

Speaking the Language of the Locals : by Marie

We were like travellers in any other foreign country, facing the deepest cultural and linguistic barrier many of us had ever experienced. I expected us to be able to communicate perhaps on some level, but I had no idea it would be so positive and encouraging. Two incidents in particular stand out in my mind as beautiful examples of how effective certain universal forms of communication can be. One day when we were passing through a village, we stopped at a gas station. We milled around, trying to amuse ourselves until Hope suggested an impromptu game of pseudo musical chairs. She began with the one African song we were all sure to know, "Waka Waka" the World Cup anthem from several years ago. To our delight, a young woman serving as one of the gas station attendants shyly indicated she wished to join our game. For a few minutes, we all laughed and clapped along; no words were needed to express the small joys we could all take in a few minutes of music.

Earlier that day we were blessed enough to briefly experience a remote and ancient culture of the Bushmen of the Kalahari. Although the police were tracking our every move, nonetheless after a few minutes we were able to slowly approach the group of 15 or so men, women and children huddled under a tree. At first they were clearly distrustful and fearful, to the point that we didn't try to shake their hands or even meet their eyes for more than a few moments. After a few minutes, the Bushmen warily began to share some of their tools and musical instruments with us, and smiles began to appear. Happily enough, they started to actually look a little more pleased and a little less scared at our presence. The high point of the experience for me was when one of the young women kindly allowed me to hold her beautiful, eight or nine month old baby girl. She was very healthy, with clear brown eyes and a few strands of beads around her chubby little waist. I know it sounds like the cheesiest thing in the world, but when I held her it seemed like there was no separation between our cultures, no real difference at all between her people and ours. It was lovely that her mother trusted me enough to let me hold her adorable child. Although the linguistic and cultural barriers were still there, they were rendered inept for a small moment in time. Through smiles, hand-waving and a moment of trust, we were able to communicate on a basic and beautiful level like never before.