



Inset above:
Magie Relph and
Trish Graham at
the market

Main:
View from the hotel

Bottom right:
Magie Relph at the
fabric shop, Accra

Fabric hunting in Africa

with Nana Benz

Robert Irwin, the 'Saturday boy', accompanies his wife Magie Relph on her shopping spree for The African Fabric Shop



The blazing sun sinks fast into the heat haze and the welcome cool of dusk falls over dusty Ouagadougou, capital of Burkina Faso. In the shaded courtyard of L'Auberge Rose Des Sable, Nana Benz enjoys a bowl of peanuts and an ice-cold Flag Bière. It is time for calm reflection, to take stock of her West African fabric shopping spree. Some of you already know her as Magie Relph: quilter, African fabric lover and proprietor of The African Fabric Shop. I think of her as 'Nana Benz'.

'Why Nana Benz,' you may wonder. As always in Africa, there's a story to tell. For centuries, West Africa has been a centre of trade: out of Africa have

gone gold, ivory and slaves; into Africa have gone manufactured goods, from trinkets to trainers and pharmaceuticals to fabrics. And who, historically, have been Africa's greatest textile traders? Why women, of course! Arguably Africa's sharpest, most successful traders, these businesswomen control the fabric markets in Ghana, Nigeria, Senegal, Côte D'Ivoire, Togo and Burkina Faso. They deal in all types of textiles. But their speciality is importing, distributing and selling the premier branded African wax prints from Britain and Holland, as well as cheaper replicas from the USA and China. The Nana Benzes of West Africa have joined Africa's economic elite. For

transport, many of them own the marque of aspiration chosen by gold merchants, oil tycoons and presidents – the Mercedes Benz.

In her peaceful courtyard, Magie reflects on her last day in Burkina Faso. We've been here for 10 days for the Salon International de L'Artisanat de Ouagadougou (SIAO). SIAO is a bi-annual, two-week extravaganza of arts and crafts from across West Africa and as far afield as the Congo and Libya. The first SIAO in 1988, with 244 Burkinabe craftsmen and 20 other exhibiting African countries, was a mere village fête compared to 2006. Today it plays host to 220 international buyers and 300,000 local visitors, and sprawls through four massive pavilions on a purpose-built two acre site. There are food stalls, bars, music, dance, fashion shows, internet facilities and



colours'. The patterns amaze, created by delicate tie dye. These are wraparound wearing cloths, made and worn by the women of the desert in Mauritania.

But it's not just the fabrics that Magie adores. It's the wonderful people she meets as she browses and barter and buys her way around SIAO. The memories will always be better than the photos. There's Peace Corp Baba; garbed in his embroidered *boubou* and headdress, he dances around his stall cackling and shouting 'African Power'. As an expert extraordinaire in textiles, beads, jewellery and artefacts, Baba is known from Marseilles to Mopti, his home town in Mali. And there are the gentle women of Mauritania. In the stifling heat of the sales hall, they recline, almost buried behind mountains of their elegant, tie-dyed cloths. When Magie shows interest, they waft lengths to tempt her. Calculators

