

The Leicester Bwana in Botswana 06 July 03

So I get off my bike to answer a call of nature on the road between Gweta and Zoroga, on my way to Nata. I finish what I'm doing and start to admire the salt pans. There is nothing around. Ahead of me there is nothing. No trees, bushes, hills, divets. All I can see is the heat rising from the ground. I slowly turn round and look at the perfectly straight road to my left. I look at the other side of the road where the refreshing view of nothingness on the salt pans grips me. I look to my right and am startled by two men wearing nothing but a pair of shorts. They are not Tswana, so I say hello first in Khalanga and then in San (bushman). There is no reply. I decide to leave and pick up my bag. I get it onto my back; stand up and the two guys have gone. Disappeared as quickly as they appeared.

I relayed the story to the local Field Officers who make me promise NEVER to stop on that road again as there are many "ancestors" there and it is not safe. The following week, I stopped at the same place to take pictures of the nothingness I was in, and to illustrate how impossible it was for these guys to have hidden.

My visit to Gweta had been eventful, as all my trips seem to be. A friend of the Field Officer (Doctor) is the local ambulance driver named Roberts. He lay on the sofa of his front room about 3m x 4m. The sofa was massive and just took over the room. He was suffering from flu, has disgusting open sores in his mouth, an STD he didn't want to tell me about, diarrhoea and huge weight loss - classic signs of HIV, but he refuses to be tested because he "will be OK soon". He finishes his tale of woe and lies back down to look at fridge freezer which is in the place of where the TV should be. His wife comes into the room and opens the fridge to take out the onion (singular) and the tomato (singular) that are the only things inside. It then dawns on me that the room is lit by candlelight and there is no electricity.

The people in Nata are very excited as they are getting electricity sometime this month. Supply will be given to 30 households at a time. They are making significant advances here as they had a fresh water supply installed earlier this year. I saw the river they used to get water before this. It was being used by cattle who performed all their ablutions in this parched river bed. The wildlife dept had to remove a stray hippo from there recently as the hippo broke both legs of a drunk guy who didn't see it as he was walking home one night.

I saw an old lady who had breast cancer. Both her breasts had been removed but the cancer hadn't. Her chest was one mass of tumours and open sores. I will spare you too much detail, but she couldn't talk because of the pain. I tried to get her admitted to hospital, but only managed to get her some painkillers. I gave her some food and sat whilst she struggled to eat it. She is a bush lady and her relatives are out for weeks at a time looking for food, so I arranged for someone to feed her daily, and had to leave with a stomach turning feeling that remained with me for days.

I've managed to wheedle out some of the HIV positive people in my field and they are slowly starting to be open about their status (which is a big achievement). I am helping a group of 9 people (should be more soon) open a soya restaurant so they can make money for themselves, feed the local orphans (there are about 150 in the area all orphaned by HIV) and the local sick. To help them, I'm giving them training on cooking, basic finances, promotion and 10 kg of soya so they can get started. I'm also trying to get money for seeds so that they can grow vegetables themselves (I'm collecting money if there are any willing donors). If this works it will have a massive impact on changing the stigma and discrimination associated with HIV as it will enable the community to get into direct contact with HIV positive people and realise that they are not the mutants most people seem to think. Moreover it will attempt to unite the local orphans who are difficult to control. I managed to get some shoes for 2 orphans so they could be allowed in school and receive an education. I tried and have so far failed to get 3 girls to go to school. It remains to be seen whether they will stop beating up their uncle with whom they are staying.

Last weekend was my free so Dave and I went to Victoria Falls. An amazing sight that is totally absorbing. On the way out (we managed to blag our way in) are about 30 Zambians wanting to sell / barter their wares. I bought some items from Mr. Never President who would have sold his legs if the price were right. On an aside, I met a policeman at the refugee camp - Constable B. Somebody. I will have to ask his first name next time when I hope to be able to keep a straight face. If its Brian, I think I'll end up laughing in his face. Other names for this month are Blanket and Agreement, both sisters in their early teens.

So we're in Livingstone and go to a crocodile farm where we sweet talk Mercy to letting us into the crocodile pit. She has a pole that she starts to hit the crocs with, and tells me (not very reassuringly) that they are afraid of the stick. We are stood about 2 metres away from a croc that's about 4 metres in length when she tells me that this is one of the most aggressive ones. She hits it again and it makes a growling / hissing noise and moves like lightening into the water. She throws some sections of cow's legs for the crocs to eat. They tore off chewable chunks and we can hear the cow's bones being crushed, the croc doing this as casually as if eating a banana. After this, we went to hold some snakes.

I arrived back into the field to find that Roberts is still lying on the sofa, watching the fridge and has not been tested for HIV. The old lady with cancer has thankfully passed away. Next week I am in Zoroga and Nata (which stands for Never A Toilet Around) spending time with Field Officers that are giving me "manga manga" (trouble) and need some attention. Olly (female) wants to cook some goat for me and reassures me that I will like it. She also eats soil as it is full of vitamins and minerals. It tastes like soil, and bits stay in your mouth for hours.

I hope that you are all well. I now have a mobile phone - +267 71 43 50 12- but the reception is not great, I can't retrieve voice messages, or reply to text messages. I hope that you are all well and look forward to your email, or, even better, any donation. One

pound means I can buy 20 seeds, and will produce a sufficient crop for “more than plenty” people.

Life is still very good. Take care

Rick