



JOHN in BURKINA 2005 the full story

first

how NOT to prepare for an important trip to an **already challenging** destination...

Picture it.

Saturday morning, I arrive jauntily at **Heathrow Terminal Two**.

On time, fresh from a night spent at a nearby lodge, having travelled from Wales by train the day before, I am feeling refreshed and pretty well prepared for the trip I was about to undertake.

So I thought.

I hand my passport to the check-in assistant.

"May I also have your visa please?"

Visa please.

The words hung poignantly in the air for a moment or two.

A peculiar fog filled my mind: Visa? ... Visa...? Slowly, an equally peculiar dawn came over me...
Visa!

Yes... I had one of those last trip...

Hazily, pieces began to fit together within my head. A trip eighteen months in the planning; meticulous planning. Absolutely nothing overlooked.

Except this. And without it: no boarding to Paris, they say, let alone to Ougadougou.

My bemused appearance and plea for help eventually sends the attendant disappearing to speak with someone more senior within an office hidden on the other side of the departure hall. A basic letter intended to assist me through Burkina customs wasn't considered sufficient: the only option the Air France staff could suggest was to remain in London, until Monday and obtain a visa from the Burkina Embassy. Implicitly this meant paying for another ticket, not to mention more lodge bills.

Impossible option.

More negotiation. Somehow it came to light that if I could get an officially headed / stamped letter stating that the ministry that had invited me to Burkina would take full responsibility for me on arrival in the airport, then I *would* be able to fly!

Confused scrabbling followed, searching for the phone numbers of my contacts in Burkina, hoping the laptop battery wouldn't fail, while explaining the unfolding events to Sarah, who would have to do all the leg work in making contact with Burkina and organising a **fax to arrive** in the Air France Heathrow office, **by 10.45am**.

It was now 9.15am

At this point I'm going to try to cut a long story a bit shorter. The fax didn't arrive on time, but I pleaded with the AF staff to allowed me to take the flight to Paris, as I convince them that the fax would certainly arrive by then: I knew it was being worked on. Denise and Barbara were assisting Sarah – one with faxing, the other with translation into French, as they frantically tried to make contact alternately with Air France, Heathrow, Air France, Paris and Richard, Ougadougou.

And they did that for four or five hours almost non-stop, by which time I was either on board, on my way to Burkina, or on my way home – they didn't find out which for a further six hours!

Meanwhile I had landed in Paris, but fresh difficulties were just beginning to mount up. Problem number one: no mobile signal – I can't reach Sarah, she can't reach me. Problem number two: I can't use the payphone because it's all in French! Problem number three: Air France staff genuinely couldn't care less. And that really isn't an exaggeration (a well-travelled friend, now informs me that Paris CDG is the "worst airport in the world," for precisely this reason: Air France

staff simply couldn't care less.) Between myself, in Paris, and the 'team' on the 'phones in Llanelli we met with **a level of obfuscation from AF that was, at times, disheartening beyond belief.** And all the while this was going on, I was being sent back and forth, on foot, between Terminal 2E and 2F – about half a mile each time.

I think I made that journey about four or five times, lugging bags and laptop with me, getting hotter, more exhausted and a bit more desperate each time.

From the beginning when the problem had first come to light, I'd experienced a quite definite grace from the Lord to be undisturbed by the challenge. It had been so clear in the months and days preceding that the Lord was with me in preparation for the trip that I knew we could overcome this challenge too. Nevertheless, by mid-afternoon, with the clock ticking down to the time when check-in for my flight would close, I was getting pretty worn down. The last blow had been laid by a young girl working at the Transfer Desk. Her attitude – besides her obvious annoyance at just being interrupted – even after grasping, I think, the desperation of my situation – was a compassionless “it's your responsibility.” Yes, I know, but I simply need someone to help, I replied, or I'm stranded.

She as good as shrugged her shoulders until I was forced to turn away.

With just minutes literally remaining before the flight closed, the awfulness of being unable to board and then having to find some way back from Paris was looming large and heavy upon already-sagging shoulders. Lord, if you want me on this flight, I know you can make it possible. If you don't, for some reason that I can't imagine, I accept it. But I do believe you want me on this flight – I don't feel you want me to let go; help me, Father. Somehow, just yards away a tiny AF Ticketing office caught my eye. One last attempt: I plead again, as I had before. This time, relief: I found some sympathy and suddenly a flow of rapid-fire telexes began exchanging between AF Paris and AF Heathrow. Then, “Go, right away to 2E Ticketing Office” (the place I'd begun about two and a half hours before, only to be sent off on my odyssey backwards and forwards!), “if the fax arrives, you may just have time to board; if you wait here it will certainly be too late.” It was about twenty minutes to close of check-in.

