

# The Head and the Heart

*Travels in Senegal*

*Mark Moxon*





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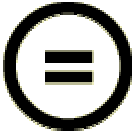
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*The Head and the Heart: Travels in Senegal*  
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Cover Photograph: La Maison des Esclaves, Île de Gorée

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# Foreword

This book is a collection of writing from the road, covering a three-week trip I made to Senegal in 2002. This was part of a larger, three-month journey that took me through Senegal, the Gambia, Mali, Burkina Faso and Ghana from 2002 to 2003.

The travelogue for all these countries and more can be found at my personal website at **[www.moxon.net](http://www.moxon.net)**, where you can also find travel tips, recommended journeys and further free books for you to download. If you enjoy reading this book, then I'd be delighted if you would sign my website's Guestbook.

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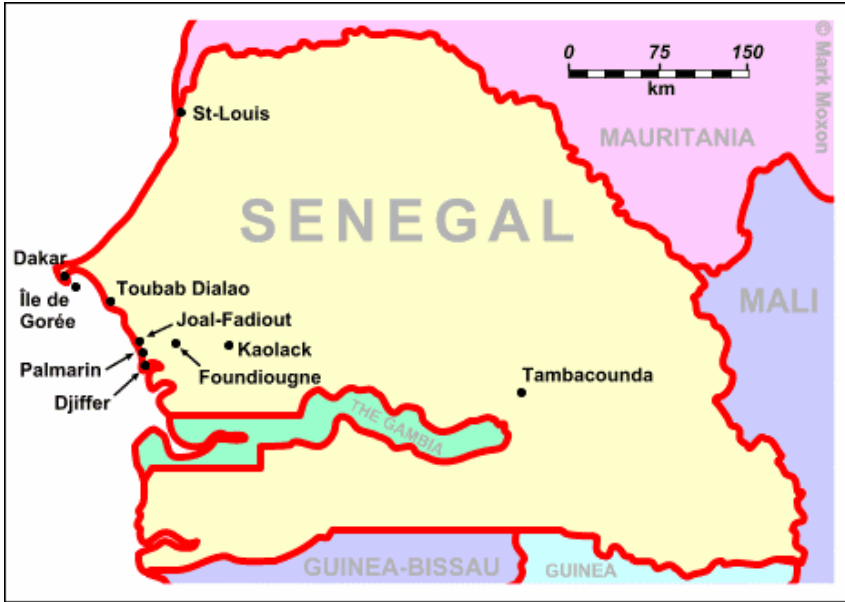
Finally, please be aware that this book is highly satirical, which means there's a slight chance that it might cause offence those who think my sense of humour is amusing as a puddle of mud. On top of this,

some parts will be out of date – which is why each article is dated – and others will betray the naivety of a traveller who discovered his way in the world by throwing himself into it headfirst. It is, however, an honest account of how I felt as I travelled through West Africa for three months, and as such, I hope you enjoy it.

Mark Moxon, September 2004

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# Map



# Senegal

## Dakar

*Written: 9 October 2002*

Dakar, the capital of Senegal and the first destination in my African trip, was nearly spoiled before I even got here. Peppering my guidebook's description of Senegal are sections that make it sound as if Dakar is a lethal place, second only to the Nigerian capital Lagos in terms of crime; but despite a fair amount of looking, I can't find the petty criminals the book is at pains to warn me about.

'Dakar is notorious for thefts and muggings against visitors, frequently in broad daylight,' it says in its section on the westernmost city in Africa. It goes on to describe how gangs of thieves will surround you, one of them distracting you while the others pick your pockets or unclip your money belt. Faced with this sort of description I couldn't help but wander round on my first few days in a state of ultra-alertness, jumping at anything out of the ordinary. Of course, this being Africa, practically everything is out of the ordinary anyway, and I've been doing a lot of jumping.

Certainly Dakar has some worrying aspects. Most large shops and banks have at least two security guards

looming in front of them and government buildings are guarded by soldiers sporting not inconsiderable firepower, but underneath this fierce exterior Dakar feels fine.

Sure, scam merchants float up from the crowds and try to pull the usual tricks – selling themselves as guides for the day, trying to flog you all sorts of junk at inflated prices, attempting to steer you towards their shops – but it doesn't feel threatening. After a couple of days in town I feel a little ashamed that I took the guidebook at face value; I was being paranoid for no reason.

