

Letter from Okulonyo 06

Dear Friends,

In Uganda people always pray for 'journey mercies' and give thanks for safe arrivals, as travelling here can be perilous and uncertain, as well as being joyous unpredictable and full of colour.

Last week Suzi and I began a 3 day journey to Murchison Falls Game Reserve, with her wedged between the driver and I, me sitting half on the seat and half on the luggage rack assuring her it was 'quite safe'. 2 days earlier she and the same driver had been thrown off the same bike as he lost control going over a bump. 3 skinny Ugandans on a tarmac road in town is an acceptable load, but 3 in the bush [one traditionally built], plus rucksacks, as they say here is 'risky'. We made it to town only to discover that the bus had 'failed' [left already], so clambered aboard a cattle truck going our way. Suzi sitting on a lumpy sack of broken cassava pieces on the floor with the women and me perched atop the railings with the men and boys. Travelling here's like life; you can spend all your time worrying what might happen or just embrace it joyously with others. At our next stop we stuffed into a small minibus with 16 others, enjoying the luxury of a bit of seat and soon reached our destination.

The following day we were sitting on a 63 seater coach bound for Kampala due to leave at 8am, but as buses here only leave when full, this allows for a certain flexibility. While you wait for the bus to go all your needs are supplied; water, chappatis, fresh doughnuts, bowls of stew, morning papers, handkerchiefs, watches, schoolbooks, are brought on by a variety of vendors. Similarly at stops along the way, of which there are many, bunches of bananas, oranges, groundnuts, roast cassava, chicken on a stick, can all be purchased through the window off the upstretched arms of traders.

If you don't get on at the start of the journey, you're not guaranteed a seat. Twice I've stood for over 2 hours after boarding the night bus to Kampala at 2am, hanging on to both luggage racks in a position of semi crucifixion, riding the bumps along the dirt track. But always the longed-for seat becomes available, and with a convivial companion the journey soon goes. It's not just humans that travel but a variety of poultry- chickens, turkeys and disorientated cockerels crowing mid-afternoon all add to the mix.

If the bus 'fails' you can often get a lift in a car. I recently agreed a lift in a small estate car with the promise that we'd overtake the bus. As I squeezed in with 10 other people and their luggage I knew we'd be lucky to arrive at all, but somehow we did.

Many Westerners working for NGOs never travel on public transport and miss the chance to sit alongside ordinary Ugandans and experience the joys and difficulties of such journeys. It's been a real luxury to travel in an air-conditioned Toyota Landcruiser and the couple of times I've been offered lifts by such organisations I've been really grateful. But like Chad and Aidan, in Celtic times, who refused to travel by horse, but insisted they go by foot on the level of the local people, perhaps the longer, the more cramped the journey the less set apart and more incarnational it becomes.

Jonathan