Or less – I hardly dared check for sure.

Another lengthy, slow-moving queue. My nerves were beginning to become stretched to breaking point; I would truly have liked to begin

pleading with people to let me go to the front of the queue, but would any of them speak English, let alone care? And how could I put across my predicament in just a few words. No, there was nothing to do except wait patiently, allowing faith alone to buoy my emotions. Finally, I arrived at the front of the desk and began to tell my story again... only to be met by another blank face. Then, suddenly, a man looked up and asked: Are you Monsieur Clements? “Oui, oui! Yes, yes! He passed me a fax, bearing the official stamp of the RESJSED youth movement whom I was to be visiting in Ougadougou. *It was enough.*

A short, rapid run to the check-in desk. More fussing and checking and querying between the assistant and her manager. “Are you sure this is sufficient to replace a Visa?” he asked me. “Oh yes,” I said, with all the conviction in the world, “I'm absolutely sure!” He finally shrugged his shoulders and I was on my way!

Exhausted, but relieved.

Six hours later, descent into Ougadougou airport began and, with it, sense of another impending struggle, but, after the last struggle, this would be easy by comparison: I knew that I would come through it, even if it took all night! In the end it did take most of it since I revealed my English-ness to the Visa staff and was consequently looked over until every single other person had been served. All forty or so of them. In fact, by the time I got away, the entire airport had emptied. If you know how long African airport halls generally empty, you get an idea how long it all took!

But I was through – the victory was complete!

It only remains in this section of the story to remind those who prayerfully supported me in this trip of **the first two prayer points** I asked you to consider:

1. *safe, completed-on-time travel, especially passing through London and Paris*
2. *easy and rapid passage through Burkina customs - after disembarking from an air-conditioned 'plane, standing in a crowded and slow moving customs hall and being unable to communicate with any fluency whatsoever, is the first challenge I will face upon my arrival in Burkina*

I'll leave you to draw your own conclusions regarding the efficacy of our prayers!

a week in Ougadougou

For some reason people who are less than familiar with Africa almost inevitably chuckle when you inform them you will be visiting *Ougadougou* (For the record, it is pronounced: Wa-Ga-Doo-Goo!) as if the name somehow embodies their notion of what Africa is like.

In fact, this was my second visit there and I found the experience quite different to the last trip I made. I think it is not an exaggeration to say that I spent much of that first, three-week trip in a fair degree of “culture shock.” To my surprise, on this occasion, I found myself quickly feeling quite “at home” – a pleasant sensation that helped me to relax into my trip right away and, as it turned out, a harbinger of feeling a depth of connection to the people and the land of Burkina which grew throughout my time there.

My first week was to be spent with a Burkinabe youth ministry, named RESJSED. I’d met their leader, Richard Sawedogo, on my previous visit, when he was my co-speaker at the mission conference. He’d witnessed and appreciated my teaching and it was he who asked me whether I could prepare it for presentation using electronic “PowerPoint” slides. Yes, I’d replied, I don’t see why not. Consequently, I’d spent the best part of the last year updating the teaching notes and transferring them onto approximately four-hundred PowerPoint slides. This allows for teaching ten, two-hour seminars, across five days.

I describe this project as a “**mobile academy of mission** — ‘mission mobilisation through leadership education’” The intention is that the seminars are provide a learning opportunity for the students (rather than a teaching opportunity for me!)—education, rather than training: whereas training teaches someone *how* to do something, education seeks to empower a student with a knowledge of a subject that aids them to begin gaining understanding for themselves. To extend the analogy of “give a man a fish and you feed him for today; teach a man to fish and he will eat for the rest of his life... educate a man and you’ll provide him with know how that can be incorporated with his own understanding, so that he can lead a whole community to gain a living from fishing.” That’s what I’m ultimately hoping to accomplish with the Academy of Mission.

Anyway, back to my story: having made my way through the airport eventually, Richard was there to greet me, as was a young man I’d met on my

last trip, Drissa, along with our driver and a lady called Justice, whom I discovered had traveled all the way from Cameroon, by boat and car, a three week journey, in order to translate the seminars into French. Cameroon is bilingual English-French and learning both languages is a constitutional requirement. Sarah Justice turned out to be a very gifted translator.

