recording oral history (Botswana). An overview on the topics was given by the session chair (Sweden) who indicated the use of anthropological research methods, an aspect that will certainly need to be researched further. The second overview paper was given by a Kenyan anthropologist who gave the CIDOC delegates a lot to think about. (1) Questions posed includes: Documenting secret rituals can be the ruin of these rituals. Should we therefore agree on an embargo on such information? The western world has become completely text oriented, but how do cultures that are dealing with other types of information (e.g. colors or patterns) deal with documentation of their cultural heritage? And: taking information from people does not automatically mean - in current museum documentation practice - that the information goes back to these same people. (The conclusion of this might be that museum documentation specialists are after all collectors, like their other museum colleagues. Collectors of information, that is!)

The discussion on documenting objects using 'multimedia' (film, video, sound, images), will be taken to further stages by the CIDOC Multimedia Working Group. To continue the discussions, documenting non-material culture will be referred to at the CIDOC 1997 annual conference in Nuremberg and will be major topic during the 1998 meeting in Melbourne, where 'Museums and Cultural Diversity' is the overall ICOM conference theme.

In parallel with these sessions, the conference delegates were also given the opportunity to participate in one of the CIDOC Working Group meetings. The working groups represent a continuous involvement in different aspects of museum documentation.

At the Open Forum session, a variety of interesting brief papers were presented. And after that, enthusiastic National Museums of Kenya staff members took the delegates behind the scenes at the museum.

The Internet was a repeating topic during the conference, with on-line Internet facilities running all the time with support from an 'Internet-team', consisting of CIDOC members and National Museums of Kenya - Computer Department staff members. They worked together to

give a series of structured and informal sessions of e-mail and Web services throughout the week. The Web demonstrations used as their main focus the CIDOC-pages about African Internet resources relevant to museums (now to be maintained by ICOMs AFRICOM Internet Working Group). On the Monday, the Internet-team gave an extensive on-line presentation to around 50 of the African participants, including the AFRICOM representatives who agreed to encourage the extension of Internet access to museums throughout Africa. The team also increased the awareness of the Internet in Kenyan policy makers, with presentations to the Assistant Minister for Research, Technical Training and Technology and the Director of the National Museums of Kenya.

A special conference day was devoted entirely to the discussions on the Internet for museums, including the role of e-mail and the World Wide Web. In different sessions the CIDOC conference showed itself very interested in the applicability of these new communication technologies for museum documentation activities. On the other hand many speakers referred to the problems the Information Superhighway might hold for those - in any part of the world - that have no access to it.(2).

On Friday, a well organized excursion tour took the delegates to the archaeological site of Olorgesailie where guided tours were provided by staff members of the National Museums of Kenya, as well as to the Magadi Soda and an interesting cafe in the Masai region.

On the last day of the CIDOC conference, two sessions gave particular regard of the AFRICOM programme. One of these sessions was devoted to standards. The CIDOC Guidelines were compared with the Handbook of Standards created by the AFRICOM project and with the Core Data Standard developed by the Getty Information Institute. The session was particularly important as an opportunity to explain to the delegates why different perspectives and goals have to result in different data standards. The 'one for all purposes' standard just does not exist. While the Handbook of Standards is focusing on creating museum inventories (thereby assisting museums with the protection of their collections), the CIDOC Guidelines attempt to define a limited standard for the description of objects in museums (assisting museums that are looking into information exchange). The Core Data Standard deals with objects that have been stolen, as for recovery of these objects (rapid) information exchange among museums, customs, police and art trade is essential.

The other session related to AFRICOM was focusing on vocabulary control. At their meeting in Addis Ababa (1995), the AFRICOM Inventory Project representatives were invited by CIDOC to use the opportunity to meet specialists on terminology control during the conference. When the Handbook of Standards is going to be implemented on a wide basis, vocabulary control will certainly become an issue. As illustrated with an example given during the session: there are at least 100 names for a 'thumb piano' in Africa. Various projects were presented: research into Arabic terms related to numismatics; terminology for paleoanthropologists; a cooperation project on vocabulary in Dutch ethnographic museums; and experience in reaching consensus by Art & Architecture Thesaurus constructors. One of the key recommendations of the session was: keep your vocabulary control system flexible to enable it to incorporate changes (such as of geopolitical nature or based on updated research).

