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A record to be proud of

Ronan White CSSp



“A most five years in Nampula and I still haven’t been robbed, not even once!”

That was my proud boast at table to my colleagues recently — the same colleagues who had warned me on the day of my arrival: “You have now entered the City of Thieves. They’ll take the eye out of your head here if you’re not watching it. Assume that they are all thieves until proven otherwise.”

Thus I was extremely proud of my record.

That is until a few days ago...

On that particular day I was heading home from work on a suffocatingly hot afternoon in a *chapa*.

Chapas are local taxis — small vans habitually overcrowded with people, animals, and a colourful variety of food-stuffs.

Embedded in the back corner

We were 24 passengers crammed into the sizzling 12-seater — all sweating profusely. I was embedded in the back corner, with a burly lady squashed on my lap and a young man pressed up against my right side. The window on my left mercifully allowed in a draught of fresh air to counteract the stifling heat produced by our sweating bodies and the overpowering stench of a number of chickens flapping wildly and defecating liberally.

Chapa drivers would put their Formula One counterparts to shame with the perilous manoeuvres they regularly perform. Only the passengers constantly feel the brunt of these actions, being tossed about in the back like confetti as the *chapas* race wildly through the city streets competing with each other for the customers waiting by the roadsides.

The passengers are unprotected, leaning forward, leaning back, all crushed together on these madcap daily journeys. But no one gets too upset — all in a day’s work.

A mad meander

On this particular ride, as we came off the city’s only roundabout at terminal velocity, the entire passenger mass was slammed up against the left side of

the *chapa*. The lad to my right ended up on top of me, lodged between myself and the roof. With the *chapa* continuing to meander madly, I paid no attention to his hands around my waist and pocket area as he calmly detached himself from me.

The journey continued and commuters and fowl gradually got off at their stops, creating some space and allowing some cool air and comfort to enter. As we were approaching my stop — by this stage there were only about five of us left in the *chapa* — I put my hand in my pocket to retrieve my coin for the fare. The coin was gone — and so was the lad who had been seated to my right!

I was furious — furious with the young lad for robbing me, but even more furious with myself for allowing myself to be robbed so easily. I now faced the problem of having to negotiate with the fare collector. These collectors have zero tolerance towards people who jump into their *chapas* without money.

Go barefoot

The collector insisted that I leave my flip-flops with him; I could exchange them for the price of the fare an hour later, when he would return on his next trip. As there was quite a walk from the stop to our house on baking hot sand and stone, I was extremely reluctant to hand over my footwear.

A debate ensued, in which all remaining passengers took part, with neither the conductor nor I conceding an inch. It came to a peaceful conclusion when an old man, dressed in rags, offered to pay for me. He gave me a big smile, paid the collector and then shuffled off at his stop without another word.

We continued the short distance to my stop and just as I was jumping off, the fare collector tapped me on the shoulder. I turned to see him pointing towards the back of the *chapa*. Following the line of his finger I saw my shiny coin glistening on the seat. It must have fallen out of my pocket during one of the frenzied swerves and slipped underneath me. Grinning, he went down to the back, picked up the coin and tossed it to me.

Only one thief

My proud record was still intact, but I walked home feeling ashamed of myself. I hadn't been robbed, yet I wrongly assumed someone had robbed me. An old man, who clearly had very little money, paid for me without being asked. And the fare collector, who could easily have slipped my coin into his own pocket, returned it happily to me.

There was only one thief on that journey and that was me — robbing the people of their goodness and humanity by assuming that they were “all thieves until proven otherwise”. In fact, it was an ongoing thievery I had been committing since I arrived here.

The statistic of never being robbed here is no longer of any importance to me. I hope and pray that some day I will have a record of not robbing others of their humanity. That indeed would be something to be proud of. ■

Courtesy of *Outlook*, Dublin.



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Disturb Us, Lord

Disturb us, Lord, when
We are too well pleased with ourselves,
When our dreams have come true
Because we have dreamed too little,
When we arrived safely
Because we sailed too close to the shore.

Disturb us, Lord, when
With the abundance of things we possess
We have lost our thirst
For the waters of life;
Having fallen in love with life,
We have ceased to dream of eternity
And in our efforts to build a new earth,
We have allowed our vision
Of the new Heaven to dim.

Disturb us, Lord, to dare more boldly,
To venture on wider seas
Where storms will show your mastery;
Where losing sight of land,
We shall find the stars.

We ask You to push back
The horizons of our hopes;
And to push us into the future
In strength, courage, hope, and love.

— *Attributed – Sir Francis Drake – 1577*