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IN CONVERSATION MICHAEL PALIN

WITH A NEW TRAVEL SHOW ABOUT NIGERIA, THE FORMER MONTY PYTHON ACTOR TALKS TO NOO SARO-WIWA ABOUT GIANT SNAILS AND THE PITFALLS OF REPRESENTING AFRICA

AFTER DECADES FRONTING travel series in the Sahara, Pacific and North and South Poles, there is barely a corner of the globe Michael Palin hasn't called on. These days, the 81-year-old has taken to visiting the ultimate no-go destinations, his last two series exploring North Korea and Iraq. Now, he is undertaking an 1,300-mile trip across Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation, a place that may not suffer North Korea's repression or Iraq's war-ravaged instability but, nonetheless, has a "final frontier" whiff about it. Was he initially daunted?

"Everyone's very frank about Nigeria, particularly Nigerians – I quite like that," says Palin. "I met an awful white man at the British Museum, who said, 'Oh it's a shithole' and all that. But these things just made me rather more interested." His journey includes Lagos, the former slave port of Badagry, street wrestlers and extravagant Durbar horse parades in the Islamic north, a meeting with a former Boko Haram kidnap victim and a ride along the beautiful River Ethiope. "There was an energy and exuberance in Nigeria despite the awful problems. There didn't seem to be as much resignation as I would have expected,"

historian, Aduke Gomez, with forthright views. "We talked it through and made it clear that the British were deeply mired in the slave trade for a very long time, rather than the other narrative which is that we were the first to argue against the trade and say it had to be destroyed," he says. "But I'm very keen, when we do the journeys, that we don't have a list of things we should talk about, because if it doesn't happen naturally it becomes a bit clumsy. I want people to feel that they can talk to me, but I'm careful not to make any judgments or try to look at the 'issues'. I liked the ease of the encounters with Nigerians. They seem to be very open and happy to talk to us, which was different from most of Iraq, and certainly North Korea."

Nigeria, however, still has its surprises. "At the Durbar the emir laid on for me, there were these people with nails through their tongues and lips; a young girl with an alligator on her shoulder," he recalls, intrigued by this apparent melding of the spiritual and political. When I ask about Nigerian food, he smiles and says he ate two giant land snails, a popular delicacy the size of an adult's palm.

"NIGERIA COULD MAKE MORE MONEY OUT OF TOURISM IF IT WAS ORGANISED PROPERLY. I RECENTLY WENT TO COSTA RICA, WHICH HAS SIMILAR SCENERY AND LANDSCAPES"

he says. "People were hustling. Whether it was selling pencils or Monopoly boards in traffic jams, everyone was trying to do something."


In the biggest city, Lagos, Palin was particularly struck by Makoko, the huge shanty town built on stilts over the lagoon. "An extraordinary place," he says. "It has this rather quaint evocation of Venetian canals but is held together by bits of corrugated iron. It's largely cut off from electricity and sewage systems, yet about 200,000 people live there. It was inspirational, particularly the school, which was oversubscribed yet there they were, all these eager faces crammed into a small room."

A BBC series about Makoko in 2010 caused an outcry in Nigeria, partly due to its ill-advised title, *Welcome to Lagos*, a broadbrush misnomer. The shanty town itself also divides opinion: for some it's an embarrassment; for others it's an example of Nigerians' organisational excellence in the absence of effective government. In any case, the controversy demonstrates the sensitivities that presenters such as Palin must navigate in an age where representation and identity matter. The former empire is clapping back, as evidenced by the passerby in one episode who harangues Palin about the British returning the famous Benin bronze sculptures they stole in 1897. Does he think that television producers cover African history differently compared to two decades ago, when he filmed his *Sahara* series?

"Yes," he says. "There's an obligation now to confront colonialism and the slave trade, perhaps more than you would have done before. So there is a difference from when we filmed the slavery story on Gorée Island in Senegal [for *Sahara*]." In Badagry, Palin meets a local

In the show, he takes the new Chinese-built train from the north to the capital, Abuja, before heading southwards to my birth place, Port Harcourt in the Niger Delta, where the land has been poisoned by crude oil extraction. He visits the Ibaa community a few weeks after an explosion caused by illegal tapping of pipelines killed 37 people there.

"We talked to a man who had terrible burns [from a previous incident] because he hadn't been able to go to hospital. An extraordinary, inspirational figure. He didn't complain. He was a painter and couldn't work any more because the burns on his lower arms have restricted the movement in his hands. There was a feeling of a real tragedy... and the people were too poor to change it themselves. So either you have this charity trying to help them or, as I suspect, some local leaders who are making sure that they carry on their illegal trade. But the problem is the way the oil is being distributed, and the oil industry, which bears a very big burden."

In its pristine state the delta is a beautiful network of waterways cutting through mangroves and rainforest. Palin sampled this untainted beauty on the Ethiope, an impossibly blue channel flanked by lush vegetation. "Nigeria could make much more money out of tourism if it was organised properly," he says. "I recently went to Costa Rica, which has the same kind of scenery and landscapes as Nigeria, but it's made a big effort, whereas in Nigeria the roads and the hotels aren't that great. But given the importance of the country, the number of people there, its wealth, it could all be so different." 

Michael Palin's Nigeria series airs on Channel 5 from April