

## **RUNNING ON TIME – *INSHALLAH***

*West Africa is rarely on the agenda for tourists to the continent. There are few high mountains to conquer and the most popular safari creatures are to be found elsewhere. Although shades of brown predominate, you can still find palm-lined beaches, vibrant culture, and legendary trading towns. **Eliza Reid** spent seven weeks in West Africa and got to know the region's renowned hospitality.*



**Seething:** *Banjul's main market is always full of people buying and selling everything from fresh fruit and pots and pans to pirated music and perfume.*

The heat engulfed me instantly, the humidity forcing me to catch a breath. It was just after midnight; even the nighttime climate of Dakar, the capital of Senegal, was a shock to a body which was adjusted to an Icelandic autumn and 17 hours on three aircraft.

That's my first memory of West Africa.

My second occurred moments later, as I reached the bottom step of those creaky metal stairs they roll up to planes. My fellow passengers on Alitalia flight AZ 850 from Milan were herding left into a waiting van which would shuttle them to the terminal. To the right of the steps was a smiling man in a long white kaftan. He held a plain cardboard sign with the name "Mme. Reid" written on it in black marker. The same man escorted me to a separate van which drove us both to the air-conditioned solace of the "*Salle d'honneur*" of Léopold Sedar Senghor International Airport. As I collapsed into the folds of a soft leather sofa, someone collected my luggage and checked my passport through customs.

Not a bad welcome for a backpacker.

My kaftan-wearing friend was Arona Sy, a friend of a friend who had invited me to stay with his family on my visit to Dakar. Arona owns a successful consulting business and his family has close ties to the Senegalese president, hence the VIP arrival. It was to be only the beginning of a seven-week experience of the region's generosity.



**Hello!** Brightly coloured kaftans are traditional clothing in Senegal and comfortable for the humidity. It is also virtually a tradition to have a nearby child run into place to become the star of any photo – they're not shy at all!

## PLUNGING INTO DAKAR

Dakar has a reputation as one of West Africa's most vibrant, hectic and sometimes intimidating cities. With over two million inhabitants, Senegal's capital is world-famous for its music scene. The influence of the French, from whom Senegal only gained independence in 1960, is apparent in the city's architecture and cuisine. Baguettes are the main breakfast staple and instant Nescafé, filled with powdered rather than regular milk due to the climate, is the drink of choice.

My first glimpse of Dakar in daylight was in the entertaining company of Arona's 25-year-old wife, Mariama, who, dressed in traditional *hajib*, escorted me through the Sandaga market. Dakar's main market is a place where men in their 20s hawk everything from mobile phone cards to coat hangers to frying pans. Huge slabs of raw meat sat warming in the heat and a man cheerfully offered to kill any live chicken I wanted to buy from several nearby cages. Women strolled by in brightly patterned headscarves with babies strapped to their backs using artfully tied pieces of cloth.

**The smell was a pungent combination of raw meat, overly ripe fruits, raw and smoked fish, exhaust fumes, sweat, and the occasional flowery fragrance which had wafted over from the soap section.** It was at times nauseating, at times pleasant, and always memorable.

### THE MANY TALENTS OF MME. SAMB

Occasional escapes from the cocoon of Arona and Mariama's air-conditioned apartment introduced me to the continent gradually. I slept comfortably every night, without the



**Sensory Overload:** Imagine standing at this spot in the Marché de Tilène in Dakar. The heat was intense and the smell from this fish and the meat sitting behind it was overwhelming. The flies certainly enjoyed it!

mosquitoes or power cuts which would become more common as the trip progressed. But after a few days adjusting, plus a quick detour to the north of Senegal with Arona's cousin Souleymane, I was ready to move on and planned a brief visit to the Gambia.

The Gambia, at only 11,300 square kilometres continental Africa's smallest nation, is a skinny snake of a country slithering into the middle of Senegal, which surrounds it on all sides but for a tiny stretch of coastline. Unlike its francophone neighbours, the Gambia's official language is English, and the



**Having Fun:** Africa has a young population and children surround visitors everywhere, especially in the villages. These kids were from the same extended family I was staying with in Northern Senegal and they had thronged around me like benign paparazzi as I roamed the dirt streets just before sunset. They all wanted their photos taken.

nation's postcard beaches are particularly popular with Brits looking to escape European winters. It is also not an uncommon site for single European women of a certain age to look to meet younger African companions.



