

An African Assessment: What It's Really Like

By Penny Randell

After having spent several weeks, months, or years on the African continent you may face re-entry issues that are challenging to say the least. It matters not how long you were gone, you will harbor great stories that are begging to be told. But, where do you go to tell them? Few will truly want to hear about your experiences and most won't care. This is by no means pointing a finger. Instead, comparing our American way of life to that of Africa comes at a price...time. Clearly, it would take hours on end to give an adequate account of African experiences and we Americans just can't seem to spare that amount of time.

Because of this, it would seem worthwhile to take in a few sensible facts in advance. To gain an understanding of African culture is entertaining, as well as mind-expanding. Here you will find various descriptions of just how these amazing folks get by. These truisms can also serve to prepare you in case you decide to take the plunge and dive into a culture unlike anywhere else on earth. As we literally skim the surface, take a moment and access some facts that may even invite laughter.

Beginning with the issue of time, it must be accepted that time does not necessarily exist in Africa. When a Ugandan says, "I am on the way," that is your first warning that it may never come to be. How about making an appointment? Same thing again. A noon appointment will probably come to fruition several hours later; if at all. There will be no excuses or apologies either, for they have done nothing wrong. Clearly this is wearing on the nerves and patience becomes your best friend, because nothing can be done. Americans are devout keepers of the time. Here, knowing what you are in for in advance can save the turmoil of exaggerated stress.

Let's take on a living example of such. A trip to an ATM machine would seem pretty straight-ahead. In Kampala, Uganda are situated throughout the city with plenty to go around. Nonetheless, that particular little jaunt may end up costing up to 30 minutes. Somehow these gentle, loving people fail to retain the instructions on the screen and each time they are presented with the need for extended concentration. There's nothing you can do but wait. If you try to pressure those in front of you it will do no good. In fact, it's not unusual for someone to make effort to cut in line. Sometimes they will laughingly say, "I challenge you." That's your cue to politely tell them to return to the back of the line. Confrontations never ensue; laughter does.

This leads us to the overall attitude on the street. In Uganda a sense of humor is prominent. Everyone is eager to laugh and the teasing and so forth is infectious. When you make attempt to speak to a passersby, they are indeed ready for a serious conversation. Few ignore you and for sure, there's always this kind of time. Everyone will greet you no matter your dressing attire, color, age, or sex. In fact, women are called "Madam" and no sexual innuendos ever take charge. Nothing but respect is offered no matter who you are. Even beggars are treated well. When you stop for a traffic jam or a red light, folks selling merchandise flood the area around your car. They are all kind, smiling, and ready to get on with making their living.

But, there's nothing that can compare with the traffic jams. There aren't that many roads in Kampala. Couple that with the great influx of people from up country and you've got a mess. There just isn't enough driving room. When it comes to a roundabout, they are always crammed and working your way into a lane is practically impossible. Then, once you are inside the circle, you can't get out. Boda bodas are motorcycles with a driver up for hire. They are the only means of transport that can get you anywhere. On the other hand, nothing could be more dangerous than weaving between stuck cars. Pedestrians have no rights whatsoever and one is risking limbs when crossing with oncoming traffic. If you do opt for a car you are looking at extending your drive time by hours. What should take a total of 20 minutes can easily turn into hours of just sitting. Every thoroughfare in this capital city is affected by these jams and there's no way to escape them.

On the brighter side, let's take an in-depth look at age through the eyes of an African. It can be pretty much summed up in three words: They don't care. Well, except for the old folks, that is, for which they care greatly. If you are male and have lived past four to five decades you are considered a "muzee" (pronounced mu-ZAY), and are addressed as such. A female muzee is referred to as "Mommy," or "Mama." The point being that a muzee is always offered respect for living so long. In America older people are often shunned or ignored. It's quite refreshing to watch the kindness, and even assistance ALWAYS extended to the older population. Too, attachment to age rarely interrupts a love affair or marriage. Except for the need to have children early, age is once again bypassed.

And what about spreading that kindness? When a crowd of people have gathered for one reason or another, it is crucial that one greets everybody. A simple fist bump will do as long as it's accompanied by a smile and penetrable warmth. Most Ugandans speak only slightly louder than a whisper. This has nothing to do with being shy, but is just another cultural trait. It remains important to hush any loud tones and listen to what others are saying. And chances are, whatever they are saying will have an element of humor cunningly tucked in.

Many believe Africa to be dirty. This is not true. As far as Uganda goes, these folks are focused on cleanliness. I mean they even sweep the dirt! Brooms are created from fallen bark and limbs of various trees that are bound together in a useable fashion. You can buy such implements while sitting within a jam for way less than a dollar. They truly get the job done no matter what you are sweeping. Restaurants, too, are kept spotless with employees filling their hours house-cleaning when they aren't attending customers. Personal attire is more often than not immaculate and folks in the capital city engaged in daily work dress accordingly. Men wear suits and ties and are always well-presented. Hotels are held to a standard that can't help but be heralded and housecleaning in general is considered an honorable position.

But, what if you are white in this land of black? Well, first of all you would be known as a "mzungu," meaning white person. You will be noticed everywhere you go and there will be no getting away from it. You will be seen as a wealthy person whose very presence conjures up ideas of how to get some of your money. Of course it is expected for you to pay for everything for everyone when you go out, and some might even ask for more than was originally agreed upon. At times it is necessary to actually stay hidden while friends attend to business. One glimpse of you and a price magically skyrockets. An example of this is the local zoo. The posted price for a

non-resident of Uganda is to pay 15,000 shillings (about \$4.00) for entrance. A mzungu will pay three times that. Again, that's just the way it is.

Sad as it is, the majority of these folks don't have any money. Some work for a dollar or two a day; often less. Primary needs such as food are often ignored and many simply go hungry. Should the opportunity to steal present itself, money or merchandise can disappear right before your eyes. Africans are wise, cunning, and know how to get what they want. Some who lean toward honesty will state up front that you should hide your money, for they admit to stealing. If a Ugandan is caught stealing, laughter will replace shame. Considering our lifestyle and money we Americans have to spend, it remains comprehensible. Yes, theft is forever present and the threat of it can definitely be a drain on a visitor's compassion. Still, you probably will never catch the one responsible and unfortunately, the question of "who done it?" can eat at you forever... if you let it.

Purposely saving the best for last, the Christian recognition and love of God rules the beating hearts of these dear folks. It's rare to engage in a conversation that doesn't make its way to their Lord and Savior and a testimony to their unshakable faith. When reaching their destination safely, they always praise God aloud. It's dangerous to move in these cramped surroundings and getting "knocked" is always a strong possibility. Many attend churches on Sunday, and that is an all-day affair. When and if they describe their needs, such as hunger or medication, they always end their speech with, "God will provide." Here belief is part of life and reality.

There are countless stories and examples of Ugandan life, just as one might imagine. This account is not close to being finished. As said, it takes time to honestly grasp and then realize what you are witnessing. Let it be known that it is well worth it. To compare our splendid way of life in America with tales of Africa can open the mind. No matter what, we are all human and all in it together. Know this and feel it. Let your heart acknowledge these people, for never has there been a greater effort to survive – and survive happily.