

## Rebel Yell

There are two ways to enter Ivory Coast from Liberia but neither is enticing. The southern route is difficult because of poor roads and is basically not possible in the rainy season. The northern route has passable roads but crosses through rebel territory. By default, I choose the rebel route.

The northern route did not disappoint; it certainly felt like I was in rebel land. The car from Liberia broke down several times and by the end the driver paid for motor taxis to the border. The border guards were just a bunch of rebels sitting around asking for small bribes totaling about five dollars. The series of bribes included the border guards, customs and a couple other random people. Everyone must pay at the border but I had to pay slightly more because as I crossed the border, I exchanged money with the money changers. The guards felt slighted, because they thought they were more important than the Liberian money exchangers, so they charged me more. The changers *are* more important than the guards as the rebels are basically useless, pestering people and destroying their own country.

Crossing into Ivory Coast, the complete vibe of rebel territory became apparent. We paid the car driver at the border to get us to Danane' and to pay for the upcoming bribes. The road was muddy, winding through lush vegetation and hills. It was misty outside as well as inside the car as the only thing that seemed to work in the car was the heat which he couldn't turn off. Each village we passed had small fires or kerosene lamps as there was no electricity and it was now dark. The checkpoints were real checkpoints not just bamboo sticks but metal spikes which would blow tires. At the checkpoints, the teenage rebels had sunglasses on even at night, were smoking cigarettes, had an automatic weapon over their shoulder and were illiterate. One was reading my passport upside down but I wasn't brave enough to correct him. They just asked for bribes, nothing more.

I arrived in Danane' at night concerned about where I would sleep but was reassured by the two Ghanaian women who were the other passengers. They helped arrange accommodations and bus tickets for the next day with a couple helpful middle aged guys. They took me via motor scooter first to a large house that had free accommodation, just people lying on the floor. In the US, we would call it a homeless shelter. The residents snickered as I entered and lay down on an open mattress. The woman in charge told me that this wasn't a good place for me that there were too many mosquitoes. We both knew it was more about security than mosquitoes. She made a call to a woman that had a house with a couple rooms near the bus station which would only cost ten dollars. Then she called the man with the motor scooter and he took me and the Ghanaian women to the new place for free. So the people in the rebel territory are kind, the problem is the rebels.

After the stressful trip it was reassuring to find a secure place. The woman of the house spoke English and was shocked to find an American in her house. After taking a proper shower, she invited me as well as the two Ghanaians and a Syrian man out to eat which was welcome as I hadn't eaten or drank anything the whole day. After eating at the restaurant, I was ready to sleep and relax.

I woke the next day, prepared to go through the rest of rebel territory. Technically the country is in a civil war but it's peaceful in that the rebels control the north and the recognized government, the south. I went with a government person in his SUV so when the rebels at the checkpoint saw his license, which

had the colored government plates, they just waved us through with no hassles. The official got me close to the capital of Yamoussoukro then a minibus got me rest of the way.



I arrived in Yamoussoukro and made a mad dash to its main attraction which is the basilica based on St Peter's. It's a huge structure and seems out of place compared to the poor houses in the country. Built in 1986, Pope John Paul II visited twice, once in 1986 and 1990. The basilica is ornate and has a recreation of Michelangelo's Pieta, but it is carved of wood not marble. A sculpture of the Lady of Peace has the affect of appearing to listen to nearby churchgoers and then smile to them as they walk away. The elaborate

gardens include statues of the Blessed Virgin and temples of the four apostles associated with scripture writing.

President Houphouet-Boigny's need to illustrate his power is the reason why the basilica as well as other big buildings in the capital were built. One large stain glass picture at the entrance of the basilica shows Jesus on a donkey followed by the twelve apostles in the Palm Sunday procession. Kneeling next to Jesus is Houphouet-Boigny, depicted as his closest and most loyal disciple. His residence was the Presidential Palace and is still surrounded by a moat with live crocs that are fed at sundown. The scene appears more to be something out of the Middle Ages than current times. President Houphouet-Boigny passed away in 1993 but his excesses live on.



The majority of foreigners seem to be working in NGOs, aid agencies or the UN. There are not too many true tourists. In Yamoussoukro, I traveled with a couple UN soldiers from Bangladesh. The colonel had completed several peacekeeping missions in Africa and also in Bosnia. The UN employees must do pretty well as the beggars were asking them for money not me. It is a common complaint of West Africans: the UN or aid agencies are just driving around in their Land Rovers burning up petrol we, the local people, could use.

In the south is Grand Bassam which was the first colonial French capital. The old general hospital and post office are still in good shape but other buildings such as the Justice Palace are not. The main Catholic church, Sacre' Coeur, is worth a visit. The old city is where the French lived separate from the main city by a lagoon. The French didn't want to associate with the locals so they built their city separate. Grand Bassam was the capital from 1893-99 but the capital was moved after an outbreak of yellow fever.



The governor's palace is now a very good museum, the National Costume Museum. The main exhibit on the first floor illustrates the various costumes and masks of the tribes who live in the Ivory Coast. The stilt dancers are more typical in the north of the country. There is a white-faced mask with fangs and a broom that whips bad people every ten years. Another is a costume for the hunters who get a badge for every animal that is killed thus releasing the spirit of that animal. Others include costumes or masks to protect women, soldiers and a white powder face to help

children. The second floor has several pictures from colonial times as well as recreations of typical villages. Many show residences with a main house and the accompanying houses for the wives as they could take multiple wives.

Many locals and foreigners stay in the old city because they want to visit the beach even in the rainy season. I stayed on the beach at the Auberge de la Plage du Parrian, which was owned by an outgoing family. I enjoyed relaxing on the beach with some coconut wine or even just looking at it from my bedroom which I could view through my mesh covered window. After entering the Ivory Coast with illiterate, gun-toting, sunglasses-wearing rebels, putting on my own sunglasses and relaxing was welcome.