**An Unforgettable Host:** Mme. Fatou Samb was my escort on an overnight trip to the Gambia. Despite a long day in a cramped and dusty shared car, she looked immaculate as always.

Most importantly for this region of the world, she could haggle with the best of them. I promised myself I needed to stay on her good side.

Mme. Samb and I left at 5am for Dakar's *gare routière*, the station from where all shared taxis depart for the Gambia and other regions of Senegal. In the darkness, I scribbled in my diary that the station looked "like a busy wrecking dump until you realize that these are the cars you travel in". It was my baptism of African public transport.

We crammed into a white station wagon with seven other passengers and, after waiting an hour until it was full and prices for ourselves and our luggage had been passionately negotiated, we drove off in the sunrise, stopping for gas after about one kilometre. (It appeared to be a rule that the longer a car waited to fill up, the sooner it would stop for petrol after finally beginning the journey.) All of the vehicle's multi-coloured warning lights

I had my own 'woman of a certain age' as a companion for my brief foray into the country. My perfect host Arona, who was determined that I should pass through his homeland without any difficulties, had put me in touch with Madame Fatou Samb - and Mme. Samb was a force to be reckoned with.

She was an expert *commerçant* (merchant) of Senegal and the Gambia, undertaking the nine-hour car and ferry journey between Dakar and Banjul, the Gambia's capital, on an almost monthly basis. She kept her greying hair tied back in a tight

were illuminated. Fortunately, the speedometer was stuck at 60km/hr so at least I never knew how fast we were really travelling.

Nine dusty hours and one ferry ride later we reached Banjul. We had travelled 260 kilometres. Before collapsing into bed, I had just enough time to check into my hotel, have a shower, buy a cheap lamb kebab from a nearby street vendor and glance at the local "Daily Observer" newspaper. Articles included a story about AELP, the African Emergency Locust Project, and a request for people not let their cows wander onto the territory of Banjul airport. They were distracting the planes.

I had promised Arona I would return to his apartment by early evening the next day. Despite the nine hours it had taken to reach Banjul, Mme. Samb assured me that if we left at 15.00 we would certainly arrive in Dakar by 19.00, *inshallah*. The habit of adding *inshallah*, "God willing", to the end of almost every sentence, an expression common throughout the Muslim world, was both endearing and unnerving.

We arrived back in Dakar half an hour after midnight. Mme Samb's glorious confidence and outgoing personality had made the journey worthwhile, even if I never had the time to do much more than sleep.

## **THE GREAT RAILWAY FIASCO**

In my guidebook, the train between Dakar and Bamako, capital of neighbouring Mali, was billed as one of Africa's last great train journeys. The Malian-operated train is officially scheduled to take about 40 hours to complete the 1225-kilometre journey; the normal actual time is three days. There is no defined schedule; a new departure time is set once the train arrives. If there was only one memorable overland way to get to Mali, this was it.

Dakar's central station was like many others in the developing world: grand and stately, with colourful facades symbolising the stature of the country, while the chaotic reality inside the elegant, if tired, shell told a different story.

I had been fanning myself in the crowded station for several hours when I was told the train was delayed for repairs until 7pm. I could see from the clusters of people sitting on mats around me that others were also tired of waiting – and most had been fasting all day in accordance with the Muslim month of Ramadan. Despite this, and the steady stream of people jostling around to catch smaller local trains, the atmosphere, if a little weary, was cheerful. No one was pushing or complaining; they were just waiting for the departure ... *inshallah*.

A few minutes before the new scheduled departure time, as the sun was sinking rapidly into the horizon, the faded green and yellow cars of the Express inched into the station. Hundreds of passengers crowded on. Many were traders, mostly in the free-for-all seating of second class, with their near human-sized sacks of onions and rice and fabrics. First class seating had assigned seats, although with the same torn cushions and dirt as second class.