Top left:
SIAO 2006 entrance

Bottom right:
Peace Corp Baba

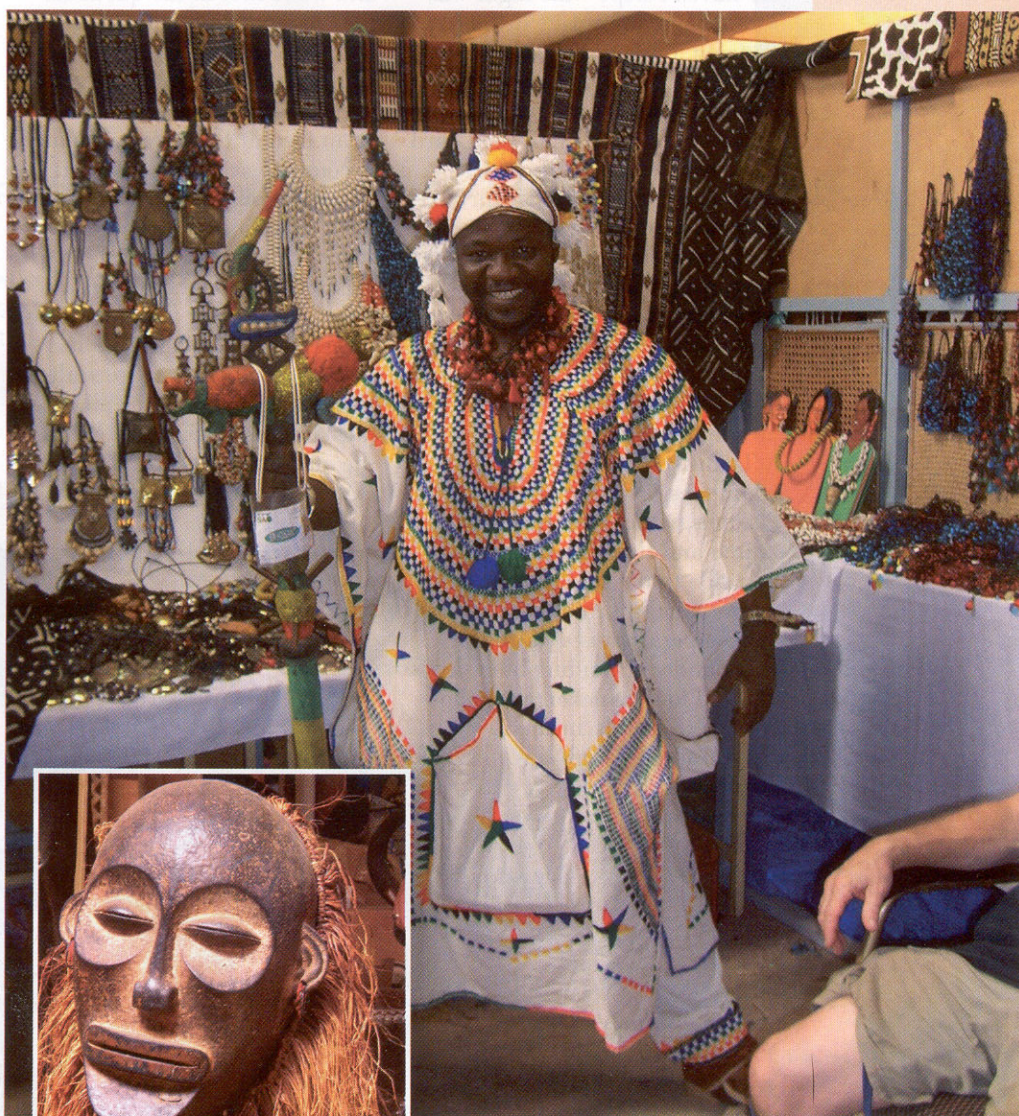
Inset:
African mask

banks. Over 2,500 trading stalls display arts and crafts from almost 40 African countries: wooden carvings and masks, Tuareg silver and leatherwork; beads and jewellery; basketry; painting; sculpture and cast art; pottery and ceramics; weapons; costumes; clothing; and, of course, fabrics.

It's no wonder that Magie has had such a mind-boggling time here. Now, with our friend Trish Graham, a Canadian beaded jewellery artist who lives in Accra, Magie must write an inventory in case Ghana customs want to inspect her bags. Notepad and calculator to hand, she unzips her first *Gucci*, the ubiquitous woven plastic carry-all of West African traders and travellers. It contains resist-dyed indigo damask from Guinea, a little-known country tucked away on the West African coast. Women use tying, hand and machine stitching to create a resist before dipping the cloth into the Indigo vat. To keep their traditions alive and to help find a market, the women have joined a cooperative called *Fédération Préfectorale des Artisans de Labé*. At SIAO, for each cloth Magie buys, the dyer's name is recorded in a ledger. Another bag holds mud cloth made by Bamana women in Mali. Strips of hand-spun, hand-woven cotton are stitched together and then painted with natural dyes, including river mud, to create striking patterns. In Mali it is a wearing cloth, but in Europe and American it is a fashionable furnishing fabric used for wallhangings, throws, bags and clothing.

