

Howell's e-Mail News

Tuesday, June 6, 2006

OK, here is the promised tale of our travel adventures in early March. Enjoy!

We decided to have our team retreat jointly with the Holton and Caldwell families who live in Lichinga, which is in the Niassa province. Because of the lack of infrastructure and good roads, our plan was to fly with MAF (Missionary Aviation Fellowship) from Montepuez over to Lichinga, and then ride with the Caldwells and Holtons across into Malawi to a retreat facility there on Lake Malawi. After our retreat time together, we would ride with them back into Mozambique to Lichinga, and then fly with MAF back to Montepuez. At least, that was the plan!

The day of our departure, about an hour and a half before the MAF pilot was to pick us up, he called to tell us that there was no fuel available for his aircraft (another aircraft had arrived in Pemba the day before and bought up all the fuel), and so he wouldn't be able to make the trip. So our family and our teammates Jeremy and Martha Smith and their boys got in our two trucks, filled up the tanks, and drove straight across (from east to west) the Cabo Delgado and Niassa provinces to Lichinga, which we thought was a pretty big adventure (...until the return trip!). The first 218 km took over 9 hours – this was not just “a bad road” - in many places it was just two tire tracks through the bush (keep in mind this is the ONLY road connecting two state capitals!). The remaining 300 km is paved and only took 4 hours, and we reached Lichinga without difficulty, but pretty tired.

The next day we crossed over into Malawi and enjoyed a good, restful retreat time together. However it rained for pretty much the entire 3 days we were there, and we were soon to learn that it had also rained for three days straight all across northern Mozambique as well. The road leading to the retreat facility on Lake Malawi caved in from the rains at one point, meaning that in order to leave Malawi, we had to take a long detour through the interior of the country. We finally did get back to Mozambique, though, and began our return trip from Lichinga to Montepuez on a Thursday, leaving about 6 am, thinking with all the rain the 13-plus hour return trip might be a little longer.

We got a couple hours outside of Lichinga (still on the nice paved road!) when we reached the very full and overflowing Lugenda river, with the fast-moving waters well over the bridge, absolutely impossible for us to cross. We could tell that the waters would not be going down anytime that day, meaning that we couldn't go back to Montepuez the way we came (directly across the Niassa and Cabo Delgado provinces), meaning we would have to drive all the way down through the Nampula province to get back to our homes in Cabo Delgado. So we and the Smiths turned around to backtrack to Lichinga and start our very long journey down the road (dirt/mud – NOT pavement) that connects Lichinga down to Nampula.

It took all day to get to the town of Cuamba, which is still in the Niassa province, where we got gas and a little something to eat before starting out again, thinking we would get to the town of Malema where we wanted to spend the night in a couple more hours. It was getting dark as we left Cuamba, and starting to sprinkle again, but the roads weren't too bad until we crossed over into the Nampula province when the roads deteriorated immediately. All of northern Mozambique was still pretty saturated from all the rain from the previous days, so as it started to rain harder, the mud got more slippery, the puddles got deeper, and it got more difficult to tell how deep the waters were on the road. It continued to rain on us in the middle-of-nowhere-remote-Nampula-province, and the puddles were looking more like flash floods, so about 9:30 at night we reached a spot that we could tell was a bridge over a creek, but with the waters so high we couldn't see the bridge. We decided it wasn't safe to keep going, so we stopped on some slightly-higher-ground, and turned off the cars, prepared to sleep there for the night, and praying that it would stop raining. The Smiths turned on their headlights every hour or so to check the level of the water, and each time the water was still at flood level. Then at midnight when they turned their headlights on again, the water was suddenly gone, leaving just a muddy road leading down to a small bridge over a creek. We were relieved and thankful as we got going again. It took us over 3 more hours to get to Malema because of the muddy roads (but by that time we definitely learned to prefer mud over flash floods!) We decided to catch some sleep at a motel-type place for about 3 hours in Malema before starting out again for Nampula.

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After loading ourselves back into the trucks the next morning, we learned from some different people in Malema that the bridge on the road to Nampula was washed out, also that if we wanted to backtrack to Cuamba and take the other road to Nampula – that bridge was out, too, and even the railway bridge was washed out! There was a detour, however, through the bush and several villages that would take us around the washed-out bridge, and if you have four-wheel drive (which we do), you should be able to make it to Nampula, they assured us. We were feeling pretty optimistic, partly just thankful that we would be driving in daylight this time! So we started off on the detour – it took us 4 hours to drive 30 km, but we made it. At one point on the detour, we drove over a medium-sized bridge over a small river in which the water was still moving pretty fast. What was fascinating, though, was that we could see from all the mud on the grass and trees that the floods from the night before had been well over the tops of our cars. Our 30 km detour actually took us to the main road (dirt) just past the bridge that was “out,” and that was a sight to see: a huge concrete bridge standing firmly in the middle of a wide, deep river bed (most of the water was gone by now), but the earth completely washed away from both ends of the bridge for a good 12-foot gap on either side.

Now we were back on the “main” road from Malema to Nampula, and it took us the rest of the day to get there. We were bumped and jarred the whole way there. We arrived about 8pm or so, exhausted and so thankful for our Good News for Africa colleagues in Nampula who kept us for the night. The next day we left Nampula for Montepuez, which is all on pavement, and that 5-hour drive had never felt so fast! All in all our girls did GREAT considering they basically spent 3 days straight in the car, and we definitely learned more about where we will and will not drive during the rainy season in Mozambique. We were also very thankful for God's blessing our safety during the whole journey – when we looked back and recounted the details with the Jeremy and Martha, not only were we in some scary situations, but our decisions (which road to take, should we stop and spend the night here or there) had turned out exactly right, even when we didn't have complete information at the time, and we give God the glory for that!

On another note, we want to share an invitation with you. On Labor Day weekend (September 1-4, 2006) the Pleasant Valley Church of Christ in Little Rock, Arkansas is hosting the first-ever “Big MO,” a conference for those interested in ministry in Mozambique. The Smith's and Roland's will be on furlough then and will be there to share about ministry in Montepuez. It will be really encouraging and informative – you'd probably get a better feel for what going on with us over here. The information and the registration form can be found on our website.

Thanks for keeping us in your thoughts and prayers,
Alan, Rachel, Abby and Ellie