

## LEARNING TO CARTWHEEL

*Eliza Reid spent seven weeks travelling alone through West Africa in late 2006. At the end of her second instalment, she was waiting for a stuck bus in Burkina Faso.*



***Presents!** Pupils at Ecole Christ-Roi show off the pens and sweets I brought them. They put on serious faces for the camera, but were full of enthusiasm once I stowed it away.*

I should have known that packing only one bottle of mineral water, instead of my standard two, and finding my first air conditioned bus of the trip meant my luck was running out.

The 10am Bobo-Dioulasso to Ouagadougou bus on which I was travelling had hit a rut in the dirt road, caused by heavy rains, and was tilting precariously as all the passengers disembarked into the midday heat.

Taking public transportation in developing countries is like eating your broccoli: you know it's good for you, because you'll meet local people and share experiences and see the countryside roll past at an inevitably slow pace. But it's never very palatable when you're actually experiencing it. Delays are the norm, not the exception. The number of people, livestock and burlap sacks that are crammed into the space available amazes me every time, and some unwritten rule states that the hotter the climate, the less likely fellow passengers are to open windows. It seems the dust and the breeze are greater foes than fresh air and a survivable temperature.

As local villagers crowded around the marooned bus, I joined two other passengers and speculated as to whether we would be stuck for several hours or perhaps longer. I was becoming wearily cynical about extended delays.

But then someone went to collect shovels. Others offered to help dig. And within an astonishing 25 minutes, the bus backed up out of the quagmire and we were on our way. I felt a bit sorry for the next big bus scheduled to follow our path, though.

## A LITTLE LEARNING

My destination was Ouagadougou, the capital of Burkina Faso. I had wanted to visit ever since I had discovered years before that an obscure African nation had such a wonderful sounding capital city (it's pronounced Wagadúgú).

My four-day visit also had another purpose. I had been invited to visit a local primary school, École Christ-Roi, which was funded by a Dutch group.

Burkina Faso is one of the poorest countries in the world and the state education system is lamentable. Less than a quarter of the adult population is literate. The teachers at École Christ-Roi earn a meagre 30,000 CFA (40 EUR) monthly. Life expectancy is 49 years, and a woman bears on average 6.5 children in her lifetime.

Many people I spoke to before my trip were particularly concerned about my visiting Burkina. "I've never heard of it," they would exclaim. "Isn't it dangerous?"



**Working:** The teachers at Ecole Christ-Roi. Patrick, the Principal, is second from the right. Each of the others is responsible for one grade. They earn about EUR 40 per month.

"No," I would reply. "It's one of the safest countries in Africa. You haven't heard of it because it's not war torn or severely crippled by famine, and that is usually the kind of news about the region that gets reported in Europe."

École Christ-Roi was founded by Patrick Nitiema, a local teacher. Patrick is 38 years old, softly spoken with a warm smile and a high-pitched laugh, both of which he uses often.

When I first heard about the school I was worried the religious name meant the school was pushing evangelical Christianity onto poor communities who had more pressing things to worry about than religious doctrine. But Patrick assured me that the school was not religiously affiliated; he had simply given it this name because he himself is a practising Catholic in this primarily Muslim and animist country.

Sharply at 7am, when the temperature was already at least 30C, Patrick collected me and took me to the school in the Yamtinga district of town in typical local fashion: on his moto, helmet free.

Like many of West Africa's cities, Ouagadougou's wide and bumpy roads were slithering with motos day and night. A car is a luxury out of reach for most people, and while a moto is still not something everyone would own, city slickers often have access to one for the day's commute.

There are no helmets. Most people I spoke to believed that they were unnecessary; it was "everyone else" who drove recklessly. I had gradually evolved from gripping the shoulders of the driver as we whizzed along, to having one hand holding the bar at the back of the seat behind me and my 20 kg rucksack firmly fastened on my back – please don't tell my mother.

École Christ-Roi is housed in a purpose-built low sandy-coloured brick building in Yamtinga, one of the city's poorest neighbourhoods. It now has six classrooms which accommodate 208 students in grades 1 to 6. Like the rest of this quarter, there is no electricity and no running water. Students use one of two holes in the ground as toilets and drink water which is collected daily by a local woman and kept in huge ceramic pots in each classroom. They take shade under a palm canopy which needs to be replaced after each rainy season, although leafy mango trees have been planted and are growing quickly.