Perhaps because of this guilt, I've decided to explore Dakar on foot. I'm walking everywhere, only using transport to get to and from my hotel in the distant suburb of Yoff, and it's pretty obvious that the oppressive heat is far more dangerous than the locals. Dakar is centred round the Place de l'Indépendance, home to the more insistent street-sellers, but if you head away from the centre things soon calm down to a more relaxed pace. For example, about 1km to the south of the city lies Cap Manuel, a small promontory that sports a weather-beaten red lighthouse, and in most cities a headland like this would be crammed with housing and pollution; in Dakar, however, it's peaceful, pleasant and not remotely crowded. It's this close combination of frenetic city centre and sleepy suburb that marks Dakar apart from most busy cities, and although there isn't a

great deal here to occupy the tourist masses – me, in other words – it’s pleasant enough.

It’s certainly not as bad as the books would have you believe...

## **Île de Gorée**

*Written: 10 October 2002*

Dakar is surprising for its lack of obviously colonial architecture, but it’s more than made up for by the delights of Île de Gorée. This pretty little island sits 3km off the capital’s east shore and has more colonial atmosphere in its little toe than Dakar does in its entire hoof. It’s little wonder that Gorée is one of Senegal’s most popular tourist attractions; it’s an easy and refreshing day trip away from the sweat of the city.

If Dakar were a western city, Île de Gorée would be a millionaire’s paradise, packed with exclusive condos and signs describing exactly how rare the hired Dobermans like their calf meat. This being Senegal, though, the island manages to exude charm in a wholly run-down way, and if there are any millionaires hiding behind the bougainvillaea they’re well disguised. Gorée feels far from exclusive, and that’s all part of its attraction. Shaped like the strange ¶ character that seems to pop up whenever I use a French computer keyboard, the island is packed with a surprising amount to see,

despite it being less than 300m wide at its waist and under 900m from tip to tail. As a day trip it's simply wonderful.

The thing that strikes me most is how similar Île de Gorée feels to the islands of French Polynesia, and it doesn't take a rocket scientist to work out why. The architecture is classic French colonialism at work, and the palm trees frame attractive balconies while glimpses of the blue sea contrast prettily with the red and blue hues of the peeling stonework. The island is beautifully faded in the way that only genuine antiques can be, and the touts are less insistent than in Dakar, adding to the atmosphere of relaxation. An old fort sits at the northern point of the island, its roof dotted with cannons in a display of colonial might that looks positively quaint these days, and from there the view of the narrow streets, pretty harbour and milling tourists is picturesque, to say the least.

Less pleasant is the island's major draw card, La Maison des Esclaves. According to the curator, the House of Slaves was used as a port for processing slaves on the way to the Americas, and it's an atmospheric little spot for such tales. A small door leads out from the basement onto the rocky shore of the island, and the small cell-like rooms in the ground floor are lit by solitary lanterns which pick out signs pointing to the storage rooms for male, female and child slaves.

Upstairs on the first floor the rooms are large and airy, catching the sea breeze beautifully and ensuring a cool existence for the slave traders, but down below in the slaves' quarters it's a marked contrast. It's hard not to be moved.

Just in case your imagination isn't inventive enough, there are signs everywhere to prick your conscience for you. 'Innocent children, unsmiling and crying for their mothers' says one, while another, signed at the bottom by the curator, lays it on thick with 'Today, those who claim that nothing happened in Aushwitz and Dachau will tomorrow be the same people who claim that nothing happened at Gorée.' It's powerful stuff.

The problem is that there's considerable historical disagreement about the Maison's actual role in the slave trade. There's no doubt that some slaves were housed there, but whether it was used as a major shipping point for slaves is simply not known. Gorée is too small an island to support such a major trade and it doesn't have enough water to make a good stopping-off point for masses of humans, and although the island undoubtedly saw some trading in slaves, the doorway to the Maison des Esclaves would be practically impossible to reach by boat, as it's surrounded by rocks and has no jetty. It's much more likely that the harbour just round the corner would have been the genuine trading point for slaves, if

there was any trading at all, and visiting the house with this in mind transforms the experience from one of horror at the slave trade to one of horror at the ease by which we blindly believe what we're told by museum displays. It's easy to picture the Maison as a completely a normal house with nothing more than storerooms in the basement, and given the shaky historical credentials of its past it's a credit to the inventiveness of the curator that it's such a popular destination for those seeking the roots of the slave trade. As an atmospheric attraction it rates highly, even if it's quite possibly a fake.

