

Fresh Air Matters... with Capt. Yaw

Last week one of my aircraft engineering staff drew my attention to the sad fate of the young man who apparently died 'hitching' a lift in the undercarriage well of a GIA flight to the UK. She could not believe that anybody would consider such a thing! I explained that he probably died from crush injuries when the undercarriage retracted, failing that from oxygen starvation when the plane passed through 12,000 feet and is if that was not enough he would have frozen at the minus fifty something Celsius at the cruise altitude.

Our workshop conversation continued and my inquisitive engineer asked 'Why would anybody want to leave Ghana?'. WOW! A simple comment but a powerful one. I have worked in Africa, America and Europe, and I cannot think of a better place than Ghana for opportunities, excitement and wonderful people. Perhaps I am biased, but why would somebody want to leave Ghana? Of course there are a many excuses such as employment, money, fame, healthcare, etc. Those are the reasons for running away from home given by twelve year olds in just about every culture out there! A recent survey by a major bank in the UK showed that over 80% of British people would leave the UK if given the opportunity... and I am sure that all of us would want to be somewhere else at some point in our lives. There is the crux of the matter 'our lives' – do not lose them in some mistaken attempt to better them.

In some countries cattle are kept in fields with fences and gates unlike our 'free-range grazing' system. It is perfectly common to see the cows in beautifully kept, green grass filled and bountiful paddocks pushing their heads through the barbed wire, getting cuts on their necks as they stretch to get the dirty brown grass outside the fence. Should you remove the cow from the paddock, it will push its head back through to gain the grass it could have had and ignores the grass it wanted five minutes ago. From this the old proverb 'The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence' originates.

The media has its role to play in the human equivalent of this. We are all aware of the fact that Africa gets painted less well than America or Europe in order to sell newspapers and gain TV viewers in so many cases. But for those of us who are privileged enough to have travelled through the convenience of air-travel to the far flung corners of our globe, we know that everywhere we go the same problems exist – they are wrapped in different colours, stored at different temperatures and have different smells - but once reduced by boiling down, the condensed soup-of-reality, is the same. The really good thing about Ghana it has an incredible support network, a fabulous climate and some of the best potential in the world – if only you open your heart and mind to it.

Let me paraphrase and aviation-fy an African fable, all rights reserved for the ancestors who originated the tale...

Sitting, cross legged on the broken concrete floor of the make shift departure lounge at a small African aerodrome we will call 'Getchimindiair-krom', is an old man. He has a beaming white smile and is wearing a worn brown and green cloth wrapped around his waist and loosely draped over his shoulder, with a gnarled, bark stripped branch held in his wrinkled, slightly shaking hand. His cattle hide sandals, which have seen better days, are placed next to him as he sits waiting for some event that may or may

not happen in his lifetime. Fifty meters away, through an open archway, a single engine air-taxi is sitting proudly on the patchy grass and latterite apron, being prepped for its flight to a remote airstrip far from the cities, concrete, tarmac or latterite roads. Not much is known about this village, but it has a small dirt airstrip and once a month the air-taxi will depart from Getchimindiair-krom to take 'Aid- workers' to the site (so called but in some cases better referred to as 'Hindrance –workers', but that is the cynic in me).

The first passenger arrives in a pin-stripe suit, with a red polyester tie and posh shoes, carrying his laptop in a leather case. Approaching the old man, he asks, "Tell me, old man, what are the people like in the village I am going to?" The old man responds with a question, as he opens his eyes a little wider, "Tell me traveller," he pauses for a half-breath and continues "what are the people like in the village you come from?" In a flash, the traveller responds "Oh, my friend, you have no idea! Where I come from people are liars and cheats, robbers and villains, and nobody welcomes you anywhere you go!"

The old man, smiles wryly, and drops his head to stifle a chuckle as he responds "My friend the traveller with nice shoes, you probably find that the people in the far away village are much the same." The well dressed man looks stern as he heads out to the waiting plane, sighing as he goes.

A second traveller arrives, her soft, white face reddened and blotchy from the scorching sun and clearly uncomfortable in the humidity. Her light brown hair dishevelled from travelling in vehicles without air-conditioning and sweat beading on her forehead. Seeing the old man, she approaches and asks excitedly "Tell me, old man, what are the people like in the village I am going to?" Once again, the old man responds "Tell me traveller, what are the people like in the village you come from?" as she smiles at the obviously 'new-to-Africa' adventurer before him. After a moments thought she responds with a big smile "Oh, my friend, where I come from people are lovely, everybody welcomes you anywhere you go and you can make friends easily and if you need something there is always somebody ready to help!"

The old man, repositions the cloth on his shoulder, to ensure that he looks his best, and as he lifts his head responds "My friend the traveller with skin that shines, you will find that the people in the far away village are much the same." The young lady thanks the old man and waves excitedly to the pilot as she walks briskly and with happy heart towards the aircraft that will take her towards new and positive experiences.

How often do we only find what we thought we had left behind when we travel to new places?

Wherever you fly to this week, be safe and remember that Ghana is still here and a great place with smiling faces and a welcome beyond all others – but, as with all things, you have to see it with your heart and you mind in order to see it with your eyes and feel it in your being.

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