

A 'bad' day in Australia is better than a good day in Timbuktu

by Catherine DeVrye



How do I know? Because, that's where I recently spent one Christmas and...Yes, there really is such a place as Timbuktu! More than just a name that conjures up images of a far-flung exotic destination, linked to the ends of the earth, the ancient city is located in Mali in the North West section of Africa.

Once a major centre of learning and trade in the Islamic world, where camel caravans found an oasis from their trek south across the Sahara Desert, it is now little more than

a dusty town where people try to eek out a living in the 4th poorest country on earth.

The Niger River, the 3d largest in Africa- once the lifeblood running through the town-is now 19 kilometres away, swallowed by the sands that have encroached mercilessly on the landscape year after year.

I've been to every continent but this was the toughest trip of all. Although I write and speak to organisations about pushing boundaries, it's no exaggeration to say that I was outside my comfort zone in more ways than one... covered by dust storms and the pollution of vehicles and open sewerage; saddened to be greeted by friendly children and know that many were dying from AIDS; and camping in flimsy tents on the river bank where we'd spotted hippos earlier in the day-or on top of mud houses in the primitive villages.

It may be the 4th poorest country on earth but it remains a mystery to me how the people with an average life expectancy of only 44, remain so rich of spirit? The wealthy celebrated the New Year with the slaying of a goat while most seemed joyous with little more than couscous, yams and onions as they sang, drummed and danced til dawn.

Did I make any New Year's resolutions and have you broken yours?

Yes, I did make a resolution and it's one I'll easily be able to keep...to never again go camping in a third world country! There certainly won't be a Tim-buk-3 for me!

It was amazing to return safely home and be in awe of something as simple as walking into a supermarket, stocked with all array of fresh and packaged food. I can only imagine how a resident of Timbuktu would react to such abundance that we take for granted.

I had quite a few computer glitches after my return and it seems that high-tech has been causing high-stress in my office. At such times, I need to remind myself that although we all have stresses in our daily life, it is no comparison to the every day struggle for survival faced by much of the world and there's no doubt in my mind that:

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Catherine DeVrye, Australian Executive Woman of the Year, is a #1 best selling author and global speaker on service quality and change.