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Russ & Jo's Digest



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Learning a New Dance, Wearing a New Hat

3 AM on Sunday morning finds me trying to act coherent and alert as I stumble through the immigration and customs process. My journey started at noon on Friday and progressed through four airports in a zigzag pattern. There are no direct routes to this mountainous country squeezed in between much larger nations. Eight of us somehow managed to show up together at the same time 10,000 miles away from where we started.

We leave the airport in pitch darkness, so the mystery deepens. I've never been here before and I really don't know what to expect. I got a few hours of sleep, but was very eager to see daylight and get my bearings again. I hate losing my sense of direction, and I long to see my surroundings.

The arrival process turns into a metaphor for the cultural realignment we needed to master. During the next two days we reviewed our curriculum and the new *rules of engagement*. The training material is designed to help teachers re-introduce the importance of ethics and morality in the public schools using a Biblical model. The catch is that we have signed an

agreement with officials stating that we would not be proselytizing. Apparently anything that might cause a Muslim to question their faith is a big No-No.

Recently they have endured several revolutions and changes of government. It is now almost 100 years since religion was openly tolerated, and all they know are vague memories of the faith values that their great grand parents held.

Likewise, since in centuries past most of the mountain peoples had been Muslims, the prevailing thought was that everyone should be a Muslim again. The good news is that they also consider themselves to be *people of The Book*. That would be our starting point as we delicately learned the steps of this new dance.

The Tension Was Very Obvious

Our first three day training event went so well that we were encouraged to be more open about our faith at the next school. However, this next bunch was much more traditional in their views, and our training coincided with an ancient holiday. The tension was very

obvious on the first day, so we prayed. The second day some teachers didn't attend. The third and final day was also the holiday. We prayed for the best, but prepared for the worst.

I was even tempted to remove a chair or two from my small group circle to hide the fact that people might be missing. Suddenly, several bus loads showed up at the same time and the room was flooded with people. A few minutes later there were more teachers in the room than we had originally registered!

It was a hoot!

Not only were they there to learn, they were there to share their holiday with us. We finished early to allow for cultural dancing and



Traditional Hat

music. It was a hoot! Don't expect to see any pictures of me dancing, though rumors exist that I might have been swept up in the moment and learned a few new moves. My group honored me with a traditional hat to signify my new bond with their culture.

What Now?

Our hosts are following up every teacher who attended the training. Before we left they said, "it takes many cups of tea before a Muslim will consider Jesus. You have filled up a lot of those cups this week."

This was the first time the curriculum was used in a public setting, and

because of its success in the capital city, the training will be expanded to another city next year.

Christians live in tension in this country. To be a follower of Jesus is to be considered a traitor by the two largest people groups. Pray for them as they courageously challenge the culture.

Please pardon our vague references to the country name and people groups. The wide distribution of this

letter compels us to take steps to protect our in-country staff. I only wish I could show you pictures.

*Jo Anne
Russ & Jo Anne*