

AN AMERICAN RABBIT IN AFRICA

by Agi Kiss

*Agi Kiss is a local HRS member who works for the World Bank. In 1993 she was posted to Kenya and her angora rabbit Merlin went with her. This story was first published in **Bank's World** in April 1993. Merlin died in 1995. She now has a sweet little guy named Goblin and adopted Henrietta (now named Gilda) from HRS as a friend for him in October of 1998.*

First, to all my friends: I'm doing fine at my new post in Nairobi. Everyone here has been great. I'm busier than I ever imagined I would be, but the work is stimulating.

So, now that we have that out of the way, let's get to what you really want to know. Merlin is doing just fine and seems very happy in his new surroundings.

Merlin is my rabbit almost certainly the only angora rabbit in Kenya and probably in all of East Africa. Based on the reaction we've met at every step along the way, I think he must also be the first rabbit of any kind to make such a journey. Apparently, everyone understands that people take their dogs and cats along to an overseas posting, but a rabbit?

Those who know Merlin understand. With his ridiculously long, soft, luxurious white fur, the black spectacles around his eyes and the silky tufts bobbing jauntily from the tips of his velvety black ears, he is regularly mistaken for a whimsical stuffed toy. He runs free in the house, likes to sit on the sofa, is fastidiously housebroken and comes when he is called as long as he thinks there's a treat in it for him. He has been my house pet and chief conversation piece for more than three years. I never considered leaving him behind. All right, maybe I considered it when I discovered his airfare alone was going to cost \$250. But one look into those trusting, shiny black eyes and one nudge from that moist, twitching nose, and I reached for my checkbook.

Rose de Souza, the very efficient Senior Administrative Assistant at the Resident Mission in Nairobi, sent me an official license for import of "one head of rabbit, male." Not being as efficient as she is, I lost it, so I called the Kenyan embassy to arrange for another.

"A rabbit?" The woman at the visa office sounded very doubtful. "We do not issue import licenses for rabbits. Only for cats and dogs. Perhaps you should contact the Kenya Wildlife Service."

Fortunately, I managed to find the original license again. A quick trip to the veterinarian, and I had a certificate confirming Merlin was in good health and there had been no outbreak of myxomatosis in the Washington area within the past week. Another stop in Annapolis and the health certificate was officially U.S. Government endorsed.

The flight itself was uneventful. I checked him through to Frankfurt, where the ticket agent at the transfer desk whipped out a picture of her own pet rabbit. We spent a restful day at the airport hotel, then arrived in Nairobi on schedule at 6 a.m. I collected Merlin and my suitcases from the conveyer belt and headed for the customs counter, armed with the import license and health certificate. Despite the early hour, the customs official greeted me with a professional smile.

"What is inside?" he asked, indicating the carrier. "A dog?"

"No," I answered, holding the papers out to him. "A rabbit."



The intrepid traveler Merlin

"Not a dog. A cat?" he asked, bending slightly to peer inside the small window.

"No," I repeated, "a rabbit." Again I offered him Merlin's papers, and this time made a point of displaying my laissez-passer at the same time.

"A rabbit," he said, in the flat, uncompromising voice of a bureaucrat who has come across something non-regulation. He made no effort to take the papers I rustled in front of him. Behind me, the weary travelers melted away to join other lines.

"Import of rabbits is not permitted," he said firmly. Just then, help arrived in the form of a young man from the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Marketing who had been enlisted to come all the way out to the airport at the crack of dawn to help me get Merlin through. God bless the Nairobi Resident Mission.

"No problem," said this knight in a suit and tie. "I will take care of this." The customs agent recognized him and waived me through with obvious relief. We were in.