I had opted to splurge on my ticket, and had purchased couchette class, which entitled me to one bed in a cabin of four. Each bed was comprised of a piece of hole-filled foam, about 7 centimetres thick, covered with a grimy sheet. Ostensibly there was a restaurant car, but it was closed for the trip; everyone had come equipped with enough non-perishable food and water to last for three days. My rations featured several tins of sardines and about a kilogram of dried apricots.

I boarded the train by 7:30pm, by which time the sun had set and my neighbours were breaking the day's Ramadan fast with tea, dates, and flatbread. There would be no electricity, and therefore no lights, until the train was moving, so everyone sat in complete darkness, with only the malaria-carrying mosquitoes and dozens of cockroaches for company (my

compartment companion had kindly pointed out all the creatures to me with her flashlight). As we were stationary, the heat continued to rise, and the air was stifling.

So we waited to depart.

And waited.

And waited.

At 11:30pm, after four hours onboard the stifling dark train, and after several very pleasant conversations with the other incredibly tolerant passengers, I took a stroll along the platform to casually inquire about what might be causing the delay. I was told by friendly officials that the train would leave once all the traders' bags were loaded onto the train, and was assured this would happen "before midnight".

Inside the main terminal building, there were literally hundreds of sacks left to load, and a handful of men standing around them not doing much of anything.

That was the end of my African train adventure – for I became a quitter.

I headed straight to the nearest public telephone and called Arona to see if I could stay at their apartment one more night.

I returned to the train to collect my belongings and bid farewell to my erstwhile travel companions. **As I endured a walk of shame along the full length of the train, many people called to me: "Madame, are you leaving the train? Why?"**

I felt lazy and guilty as I made excuses about needing to arrive in Mali before the weekend. What a spoiled rich Westerner.

But once I sank into the maroon cotton-rich sheets of Arona and Mariama's guest bed, I had come to terms with my decision. I'd experienced long train journeys before and had already met many local people. More importantly, although a journey like mine was meant to be an adventure, the train just wasn't any *fun*.

I took an Air Senegal flight to Bamako the next day.

## **MALI'S DUST BOWL**

Tens of mosquitoes. Five cold showers. Three power cuts. One long night.

Such was my first night at the Auberge Toguna in Bamako, a 12,000 CFA (ISK1500) per night "budget" hotel. It was representative of most accommodation on the trip. Disease-carrying mosquitoes are a particular threat at night, when their bites can transmit malaria, a potentially deadly virus, to unknowing sleeping victims. Power cuts are common throughout West Africa, as companies who are owed money shut off power (and often water) to city districts with alarming regularity.

When the power went off, the heat crept up instantly like a blanket. The only way to get relief was to take a shower, and in the budget hotel's hot water was non-existent. (Actually, that was a good thing. No one needs hot water in that heat.)

The next morning, it was therefore an exhausted traveller who ventured onto the dusty streets of Bamako with the goal of procuring visas for the next countries on my rough itinerary.

Bamako is surrounded by hills, and has a reputation for being dirty, hot, and tiring. I was helped by strangers who assisted me in locating embassies, however, and enjoyed walking around for the day. Even security guards and police officers waved hello if I smiled as I passed by.



**Tradition:** This mud mosque, in the typical style of the region, is one of three in the tiny village of Ségoukoro, 10 kilometres from Ségou. Bambara Kings ruled the region from this village in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

But capital cities are rarely indicative of their countries, and since the music scene, Bamako's main attraction, was somewhat diminished by Ramadan, I moved on quickly, taking a bus 260 kilometres northeast to the ancient town of Ségou, on the Niger River.

I arrived in the afternoon and checked into the Auberge, a popular Lebanese-run facility. While enjoying my first beer of the trip (it's hard to find alcohol during Ramadan), I met two other foreigners: Bart, a Dutch tour guide taking a day off before collecting his next group, and Joumana, a Montréalais on vacation who used to live near Ségou. They invited me to go dancing with them later that evening and I happily accepted - solo travellers didn't usually get the chance to go out on the town!

But shortly after supper, I started feeling unwell with a general malaise, headache, aches and pains, and chilliness. Ever paranoid about developing a serious illness while alone abroad, I looked up the symptoms in my dog-eared guidebook.