# Impressions

The overall opinion on the CIDOC conference in Nairobi was positive. An African museum professional stated that 'CIDOC has started something in Nairobi'. The most important contribution to this success was the input by the generous and efficient host organization, The National Museums of Kenya, and more particularly that museum's Computer Department and Public Relations Department. The good atmosphere was very apparent at the final party when organizers and delegates had a good 'dinner and dance' together. CIDOC is very grateful to the museum's support.

That is also why CIDOC board would recommend that other ICOM International Committees plan a conference in Africa, whenever appropriate in combination with an AFRICOM activity. A word of advice though, at this first combined meeting of such character, it was clear that the AFRICOM Coordinating Committee meeting should have been scheduled in advance of or after the CIDOC conference. Now, members of the committee missed many opportunities to follow the CIDOC sessions due to their own meeting schedule.

More information on CIDOC's activities and perspectives can be found in the upcoming issue of the ICOM Study Series, an issues that will be dedicated to museum documentation.

To end this summary of the CIDOC annual conference in Nairobi: here are some quotations picked up during different sessions.

"We are now quite able to collect information from the periphery to one place (physically one place, or via Internet), but we have done little about getting information back to the periphery again." Dr. S. Somjee, session on Documentation of non-material culture

"(we could be) building intelligent links between people and their cultural heritage." Eleanor Fink via Jane Sledge, session on Future of the Internet

"An object without documentation, is like an orphan that nobody knows about." Hassan Wario, Open Forum session

"A terminology control system is an interpreter between human language and structured system language." Jos Taekema, session on Vocabulary Control

"It is not possible at the moment to see if the information (on the Net) is true, correct, researched, etc." Lynn Sherwood, session on Future of the Internet

"There is the beauty of an item and the beauty of the information." Hassan Wario, Open Forum session

"The first advice to terminology control developers, also in Africa, would be: always work together, don't work in isolation." Toni Petersen, session on Vocabulary Control

"My museum feels no longer isolated from the expertise in the rest of the museum community when using email and Internet to get up to date information." Emma Mbua, session on Vocabulary Control

"We, as information specialists, could for museums be the map makers of the Information Super Highway." Jeanne Hogenboom, Closing session

"Africa is becoming more illiterate than in the past, perhaps it will never be fully literate. So, should we not be looking at other forms of documentation than text?" Dr S. Somjee, session on Documentation of non-material culture

"We know very little about our audiences, and certainly very little about the information they are looking for." Lynn Sherwood, session on the Future of the Internet

