

Beyond My Comfort Zone – A Malawi Experience

Ramblings from my Diary by Rita Pleasance

My Roman nose pressed to the airplane window provided me with my first panorama of



Malawi's flag fluttering wildly in the wind at the airport as we descended.

Three horizontal stripes of black, red and green. Black stands for the people of Africa and contains a red rising sun motif signifying the dawn of freedom. The red band signifies the blood of the martyrs of African freedom, while the green represents the evergreen nature of Malawi. Peering down upon a beautiful country as it

manifested itself through the clouds. It is bordered by Tanzania, Zambia and Mozambique. It is a landlocked country with a massive inland lake called Lake Malawi (its length being 364 miles or if you are under the age of 50 odd, 585 kilometres). I remembered that Malawi is also known as the 'warm heart of Africa' and the people speak a language called Chichewa. I could hardly pronounce the name of their language so how was I going to cope with 'Mulibanji' which is Chichewa for 'how are you?'

Carolyn scraped a very hot Penny, Phil, Martin and me up from the airport in her pickup truck. It was about 30C and very humid. I sniffed the air around me appreciatively as I plodded to the car – I would describe it as flowery, hot, wet and musky. A man sat in a wheelchair begging for money in the car park. During landing, skimming over the airport the rain hammered down in the storybook expected tropical style from clouds that were surprisingly, as dark, gloomy and forbidding as our English winter skies. We were delighted that it did not take long to drive to the Lott's house which was very near Lilongwe, the capital city of Malawi.

My initial impression, as we zoomed along a long straight highway, was initially, how most of the inhabitants walked or cycled, were ultra slim and also extremely young. I didn't see many grey haired or elderly people about anywhere though I did see more in the villages. Tragically, apart from the lack of food the dreaded Aids disease had also taken a huge toll of the younger ones in the country.

I became entranced by a man swiftly, running with a huge tyre pushing it with his hands, along the red dusty road. He loped along like a gazelle – hardly a bead of sweat on his upper lip and I sat in a car not even moving and I felt as though I was melting and dripping through the floor. And this was February - not even the height of summer.

We were introduced to the men who help Julian with Christian mission work and distributing food in the villages. I quickly noticed how polite people were towards each other.

Our bedrooms at Caroline and Julian's house were very comfortable. We had large round blue mosquito nets over



our beds. After I made my bed on the first morning I followed the same daily habit. I would continue to keep my net covering the bed. Dusk is normally 'DEET Alert' time. The mosquito repellent is the most ghastly smelling concoction which I have ever had the misfortune to inhale. My normal mode of dealing with the DEET is to take a huge shuddering intake of air into my lungs, spray over the exposed skin, under my net, over the top of my net and then run like a lunatic down the corridor to the kitchen or lounge before I would gasp fresh air into my lungs. Phew. Sniff, sniff. Yuck. However, this daily performance was still far better than the repeating bite of an angry buzzing mozzie. I would also gaze around me very carefully, especially when outside, and I would never rush into high grass – if a visit to the ladies became of paramount importance – but my brain and bladder were told to wait until the pleasure of a bathroom beckoned. I did discover that hopping about was just not in the domain of tiny children when a visit became more imminent!

Well, well, three months previously, I would never have anticipated that I would be bopping along in the back of a Toyota, as it bumped and ground the lumpy dusty red road to Ngoma and Katema. Katema is the village where there was no existing church and Ngoma is a completely new village for Caroline and Julian to 'plant a church' as it was described. As we careered down the highway we observed maize fields beginning to come to fruition. We saw tobacco growing and being hung in wide sheds to dry prior to sale at market. I saw groundnuts, soya, pumpkin and a little banana. People, again mostly young, were walking, talking, playing and gardening on both sides of the road. We observed tree branches that had deliberately been laid down in the road at the beginning of the village and then again at the end. This signified that there was a funeral in the village that day and groups of villagers were clustered around awaiting the beginning of a burial. People travelled for miles to join the funeral. Caroline told us that she had attended one where the women had sat from early morning with the body of the deceased. The men sat outside discussing and at the end of the day they collectively buried the body in a copse of trees near the village. This of course can interfere with the fresh water of the village water well if the cemetery is too close.

We also observed small mounds of soil, set on the side of the road which would later be mixed with water to create bricks for the local huts and houses. A village elder ushered us into his house and proudly showed us around. It had taken him two years to build his house and all it contained was a poster, a bench and some hooks. Entirely different from my western abode.



The women seemed to do all the work. A man proves his virility by the amount of children



he has fathered and, hence, the more workers in the fields!!! Most women seemed to be carrying tiny children and it was considered quite normal to see a mother suckling her child. What was deemed unacceptable was a short skirt. The ladies always had their legs covered. I always wore a long skirt in the bush when visiting the villages. The children (from a very young age) are expected to work with their mothers in the fields. The women do age very rapidly and are expected to look after the children totally and cook and organise the household too. The food is divided as follows at mealtime:- Men first, women and children second and orphans last (if they are lucky). The women are expected to collect the water and if

there is no 'well' in their village they may spend 2 hours, perhaps more, collecting water and walking with a pot full atop their heads. It *would be* a calamity of massive proportions if you dropped it half way home!

I loved the tiny children, who not unlike a flock of geese who would hurtle up behind us,



squealing and shrieking swooping backwards and forwards, occasionally falling away frightened if I came too near. Their open mouthed interest in us was quite overwhelming. I was white with blond hair and blue eyes and was considerably more bountiful than all the people around. People stared intently as though I was an alien from the outer wherever. They would stare, so open mouthed at this startling stranger. Whenever possible I would begin to play with the children teaching them how to play windmills –

remember from school the exercise of lifting one leg and then the other and flailing your arms from side to side. The children loved it and joined into the affray with great abandon with loud shrieks and yells.