But who cares whether it's real? Gorée reeks of history, and it's important that nobody forgets the horrors of the slave trade, even if that means stretching the truth a bit. The island is a pleasant day out from Dakar, it's authentically colonial, and it's well worth the 20-minute ferry ride. Besides, it's not every day you get to play in a millionaire's playground without any millionaires around.

## **Homesickness**

*Written: 11 October 2002*

It feels like it's taking an especially long time for me to get into this trip. The problem is that I suffer terribly from homesickness – I always have done, ever since I was little – and putting myself in a strange country with

a strange language in a strange continent is a sure-fire way of bringing on that constant sinking feeling.

Homesickness aches, quite literally, just behind my solar plexus. It's a longer-lasting version of the sudden realisation that something really important has fallen out of your pocket, and you have no idea where it is. Take this sinking feeling and roll it up into a stiff ball, and you've got homesickness.

I shan't harp on about it, but it's important to note that the first few weeks of this kind of trip are tinged with the distraction homesickness causes. Everything manages to remind me of home in some way, whether it's music, food, possessions or people, and it can be hard to see through the haze into the fascination of the country surrounding me. But, as with all heavy knocks, time will no doubt prove to be a great healer, and soon enough I'll start looking at home as a fond memory rather than a longing; I'll remember the good bits and realise that I'll be back there eventually, but first there's a whole continent to explore.

It still amazes me how difficult it is getting over the wrench of leaving home. I remember feeling blue for the first few weeks of my last trip, but it's so long ago I can't recall the exact details, which is probably a sign that we all adapt eventually. I know it will get better and I know the ball will slowly unwind, but in the meantime I'm occupying myself with little things like reading my

guidebook and changing my travellers cheques into the local currency, CFAs (the Communauté Financière Africaine Franc, pronounced ‘see-fay’, is the common currency of Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d’Ivoire, Guinea-Bissau, Guinea, Mali, Niger, Senegal and Togo, and as the African equivalent of the euro the CFA is damn useful, even if they missed the opportunity to call it the ‘afro’).

I’m also planning my route through Africa and getting regular fixes at the internet café round the corner, which charges a whopping 25p for half an hour’s access (not bad value as long as the electricity supply manages to keep up). It’s amazing how even a few words from home can make things feel better, and it won’t be long before I look back on this period with a fond nostalgia of its own. I’m making friends, I’m making plans and soon enough I’ll be making stories, and that’s when I’ll manage to switch from being a frightened little boy who doesn’t want to go back to school into the traveller I’d become by the end of my last trip in 1998. It doesn’t half hurt getting there, though.

## **Senegal v Nigeria**

*Written: 12 October 2002*

I’ve never been into football, much to my annoyance.

It's a real pain being English and not being a football fan, because every Saturday, between 5 and 6 o'clock, I end up being left out while most of the country sits goggle-eyed as the results roll into the television. More importantly perhaps, football is *the* global language (along with the music of Bob Marley) and being fluent in football goes a long way to breaking down even the highest cultural barriers. Of course, there are exceptions – India is obsessed with cricket, and in the USA soccer is regarded as a children's game – but in most countries football is a religion, and sometimes I wish I believed in the Beautiful Game.

Unfortunately I don't, and I have to get my sporting kicks from other, more minority pastimes. I like cricket, though I have great trouble explaining why, and I have lots of time for darts, curling and other sports that get almost no television airplay. I used to like snooker back in the days when it was a TV novelty, but like *Queen's Greatest Hits* and sweet cider I overdosed on it in my youth and now I can't stand it. Hell, I once watched televised bridge without knowing the first thing about the game, but football just leaves me cold. However, I'm a sucker for the mob effect, and live football matches are perfect examples of people power. I've been to a few live matches and they're quite different to an afternoon in front of *Soccer Saturday*, but nothing prepared me for how much I would enjoy watching

Senegal play Nigeria in Dakar's national stadium.

