

THE INCIDENTAL TOURIST

Dirt rich in rural Rwanda

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RWANDA is known as the land of a thousand hills, but land of 10,000 valleys might be a more appropriate description. After all, it is the complex network of valleys that defines the hills. Roads and towns, like the one in which my husband and I are based as volunteers for a year, are built on the ridges, but it is on the hill slopes and in the verdant valleys that food is grown to feed Africa's most densely populated country.

From our house we can gaze into one such valley. Thickly stitched with crops and threaded with red-brown tracks, it weaves around hills, skirting spurs and collecting tributary valleys en route. On our evening strolls, exploring the maze of dirt tracks in the neighbourhood, we begin to appreciate the complexity of the local geography as fresh vantage points reveal previously concealed side valleys, soft, moulded scoops of green spangled with banana plants.

Our explorations are spoiled somewhat by the attention we receive.

"Muzungu!" The cry goes up as we appear. Young children come skittering to see the strange aliens with their pale skin; a giggling band tails our every move. Adults, too, remind us that we are not of this land; they stop to stare at us, sometimes open-mouthed.

I first descend into the valley with some US Peace Corps volunteers, muzungus who live locally. They have been setting up demonstration permaculture plots at the invitation of landowners to transform a spare bit of land into a vegetable patch. Laden with hoes and spades, we wind down the hillside past farmers engaged in the endless task of digging and weeding their banana, sorghum and bean patches.

With a Rwandan language teacher and a Japanese volunteer, we make a multinational taskforce. We arrive on the valley floor and set to work.

The people in the valley are dirt poor but also dirt rich. The red-brown soil is wonderfully fertile, sprouting with greenery. Houses are built from blocks of mud dug from a hole in the front yard and assembled on a dirt floor. The children's clothes — charity shop cast-offs — are suffused with mud; they play in dirt yards and on dusty tracks and follow their parents into the fields. If you have to carry your clothes to the nearest water body to wash them and need to carry drinking and cooking water home in jerry cans balanced on your head, would you bother with the pointless task of washing these kids' clothes?

Trips to the valley become a regular event. The Americans speak good Kinyarwanda and communicate well with the valley dwellers. Side by side with the landowners, we dig and hoe, deeply loosening the soil in preparation for questing vegetable roots; these plots can enrich the people's diets with carrots, onions, beetroot and celery.

But the efforts of us foreigners are pathetic and the locals soon take the lead, vigorously shifting the soil, fuelled by no more than a gruel of maize or cassava flour with a few beans.

In Rwanda it is rude to call an older person by name; a woman is usually known as the mother of one of her children. With my white hair, I must seem impossibly old and eventually I am told they have decided on a name for me: "Uwimana". It translates as "person of God". I am embarrassed but touched and also pleased, for in this one small patch of Rwanda I am no longer a muzungu.