

# Caterpillars and Chips

## Twelve days in Burkina Faso



by Andrew Vinter

### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the staff and pupils of Kimberley School, particularly John May and Andrew Lings, for charging Alison Scothern and myself with the task of developing the school's link with the *Lycée Bassy* in Ziniaré, Burkina Faso. The following is an account of the trip we made. It is written in good faith and is dedicated to the children of Ziniaré.

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## DAY ONE : FRIDAY 18<sup>TH</sup> OCTOBER

### 1 No insects please...We're British

After all the preparations, it was at last time to set off for this blind date with Africa. I had been to the pub for last, and penultimate, orders the night before but the beer hadn't helped me to sleep much. It seemed an ordinary enough morning now, a few cobwebs inside my head and a very dark world outside. Then again, it was only 6.30 and I was leaving the house one hour earlier than usual. Supportive as ever, and with his customary mix of concern and interest in the whole venture, my father had agreed to collect first me and then Alison, and take us both to the airport together. As we loaded up the car, he mused on just how many bags, rucksacks and packages I had (seven in all), and we knew that Alison would shortly be adding hers to the tally. I was genuinely excited at the trip ahead, confident most of all that the hospitality would be excellent, but my one reservation, for days now, concerned the ridiculous amount of luggage that had accumulated. Alison had seemed more worried by the medical side of things, having heard stories of diarrhoea, malaria and even rabies. I had no doubt she would be ready, however, and before long we were heading to Birmingham airport in the full light of day. We discussed a programme we had both seen the night before, *Shops, Thieves and Videotape*, a hard-hitting documentary about the police's difficult job on the streets of Nottingham. It seemed timely to reflect just how ruinous society had become, with its evils and vices. The programme had certainly sent me out for two pints of lager and a packet of crisps, perhaps thinking they might be the last I would get for a while. In the part of Africa we were going to, Alison and I certainly felt we were in for a dose of back to basics.

When we checked in at the airport, the nice man 'exercised his discretion' (his phrase) as regards our things being nearly double the weight allowance, and the two computer parcels went separately as fragile goods. We were pleased to know that we wouldn't have to recover them in Paris and check them in again for Ouagadougou. In the event, Charles de Gaulle airport, Paris, was confusing enough, even for two French speakers, but we eventually found ourselves in a departure lounge full of well-dressed, strapping Burkinabè men, and the woman with no face.

The woman with no face was accompanied by a smart man, probably her son. On the large, spacious plane they took the seat in front of us. She was small, enveloped in a giant cape and hood, and he did everything for her. I was feeling safe enough but I noticed Alison was already spraying mosquito repellent, having heard it was possible for mosquitoes to survive even in air-conditioned planes, and this plane had come from Ouagadougou. I then thought how awful it would be to get malaria, so I also sprayed. Caution was the watchword here. I would come to rely on Alison's natural sense of caution, not only for self-preservation but also humour. The Air France service was excellent.

It was 8.20pm, and 34°C, when we arrived in Ouagadougou, the capital of Burkina Faso. No airport shuttle buses here, it was an airless, noisy walk to the lights of the terminal building. We had to make sure none of the people holding placards on the tarmac were our hosts. I felt the sweat begin to fall down my back, as Alison spotted our first mosquito. There was a kind of queue for showing passports and visas, after which the woman with no face walked into me and I got the most terrible smell from her. I steadied her, noticing her featureless almost eaten away head beneath the cloth, and guided her back to her son. I felt real pity for her. Past the first layer of the military, Alison and I were met by Abou and Doubou, and proceeded to the very small luggage reclaim area. All our parcels had arrived safely, as had, by now, a further three or four colleagues from Ziniaré. It was becoming very difficult to remember all the names, but I was pleased I didn't have to carry anything. At the next desk of soldiers in camouflage and berets, we had already seen off a few questions about our luggage when I was asked about the two bubble-wrapped and blue bin-lined packages marked 'FRAGILE'. I had to tell the soldier that they were a brand new computer, a gift from our school in England to a school in Ziniaré. He issued us with a form and said we could collect the packages in the morning. It was pitch black out there but I could see the pigs preparing for take off. We had even more introductions, and were greeted by dignitaries like the *directeur régional*, before being ushered into the backseat of our limousine, a Nissan pickup truck. Zakané and Compaoré rode in the open air, with our luggage. A cheeky chappie named Poyga, who we hadn't realised was the head teacher, jumped onto the back seat with Alison and me. As we left the airport, I looked longingly, and with a raging thirst, at all the banners advertising 'Flag'. I knew this was one of at least four Burkinabè lagers. Maybe not tonight, but I would try them all before I left. It felt like a carnival. We were in a convoy of vehicles winging our way to Ziniaré. There was a variety of smells, some putrid, as we passed the *barrages* (dams/reservoirs). In the darkness, there seemed to be so many people and shacks road-side, even when we were well out of Ouagadougou. It was very hot, and we had all the windows down. After seeing various spellings of Ziniaré, I was pleased to nail it at last; I also learned that the school was named after a man called Bassy and had been going since 1984. These men were also proud of Burkina Faso's passage to the semi-finals of the African Nations' Football Cup four years ago, held in Burkina Faso.

