

Getting around Southern Sudan

Getting around in Southern Sudan is neither easy nor straightforward. Most of the locals will get where they want to on foot. Women carry water, food and all sorts on their heads (right), as well as their babies on their backs. I saw one lady walking past Yei Cathedral with an upside down table on her head and a child tied onto her back in the traditional way.



More and more people are turning to motorbikes to get around, but the cost of these would be prohibitive for many.

There are not too many cars, and those that are on the roads are mostly four wheel drive. This is because the roads in Yei and elsewhere in Southern Sudan are in a desperate state. They are made of dirt and are so rutted that driving at any speed is impossible. Drivers should stay on the left, but in actual fact weave their way from side to side, trying to keep in the tracks (as advised by roadside signs). Fortunately there is little traffic but large lorries do cause more damage to the roads as they wind their way into Yei from Uganda. The Connor team saw the roads in the dry season, just imagine what they must be like in the wet season!

Until something is done about the roads to and from Yei, it will remain isolated and vulnerable. Local people cannot take their produce to markets in Juba or other large centres because they cannot transport anything. So despite the incredibly fertile soil there is no point in investing in any large-scale agri industry. Families just grow what they need to survive, but not what they need to thrive.

The alternative to driving is to fly. But the flights from Yei's red airstrip are too expensive for the majority of the people. The Connor team flew into Yei from Entebbe, via the Ugandan town of Arua, with the Ugandan Airline Eagle Air (seen right touching down at Yei). That in itself was an experience. Although the 20-seater plane was somewhat larger than the MAFF planes which also serve Yei, we could practically touch the pilot and co-pilot!



We boarded at Yei, when we were advised by a lady named Amy to strap ourselves in, told our flying time to Arua would be one hour 15 minutes, with a further 25 minutes to Yei, and off we went, without any safety instruction or further ado. It turned out Amy (you can see the back of her head in the picture to the left), was the co-pilot, and we had a wonderfully smooth journey to Arua, with a fantastic view of the Ugandan landscape from the windows. I had presumed

the on-board toilet was out of use as it seemed to be full of luggage, including a guitar, but I later learned that there is in fact no toilet on board.

The flight from Arua to Yei was rather more bumpy – as Archdeacon Forde reassuringly commented – we were ‘flying by the seat of our pants!’ But apparently this is normal for this section of the journey and to be honest it was considerably smoother on the return leg. (David Cromie and Karen Bushby, right, beside the Eagle Air flight which brought the team’s luggage to Yei six days after they had left Belfast!)



Both Arua and Yei were dust runways (left), which made for surprisingly smooth landings, and fortunately the goats removed themselves just in time! Flying back into Entebbe on the return journey was also memorable, as the angle and direction the plane came into Entebbe at allowed us a bird’s eye view of the runway on our approach. Not something you see everyday!

Visa and passport control at Yei was located in a shed-like building and was all very casual. Except that taking photographs of airport officials, army, police or anyone else in uniform is strictly forbidden.

The journey to the Episcopal Church of Sudan (ECS) Guesthouse was our first experience of Sudanese roads, and the hour and a half long journey to Mongo a few days later was something of a wild terrain ride which people at home might pay hundreds of pounds to experience.

And of course bad roads do have some advantages. Little traffic, limited pollution, a safe highway for children to walk and cycle.

However, in a town with no doctors, the reality is that the state of the roads can literally make a difference between life and death. As the Connor team left left to return home, Bishop Hilary was preparing to take his nephew Francis in his jeep to hospital in Juba, a six hour journey. He had paid considerable American dollars to a ‘private’ doctor to do an X-ray and confirm that Francis had broken his spine in four places after a motorbike accident. As we jolted our way along the Juba Road to the airstrip, just a few miles and a half hour journey, we prayed that the inflatable travel pillow we had left to be used as a neck support for Francis on his journey would be of some use. Tragically, Francis died two days after his arrival in Juba.