**Ready for the Close-Up:** Two students pose during the morning recess. The girl on the right is sporting one of the popular hair styles for female children.

Each time I entered one of the classrooms the students all stood to attention, crossed their arms, and recited "Bonjour, Madame" in perfect unison. With each presentation of a pen I had brought for them, they would bow or curtsy and say *merçi*. One of the classes was learning the regional capitals of Burkina Faso, each name written in perfect cursive writing on the chalkboard. There aren't enough textbooks for the students; the teacher has one book for the class and writes each lesson out by hand on the blackboard.

The oldest class had only six pupils – presumably as the children get older their parents begin to take them out of school to work in the fields – and I asked each of them what they wanted to be when they grew up. Their answers were varied – doctor, businessperson, priest, police officer, journalist (this from the lone female student) – and all with the same childhood aspirations that everyone has at this age. I hoped they would have the opportunity to realize those dreams.

Later that afternoon, walking down the dusty track by the school, I saw a young boy, no older than ten, wearing grubby brown shorts and, noticeably, a bright fuchsia shirt, unbuttoned. As he strolled along, for no reason I could see, he abruptly stopped and dove into a huge cartwheel, then continued on his merry way.

There is definitely hope.

## **DINNER IN BOGODOGO**

Off a non-descript uneven dirt track in the Bogodogo neighbourhood of Ouagadougou lies the home of M. Sandaogo Kaboré, assistant to the mayor of the district. M. Kaboré and his family live one street over from the compound of his brother, Moog-Naaba Baogho II, who is the chief of this quarter of the district, a man given the authority to mediate disputes and to be a sort of moral leader in the community. He is a practising Catholic with three wives and ten children.

M. Kaboré, a jovial man who looks much younger than his 45 years, lives with his wife of almost 20 years and their seven children in a grey brick structure like the others in the neighbourhood. It has electricity but no running water. His sitting room belied his fairly senior position on the local council: he had three velour sofas imported from Ghana, a clock whose face was an image of the mayor of Bogodogo, and a large framed image of dogs playing pool.

I was pleased, but not entirely surprised, when M. Kaboré invited Patrick and me for dinner.

Despite the limited means available to most people, the hospitality I had experienced on the trip was frequent, generous, and very touching. Part of me wondered if this was because I was a woman travelling alone, - though more likely it was because I was a guest in the country, and guests, whether male or female, alone or in a group, are treated like royalty.



**Responsibility:** *Monsieur Sandaogo Kaboré at his desk in the office of the district mayor of Bogodogo. The flag of Burkina Faso stands proudly on the left and his desk is strewn with the official papers he proudly showed me, indicating the level of responsibility his position carries.*



**The Chief:** *Moog-Naaba Baogho II, chief of his quartier, relaxes at dinner at his brother's house. The hat is a traditional one worn by people in his position.*

M. Kaboré's wife, Thérèse, prepared a delicious meal of *tô*, similar to thick polenta, with beef sauce and roasted chicken pieces. We washed it down with large 75cl bottles of Castel beer, a local lager, and a bottle of sweet sparkling wine which M. Kaboré had brought out with a flourish at the beginning of the meal.

The formalities continued once we finished eating and cleaning our sauce-covered hands. Moog-Naaba Baogho presented me with a gift of locally produced cotton, wrapped in purple paper, while I reciprocated with one of the small tokens I could squeeze in my backpack for such occasions: a small china coaster featuring a puffin.

M. Kaboré sombrely delivered a very touching speech, hoping we could stay in touch and thanking me for my help with promoting the École Christ-Roi.

"People like you help, not because you have the means, but because you think that in life, people should share," he said in French. My murmured response was not nearly as eloquent.

## **BENIN, INTERRUPTED**

The next stop on my journey was Benin, but it takes about 20 hours to take a bus the 1100 kilometres from Ouaga to Benin's de facto capital, Cotonou, on the coast. The rate of fatal accidents is much higher after 6pm, when the sun sets, and in order to avoid travelling at night, I came up with what I thought was a full-proof plan: I would take the bus as far as Natitingou, a large town in the north of Benin, and then continue to Cotonou on a Beninese bus early the next morning.

