

Weaving through the pitfalls

Business guide by William Wallis

A litany of recent disasters and outbreaks of violence and crime have not helped Nigeria overcome the fearsome reputation it has gained among businessmen abroad.

But for sheer energy, amusement value and diversity, Nigeria and Nigerians are still hard to beat. One of the central paradoxes of the country is that so many humorous, articulate and imaginative people live in such a dysfunctional society. So many of them have for so long identified the problems, and even the solutions to their nation's woes, without being able to put them into practice.

On a trip to Nigeria you may be stressed, alarmed and worn out. But you are unlikely to be bored. Moreover, opportunities to escape from at least some of the problems have been put in place for you by a national elite which has long perfected the art of insulating itself from the harsh realities around them.

There are plenty of good restaurants and bars, at least in Lagos - try the Bangkok of Cera Una Volta on Victoria Island. What the members clubs inherited from colonial days have lost in terms of silver service, they have gained in vitality and fun. Many of the hotels are currently undergoing overdue renovation. In Lagos the Eko Meridien or Morehouse are preferred, in Abuja the Sheraton or Hilton.

If you have been scared off by reports about the chaos you will encounter on arrival at the Murtala Muhammed airport in Lagos, be reassured. Even the long, sweaty walk to and from the boarding gates has been eased by a conveyor belt that usually works. The air conditioners have mostly been fixed, and if you are seeking luxury there are some excellent first and business class lounges above the duty free shops. Do not, meanwhile, be alarmed by the departures panel which for years has mentioned only one destination - Abeokuta, a town north of Lagos where there is no airport to speak of. It is simply trapped, like other aspects of the country, in a time warp.

More importantly the hassle and bribes at immigration and customs have largely been cleaned out. The same is true at the boutiques in the departures hall, and most of the hangers there have gone. It is only when you get out of the door that the crowds begin to weigh in.

It is still advisable to be met at the airport in Lagos by a reliable driver known to you or your hosts. For one thing, you are almost certainly going to have to sit with him for an hour or so in traffic.

If you are still not reassured, there is now a British Airways flight to the new and sanitized international airport in Abuja, the federal capital. If you're heading north, KLM fly to Kano. Air France also flies to Port Harcourt, the main city in the oil producing Niger Delta.

Competition since Virgin began services to Nigeria last summer has brought prices on the London route down to more affordable levels. But it has yet to ease congestion much. You need to book well in advance to be sure of a seat on flights that are almost always full.

Inside Nigeria there are few comforting solutions to travel. The roads can be dangerous because of highway robbery and accidents. Air travel is not much better, although there has been no major plane crash since 1996. There are now an abundance of private airlines flying to all the major cities. Of them Chanchangi and Belleview are probably the most reliable. Aerocontractors (tel: Lagos 4962570 or 4961340), which takes the maintenance of its twin propellor planes seriously, flies on schedule and is the safest way to go between Abuja, Lagos and the delta cities of Port Harcourt and Warri. It is also the more expensive.

A final word of warning: "If it is too good to be true, then it isn't true," says Charles Tive, an expert on Nigerian fraud and author of the recently published *419 Scam: Exploits of the Nigerian Conman*. Amazingly there are still enough greedy and gullible people outside Nigeria to fall for what is an old trick.

Hundreds of millions of dollars flow into the country each year to conmen who mostly extract bribes and levies from foreigners who are duped by e-mail and phone into believing a much larger sum is coming their way. The latest variation on the scam, according to Mr Tive, targets Pentecostal churches promising great sums from some fictional Nigerian will, if "legal fees" and "taxes" are paid first. Legitimate Nigerian business suffers greatly as a result.

Lastly bring business cards. Without them you may feel anonymous in Nigeria. Your European mobile phone works now. And, if you are looking for the best coffee in Lagos go to the café on the second floor of Megaplaza on Victoria Island.

READING LIST:

This House has Fallen: Nigeria In Crisis, by Karl Meier

An excellent introduction to Nigeria's recent history available in the UK and Nigeria in Penguin or in the USA in PublicAffairs.

Crippled Giant, by Eghosa Osaghae.

More academic but also a good introduction. Published by C.Hurst and Co.

Religion, Politics and Power in Northern Nigeria, by Matthew Kukah.

Published by African Books Collective or Spectrum in Nigeria. An invaluable guide to the complexities of the north.

Things Fall Apart, Anthills of the Savannah and A Man of the People, all by Nigeria's renowned novelist, Chinua Achebe, and unmissable.

NEWSPAPERS:

Thisday is the best newspaper for news, and **Guardian** the one with the most solid tradition. **Punch** is the most popular among Lagosians. Buy state-owned **Daily Times** for an official plug-in, and for an angle from the north try the **Weekly** or **Daily Trust**. The scandal rag **City People** occasionally breaks important stories. There are an abundance of other titles including the new business paper **Business Day** and subscription only **Business Confidential**. Weekly magazines containing a combination of scandal and analysis but also some thorough investigations include: **Newswatch**, **The News** and **Tell. Africa Confidential**, the London-based newsletter, provides regular in-depth analysis of political and economic events.