Tragedy struck Senegal on 26 September, a couple of weeks before I flew out. The ferry *DS Joola*, while plying its regular route along the coast between Ziguinchor in southern Senegal and Dakar in the north, hit a storm and capsized. Of the 1000 or so people on board, the vast majority drowned, including a large number of women and children; even worse, it took a whopping eight-and-a-half hours for the air-sea rescue service to notice that the *Joola* was in trouble, by which time most of the passengers had already met their maker. One story I heard told how one survivor held on to a piece of wood for nine hours, during which time the four other passengers holding onto the same piece of wood let go one by one, worn out by the storm battering the sea around them. It's impossible to imagine what that would feel like; understandably, the disaster hit Senegal hard.

One positive response to the tragedy was a hurriedly scheduled friendly football match between Senegal and Nigeria, as a tribute to those who perished. I'd originally planned to head north today, but when I heard that there were still tickets available and that the stadium was only just down the road from Yoff, where I'm staying, I joined up with a small group of fans from the hotel, handed over CFA2000 for a ticket, and postponed my departure. It turned out to be an inspired piece of

procrastination.

Football is indeed a universal language. As we approached the stadium it was apparent that the whole of Dakar wanted a bit of the action, and I naively assumed that the whole place would be absolute chaos. I was stunned, then, to see that everyone was queuing up in one extremely neat line, each fan standing exactly behind the man in front, never two abreast. I couldn't believe it, and I felt a bit guilty; perhaps the lack of queuing etiquette you come across in Asia doesn't apply to the Senegalese, or perhaps it's a case of football being a higher authority than anything else. Whatever, we joined the back of the long but perfectly formed queue, and started shuffling forward with the rest like an orderly collection of millipede's feet.

I'm not quite sure what happened next, but suddenly the officials herded us into a separate line to stop the ever-expanding first queue from blocking the nearby dual carriageway, and by some amazing fluke our new queue ended up being about three people long. Before anyone else noticed that we'd managed to avoid about 15 minutes of shuffling, we squeezed past the ticket inspectors, grinning madly and flashing our tickets, and a couple of minutes later we were in the stadium.

It was packed. One of the local supporters in our group told me the stadium's capacity was 50,000, and on the other side of the pitch the stands were full,

looking like a Jackson Pollock on black canvas as the yellows, reds, greens and whites of the Senegalese strip peppered the stands with colour. The simple but effective stadium terraces had about 50 rows of concrete steps all the way round the pitch, with not one seat in sight; we just sat on the concrete and waited for the entertainment to start while the crowd buzzed in anticipation.

I might know precious little about the subtleties of football, but I can recognise a friendly match when I see one. The crowd was there to watch good football, and that's exactly what they got. Neither team was taking it too seriously, and every time a player managed a particularly skilled turn or played a trick shot, the crowd murmured its approval, whichever side had the ball. Given the swift arrangement of the fixture and the prohibitive cost of flying from Nigeria to Senegal for most Nigerians, the crowd was almost totally Senegalese, but that didn't matter; it was the football that counted.

Surprisingly for such a musical nation the crowd didn't sing any songs – a pity, as I'd love to know what 'Who ate all the *halal* pies?' sounds like in Senegalese – but the local drum troupe provided a constant and invigorating beat to keep the crowd going, and even the shock scoring of two Nigerian goals in the first five minutes of the second half didn't dampen the crowd's

spirits; indeed, the Nigerians got a huge round of applause for both efforts, especially the second one which flew over the Senegalese goalie from just inside the halfway line. Everyone was into the spirit of the game, and when the entire Nigerian team dived to the ground after one of their goals, the stadium grinned from touch-line to touch-line.

I don't know if the football was skilled but it was highly entertaining, and apart from a healthy collection of RADA-standard dives from the Senegalese and one yellow card for a late tackle, it was gentlemanly football to a man. The fact that Senegal scored 15 minutes from the end and then equalised with a couple of minutes to spare was the icing on the cake, and I was up there slapping hands with our neighbours like I'd been supporting Senegal for years. The power of the mob had me, and I wasn't going to let on that my relationship with football hasn't even reached first base. Somehow, out there in the crowd, that sort of technicality doesn't matter one little bit.

