



Kinshasa, the Beautiful

Dispatch

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May 24, 2006

Kinshasa, the capital city of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), once referred to as Kinshasa la belle (Kinshasa the beautiful), is now best described as post-apocalyptic. Take a deep look into the mind of a science fiction writer and imagine the way he or she would describe the conditions and people in an isolated city 10 years after the "bomb."

The city has the appearance of having been built on top of a garbage dump. The dusty sidewalks and streets, which were once paved, are heaved and covered with trash. The trash often accumulates into piles up to two feet high. Vegetation can even be seen growing out of trash piles that have enough dirt for a plant's root to take hold.

Eventually someone will set the piles alight and abandoned them to smolder for days.

The main boulevards and streets of Kinshasa are crowded with people selling everything from ballpoint pens to prepaid calling cards for cell phones (there are few working landlines in the city). Many young men roam the streets with large plastic sacks resembling burlap bags skillfully balanced on their heads. Inside each of these large sacks are dozens of smaller plastic bags containing cold water. Each bag is filled about half full and then tied at the top. "Fifty francs, fifty francs" the boys call out in French or Lingala, the primary local languages. When a sale is made, the thirsty customer will often make a small hole in the corner of the bag by biting it at the seam and drain its contents on the spot. Once empty, the bag is immediately dropped and left to the wind to be scattered around the city.

Kinshasa's original infrastructure and buildings, which were developed during the Belgium colonial period, were designed to support a population of approximately 500,000 inhabitants prior to 1960. Over the past 40 years, Kinshasa's population has swelled as more people arrive everyday fleeing ethnic violence or seeking work. The current population is estimated somewhere between eight and 12 million. What little remains of the original infrastructure has fallen into disrepair and is surrounded by makeshift houses and slums. The most basic of services, such as running water and electricity, are in short supply or simply nonexistent in many parts of the city. Anyway, the water that flows from the tap is unsuitable for drinking and emerges the same brownish color as the Congo River, which flows around the city.

Since independence in 1960, some work has been done to maintain or expand the infrastructure, but without the consistency needed to keep up with the rising population. The neglect has reached the point where the Konios, (residents of Kinshasa – pronounced kone-wah) no longer rely on the government for much of anything and have developed their own systems of trade and tariffs for obtaining the basic essentials. Dealing, negotiating, and theft are the normal way of life, and facilitators are always on hand for each deal to take their small cut. As Theodore Trefon wrote in his book, "Reinventing Order in Congo," the mindset of a Konios is "a day without stealing is a wasted day."

The city is not without some bright spots, and many international businesses, such as airlines and banks, have highly fortified offices in the city. With the increased level of stability brought about by the cease-fire, combined with the subsequent infusion of dollars into the country's economy over the past five years by 17,000 United Nations Peacekeepers, Kinshasa is teeming with energy. The U.N.'s need for "western" standards of food and housing has resulted in small restaurants and shops opening throughout the city. However, western food is extremely expensive, as I discovered at a local market where \$5 was the going



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Kinshasa, the capital city of the Democratic Republic of Congo, has the appearance of having been built on top of a garbage dump.

rate for a can of Pringles potato chips. Such luxuries are unobtainable for most of the city's residents, who live on just a couple of dollars a day or less.

There are some areas of the city, mostly near the ambassador residences, that have fared better than others. However, the combination of a police force that is as effective as a referee at a World Wrestling Federation Match and the high incidences of crime make the city extremely dangerous. Venturing out alone on foot after sunset, especially for a Mzungu (slang for fair skinned or without skin), is almost guaranteed to result in a mugging. Residents with anything valuable hire private security guards and surround their homes with high walls. As a result, Kinshasa is dotted with mini-fortresses, and the majority of its streets are lined with walls leaving the visitor with a closed-in and slightly claustrophobic feeling.

By the end of the day, the movement of the city's population through the exposed dirt kicks up a layer of fine dust above the city. The dust, combined with the smoke from thousands of smoldering trash fires, creates a haze that continuously obscures the sun and gives the city the perpetual smell of a distant forest fire. A city that was once labeled, Kinshasa la belle, is better described as Kinshasa poubelle (Kinshasa the trash bin). VT

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