

February 2020

This morning great excitement as one of our young neighbors shot and killed a crocodile emerging from the stream near our house. All the local villagers rushed to see this extraordinary event until the sad looking "savage" was dragged off to be eaten or more likely sold. Guillaume, concerned for his children, warned them never to swim in the stream again.

In contrast, most mornings as I scan through my email, I can't help comparing the frenzy and scare-mongering in the news worldwide - the spread of a deadly virus in China, volcanoes in the Philippines, impeachment and jockeying for position in the Presidential primaries -- to the calmer, more tranquil way of life here.

While I appreciate the slower pace and faultless hospitality of the Beninese, I also need to stay calm and cheerful when much of the work we undertake must be done two or three times over because of a lack of competence, ignorance or just plain clumsiness. Most recently our plumber, while trying to install a 3,000-liter tank, dropped it from a height and cracked it. Water dripped out for the next 24 hours, drop by agonizing drop, until it was completely empty. We must now replace the tank for an additional \$500.

The cracks in the tin roof of our house, allow rats, mice, lizards and bats to crawl in above the ceiling and engage in a frenzy of dancing and dashing around at night. I imagine them calling together a great party of their friends to enjoy a feast of the sorghum and corn Guillaume has stored in a back room of the house. But do the workmen know how to apply foam to plug the cracks? Apparently not. Guillaume's solution is to install slippery tiles around the base of the house so that animals cannot climb up, plus metal grills under the eaves of the verandah. We shall see.

To overcome these irritations, I take hikes through the fields and hills surrounding our house. Yesterday, Guillaume and I walked for four hours to a remote village at the top of a nearby hill, while bird watching and enjoying the flowers blooming despite the dryness and heat. They are like soldiers in the French Foreign Legion, adapting to adversity. Then on to another village where my son played on the local soccer team a couple of years ago. Tired and aching, we gratefully took a motorcycle ride back to the restaurant on a Zem. The locals, of course, walk this far every day to market or to school, in both directions!

In a moment of humility, while searching for a phrase to describe BIO-BENIN for our website, my contributions were a series of complicated Latin-based words ending in "tion". Whereas Guillaume, with a sixth-grade education and much practical wisdom, came up with something simple and memorable almost instantly:

Centre de formation intégré en BIO
Organic farm-to-table training center

A perfect explanation of the training we will provide young Beninese to grow organic vegetables, raise fish, poultry and rabbits and provide all these to his restaurant. I just read about restaurateur Bill White doing almost exactly the same thing in Park City in a "closed loop" system where everything feeds off everything else -- organic restaurant debris to create compost, fish droppings to feed cattle and *ainsi de suite*. Small world.

Just after New Year's, Guillaume, always searching for an opportunity, bought a truckload of pineapples at a huge discount because the truck had broken down in the middle

of Natitingou. Over the next three days, he and his entire staff worked night and day to sort through the pineapples, pick out the best ones and devise a primitive but effective "press" made of two large, flat, hinged logs. With these they extracted the juice, stored it in yellow plastic containers, supplied in bulk by a local female vendor, then pasteurized and bottled some 1,000 bottles for restaurant customers. I just had my second bottle of the day. Very refreshing!

With optimistic courage we have made a down-payment on the solar panels and pumps we need for irrigation and our micro-brewery, helped, in part, by donations received from some of you on our first appeal at Christmas. We hope more of you will reach out to help us in the coming months.

From mid-October to mid-April, not a drop of rain falls and the *chaleur*, the very hot season, when temperatures soar to 120 degrees, is starting now in mid-February. I have installed a hammock on which to read and edit my own memoir in a cool spot on the verandah. Perhaps soon we might also have solar-powered electricity to operate a few fans.

Meanwhile, I listen to the "Congo" bird with his single, repetitive note, like the hum from rubbing a bottle top, parakeets darting noisily around among the trees, watch butterflies hovering silently over the plumbago and passionfruit flowers in the garden of Chez Guillaume. Discover, joyfully, the first three eggs laid by one of our hens. Life is peaceful and I am blessed with a partner who never ceases to impress me with his hard work and practical wisdom.

Julie Wang

To make a donation to BIO-BENIN, please send your cheque to 7483 Pinebrook Road, Park City, UT 84098. For tax purposes, our tax-deductible number is 84-274245.