

Back to Africa

Rosie Smith, June 2007

It's dangerous to make a return visit to Africa — the place just gets under your skin and welcomes you back like an old friend. Flowers bursting colour, juice-dripping mangoes, dust brown earth whizzing past the van windows, women balancing water pots (move over Kate Moss!), boy chasing wooden hoops, roads that are more hole than road, geckos galore, rats on the rooftop, oh and endless chickens crossing the road (makes you wonder if they know about that joke...)! Drinking from old coke bottles that look like a thousand mouths have been here before, going to bed at 'missionary midnight', learning to walk slow or face death by melting, remembering not to pat the dogs and cats, and forever popping those malaria pills....Yes, welcome back to Africa!



'Welcome to Nigeria.' We are the happiest nation on earth!



February 2007 — the reason for my visit was to be part of a Pastoral Care Team visiting friends living and working with SIM in Jos State, northern Nigeria. It was a delight — to be praying daily for the people we met and the various mission projects we got to see (many of which are specifically responding to the spreading bombshell of AIDS in this country). We came away deeply impacted, and very humbled. Nigerians are a lot of fun to meet — they've cornered the market on contentment, and showing hospitality ('You are welcome!', 'You are welcome!') and they make six-part harmonies a walk in the park. The only thing louder is the colour of the clothes the women love to wear.

Into the North...

One of the journeys that affected me most was venturing upcountry near the border — close enough to feel the desert. For many centuries trade routes have criss-crossed the Sahara — and the 4 million city of Kano marks the gateway to one such route. As such, it was one of the early cities in the region giving its heart to the Islamic faith, and remains a stronghold to this day. Kano has the palpable feel of a very ancient city, with glimpses of old city walls that would not look out of place on cards depicting sleepy Bethlehems. Minarets dominate the skyline and the sight of a river tide of white-robed men bicycling en masse to Friday prayers is one I shall not forget. Religion is a serious matter here, shaping all aspects of community and politics. The Islamic faith forbids all representation of the human form in art, so it was strange to see so many election posters with smiling faces of jostling candidates. It's hard for the Christians in this city to forget that they live daily under the canopy of Islam — Koranic quotes appear on signposts along the verges of the city streets — and I felt very challenged to be praying for the Church living and witnessing to Jesus in such a spiritually humid place. I felt challenged to pray that the Church would bloom like a flower in the desert — and be a pleasing thing to God our Father.

'Do you have the correct papers?'

Corruption is everywhere present in Africa, we are told. We saw it in the half built projects that spoke of squandered funding, the rich houses next to slum-like villages showing the ever widening rift in society, and of course the 'nail boys' — our road block welcoming parties inevitably waiting for us at some point along our journeys out-of-town; self-appointed authorities, clutching sticks for weapons, asking to check our vehicle papers and finding some 'discrepancy' that required a greased palm to correct. It was with fear, anger & frustration that we met the surreal reality of having our 'right to travel on the Presidents highways' curtailed by the whim of these boys owing to their arsenal of makeshift planks with protruding nails strewn across our path. Stories abound of missionaries who have played the patience game and won the day, but again these times were a reminder that Christians living here (both ex-pat and Nigerian) need our prayers for their daily protection and their transparent integrity.

'Lord, teach us how to pray.' Learning to pray is not easy, but having the opportunity to be a part of a Pastoral Care Team has shown me with greater vividness how I should pray for my friends, for those who serve the Lord in far off lands like Nigeria. It has shown me a glimpse of what it is really like for them.

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Urgent Prayer Need

Pray for the country of Nigeria - for peace to be restored, and for the Lord's comfort for all those affected by the recent violence.