We drove into Ziniaré, where important buildings like the police station, hospital and post office were pointed out, and onto the school site to the walled compound of Poyga's house, for a brief hairy moment. His dog was poised with an overenthusiastic greeting, and like all owners Poyga played down the evident danger. Alison's references to rabies flashed through my mind, so I jammed my hands in my pockets and hoped for the best. I survived to see the veritable feast Poyga had ordered the womenfolk to prepare, and after more introductions everyone sat at the long table in the open air. Alison and I had been stage-managed to the tiny bit of light that there was, and we were the first to have our hands washed, by holding them over a bowl while two lots of water, soapy then clean, were poured over them. Poyga blessed the food and one person

even sang. There were lashings of home-made *bissap*, a cool sugared drink made from hibiscus petals, large dishes of chicken, *tô* (millet), sauce with hibiscus leaves, and *piment* (hot chilli peppers). I enjoyed all the food, but was a little dismayed to select a piece of chicken that resembled a miniature climbing frame, such was the criss-cross array of bones beneath the skin. One of the shadows across the table said 'Andrew a mal choisi' (Andrew has chosen badly) and dug deep to find me a much better piece. This was an almost equally meatless drumstick, which I gamely chewed on. As for the *bissap*, there must have been several vats of it fermenting away somewhere. Once it was clear that we liked it, our supply would be constantly replenished.

## 2 The breezeblock palace

Eventually the time came for the final leg of today's epic journey. We were ushered to the luxury back seat of the Nissan truck, blind to the convoy that was reforming around us. As our own bones jolted and jarred their way to what was to be our residence for the next eleven nights, a number of questions bounced around in your battered mind. This was certainly a pivotal moment. How far away were we going to be? How safe would we feel? What would we have by way of electricity, running water and washing facilities? Would we be cooking our own food, and if so how would that work? (I wasn't planning to spend a great deal of time cooking, I have to say.) And then, of course, there was toilets, the subject that dare not speak its name. If any of my pupils read this, they'll probably be surprised that Sir even goes. Where we were going, this was always going to be a real issue. Amongst the many pieces of advice and comment from wellwishers on the subject, the one thing nobody seemed to doubt was that there would be a real issue, quite possibly an overregular and overrunny one. Constipation was not considered an option.

The first of my questions were already being answered. We had driven back into the centre of Ziniaré, turned off the main road and after a very short distance had entered, via a gate, a compound where the front of a chalet-type concrete building, and a generous amount of airborne insect life, were illuminated by the lights of our vehicles. We hadn't come far, but the chalet did have a feel of isolation about it. All around was pitch black. Security was looking a little too tight, if anything. In fact, the man entrusted with the key struggled for some time to get the door open and I wished I'd packed some WD40.