I called the bus station and reserved a ticket for Natitingou. I arrived at the station at 6am and picked up my reserved ticket for Natitingou. I put my backpack in the bus's hold, which the bus clerk clearly marked with masking tape for – of course - Natitingou. I showed my ticket for – you guessed it - Natitingou at the door of the bus, and again to the conductor when the journey started.

So imagine my surprise when, 2-1/2 hours into the journey, the chauffeur announced he was going to Togo, one country to the west of Benin.

I wasn't the only person who was heading for Benin (although I was the only one who was bound for the north of the country). The other Benin-bound passengers, most of whom were

merchants and who would now have to pay extra border bribes to get their goods across two borders, were very displeased with the new route.

The new schedule had us heading south from Ouaga into Togo, and along the length of the narrow country to the capital Lomé, also a 1100-kilometre journey. The bus would then continue the three hours east into Benin and on to Cotonou, and, the driver assured me “then we will go north [about 800 kilometres!] and drop you off.”

I didn't have much choice but to continue to Lomé.

After 5.30, the sun began its rapid descent and nightfall quickly approached. Then nervousness began creeping in.

As it dipped down, the sun revealed the picture postcard and *hilly* scenery of northern Togo. All along I'd been taking public transport in the comfort of knowing that if the driver did fall asleep or run over a donkey, we would just careen off into a nearby millet field. Here there were many tall trees and, as the sun was tantalizingly revealing, lots of hairpin bends and steep drops in the road. I hoped the hills would end before the sun.

Two hours later, after a brief supper break (tinned sardines squished on a baguette for me), we stopped briefly where a discussion ensued with three youths at the side of the road. **It transpired that they were mercenaries and the chauffeur was negotiating their fee to accompany us on the bus, in order to protect us from possible bandits at roadblocks.**

Then I noticed the machine guns slung over the shoulders of these kids.

A settlement on pricing was never agreed and the bus rolled on without them. I hardly had time to dwell on this prospect when I began thinking about what was the most realistic threat to our safe arrival: the driver's exhaustion.

With the exception of two 15-minute breaks and customs, he had been driving straight since 7am – anticipated arrival time in Cotonou was 4am – and everyone else on the bus was blissfully sound asleep in the darkness. I sat rigidly in my seat, sending mental signals to the driver that if I could stay awake, he could too.

As we drove further into the darkness, my mind conjured up images – were we all going to be robbed? Would I be targeted as the only westerner on the bus? Would the chauffeur drift off to sleep and drive off the road?

The minutes ticked by.

**END.**

*Eliza Reid travelled alone through West Africa last October and November. This is the third instalment of her story, which will continue over the next two Sundays in Morgunblaðið.*

## **ECOLE CHRIST-ROI**

Only one third of Burkina Faso's children attend primary school, mostly those in urban areas like Ouagadougou. Children's value as a source of labour in the home or in the fields becomes more valuable to families who would also struggle to pay for any necessary books or school supplies for potential students. Only 1% of children eventually attend some form of post-secondary education.

The students of Ecole Christ-Roi need to pay a nominal tuition fee to attend the school, but the Dutch group which is sponsoring the school raises funds to sponsor students – it costs EUR 100 (um ISK 8.800) each year to pay for one child's tuition (EUR 30), school supplies, backpack, shoes in which to commute, and a portion of the teachers' salaries.

The Dutch group is also fundraising to build additional toilets for the school, textbooks for the students, a larger playground, and funds to plaster and paint the inside and outside of the building.

For further information on the school, contact Mieke Rietveld, President of the Stichting Ecole Christ-Roi on [g-m.rietveld@wxs.nl](mailto:g-m.rietveld@wxs.nl).

## **WEST AFRICA**

### Burkina Faso

Population: 13.9 million

Capital: Ouagadougou

Official Language: French, although various native African languages are spoken by the vast majority

Religion: Muslim (50%), Indigenous beliefs (40%), Christian (10%)

Life Expectancy at birth: 48.85 years

Burkina Faso is one of the world's poorest nations. It is landlocked and its dry climate makes regular, healthy harvests, especially for cotton, its major product, a challenge. After some turbulent post-independence years characterised by regular military coups (six since 1960), stability returned to the nation under President Blaise Compaoré, albeit not without dubious accusations. But for visitors it is one of the region's safest countries.