

Transport Problems

Due to political unrest, not many people travel to the Guineas, locally known as Guinea- Bissau and Guinea-Conakry. The real issue, however, is transport. I entered Bissau after seeing two fights at the bus station and waiting one and half hours for enough people to fill up the minivan. It was the first time the driver ventured into Bissau thus the police saw him as “new meat” and often asked him for bribes. They asked him many questions about the functionality of his car and when the left directional did not work, he was fined. He was also later fined because the hatch door didn’t open and one more time because the luggage was too high and he couldn’t see out properly. The other people in the car were angry at the driver because he did stop for the checkpoints; most drivers ignore the police and drive by.



Entering Bissau, one senses the political corruption but also the warmth of the people. There was a coup three months before I arrived but one of the good things the president did before they overthrew and killed him was build bridges. Previously, people had to wait for ferries so this cut travel time immensely. I only stayed in the capital of Bissau for a few minutes, just long enough to get the car to Gabu helped by a local man, Sean Paul, and another guy who was trying to sell me a T-shirt I did not want. I also had a small lunch of peanut sauce on rice before leaving for Gabu.

Gabu doesn’t have many sights but it is a good place to sample local small town life including kids playing soccer, a bicycle repair shop, a kid pumping water from the village well and unofficial gas stations selling one gallon or five gallons at a time. The bicycle repair shop must be busy as the roads put a real strain on the shocks. The village pump extracts water by people jumping onto something that looks like a small teeter totter which then pulls the water to the surface and into dirty five gallon pales. The gas stations sells gallons of petrol in glass jars with a cloth put over the mouth of the jar to strain impurities before being dumped into the vehicles.



The trip to the central region of Guinea-Conakry was long due to bad roads as opposed to distance. Gabu to the Bissau border was okay and the border guards were tolerable. More difficult was the trip to Koundara, via Sareboido, in a burnt out seven seater, basically a station wagon that really appeared to

have been on fire at one time. Hotel Gangan had basic accommodations with a wide variety of bed bugs with painful, piercing bites but I enjoyed talking with the owner. More small town life can be witnessed including people grinding rice, attending the big mosque and of course getting swarmed by small children who wanted to touch my skin and fine fair. The city was dusty and more conservative than Gabu but it was a good stopover before proceeding to Labe.

The trip to Labe was to take eight hours but ended up taking fifteen. We had three flat tires and the engine overheated about every half hour. Furthermore, we went through an area where the rebels had opened fire on three cars and killed all the people in the cars. Based on the reaction of the other passengers and the fact that the overturned cars were still on the road, the murders seemed to have occurred fairly recently. Then there were more car problems and more flat tires. The driver had an extra muffler and radiator as well as a jack but didn't have a lug wrench to take off the lug nuts. Eventually a car passed that had a wrench. After our fourth or fifth breakdown, the large woman next to me who spoke some English turned to me, "You wanted to see Africa, this is Africa". By now it was getting dark and the car had no headlights. It's not that the headlights didn't work; it's that there were no headlights on the car. The driver bought a couple flashlights to use as headlights and a couple passengers jumped on the roof with the flashlights, becoming our headlights. We could see oncoming traffic but others, including a semi that ran us off the road which led to a broken axel, couldn't see us. Staying by the side of the road looking at the June bugs was enjoyable, but I really didn't want to sleep at the crash site. The large women and her military son flagged down a car and we all went to Labe in the new car. The two made sure I got to the hotel I wanted in Labe, so she was really looking out for me. Every time we had broken down the military son would somehow find food somewhere and share it with everyone in the car including myself. It felt as though I was an endangered species and they were protecting me.



Near Labe are the hills of Guinea, Fouta Djallon. There are some scenic hiking trails as well as some waterfalls most notably Chute de Kinkon. Many people gave me free rides on their mopeds so it was easy to get to the hiking trails and falls. Also of note is the decrepit house of Professor Chevalier. He was a French professor who moved to Guinea in 1908 and tried to prove that West European vegetation could also grow in West Africa. The gardens are still functioning. In Dalaba, there is the Villa Sili, the old governor's palace and the Case de Palabres which had a local tribe's (Fula)

artifacts. I also had my first experience with palm wine, which is basically strong moonshine and I also had steak and onions which was a nice change from rice.

The trip to Conakry was part transport, part ambulance ride. The shared taxi included a passenger in the backseat with his wife that we picked up at the hospital. His family didn't want the taxi to leave because they realized he probably wasn't coming back. He was sweating previously and breathing heavily and after we hit each bump he let out a labored groan so he was in dire straits. After reaching Conakry and getting a multicounty visa, I visited the National Museum, then Club Obama for some live music and then some street food.

Leaving Conakry was another travel adventure. I had planned on leaving in the morning and getting to Freetown, Sierra Leone, in the afternoon as it takes about seven hours for the trip. The driver of the minibus kept loading supplies on top of the minivan because although the bus fares are set, he makes money based on the baggage he transports. Although we had enough passengers to leave by nine in the morning, we didn't leave until 1:30 in the afternoon. By this time, the driver was drunk as he was buying beer with the money he made from the baggage. We finally departed and drove a short distance before a downpour with heavy winds began. Since the bus was so top-heavy, he stopped and drank some more. We took off again after an hour and he rear ended a taxi, side swiped another van before the police stopped him at a roundabout. However, he drove off and the police were only able to grab his hat as he left. A mile down the road he stopped and walked back to the police to get his hat, which he did get back. Meanwhile, we took the minivan keys that he had left in the ignition. We got his sober assistant to drive but by the late afternoon, the officers at the police checkpoints are drunker and more aggressive so we had to pay bribes.

It was now too late to cross the Sierra Leone border, so we had to sleep on wooden benches at a restaurant at the border. Groggy from nearly no sleep, I woke up at dusk protected by a couple of locals who had made sure nothing bad happened to me. I saw a silhouette of a woman and man sitting at a wooden bench near me.

"I was in that field over there yesterday." The woman pointed to a nearby field. "I had blood all over my head and that's when I lost consciousness. When I rise up I crawled to this bench and feel me head. I think I was shot."

The man calmly responded with, "You go to doctor, ya." As if getting shot in the head was as common as the common cold.

"Ya, me go doctor today", the woman responded in Krio.

A fitting end to the Guineas. It was yet another horrendous trip. The political tension was apparent as well (Guinea Conakry had a coup a couple months after I left as well). But, in the Guineas the people helped me through these problems.