As we said goodbye to one lady I noticed three tattoo lines on her forehead in between her eyebrows. This indicated that she used the witchcraft method of dealing with a personal problem by visiting the local witch doctor and he would have carved three lines on her forehead. This method was part of dealing with the problem and was an inherent part of the pact. Over the years, many witch doctor visits meant many lines. Therefore the likelihood of looking pretty

bug ugly by the time you reached a grandmother status was extremely high! Not my personal choice of problem solving.

One day we picked up 10 ladies and an assortment of babies and crammed them into the pick-up truck. They, in turn, squashed up between two men already hiking a lift with us. Their cheerful sounds of chatter following us as we heaved and lurched over the dusty red roads were really uplifting.

It is so difficult to keep clean here in Malawi and we are not even living through the dry season. The red dust seeps to the very core of everything – even on my false eyelashes. Don't ask - it's a long story. It seemed a good idea at the time!

Never on any occasion was I overwhelmed by the body odour of the locals with whom I had been in contact. Nobody could have probably ever had a bath in their lifetime, other than perhaps leaping into a stream. I would say that the worst smell I encountered in Malawi was me! Phew. And I did have access to a bath back at Caroline and Julian's home.

One day one of Julian's helpers took us one day to an area where he was growing maize. As we strode into the bush I refused to think about creeps and crawls that could bite and consume! We marched past a goat who eyed us with some considerable awe; mute and quite still in shock at our appearance. Trod quietly past a second and studied the field full of maize waving in the field, the sound of water droplets from a tiny natural stream dripping into a brook. It was such a lovely moment standing in the quiet of this crop with absolutely no sound of man not even in the distance. No car, no aircraft noise, just grass waving silence. It was so very beautiful to the eyes and quite, unusually, to the ears!!

We studied the contents of a village well one day and was shocked at how utterly revolting it was. Like the contents of a washing machine. Its foaming greyish gunk gleaming from within the well walls was not unlike the contents of a washing machine that had washed the grimmest of clothes.



One day we travelled to the village of Khoswi. Caroline and Julian had developed close links with the village and were supporting their church and a feeding programme for the orphans and widows. We met the elders and stood looking at vast pots of "porridge" bubbling over wood fires. A solitary chicken risked his scrawny legs to peck into the embers to catch a morsel or two. A tan coloured sick looking dog sniffed disconsolately amongst the red earth beneath the huts. The wood smelt wonderful. I would always gravitate towards the fire and allow the smoke to drive towards my body which I figured would halt the attention of any passing insects and improve my body smell! Groups of people, mostly children, sat or stood waiting for food. A group of three or 4 ladies prepared by washing spoons, plates and doling out the porridge type substance, called "nsema" comprising soya, salt, maize sugar and vitamins. The intended recipients



were mostly children, 200 or more, who stood in quiet queues, many dressed in clothes that I would not even give to the jumble sale. Many were orphans and these children lived rough in the grass near the village. If a child's mother dies (AIDS has knocked out a whole generation) and there is no close female relative the men do



not bring up the children. They are left to fend for themselves and many without Julian's help would just die. One by one, in turn, they received their bowl of food and then they squatted on the dusty floor to eat. The older people and the disabled were the last to be fed. This village has supplies bought to them three times a week. It used to be four but there were not enough mission funds to cover this.



Afterwards we played with the children – pat a cake ball games and windmills. We sang songs. Their tiny serious faces changed into smiles. The atmosphere lightened.

We also attended a local school which was really rather an exciting event. We arrived with



the men in the front of the wagon and Penny and I in the back, nursing slightly sore posteriors following the umpty, lumpy journey. As we trundled up the drive I became aware of about 100 children sat under an enormous tree with a couple of teachers. We were welcomed and were introduced to the staff and the headmaster. About 13 teachers deal with 800 children, who I must say were extremely well behaved. We then joined a classroom of 10 girls,

aged between ten and twelve, and Penny, I and the teacher taught the children how to made brooches using silk ribbon, buttons and beads, that we had brought from England. These we were hoping to sell back at our church in England to help raise funds for this school. The atmosphere was terrific, the children so intent on learning. Great day!

Five children live in the orphanage at the bottom of Caroline and Julian's garden. They are looked after by John and his wife Betha who originally separately came over from Mozambique. John and some 15 others came over in a carved out boat hewn from a tree trunk during the troubles in the 1980s. He literally had no clothes and covered his personal parts in a plastic bag. They sailed over across the river into Malawi, which took all day. They were not apprehended and were able to land. This life changing experience, meeting Betha plus his love of Christianity and its teachings bought him to live with Caroline and Julian.



One experience that I shall never forget was enjoying a church service in a mud hut. For the day I was considered an honorary man and therefore able to share the hut with the 12 men. Their stunning voices uplifting in collective song was really such a wonderful treat to listen to. Wedding organizers would pay large sums to employ them to sing. Bible verses were then shared and explained.



How do people sit on rush floors for so very long? My rear end complained unceasingly, my wobbly clambering up was an amusing sight to behold and was alleviated only by a gentle staggering stroll up the main street.

Despite the material differences from my usual Western comfort zone I was sad when our week came to an end and I had to board the plane. Julian and Caroline are so inspiring and Africa gets under your skin.

And there is definitely something indefinable about this place called Malawi. The burnt African smell, the huge joy in the smiles of the people, especially the children, the countryside..... In this culture they only really live for this present day and the immediate moment. Tomorrow is not to be considered, especially not today!

