

PURELY PERSONAL

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Many of our colleagues have had adventurous periods in their lives; if they can bring themselves to describe these and if the written description turns out to be interesting enough, we will gladly publish it.

I am now a Consultant Surgeon in Malta. My family is with me, my job is pleasant, the climate is reasonable and I can communicate fully with my patients. Why then have I such a nostalgia for Nigeria where I have been working for the last 15 years? This is an appreciable slice of one's professional life and even if Nigeria were Hell I would think of it with some affection. But it was not Hell, for from it.

My arrival at Lagos Airport in July 1956 was inauspicious. A smartly dressed driver came up to me, saluted me and handed me a letter from the Director of Medical Services, Western Region, which said that I had arrived sooner than expected, that my house was not quite finished and that he had made arrangements for me to stay in a rest-house in Ibadan for a week to see to my papers, buy a car, etc. The driver had no English so after two attempts at conversation that went no further than "Sah!" on his part I kept silent

for the two and a half hours journey north. My first impressions were of considerable heat, good roads and poorly dressed people.

My first posting was to Abeokuta, a Yoruba town of about 80,000 people and of historical importance. It is 64 miles from Lagos and has numerous schools and colleges. I was the first surgical specialist in its life and by a process of trial and error (mainly the latter!) I tried to set up a department of Surgery. Surgical training in Malta and England being what it is I made no pretensions to knowledge of Obstetrics or of Medicine but I soon found out that the people could not understand this ("surely you are a doctor!") and in any case in the absence of men learned in these disciplines I had to do what I could to help.

Nowadays Abeokuta boasts of specialists in at least the three major branches of Medicine. After three years here I was transferred to Ibadan, a much larger

and more sophisticated town of a million souls. I stayed there for over nine years, with generous periods of leave every 18 months. Here I was one of two surgeons most of the time and had duties at the big Ade-Oyo Hospital and in a much smaller nursing home meant for senior civil servants and the like. It was not all plain sailing by any means. Water shortage, power failures, staff resignations, lack of drugs and instruments, all these occurred with monotonous regularity and interfered with good work. But if one took a longer view it was obvious that progress was taking place, though the chart showed very irregular peaks and troughs.

A great boon was the presence of University College Hospital, a gift of the British Government, imperialism at its best, from where flowed a regular supply of young, keen, well-trained doctors, scientific papers and studies and a readiness to help in any trouble. I was delighted when I was appointed part-time lecturer in the department of surgery and later on associate lecturer.

The Yorubas are an intelligent, cheerful, extrovert people. English is widely spoken and my poor Yoruba did not detract much from history taking.

My last three years there were saddened by the tragedy of the Civil War. The premier of the West was shot dead in his house on 15 January 1966, about 500 yards as the crow flies from where I was sleeping and the gun fire woke me up. Next morning his body was brought to the mortuary of my hospital. The troubles of July 1966 were again felt in Ibadan but the civil disturbances and massacres which followed happened in the North and East rather than in the West.

The outbreak of war in 1967 meant an increase in work owing to the casualties brought back from the front. The numbers varied and the convoys arrived at irregular intervals. The bulk of the load fell on O.C.H. with superior staff and facilities but my hospital did its share of the work. Happily the war is over, a generous reconciliation has taken place and I sincerely hope that Nigeria will remain one.

In 1969 I planned to return to Malta but things did not turn out that way and I went back to Nigeria, this time to Kaduna, where I was appointed senior lecturer in Surgery at Ahmadu Bello University. The work was similar to that in Ibadan but there was closer contact with the students who will be the first to qualify in Medicine from A.B.U. in 1972. The typical Hausa man is quiet, dignified and conservative. He makes a wonderful patient. A knowledge of the language is quite important in Hausa land and luckily it is not difficult to learn at least in elementary fashion. I left Kaduna in August 1971.

Apart from the work, it's diversity and interest, and one's usefulness, what is there about Nigeria that attracts? Many things can be mentioned: the wide open spaces (I now live on an island 17 miles by 9) excellent roads with little traffic, the chance to visit neighbouring countries, bird life, riding and polo (eminently enjoyable even though my handicap never went below -2!), the dry climate in the North, the easy social life, rock climbing... But the main constituent of the list must be the good nature, friendliness and charm of the people. I hope to return there when I retire at 60 and the children have grown up.