I had all the symptoms of malaria, except the most important – a high fever. The guide soberly instructed that it was vital to see a doctor promptly if there was any fever over 38C. If left untreated, severe forms of malaria can rapidly progress into the brain and become fatal, so diagnosis is critical. In Africa, one person dies of malaria every 30 seconds. But my lack of fever convinced me I was only getting the flu and I slept instead.

The next morning I felt much worse; even walking became a chore. That evening, to be on the safe side, I took my temperature. It was 39.3C. The hotel called a doctor to see me immediately.

**END.**

*Eliza Reid travelled alone through West Africa last October and November. Her story appears in Morgunblaðið today and for the next four Sundays.*

### **IN A NUTSHELL**

The Trip: A solo adventure through West Africa, with stops in Senegal, the Gambia, Mali, Burkina Faso, Benin, Togo and Ghana.

When: 2 October to 21 November 2006 (seven weeks)

Who: Eliza Reid, 30, a part-time journalist with *Iceland Review*, part-time marketing consultant and freelance writer with permanent wanderlust. Originally from Canada, now happily settled in Iceland.

Why: It had been over three years since my last extended solo trip (through Central Asia in 2003) and I was keen to get on the road again. I chose West Africa because I had always wanted to see the continent, but was not particularly interested in the safaris and game parks the east and south are known for. West Africa is also home to many stable countries which are relatively small and easy to travel around, so I could visit several countries overland using public transport. The fact that the region is a relatively little-visited part of the continent, at least for Anglophone travellers, was also appealing. I like to go to places more off the beaten track (my summer holiday last year was to Belarus).

I chose to go alone on the trip because I had travelled this way in the past and enjoy the freedom it affords a selfish person like me to do exactly what *I* want. And my understanding Icelandic husband doesn't like the heat – so there was no way he wanted to tag along!

Preparations: When I first arrived, I had nothing but my plane ticket home, a yellow fever vaccination certificate and proof of other jabs, two guidebooks and some contacts from friends. I found places to stay each day when I arrived in a new town and usually spent a few days in one place before moving on. Internet cafés were everywhere, so, barring one of the frequent power cuts, it was easy to keep in touch.

### **WEST AFRICA SNAPSHOT**

Sub-Saharan Africa is one of the world's poorest regions. Many, but by no means all, of the countries in this part of the world have survived or are embroiled in civil war. But many are peaceful nations with democratically-elected governments and improving standards of living. Levels of education, health care and infrastructure vary greatly between countries. Ghana, for example, has a highly educated population, while its neighbour Burkina Faso has one of the world's lowest literacy rates. Most people in the region eke a living from subsistence agriculture.

#### Senegal

Population: 11.9 million

Capital: Dakar

Official Language: French, although Wolof is largely spoken too

Religion: Muslim (94%)

Life Expectancy at birth: 59.25 years

Senegal is considered to be one of the more stable democracies in West Africa. It is the only Western African country which has not experienced a coup since its independence.

Presidential elections held at the end of February 2007 passed smoothly and without international criticism of the electoral process.

Senegal is the westernmost country on the continent and is known for its lively music (Yousou N'Dour is the country's equivalent of Björk). The half million tourists who visit each year come for the beaches, Dakar's nightlife, and sites associated with the slave trade, particularly on the Ile de Gorée.

## Mali

Population: 11.7 million

Capital: Bamako

Official Language: French, although a large majority have Bambara as their first language

Religion: Muslim (90%)

Life Expectancy at birth: 49 years

Landlocked Mali has the eighth highest infant mortality rate in the world (107.58 deaths per 1000 live births. Iceland has 3.29). Less than 4% of the country is arable land; much of the nation falls within the encroaching emptiness of the Sahara desert. Mali is West Africa's most visited nation as far as tourism is concerned. It is home to four UNESCO World Heritage sites, including Dogon Country, the legendary Timbuktu, and the world's largest mud mosque at Djenné. Occasional Tuareg rebellions have made the region north of Timbuktu off-limits to travellers, but the rest of the country is very safe.