

## From our water correspondent

The mouse birds in the bush outside my window have been chattering loudly since 5a.m. By 6a.m. we're driving though the mist and marshlands on the outskirts of Kigali, on the way to Gitega, Burundi. Bernard the driver is listening to a bi-weekly health show, which is more popular here than Big Brother at home. I stare out of the window, blurrily massaging my eyes with the hundred colours of green.

Normally Bernard drives like he's in the Grand Prix, while I sleep in the back or work on my laptop, but today we are stuck behind a Rav4 that has an interesting approach to driving. He keeps to the middle, except when he drives on the left while going round a left-hand bend and on the right when going round a right-hand bend. There is no way to overtake.

We take a detour near the border, so Bernard can show me a big rock. He's taken me to various big rocks around Rwanda before. This one, at least, has a sign, 'Big rock this way'. 'People come from Kigali just to see it,' he says, and others, passing, with bundles on their heads stop in awe and wonder as to how it has got there. It's about 5m high and 24m circumference, and looks like a large pebble to me.

At the border I am sent back by the police to the lady in customs who has written the wrong departure date in my passport. She scribbles it out and biros in the right date.

Two hours later and we're in Gitega; Bernard goes off to fix a problem with the bonnet of the car, while I go for lunch. I go to the same restaurant I

always go to, I order the same meal, and talk to the same waiter, Vincent. He's getting paid 10,000 Fbu (US\$10) per month, and that's because he's a good waiter (the others get 8,000Fbu); he works 7 days a week from 6a.m. to 10p.m. and gets his food thrown in free. He never gets a day off, but he likes it here, because he can practise his French on the *muzungos* and watch MTV. I ponder for a moment and realize that I am carrying the equivalent of four years' salary in my bag; suddenly things don't seem to make sense and I'm not very hungry any more. I leave, tipping him half a day's salary and take a push bike taxi to the office. This is definitely the best way to travel here, on the letter rack at the back, side saddle, wind in your hair, chatting and waving to other bikers, and causing much amusement to the locals, who usually see *muzungos* travelling at the speed of sound in huge white Toyotas.

My job today is to check the finances of ODAG, a local NGO which we, PROTOS, support. We prefinance their work and my job is to check that the receipts are properly organized, legitimate and acceptable to our donor the Belgian Government. It's a tedious task, but thankfully ODAG are relatively good at it. I check dates, amounts, descriptions (must be in French or translated), whether they have receipts and invoices, I look at expenses for trainings and ask for lists of participants with signatures (more often than not thumb prints as many local volunteers can't write), I ask for the letters of invitation (rarely there, as often informa-

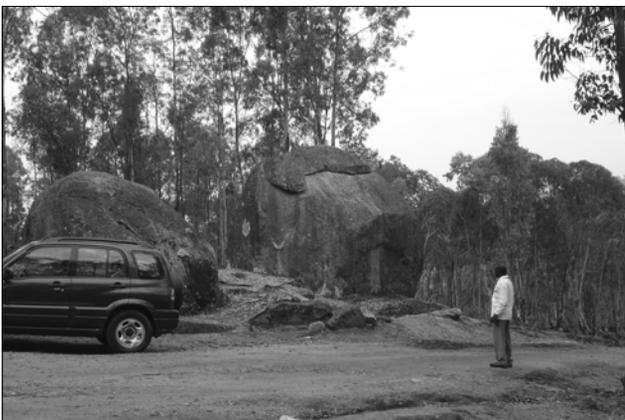
tion is communicated by word of mouth, but still a requirement by our donor) and training reports, usually in the local language which must be translated into French for our purposes. The donor doesn't pay '*frais de mission*' or '*visit de sejour*', only '*per diem*', so these must be changed – and absolutely no taxis. All receipts over a certain value must be accompanied by a price comparison from three retailers with invoice, and receipt. It's a lesson in good paper management. Then I check the numbering and order of the receipts, and the totals.

Luckily in this case ODAG have done their work on Excel, but it is not always the case. I have received lists in Word and had to get the calculator out, as well as piles of receipts badly ordered or with many mistakes regarding amounts, or concerning various parties that seem to have gone on, and that have included beer (also a 'no, no', whatever the culture). I leave a list of questions to be dealt with and a date for the final receipts, and go off to find Bernard.

He appears with a receipt for 12,000Fbu, which I don't accept as we've been over-charged, so I send him back and ask him to ask for a reduction, a new receipt and a reimbursement.

A couple of hours later he is back with a long story, a new receipt and some change. This is the 'I know you're cheating me game', and also the 'if I confront you about it, you'll deny it and we won't get anywhere' game, so we pretend that it's someone else's mistake and it gets somehow sorted out. It's not so different with the partners: many people in East Africa skim a little, to pay for school fees or medical fees, weddings or funerals, and all I can do is reduce it by a certain amount, because let's face it, if I go into a shop with my *muzungo* face it will cost twice as much. I can only reduce what they skim and make sure their accounts are correct, but I can't eradicate corruption altogether.

*Hester Kapur is Regional Co-ordinator, Rwanda, Burundi and DRC, for PROTOS (a Belgian NGO promoting water management and sanitation).*



A detour took in a remarkable 'big rock'