

Road Trip

So perhaps it's finally time I (Kevin) write a post or two. A few weeks (more like a month) ago, I was on Facebook and I posted a comment regarding a road trip I was to take the following day to inspect a brand new airstrip for a potential first landing. This is the rest of the story...

The company that built the airstrip sent a driver to the airport to pick me up early in the morning. We had to hit the road early to get everything accomplished if I wanted to be picked up by plane later that afternoon. Even by departing at 5:45 AM, we hit some pretty gnarly traffic trying to leave Kinshasa. It took the better part of 2 hours just to get out of the city.

Once the city was behind us we were able to take one of the few decently paved roads in the country for about 80 Kilometers (50 miles), passing through multiple customs and immigration checkpoints, and too many broken down or turned over vehicles to count. After about 1 ½ hours of open road, we made a quick turn and said goodbye to pavement. The next 55 kilometers (34 miles) were some of the most brutal and quite honestly, the most frightening bits of road I have ever been on. I wish I had been able to take more pictures, but on the really hairy stretches of road, I was too busy trying not to bounce my noggin off the passenger door window.

The rainy season was still going strong and it had been pouring in this area for the last 4 days. This driver was good. Really good. We were going down very steep, very slick ravines that were so rutted, the oil pan of the engine and transmission were dragging the middle of the "road". There were several occasions that water started coming in to the Land Cruiser from the bottom of the doors. We only got stuck once, but once he dropped the transmission into 4 wheel low, we were eventually able to free ourselves.

Finally, after nearly 3 hours of bouncing, slipping, banging, and off-roading while still on the "road", we were about 5 kilometers (3 miles) from the site. We had just passed a small village and began to descend off a small mountain. The road at this point had been carved out of this mountain and was bright red, wet clay. It was so narrow and so slick the back end of the Toyota would skid to one side, smack the side of the mountain, and bounce back to smack the other side of the hill. Then, we turned around a bend and he had to slam on his brakes.



A large and grossly overloaded (which is quite the norm here) cargo truck was nearly wedged in between the two sides of the mountain, and there in front of him on the ground, on the fenders, and all over the place, were his clutch, exhaust driveshaft, and transmission... in pieces...in the dirt.... He obviously wasn't going anywhere for a while. We were long since out of cell phone range, but were able to back up the hill and find a signal for the SAT phone I brought along to call the camp and have them send another vehicle to the back side of the broken down truck to pick me up.



So after leaving Kinshasa at 5:45 AM, I had at last arrived at the airstrip around 2 PM. I checked the width, length and hardness, called back to our home base in Kinshasa to inform them the results of the inspection and discuss some of the other qualities of the strip. We had to wait for some weather to clear, but around 4 PM, we heard the Cessna 182 arrive and make a smooth landing on the new (and still very wet) strip.

I hopped in the plane, grateful I wouldn't have to go back to Kinshasa by car, and then did a few landings there myself to get acquainted with the new airstrip. The flight back to Kinshasa took 25 minutes and that was only because we had to be vectored around due to other landing traffic at the international airport.

Although this strip was built for a business, most of the places we fly to were built for Christian or Humanitarian purposes. This particular strip is only 40 miles by air from Kinshasa. The next closest one is more than 100 miles away (Kikongo), and the drive time and difficulty increases exponentially. In fact the missionary at Kikongo said it is actually cheaper for him to take an MAF flight than to drive . . . This is why we are here!