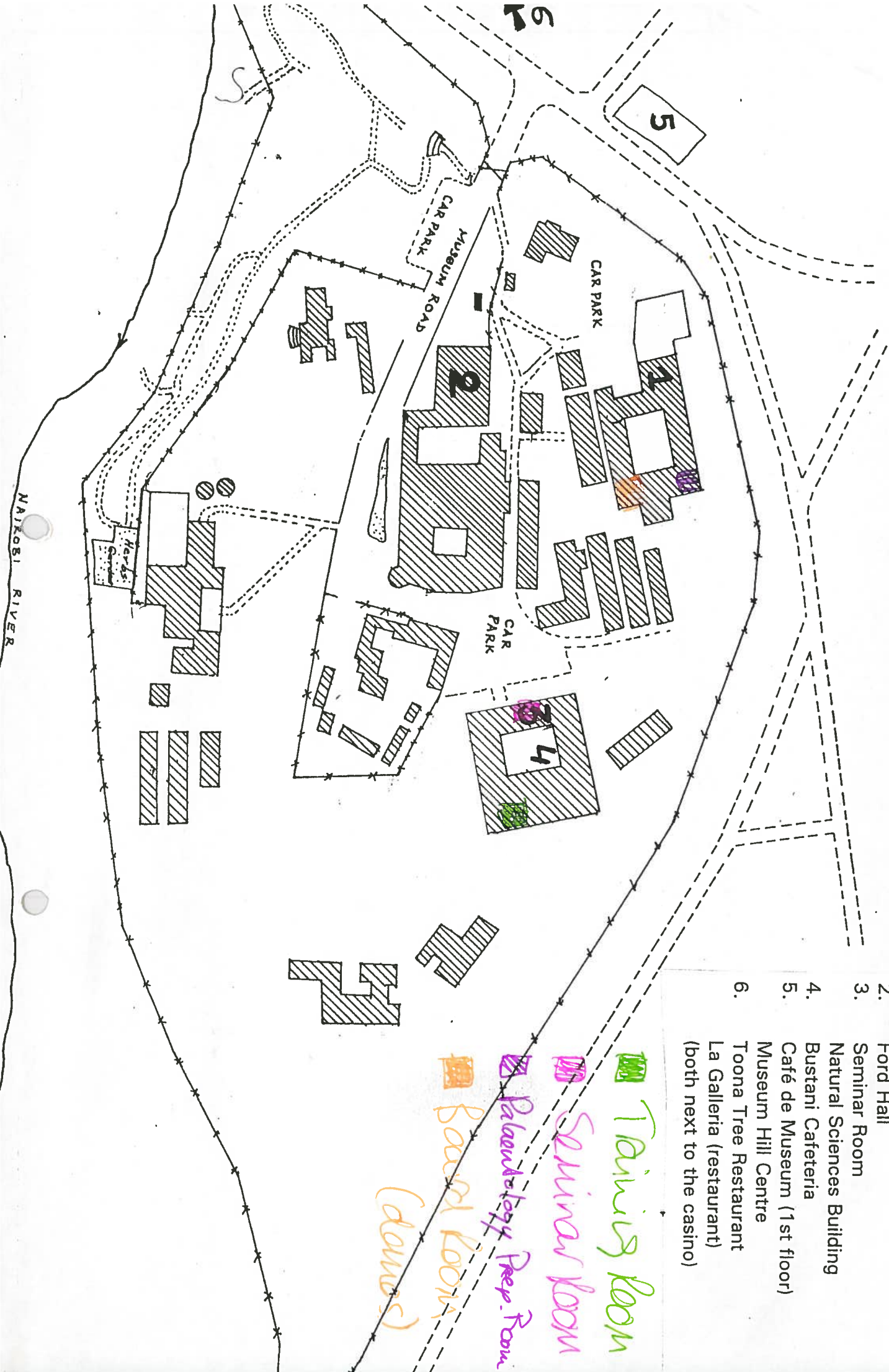
(1) By Dr S. Somjee of the National Museums of Kenya, whose paper is to be published in the 1997 issue of the CIDOC Newsletter.

(2) This part of the report is based on a text by Andrew Roberts, co-organizer of the conference. Other organizers were: Tony Theuri, Head of Computer Department at the National Museums of Kenya, the CIDOC Treasurer Alice Grant and CIDOC Chair Jeanne Hogenboom.





# SITE PLAN OF NAIROBI MUSEUM



1. Louis Leakey Memorial Auditorium
  2. Ford Hall
  3. Seminar Room
  4. Natural Sciences Building
  5. Bustani Cafeteria
  6. Café de Museum (1st floor)
- Museum Hill Centre  
 Toona Tree Restaurant  
 La Galleria (restaurant)  
 (both next to the casino)

■ Training Room  
■ Seminar Room  
■ Paleontology Prep. Room  
■ Baseel Room  
■ Games





## FOR YOUR SAFETY AND COMFORT

### DRESS

In Nairobi, dress is smart but casual. The temperature rarely falls below 24o C during the day and 10o C at night; however, warm clothes are advised for evenings. There are two rainy seasons: the Long Rains which occur from March to June, and the Short Rains which occur between October and December.

In Mombasa and its environs, dress is casual but modest; this is a mainly Islamic community, where long-standing traditions must be respected. While most attires are acceptable in the beach hotels, please refrain from wearing very short or revealing clothing in town.

