

FLIGHT INTO THE SAHARA: June 2018

Flying, they say, is 99% boredom and 1% sheer terror.

From a MAF pilot's perspective, it's often routine, almost mundane, load, fly, and offload – repeat. Return back to base for a decent shower, comfy room, and air-conditioned if needs be, tasty meal, fellowship with kindred people and a good night's sleep.

Occasionally however, one has the real privilege of spending time on the ground, and staying with missionaries in far flung places, living as they live and getting a privileged glimpse into the lives they lead in obedience to the Lord.



Comfy pilot accommodation for the night

Missionaries in the middle of the Sahara desert, who have been there a long while because God called them there, who have been slowly building relationships, and learning a language in this remote desert oasis village. Their children have grown up there and left, and they are now well along in years, but remain here because they feel called by the Lord to be his light in this tiny corner of the world.

Don't be drawn in by the oft misused word "Oasis". Tropical paradise this is most certainly NOT.

In this context oasis refers to a small collection of palm trees, mud brick dwellings and some scrubby plants that are gathered around a low lying area of the desert floor allowing water to be close to the surface. It's near an ancient volcano so the ground is rocky ancient lava flows, sandy and dusty. Goats forage for what little food they can find, or are found standing under the shade of the palm trees during



the heat of the day, which often is in the mid 40's or higher. The place is littered with the wrecks and parts of vehicles that have come here to die, and anything that is eaten or consumed has to be trucked in from a neighboring country over long distances in the desert and at great cost.

Litter disposal and recycling? You are kidding right?

This couple live in a typical two roomed mud brick dwelling in “town” that gets blistering hot in the hot season, and very dusty in the windy season; with a simple “squat hole in the ground toilet” and an adjacent open air place for ablutions using a bucket and a jug.



Toilet lid on left

bathroom area on right.

For the privacy conscious, the bathroom/toilet door consists of a stick angled across the entrance to indicate occupancy around the corner. ☺



Oops!! The bathroom/toilet is occupied...

Food is almost totally prepared using a basic solar oven, and occasionally they use a primus stove.

When they can get paraffin/kerosene (that has been trucked in a great expense from a neighboring country) they will also use that for cooking, otherwise they will buy a few liters of Jet A1 aircraft fuel from the visiting MAF plane to use as it's pretty similar to paraffin. We always try to include sufficient fuel in our payload to be able to drain off this fuel for them without harming our essential reserves.

Cooling is done by means of laying items in a shallow container and keeping them covered with thick hessian/burlap sacking that is constantly doused with water. The resultant evaporations does a remarkable job of cooling the item such as a watermelon for a meal, coke, bottled water etc.

Driving to the nearest larger town with an airfield; also at an oasis; can take a few days due to the incredibly harsh and unforgiving landscape, and then another week of travel through the desert down to N'djamena. The 4.6 hours I spent bumping along through turbulent air to reach this place from Ndjamenas pales into total insignificance.



You REALLY don't want to force land here, but this is what you will have to drive through if you go overland.



Suddenly my perspective changes ... 20 liters of Jet fuel = about 7 minutes flying for the Caravan ... but represents a few weeks cooking for the missionary.

That clumsy, fragile solar oven that I struggled to load in Ndjamena , half wishing that I didn't have to deal with such an awkward piece of equipment, is incredibly precious to the missionary; and I handle it now with all the care of a newborn baby, as I realize the huge difference it will make in their lives. Bread, muffins, stews, cooked food, hot water for washing.



That box of car parts to keep their 4wd vehicle on the road, is like a Christmas present to them.

When i messaged then and asked if I could bring them anything special as a treat.

I was told "No, just please make sure all our mail gets here".

Ah yes internet?!?!

Yeah right; that's tediously slow if and when it works, and hideously expensive. There is a cellphone network with a decent signal, but forget 4G or the like.

The medicines we loaded for the small hospital there, where another missionary couple work, I now recognize as incredibly important. While driving out to the airstrip the doctor was talking about the Diphtheria he had to deal with, the rash of Hepatitis cases he was dealing with, and the multitude of gunshot and stabbing wounds he needed to treat on a regular basis. All in a day's work for him working under those conditions ... but almost unbelievable to the average doctor in western civilization.

On the flight back home, we stopped off at Faya, an oasis and airstrip in the middle of the Sahara, to refuel, and while we were there the doctor was asked to examine a lady who was pregnant. This consultation was carried out in one of the rooms in the small airport building that had a door that could close.

The rest of the passengers simply sat on woven plastic mats in the shade on the floor of the airside verandah while we waited.

One quickly realizes, that the role aircraft play in the whole process, is a vital one, to enable these incredible people to continue to live and serve in these harsh circumstances.

These people, who pour out their lives like this are my real heroes in life. They have truly learned and practice Paul's words in Philippians 4 - "Content in all circumstances".

As you talk with them you can feel the love they have for the people they live amongst and serve, and hear their heartache that these tough self-reliant, independent desert dwellers might one day, somehow, get to know the good news of Christ, and make it their own.

Mark

10 June 2018