The opening celebration for the Resjسد convention was on the Tuesday evening. Wednesday morning began with a trip to an obscure corner of Ougadougou to pick up a projector. Unfortunately, due to a misunderstanding, when we arrived, it turned out to be an overhead projector! I’ve learnt over the years when visiting Spain, Portugal and Africa, that at such times, the only thing to do is to stay calm and let things happen at their own rate. The first consequence was that my first seminar was postponed until later in the day. At lunchtime, another projector appeared and everything looked set to go ahead. Unfortunately, the power lead had been left behind by whomever packed the bag!

I was, therefore, asked to begin the Academy using chalk and a blackboard, something I’d done before, on both my previous trips to Africa, however, the first seminar is undoubtedly the most technical and with the session beginning at three—the period sometimes known as the “graveyard session” because everyone is so sleepy after lunch—I wasn’t confident that this was going to be a great start. During the afternoon, I noticed a group of three people who were going up and down the isles of the lecture theatre in which the seminars were held. Looking along each row, they would occasionally see something, draw attention to it and the message spread along the row to the person concerned. Intrigued, I wondered perhaps, whether they might have been intercessors, praying row by row for the students. In fact, it turned out that they were there to monitor those students who were falling asleep in the 35-degrees-in-the-shade heat and make sure they got roused by a neighbour! *An inauspicious beginning.*

The next day the projector, complete with power lead, was proudly put into place, balanced delicately upon one table on top of two others, to give height, with my laptop balanced besides, upon a chair upon a table, as the lead from one to the other was quite short. Then the technical job of setting up the projection apparatus began. It immediately became clear that the intense sunlight was going to be a challenge and the

saturation of the images was going to be far less than perfect – in fact, it was practically invisible at first! Should we change to evening lectures, when the projected slides would shine brighter? No. A final decision was taken and great joy was declared over the slides now appearing on the painted wall of the lecture theatre. The challenging start was over, now the real work of communication and education would begin.

Gauging feedback from a new group is an art-form. In times past, I've tried the "Afro-Pentecostal" approach: stirring the congregation with loud, vigorous questions and arm waving and I've tried the humble, quiet, English, "butter-wouldn't-melt-in-our-mouths" approach, with hands held politely at bay, all in an effort to break the ice and make a connection. Unsurprisingly, I've found neither a very satisfying experience and have, instead, learnt gradually to relax in front of gathered listeners, to be myself, recognising that people are there to hear what I have to share and, in that way, to simply enjoy the experience. Having developed the Academy teaching entirely myself makes this easier, since I can have a lot of confidence in what I'm going to communicate—I'm not recycling anyone else's material, or working it out on-the-hoof.

Also—and particularly so in Africa—I have discovered people almost always like to hear first about your family, before anything else, so I showed a map of Wales and a photo of my small clan and myself, which as usual, went down well. A quick recap on the previous day's chalky seminar followed, using the much-worked upon electronic slides and then onto the follow-up seminars, which collectively make up "module one – the destiny of the messianic community." Comments gathered in the evening suggested that while a foundation had been laid, the students were still reserving judgment on just what to make of the Academy teaching. On the second day, one of the comments I received particularly struck me: "Your teaching is deeeep ... deep!" I had the impression that was a good thing, though I wasn't entirely certain!

That night I was woken by rain. I knew that it was much needed in the country, though less so in Ougadougou itself. This night the rain was particularly heavy and I could see lightning. Just at that moment, what seemed like a thunderbolt seemed to strike the house: lightning lit up the entire room, short-circuiting the electricity, stopping the electric fan which keeps you cool at night (and ensures the mosquitoes don't settle!), following which there was an almighty crash the

like of which I have not experienced in Britain. I hastily closed the shutters and windows and hoped the next strike wouldn't get me! It didn't and the rain brought a welcoming coolness to the start of the day.

As the next few days went by, as I have now experienced each time the Academy has been conducted (within the context of at least three very different cultures), the students clearly began to warm to the teaching and to trust me as a teacher. When this happens, the atmosphere palpably changes and post-session comments become more inquisitorial. The young people of Resjseid certainly did not disappoint in this regard: I found them a very engaging group. Their appreciation was always expressed first, with questions asked afterward. It was apparent that they greatly enjoyed me hanging around and sharing a *Fanta* with them—I suspect many speakers tend to be whisked away almost immediately after their sessions end—and I enjoyed their company. All of this without my speaking more than a few words of French, it should be noted! A great deal of communication, of course, is beyond words and sometimes I found efforts at actually communicating with words ended up almost counter-productive, unless there was a capable interpreter to help out—sometimes just passing the time together can be enjoyable and meaningful.