Once inside, the electric lights were switched on and you could see the building had two distinct but adjoining halves, each with its own bathroom and wardrobe space. In fact, in terms of design the place was perfectly symmetrical. This was a relief to me, for if there had been a worse half I would obviously have volunteered for it, but there didn't seem to be any real disadvantage to either side. Our hosts hadn't quite got their story straight, however, about who was having which side, and it was one of

the women, who had been here preparing the place (in addition to preparing food at Poyga's) while the men had been at the airport, who had the last word. That was unusual in itself. This side was for *Alice-son*. We weren't bothered and would make our own decision anyway, when they'd gone. The place was very bare, generally, but Alison and I were pleased to note that all the doors and windows were covered, from the inside, with a thin metal sheeting full of small square holes. Abou told us that this would prevent mosquitoes entering, provided we kept the doors and windows shut. What was more, we each had a bed that was fitted with a green mosquito net, and a fan, Alison's on the ceiling and mine on a stand fixed to an electrical extension socket that looked as if it had been bought especially for our visit. I felt grateful already, for it was sweltering even this late at night. There was a fridge on my side, a metal table and some chairs, mostly metal, on each side. Ominously, I noticed that a gas cylinder was lurking with some intent on Alison's side.

Fittingly, I suppose, I was in the company of males when I was shown to my toilet/bathroom. I approached this moment of destiny with a rare stoicism and low expectations: there had been talk of holes in the ground, buckets and an all-round absence of toilet paper. Entry to my en suite was frustrated by a misfiring door handle. The inefficiency of Ziniaré's door handles had not gone unnoticed. Two out of two had convincingly failed to open their doors at the first time of asking. Surely it would be difficult to maintain this 100% record. Somebody got angry enough for the metal door to open to a huge clashing noise like that heard when a football is belted against a garage door. Another electric light and to my great surprise a proper-looking toilet, even a seat. That is more than you get on some railway stations. Questions remained, of course, chief amongst which was 'Does it work?' Time would tell. It was no use counting your chickens before you've flushed. The signs were good though, for on a small glass shelf awkwardly placed diagonally above the toilet there were toilet rolls. Things went from good to better when I looked beyond the toilet to a tap quite high on the wall and a showerhead hanging above a section of the concrete floor gently tapered towards a hole. It would have been too cheeky to ask the chief question, but my hosts made knowingly positive noises and I tried to remain as cool as them about facilities I had by no means counted on having.

Our hosts were up well past their bedtime and did not stay long. As we said goodnight on the front of the house, I made a pig's ear of Doubou's name a final time and started to worry about locking the door properly. I was the motive force behind a brief attempt to start a video diary, but kept walking into things and felt such an arse doing it that the idea was prematurely shelved. There was more fun to be had in doing a quick 'reccy' of each other's side of the house. Alison had an equally pleasing bathroom with the added extravagance of a sink, which she said I could use if I wanted to, and her wardrobe space was a bit more enclosed, which just made it scary at this time of night. Then there was a washing line hanging across one corner. That must have been the decisive factor, then; the women had spotted that I would have had no use whatsoever for that, and put me on the other side. I wasted no time in dragging my bed into the middle of my room and nearer the business end with table,

chairs, fridge and front door. In the far corner it was too dark and I was too far away for Alison to hear my screams if the bogey man got me. I would also be running the risk of getting out of bed and walking straight into a metal door that, as well as not opening properly, made a huge clashing noise like that heard when a football is belted against a garage door.

I limited my unpacking to a few essential items, and I think Alison did the same. Many people had told us to take plenty of toilet rolls with us, and we had. In fact, on unpacking our finest Andrex it appeared we could mummify half the population of Ziniaré between us. We briefly discussed our relief at the promising situation before us and on Alison's advice I cleaned my teeth at her sink and using bottled water. At last it was time to turn in. Or rather begin the process of turning in. I must have got in and out of bed half a dozen times. I wasn't bothered about the sheet but there was no pillow so I had to retrieve my sweatshirt, fold it up and resign myself to sweating it up. I also had to adjust my fan so that it cooled me from head to foot and back again without any wasted blowing. Then there was the light switch near the fridge and the dark and treacherous journey back to bed without losing my lower leg in the exposed noisy propeller at the back of the fridge. And then my alarm clock, which thankfully had a miniature light; not only was I banking on it to wake me in the morning, it also increased my chances of keeping the use of both my legs. The erection of a mosquito net on the bed itself was a triumph of DIY carpentry and a defiance of all laws of physics. Quite how you could nail such streaky planks of wood to the four corners of the bed and have them point so steadfastly upwards for such a distance was beyond me. Draping the net over them must have been a relatively simple matter. I tucked my net in for the last time and gave a long sigh. Home sweet home. It wasn't as luxurious as it may sound, and the noises hadn't really started yet, but it wasn't bad, all the same.