The inventory grows... Twelve-yard lengths of hand-dyed Batik;

rolls of organic strip-woven cotton from a Burkina Faso cooperative; and finally a cloth that Magie has discovered for the first time at SIAO. It is as light and diaphanous as silk, yet it is cotton, finely spun and woven. The colours astound; the orange of the setting sun, maroon of desert flowers, green of Islam and indigo blue, the 'king of





Above:
Left to right, Bob
Irwin, Magie Relph,
Trish Graham

Below:
Magie Relph
choosing indigo
fabrics

are consulted and a deal struck. As Magie bids them, *'Merci et au revoir,'* one lady offers a scrap of paper bearing a number – her mobile in Nouakchott!

While Magie repacks her shopping bags for tomorrow's dawn run – 90 miles to the Ghana border – I look for a taxi that might not collapse under the weight. Sunday morning arrives. We haven't slept – the night was a cacophony of music, drums and dancing, punctuated by cannon fire right outside our window. As we stumble to the breakfast kiosk on the corner (no eggs, bird flu), it dawns on us, in Africa Saturday is funeral day. Our taxi is two hours late. It's a different taxi with a different driver. *'Pas de problem,'* he says, and he believes it enough to hit 102 mph on the deserted road to the border. I pay him. Then I notice his wheels; yes, there are four, but he's short of a wheel nut!

Thanks to Trish, who is a Ghana resident, we negotiate customs without an inventory search and then survive another taxi ride to the border town of Bolgatanga. It's mid morning and the temperature is a 'normal' 33°C under a blinding blue sky. We find food; chicken and jollof rice, so we call it 'brunch'.

We find the transport park, but there are no buses. Only *tro-tros*, the dilapidated mini-buses held together with chicken wire and faith. They don't go anywhere until they are packed to capacity plus five. We buy seats and wait. Bolga is famous for three things: getting stranded, basket weaving and the local man's wearing smock. Magie follows a lad through a hole in a fence into the dusty market, deserted

on Sunday morning. Weavers appear bearing 50 metre rolls of strip-woven cotton. Some are plain white, and others contain checks and stripes woven in Indigo. 'Ideal for embroiderers,' Magie thinks. Tailors arrive with arm-loads of smocks. They're made of the woven strips, sewn together and embellished with hand embroidery. Despite the blazing heat, they are incredibly heavy weighing up to 1.8 kilos! Magie bargains hard and still manages to part with 800,000 Ghanaian Cedi. At last we cram ourselves and our fabric haul into our *tro-tro*, destination Tamale, three hours away. We are the only patrons of a 'motel' attached to a Chinese restaurant; at least the air-conditioning works, even if it does sound like shrapnel in a Dyson.

After another virtually sleepless night, we find a pre-dawn taxi to the bus station. It's still dark and we're first in the queue for the only bus to Accra. CNN flickers on the TV above the waiting benches. After three hours an empty bus arrives, and in an instant the orderly queue becomes a scrum of shouting, desperate pilgrims, waving Cedi bank notes and pleading for seats. A ticket tout wearing a classic Bolga smock pushes a mother and baby aside. We hold our ground, stay calm, smile a lot and somehow emerge with tickets. A porter weighs and tags Magie's Guccis; we pay him the *dash* to make sure they are loaded and settle down for the

endurance ride to Accra. The air-conditioning works and so does the VCR; we watch 12 hours of Nigerian movies starring all the same actors and featuring almost identical plot lines.

Accra at last! Even at 10pm traffic crawls no faster than the throngs of street vendors from the distant suburbs to the city. On Trish's cool balcony, we toast Magie's shopping spree with gin and tonics. The late KLM flight – Trish calls it the 'dog plane' – skims over our rooftop, and hundreds of neighbourhood dogs howl in unison. We're glad to be home, or back in Accra at least. But before we board our own 'dog plane' bound for Yorkshire, we have to see Batik dyers Esther and Grace, bead-makers Florence, Okla and Paul, and Akisombo Textiles near Mokolo Market. And last but not least, our tailor, Vera, who is busy transforming stunning Batiks into our autumn wardrobe.

For Nana Benz in West Africa, the shopping spree never ends. Already, she's planning her next expedition – to Senegal. ♦

FURTHER INFORMATION

Magie Relph
The African Fabric Shop
19 Hebble Mount
Meltham, Holmfirth
HD9 4HG
01484 850 188
magie@africanfabric.co.uk
www.africanfabric.co.uk
http://www.siao.bf