## **Unstable Continent**

*Written: 13 October 2002*

One of the more interesting things I've picked up in Dakar is the July/September 2002 edition of the BBC's *Focus on Africa*, the World Service's magazine for the

region. It's interesting not only because it contains a bunch of fascinating articles about Africa, but also because I find myself waxing nostalgic over my old job at the BBC, less than a month after I finally managed to escape the shackles of its bureaucracy. OK, it's fair to say that less than a week after landing in Senegal I find that anything remotely British brings on a sharp intake of homesick breath, but to find a BBC-published magazine to be a source of heady nostalgia is a bit of a shock. But there it is; I find myself getting almost tearful at the Bush House address along the top of the letters page, and it's weird.

The contents of the magazine do precious little to make me feel at home, though. Reading about Africa doesn't dispel the feeling that this continent is in a real mess, and judging by the contents of the July/September issue, no news is good news, because pretty much every story manages to highlight another crisis in the making. Madagascar is suffering from a huge dispute between the country's two rival presidents, each claiming that the other shouldn't be there; war-torn Algeria is still in a mess after the country's elections were marred by rioting and a very low turn-out; Lesotho's election results are proving hard to swallow for the losers, and the last time this happened riots left 75 people dead; Liberia is still tearing itself apart in a bloody civil war; Sierra Leone is trying to recover from its own civil war,

but it still has a long way to go; Ghana is reeling from the murder of one of its local kings, and the political effects may be wide-reaching; Angola's civil war may be at a cease-fire, but turning this into peace is a huge challenge; Somalia is a disaster area, with the country split into four different parts, each one refusing to recognise the others' claims to the country's rule; elections in Mali have been criticised for being a set-up by the West, though at least there is hope the new president may be able to turn the country around; Nigeria continues its slide into civil unrest and economic oblivion, which could threaten the country's stability; the Democratic Republic of Congo is no nearer to peace as the two sides in its long-running civil war continue to commit awful atrocities on each other; Kenya wonders whether its president will actually retire at the end of this constitutionally last term, or whether he'll change the law to enable him to cling onto power; and the South African Rand is suffering from a 40 per cent drop in its value over the last year, which seriously affects the country's poor as inflation rates go up.

One of the magazine's most tragic stories has nothing to do with regional instability and everything to do with human error. Poor Mozambique recently suffered a train crash that killed about 200 people; the train, made up of both freight and passenger sections, couldn't make it up a hill due to mechanical difficulties,

so the driver de-coupled the passenger carriages, wedged rocks under their wheels and drove the freight carriages back down the hill, intending to leave the freight at Muamba station, which the train had just passed. However, the rocks slipped and the passenger carriages started rolling back down the hill, gaining speed all the time, until they smashed into the freight train, which was by this time parked in the station. Two passenger carriages were completely destroyed and buried in the cement that the freight train was carrying, instantly killing those on board.

All these happy stories appear in just one issue of *Focus on Africa*, and although there are also some upbeat articles about potential solutions to Africa's problems, the emphasis is very much on the problems themselves. Indeed, this issue doesn't even mention the recent unrest in Côte d'Ivoire because it's only just kicked off, but you get the point. As continents go, Africa has a really tough time, and it makes you wonder what the future holds. I get the feeling that, in the short term at least, it will consist of more bad news rather than no news.

## **St-Louis**

*Written: 14 October 2002*

I arrived in St-Louis with an annoying tic in my right

eye and the hollow feeling of leaving familiar territory. I was only in Dakar for a few days, but already my mind, preoccupied with feeling homesick and sorry for itself, was desperately trying to put down roots, even somewhere as unpleasantly sweaty as the capital of Senegal. Now I've ditched the daily routine off Yoff and taken a bush taxi to the north of the country. It feels like leaving home all over again; I guess it will take some time before being alone stops feeling so lonely.

