

## Bemused In Bujumbura (Where?!) - mostly text (Mar 09)

Bujumbura: the name has a nice ring to it, and the city even nicer lake-side beaches. Yet Burundi, of which Bujumbura is the capital, is a fractured country in need of ethnic healing, economic development, and political stability. After a weighty February for us, a temporary sojourn in Africa puts Jules and I in this beautiful country long enough to get a feel for the place.

Bujumbura: set in green foothills on the north end of Lake Tanganyika in East-Central Africa's Great Lakes region; French-inspired city with wide avenues, where speaking French will get you easily by while founting Kirundi will make you a local; where with brew at forty cents for an Amstel petite (if you buy in bulk), beer is cheaper than bottled water; where a fragile peace is holding for two years now after a twelve-year inter-ethnic conflict.

Bujumbura (think: three "u"s and one "a") is the capital of the tiny African country of Burundi, about the size (I've heard it said) of the state of Maryland in the US. "That's in Africa, right?" I said when Jules told me she might be going to Burundi for work for the month of March.

We arrived on March third - after two days, three layovers, four airplanes, and five countries - a bit rattled, but not necessarily by the travel. February had just happened to be, as Jules put it, possibly "the worst month on record for us." Thankfully, the trouble wasn't happening between us; rather, having each other is what kept us afloat in a dark month.

To begin, early in February our friend and fellow Quetta expat John Solecki was abducted - his vehicle shot up and his driver killed - while on his way to work in the morning. We had to fly out of Quetta that day to Islamabad "for our safety" until things settled down.

Three days later, in the middle of trying to process our friend's disappearance and our possibly lengthy exile from our home in Quetta, I received word that my mother, Fannie Lapp (who hadn't been well for months), was dying. Twenty-four

hours after, both Jules and I were on an airplane to the US.

We arrived at my parent's Lancaster County, Pennsylvania home too late to say goodbye to my mom, but were glad that we could arrive so quickly to be with family in the days after she left us. The funeral, which was held at my parents' childhood church in Lancaster, and a memorial service in Washington DC did their job and helped bring some closure for me, a measure of respite in a time of grief.

We stayed in the US, going back and forth a couple times between DC and PA, for almost two weeks. Though much of it was a blur, we did get some rest and savored some good moments, including time with my family and time with friends in DC.

(I love this photo of my mom - she's got a tea cozy gift from Pakistan on her head. Taken about a year before she died, it's got her trademark humor that kept family laughing even as her health deteriorated.)

Back in Pakistan, only upon arrival did it really dawn on us that we would only be there for a week before flying out for our March month in Burundi. Still shut out of our Quetta home by security concerns, we wrestled with displacement and with grief, our sadness made worse by the sudden death of my cousin's young daughter, who we had just spent time with as we stayed at my cousin's inn during our trip to the States.

So you can imagine that, by the time we touched African soil in Bujumbura, we weren't quite sure what day it was, what time zone we were in, or even what continent we were on. The first week was a bit rough as Jules tried to figure out what was going on at work, I tried to figure out how I would occupy myself, and we both tried to figure out how to get the things we needed, get around town, and make a welcoming temporary home out of the huge, empty house we are staying in.



Two weeks in, however, the benefits of our sojourn here are piling up. There's the lake, which has a couple nice resorts on a long stretch of beautiful, sandy beach (including some fun beach volleyball for me!). There's the hills, which one could probably call mountains, that rise on the outskirts of the city. There's the profusion of green and growing things, the equatorial warmth, and the nearly daily thunderstorms - greenery, warmth, and rain something that we had been used to living without in Quetta's winter-time desert. The expat community is also so much bigger here, but then almost anywhere we go that would be true, as there were only about twenty of us in Quetta. And, of course, there's the cheap beer.

I'm also enjoying being south of the equator, my first time. Soon after our arrival I flooded one of the sinks, just to see if the water did indeed swirl downwards in the opposite direction from what it does in the northern hemisphere. But wouldn't you know, I couldn't remember which way it goes in the north, so I had no solid evidence with which to compare the phenomena I saw in our sink in Burundi. Which way is it up there, people?

Another great thing is how much more relaxed Burundi feels. I told someone yesterday it's almost like having an RnR just being here. If you're paying any attention to the craziness in Pakistan, you'll know why life could be tense for us there. We do love the place, and in some ways we are hooked on the unceasing drama and actually miss it, but especially after our month of upheaval in February it is so nice to be in more laid-back surroundings.

Not everything is great for everyone in Burundi, of course - which is the reason why Jules is here to work. (pic right: In the capital, these two young men are lucky to earn some money carrying bags of charcoal for customers.) It's a poor country, there's been years of inter-ethnic conflict that has killed hundreds of thousands of people and forced many others to flee, and - at least according to an article my friend sent me - in 2006 a study rated it as the unhappiest country in the world. The violence that hit here, and which seems to be resolving peacefully but could flare up again, was a similar model to the more famous conflicts in neighboring Rwanda, just to the north. Rwanda is doing pretty well these days, actually, better than Burundi with its fledgling peace - you just haven't heard about it because this country is not as famous as its northern neighbor (i.e. there's no Hollywood "Hotel Burundi").

Jules and I plan to be here till the end of March or beginning of April. We'll be trying to make ourselves of some use to the world, but also enjoying the exotic flowers, the weekend afternoons on the beach, the locally-brewed Amstel, the fresh baguettes from the patisserie down the road. Afterward, we are scheduled to go back to Pakistan and will see what awaits us there. "Be flexible" is our mantra these days.