### SECURITY

Nairobi, like any other large cosmopolitan city, has its share of crime. It is for this reason that caution should be exercised. If you go out in the evening, be sure to always go in a group and avoid deserted lanes and streets. Expensive jewellery and cameras should not be overtly displayed. Walking in town at night is not advised; it is always wisest to take a taxi, preferably the Gov't Kenatco taxis, or the London-look-alike cabs. Taxi rates should always be agreed upon before entering. In Kenya, as with many African countries, bargaining is not only allowed, but is expected. Be wary of street children and con-men/women; many pretend they are students or refugees requiring financial assistance.

### HEALTH

In the unlikely event of your falling ill, there is a Hotel Doctor on call at your hotel. It is especially important to notify the doctor if you suspect malaria. Nairobi boasts numerous excellent private hospitals, including Nairobi Hospital and Agha Khan Hospital. Most visitors to a foreign country experience slight stomach upsets on arrival; this is usually nothing to worry about (a handy tip is to eat Papaya fruit, as well as chew the seeds!). However, it is always wise to consult a doctor if you are unsure. When travelling into malarial zones (Coast and Western Kenya) it is advisable to take the recommended precautions (eg. cholroquin tablets). Tap water in Nairobi and Mombasa is generally safe; however, visitors are recommended to drink bottled water, which is readily available everywhere.

### MONEY

Exchange rates for the Kenya Shilling vary from time to time, and current rates are available in the hotel lobby and daily newspapers. The Kenya law prohibits the exchange of foreign currency anywhere but in banks, authorised hotels and bureaux de change. Banking hours are from 9am to 3pm Monday to Friday, and 9am to 11am on the first and last Saturday of every month. All major credit cards are widely accepted in almost all shops in Nairobi.

### SHOPPING

Nairobi offers fabulous shopping deals for visitors, especially at the City Market, where you can find a vast array of wood carvings, colourful African textiles, and basketry. Many Kenyan, European and South African goods can be found in the various up-market malls throughout the city, including Yaya Centre, Sarit Centre and The Mall.

### TELEPHONE/FAX

Local calls can be made free of charge from the Museum; and fax rates can be provided upon request. Your hotel also will provide rates for phone and fax charges upon request.

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If you have any problems, please notify the Public Relations department; the ladies there will be more than happy to assist in any way they can, or contact Tony Theuri, the local organiser of the conference.



# Trip to Olorgesailie and Magadi Soda

## Background information

### 1. Olorgesailie Prehistoric site

Olorgesailie is approximately 70 kms south of Nairobi at the bottom of an arid sector of the Rift Valley. Comprised of a series of excavation sites along the fluctuating shoreline of an ancient lake bed, this site presents the visitor with a unique opportunity to see artefacts from the Acheulian hand axe culture of 400,000 to 500,000 years ago. Initially excavated by Mary and Louis Leakey in the 1940's, the immediate vicinity is still being investigated. Thousands of identifiable stone tools are visible in an area which seems to have served as a tool making site for many years. Very few faunal remains and no hominid bones have been found.

A small museum and a guided tour, which take the visitors through a series of excavated sites over which protective shelters have been built, provide an excellent introduction to the history and present day ecology of this particular area.

*(text extracted from Museum Guidebook)*

### 2. Lake Magadi

Lake Magadi is the most southerly of the Rift Valley lakes in Kenya and is very rarely visited by tourists because of its remoteness. Like most of the Rift Valley lakes it is a soda lake and supports many flamingos and other water birds. It also has a soda extraction factory, hence the railway line there.

Magadi is quite different from the lakes to the north as it is in a semidesert area.

Temperatures hover around the 38°C mark during the day and much of the lake is a semisolid sludge of water and soda salts. There is a series of hot springs around the periphery of the lake.

*(text extracted out of Lonely Planet, Travel Survival kit)*

## Some advice

- each person should bring a bottle of water
- bring sunglasses, sun protection cream with high factor and a hat (even when you are used to lots of sun!!!)
- dress light and comfortably, bring a shirt with long sleeves (as the sun is very harsh) and comfortable walking shoes.
- do not take any pictures of people without asking them

We all wish you a very pleasant day!

