

On Kiribati - Part One

OR

Rescued by Mormons -- Twice!

Remember that first morning of the millennium (January 1, 2000) watching TV coverage of the first rays of the sun hitting land? That land was Christmas Island, a part of the island nation of Kiribati (pronounced Kiri-bas) and located just past the International Date Line.

I've wanted to visit there ever since.

This far-away atoll came back into conversation sixteen years later when traveling with Lindblad/National Geographic on Their *Atlantic Ridge* itinerary (28 days from Ushuaia to Spain). A fellow participant's brother worked there as an NGO and she regaled us with fabulous, and often funny stories of his time there.

That made me want to visit it even more.



This small island nation is the seventh stop on our itinerary. It consists of 33 atolls and islands spread over 3 million square miles. We are to stay five days here. Later we wonder why.

Just off the plane, we are driven to the edge of a lagoon where staff from a lodge hoist our baggage onto their shoulders and start wading across the water to the island of North Tawara. We are to follow as best we can, walking thru thigh-high water. It is low tide, and had it been high tide, we could have taken canoes. Some are wearing long pants, others don't have reef shoes, and we are all wondering why we weren't told to be prepared for this.

But we make it to the Tabon Te Kee Kee Eco Lodge - wet, grumpy and one person has a hurt foot.

It is a Sunday. The property is crowded with tourists and locals many toting coolers and picnic fare. The lodge had prepared lunch for two groups expected to arrive shortly. Kids are running around, people are peeking into the open structures and the scene is loud, noisy and chaotic.

We are told to take any one of the 6 buias (huts) we wished and it would be our “home” for the next two nights.



The buias are raised platforms, with a roof but no walls or doors, hence no privacy. Furniture is a mattress, sheets and a mosquito net. Nothing else. The overhanging roof (there are no sides) is made from woven pandanus leaves and previous occupants have left bits and pieces of tissues or worse tucked in-between. I spot a razor as well as a used toothbrush. There are bugs and flying insects everywhere.

The huts offer no privacy, either for a person or for belongings. Everything is out in the open.

As I walk around, the situation worsens. I notice garbage strewn about as well as leftover bottles/cans/napkins from meals are not picked up. Behind the kitchen is a pile of rotting compost. The property is advertised as an “eco-lodge” and it is as far away from the concept as be.

Under a different set of circumstances, Tabon Te Kee Kee could be idyllic, but today, it is not.

It takes less than five minutes to realize this is not a good place for me. Unfortunately the person in charge of us who could arrange a move into town, disappeared for the entire afternoon.

After lunch, I began wandering around the island, asking people if they know of another hotel or guesthouse - preferably one with walls. No, nothing available on this island.

After about the 10th person, I meet two Mormon missionaries, along with two young girls. They ask about my plight, and I confess my situation. Luckily, they recall passing a small hotel across the lagoon in South Tawara and offer to take me there. These kind people even pay for my 50 cent fare on the "canoe-ferry" (it was high tide now and it was running). We jump into their car and they drop me at Buota Lodge.



We spent about 45 minutes together and it is my first time for any kind of interaction with Mormons. They were so nice and so kind to a stranger. They represented their religion well.

Here we are on the canoe-ferry, ready to go across the lagoon.

Unfortunately, there is no room at the inn. Dejected, I walk back to the ferry dock, take the small boat across and return to the Tabon Te Kee Kee Hotel.

It was not for naught, I had a bit of an adventure and met some nice people who renewed my faith in humankind.

The tour company representative finally shows up. She is very sweet and soft-spoken. I express my desire to move to a proper hotel but it is too late now. I ask her to make a reservation at the Utirerei Hotel for the following night as that is where the group is to stay next.

I do the best I can under the circumstances. I don't mind primitive camping when it is necessary to see something special. But there are no alternatives here and this is not anything special. I remember to put forth a stiff upper lip, to keep my mouth shut and bide my time.

The next morning, Peter, our guide from Tobaraoi Travel (handling our local arrangements) arrives to guide us for the day. He tells me he will help move me at the end of the day. So I am able to stay with the group for the day's activities



but am spared having to spend another night at this “eco lodge.”

This small island is doing its part with recycling efforts. Plastic bottles and cans are used for fencing.

After visiting the local school, and walking to the decorative clam farm (sounds boring, but is really interesting), Peter grabs my luggage, and we ride a canoe across the lagoon. In our conversation I learn that he is Mormon and, as Mormons do two years of missionary work, he was assigned to, of all places, Oklahoma! So we have a great conversation about his time in the U.S.

He drives me to the Utirerei Hotel, checks me in, gives me instructions for the next day and lets me be for the night.

The room is a step up from basic, but is clean, has walls, hot water, etc. I am a happy woman!

I spread my belongings out on a white towel and watch for bugs to crawl out. Unfortunately, I am rewarded. I spray my luggage with deet and hope for the best.

I have never thought of myself as a damsel in distress but here I am, rescued by Mormons --- twice!