The Academy came to an end on Sunday morning, by which time we had managed to organise and print some certificates, which I was then asked to present to all attendant students, along with some French-language books – "Out of the Comfort Zone" by George Verwer and "Aids and You" by Patrick Dixon – which had been generously donated by Operation Mobilisation. You can see photographs of the many of these presentations, as well as other element of the Academy, at eternalpurpose.org.uk/gallery2.

Here are some of the comments sent to me afterwards:

Richard (Co-ordinator) —

"During the seminar, a lot of people were amazed. It was really amazed and beyond their expectations. On the beginning some historic perspectives were pointed out and people were very quickly fascinated. All those who hear the topic on "the mission" think that we are called to leave our homeland and go abroad and preach the good news but during this seminar on ... mission everybody felt concerned: intercessors, evangelists, pastors etc were affected in their

ministries and even those who don't believe they were called have found much interest."

Sara Justice (Translator) —

"I have received something special: a new and deeper understanding of the mission. And the most edifying part for me was the one on the different stages of the Christian with their different characteristics, weaknesses, traps etc. I knew God was the God of history but I never discovered it put together the way it was."

Ezekiel, from Fada —

"We are struck and our vision of things has changed."

Elie Rouamba (Intercessor) from Ouaga—

"It was a really deep teaching and the part about intercession was instructing for us."

Thomas Koussoube, from Tougan—

"The theme on mission is very deep. If all our churches had benefited of it, they would have been healed and would have stopped holding themselves in contempt so openly."

Philippe Sawadogo (Organizer) —

"It was really a revelation from the Lord. The illustration with the video was really overthrowing and it gave a deeper understanding of the mission."

You can see photos of the RESJSED academy of mission, the students and 'John-at-work' at: <http://picasaweb.google.com/clements.jb/RESJSEDAcademyOfMission>

a week in Leo

Straight after completing the Resjsed academy I was met by my good friend, Pastor David Zopoula. It was great to meet up after many months of only being in touch by email. We immediately set out for Leo, hoping to make the journey before nightfall.

Progress was halted early on at one of the military-style gatehouses out of the city. It seemed to take an inordinately long time for his few documents to be checked. David said that when they stop you like that it can be that they are looking a bribe, particularly if they see you with a westerner. Eventually we got going again.

Again, on the journey down through the villages, I was struck again by how pleasant it felt to be back in Burkina. The journey of around one hundred miles took us about four hours in total. I was glad

to see that considerable progress had been made on the improvement of the main road from Ouga to Léo, however, it still turned into a bare track towards the end which slowed progress considerably.

On arrival in Léo there was time to meet some old friends before being taken to the compound where I would begin my stay with the charming Daumler family from Canada. You can see photos of my stay with them and of the orphanage at Boura, which they were helping to establish, at: <http://picasaweb.google.com/clements.jb/StayingWithTheDaumlerFamily>

After the hitches with boarding the plane and then getting a working projector, the Leo academy felt like a breeze. Actually a 'breeze' would have been so welcome—instead I made do with an electric fan! About forty people in total crowded into the bible school building for the Academy teaching, most of them missionary pastors who were taking a week away from their villages, while they waited for some rain prior to harvesting.

Probably because of their experience in some of the toughest places on earth—both in which to farm and in which to establish a Christian community (most villages where they are located are at least nominally Muslim and fairly suspicious of Christian agendas) the atmosphere in presenting to these pastors was completely different to the week that had just passed with the young students of Resjsed. On this occasion it felt as if the teaching was literally sucked out of me, almost effortlessly, such was the immediate level of hunger and appreciation.

This was undoubtedly in part because it was my second visit to Leo and because Pastor David had provided me with a ringing endorsement on behalf of the MIEL board who were responsible for the Academy and the pastors. Nevertheless, it also became clear that the missionary pastors found a deep concordance with the teaching I was presenting to them. So much so that we only managed to complete about half-to-two-thirds of the Academy modules, such was the level of interest aroused and reflected in the questioning. Truly, it felt a privilege to spend time with such people and an honour to be able to present them with a copy of the AIDS and mission books, as well as an Academy Certificate at the end of it.

You can see photos of the Leo Academy, the pastors and something of Burkina Faso, at: <http://picasaweb.google.com/clements.jb/MIELAcademyOfMission>