During my last visit in November, I had arranged with the manager of the Norfolk Hotel (my usual haven when on mission in Nairobi) to spend a few weeks there with Merlin while looking for a house. Still, the receptionist looked dubious when I actually showed up with him in hand. Apologetic but firm, she asked me to wait while she called the manager to the front desk. Meanwhile, in the lobby, Merlin was attracting a lot of attention from the tourists who had come to Kenya to see wildlife. Someone asked me whether he was a wild African rabbit. The idea of this fluffy epitome of domestication making his way out on the savanna seemed obviously ridiculous to me, but, of course, not everyone is a professional biologist. I was just starting to tell the group about the little known annual angora rabbit migration on the Serengeti plains (they run between the feet of the wildebeest, that's why people rarely see them) when the manager arrived.

After one amazed look, the manager suggested that Merlin would be more comfortable in a suite, which he proceeded to give me at no extra cost. (The moral of this story: to get VIP treatment at hotels, always travel with a rabbit.) In fact, the suite

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Thank you to the following Special Friends who donated \$25 or more to help the rabbits:

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Brookeville Animal Hospital
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Ridge Lake Animal Hospital



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was perfect, particularly the enclosed patio where Merlin stretched out in the sunshine, ears and nose twitching doubletime as he tried to take in the million new sounds and smells of this strange new world.

We tried to keep a low profile, but Merlin's reputation spread and soon there was a steady stream of hotel staff knocking politely on my door, asking to see this amazing rabbit who they had heard was three times the size of the local variety, had hair down to the floor and knew how to use the toilet. If they were disappointed with the reality (most of his bulk is hair and he only uses a litterbox), they did not let on.

By popular demand I took him into the office one day so everyone there could meet him. I set him loose and he immediately began to hop along the hallway, popping into every open door to see who was inside. I have to confess I enjoyed the chorus of amazed yelps followed by chuckles as one new colleague after another was startled by the large, furry white object that suddenly appeared out of nowhere.

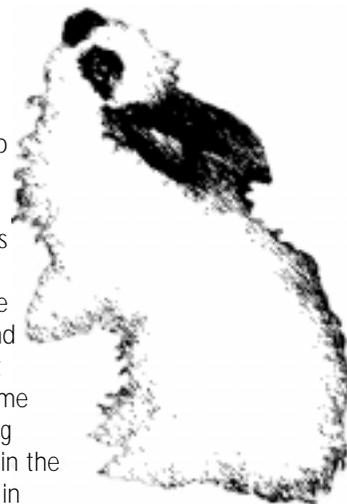
Finally, he reached the end of the hall and hopped smartly through the last doorway. Just then, a colleague grabbed my arm and said, "You know, they are negotiating the Drought Recovery Project in the conference room."

I will be living and working in Nairobi three years. During that time I hope to win the confidence and respect of the people with whom I will be working, impressing them with my professionalism and maturity. In other words, I hope to live down the initial reputation I undoubtedly earned by interrupting a tense meeting of high-level bank and ministry officials in order to retrieve my fuzzy white bunny.

Meanwhile, Merlin is settling nicely at our new house. Sometimes I find him sitting next to the sliding glass doors that lead out to the sunny garden, his furry face pressed wistfully against the netting I have stretched across the opening. I don't dare let him outside because every few minutes I can see the shadow of a kite swooping low over the garden, patiently waiting for the tasty morsel lurking just inside. I wonder whether Merlin misses his feline companion, Isis (who will be coming out to Kenya a little later), but he has already become very attached to my housemaid, Beth, whom he follows around the house like a puppy. I suspect she is feeding him lots of the tiny, sweet bananas he seems to love even more than the pears that were his favorite treat in Washington.

All in all, I would have to count Merlin's first six weeks in Kenya a resounding success. Really, it doesn't bother me in the least that I am now generally known around town as "the lady with that rabbit," or that people coming to my house for the first time immediately push past me and start hunting around on the floor. I'm content to shine in the reflected light of the only American rabbit in Africa.

Editor's note: Agi Kiss is Senior Ecologist, AF2AA.



calling all web sites!

Local HRS website guru Kate McGinley would like to add a section to the site with links to members' pages. Got a web site featuring your bunnies? Email kmcginley@geocities.com
www.houserabbit.org/BaltWashDC/