

Wisdom of Solomon still found in Africa



When Dottie Foote signed up for a year in Africa, she had just graduated from William and Mary and was ready for some adventure.

The International Service Corps would give her a job teaching children of American Baptist missionaries in Burundi, a small country about the size of Maryland between Zaire and Tanganyika.

Stewart Granger had gone there in King Solomon's Mines, a 1950s movie, looking for lost treasures in land that was the home of the tall warrior tribe, called the Watusi. Granger barely escaped with the treasure and his life.

But now the Watusi are a political party in Burundi, and politics

have replaced warfare.

Burundi sounded just safe enough and just unknown enough for an adventure, thought Miss Foote. Would Africa teach her anything? Would the "dark continent" reveal its treasure? She would make this journey without taking any baggage: no preconceptions or conditions.

Now back in Nottoway Country, Miss Foote finds that Africa has left her with an unexpected treasure: self-contentment.

"Before I went to Africa, I loved to listen to the radio. And I still do, but now I find myself consciously turning it off. I don't want to fill up that space inside me all the time," she said, trying to find examples to describe this subtle change.

When you go to a place like Burundi, she said, where English is not spoken, you find yourself "unplugged" from American culture.

"The pace of life was much slower there," she said. "It was hard to adjust at first, not having a lot of people around, not being able to turn on the television or radio and understand what they were saying. It was a feeling of isolation, and I was really bored at first. But after awhile, I began to look inward instead of outward for stimulation."

Going from being part of a racial majority to being a racial minority increased her sense of isolation. "That was hard to deal with at first. Any white person was constantly stared at. But after a while I became accustomed to it, and it stopped bothering me." But even with the staring, she said she felt safe wherever she went.

At the end of her year, she and another volunteer traveled "by planes, trains, buses and boats," through eastern and southern Africa. She was struck by how little Americans know about Africa.

“Africa is a huge continent. What we see in the news is usually the worst of what’s there. But once you get out of the cities, it’s really quite peaceful.”

Burundi was especially beautiful with its Lake Tanganyika, the second deepest in the world, and the mountains that came right down to its blue waters. And the source of the Nile is also in Burundi, but she said the spring that they claim is the great river’s headwater is an anti-climax.

Staying healthy in Africa was not a problem, she said, as long as you exercise common sense and take precautions with drinking water. “In fact, it was one of the more healthiest years I’ve ever had.”

The second culture chock of her adventure was, ironically, returning to America. “The one going into Africa wasn’t as strong as the one coming back, because at least I expected the first one.” Africa was going to teach her as much about America as it was about itself.

“I noticed when I came back how much psychology plays a role in our society. Talking about stress is not so popular there. I really don’t think they have the stress-induced problems we have here.” She couldn’t imagine Geraldo having a talk show in Burundi.

And she was amazed at “how ridiculously convenient things are here. When I hear someone complain because they couldn’t find their particular flavor of orange juice it really strikes me as absurd.”

People here seem to be afraid of just sitting with themselves like they do in Burundi, just sitting by the side of the road, their heads the only things moving as they watch you pass by. Here, if you have a little emptiness, you’ve got to fill it up. If you aren’t doing something constructive, you are suspected of being lazy.

In Burundi, everything closes from noon to 2:30. There was nothing to do for two and a half hours! If she wanted a hit of American hyperactivity, she had to pay \$5-\$10 for a Times magazine at the market. She depended on friends to send papers so she could stay informed.

Back in Nottoway, Miss Foote is enjoying her expanded awareness of both Africa and her homeland. She noted that African’s level of awareness of what’s outside them is much greater than our level of awareness of what’s going on there. “The majority are more educated than we think.”