

Senegal Style

I had attempted to make the transition into West Africa as easy as possible by breaking up the trip with a one night stay in Atlanta. Not impressed with the security situation near the airport, I instead stayed at a middle aged couple's house in east Atlanta that I found through couch surfing. Couch surfers are people that agree to let random people sleep on their couch or bed and who also then sleep on random people's bed and couches when they travel. The husband, Ken, was a son of missionaries and grew up in India and thus had an odd accent combining British and American English. It was an interesting and safe start to what I had hoped to be an interesting and safe trip to West Africa. I found out when I returned that Ken had been shot near his home in Atlanta (he lived). So all that worrying about West Africa and Atlanta is where the shootings occurred.

Senegal is one of the easier places to start in West Africa. It was the only country that I did not need a visa. Senegal is more prosperous than its neighbors and has good infrastructure, banking, etc. There were many people that spoke English and I stayed at Senegal Style, a B and B with an American woman, Sineta, who moved to Senegal ten years ago. It was good to find someone speaking English to start as it's always a challenge to be in a new country with different customs, languages, etc.

Despite the familiarity she offered, it's still a shock to see how poor people are even though I've witnessed it for several years. Dakar's relatively wealthy compared to others and I stayed in the suburbs which is much more relaxed than the center. There were a lot of horses, beggars, sand and dirt which was contrasted by the colorful clothes and robes that people wear. It was hot but it's a Muslim area so I didn't break out the shorts.

As I was groggy and would be visiting Dakar before I flew out, my only goal was to get my Gambian visa which took only 15 minutes. With unexpected extra time, I strolled around the center visiting the square and cathedral. There were some nice sites but as usual the people are more entertaining. Many approach with lines such as "Remember me, I'm from the hotel" or "Boss man, come some see my shop". They were calling me boss man because I was white and, although slightly pejorative, political correctness hasn't reached West Africa yet. Many were trying to mooch money and one was trying to get me to a back alley to rob me. I was weary and must have looked like an easy target as when I returned to Dakar two months later, I had a more hardened look and people stayed away from.

Surrounded by Senegal is The Gambia, which is even easier and calmer place as it is smaller and English speaking. The National Museum in Banjul is small but interesting, illustrating masks, colonial times and West African empires. The museum explains that eighty percent of Gambia is burnt but with the rainy season plants grow back quickly. Along the main road, Arch 22 can be climbed which then provides an overview of the city. Many people wanted to be my friend to get citizen sponsorship but many just wanted to chat. Suleyman was a military officer that walked with me for a while as well as BB King (not his real name), a Rasta guy, but many people from many walks of life talked with me. My hotel was also a brothel next to the wharf but the women were nice; they lent me their bathroom slippers as the bathroom floors had a lot of mildew. It's typical for cheap hotels in West Africa to double as brothels. The owner was a good person and I had a lot of faith in him; he seemed to be looking out for me.

Touring the city, people ask “Are you OK?” or “How are you feeling?” which makes more sense than “How are you doing?” and the females that like you say “We will link”. There is good food in the city including a rice pudding coconut drink, called chare, as well as shrimp and other seafood.

There are a number of places to visit close to the capital. Bakau has a crocodile farm with the crocs out in the open; I almost stepped on one. I petted a croc and even though they are docile it’s still an unnatural feeling. There is a nearby fertility pool whose water is supposed to help humans who bath in it get pregnant. Close to the crocodile farm is a small museum with African masks such as the fang bond and a red mask with horns and musical instruments such as



the kora which is a stringed instrument that appears to be made out of a gourd. Another area in the museum is dedicated to those who led the resistance to British colonialism. In the city there is also a colorful botanical garden with bright flowers. In Bakau, there is a beach which is why most tourists stay here. While lying on the beach, many locals came up to me and told me their life story in hopes of companionship, sponsorship or money. “I could only go to school until 11th grade. My father died so I had to stop and work for the family. Now I am taking computer classes for two hours on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday.”

Serekunda is another suburb, which has a beach but also the embassies. The embassy for Bissau had moved from central Banjul to Serekunda but someone on the street wrote instructions: take the Serekunda minivan, get off at the petrol station and then walk to the old cinema, nearby is the Guinea-Bissau Embassy. Somehow I found it. I returned to Banjul and got the Sierra Leone visa. The female embassy director in her air conditioned room asked some somewhat obtrusive questions, “Why are you going to the Guineas, why don’t you fly to Freetown, how long have you been a teacher?”

Much like Alex Haley I went to Jufureh, which is where he went to find his roots inspiring the book, *Roots*. I met the eighth and ninth generation removed from Kunta Kinta who is the basis of the book. One of the girls from the ninth generation I think was interested in me, but they were all accommodating. I wouldn’t like tourists visiting my house, but they seemed okay with it. The little village includes a museum about the slave trade; about six percent of African slaves came from this area. A small fourteenth century Portuguese church still stands near the museum and James Island, where the



slaves were actually shipped from, can be visited by boat. Historians aren't certain if *Roots* is accurate as Kinta is a common name and Kunta is a title, but the family definitely was from here. It's a powerful feeling knowing what had happened there. Seeing the donkey, goats, blue birds and monkeys is an exciting part of the country trip to and from Jufureh.

One bad part of Banjul is I couldn't get rid of this guy that wanted to rob me. He wanted to show me around the city and then take me to a bar where he would

lighten my pockets. Then another guy came and "saved" me and told the guy to get lost but they worked together. I'm supposed to be so relieved that the second guy saved me that I would go with him and then they both would rob me. Eventually, I got away from both without being robbed and despite this enjoyed my time in Gambia before heading to the southern half of Senegal.

Ziguinchor is the biggest city in the southern part of Senegal with some impressive colonial buildings, but the people can be overwhelming. The people were harder to shake than in Gambia and these just wanted money. One walked around with me for an hour, saying that he had malaria and gave a fake cough as proof. Not wanting to return to my hotel as I didn't want him to know where I stayed, I finally lost him when I snuck into an internet café and the owner told him to leave.

Making a big loop around West Africa back to Dakar, I visited the northern half of Senegal at the end of the trip most notably the colonial city of Saint Louis. The city is charming with intriguing buildings, jazz and a fun nightlife. Ramadan started at the end of the trip and although Senegal is 90% Muslim, many aren't overly religious, so some fast while others don't. One Muslim didn't like that I was downing a cinnamon roll in front of him but I was hungry. I then returned to Dakar and Senegal Style which was welcome after a demanding trip.