A bush taxi, or *taxi brousse* in the local patois, is nothing more than an eight-seat Peugeot 504 station wagon in which each of the seven passenger seats is sold for a fixed price. Bush taxis queue up alongside the buses in most Senegalese cities and they leave when full; on a popular route like Dakar to St-Louis it doesn't take long to sell all seven seats, and then it's a direct drive to the destination, a much quicker proposition than the bus, though it costs about 30 to 40 per cent more. In theory the prices are fixed by the government, but in practice the touts charge you extra for any bags you might have, and the Senegalese are as cut-throat in their bargaining as you would expect, especially when it comes to fleecing stupid white men like me. I know I paid far too much for my bag – you can sense it in the way the touts look at you – but getting ripped off is all part of the learning process.

Unfortunately my window seat on the middle row

proved to be a nightmare; hot, dry air gushed through the broken window at breakneck speed, constantly battering my face like an industrial-strength hairdryer, and four hours later I had no feeling in the right side of my head, my hair felt as if it was in dreadlocks, and the bottom lid of my right eye started to twitch involuntarily. By the time we arrived I felt as dried and withered as a prune.

## **The Beach**

Thank goodness for St-Louis, then, or more accurately the wonderful strip of beach to the south of the town. This area is called L'Hydrobase because back in the 1930s it was an important refuelling stop for planes flying between Europe and South America; these days it's home to a number of picture-perfect beach hut complexes, each of them overlooking a west-facing Atlantic beach.

I took a taxi to Hôtel l'Oasis on a whim, and I struck gold. For CFA10,000 a night (just under £10) I got my very own beach hut, big enough to house four beds, and I happily collapsed into the hammock the hotel had so thoughtfully provided in the sunset, where I introduced myself to the local sandfly population and tried not to step on the crabs scuttling along the beach. Slapping away, I idly browsed my guidebook, noting that not only was St-Louis the capital of Senegal until

Dakar took over in 1958, but it's also a UNESCO World Heritage site, an indication that it's considered to be of global significance. I took this to be a good sign as I tucked into a delicious fish pie in the hotel's restaurant; I couldn't wait to get stuck into St-Louis in the morning.

What a pity that I pretty much missed the point of the place. After waking up among the itchy effects of paradise, I decided to walk into town, some 4km away from my hotel, and I was glad I did, as it enabled me to get a feel for the town's layout. The main centre of St-Louis is built on a lozenge-shaped island in the middle of the River Senegal as it flows from north to south, parallel to the coast (the river finally meets the sea about 20km south of town); bridges link the island to the mainland to the east and to the long, thin peninsula to the west (the one that's home to L'Hydrobase). This set-up is pretty unique and adds a definite charm to the place, and as I approached the island from the south I couldn't wait to get stuck into the promised colonial architecture.

Surprisingly St-Louis turned out to be nothing terribly special. It isn't a dump, but it isn't much cop either. The peninsula to the west of the main island is home to a rancid fishing village of the type you find dotted all over the coasts of the developing world; the town centre might have plenty of balconies but it has nothing on the Mediterranean vibe of Île de Gorée

(which is also a World Heritage site); and I walked through the town square, with (according to the book) its ‘air of faded elegance’, wondering whether I’d got the wrong St-Louis. Even the beach on the way up looked decidedly dodgy; I noted the rusting hulk of a beached fishing trawler on the outskirts of town, and couldn’t help wondering whether anyone here even knows who UNESCO is. Somehow I doubt it.

### **From the Heart**

I didn’t really mind that St-Louis turned out to be a disappointment because I rather enjoyed wandering through the squalid fishing village, nodding *bonjour* to the locals and grinning the grin of a man who isn’t remotely fluent in the local language. Indeed, people were very friendly, so it was no surprise to be accosted by a happy-looking chap in the centre of town who introduced himself as Falou and latched onto the fact that I was English.

‘Not many *Anglais* visiting here,’ he said, his eyes masked by ultra-cool wraparound shades. ‘Many *Français*, many *Belgiques*, but not many *Anglais*. Where you from, Marc?’

‘London,’ I replied.

‘Ah, London,’ he said. ‘You know Liverpool?’

‘Sure do,’ I said.

‘You know Mr Ibra Bah?’ he asked, hopefully. ‘He

lives there, he is a good friend of mine.'

'Um, no sorry, I don't,' I said. 'There are millions of people in Liverpool, you know.'

'Ah yes,' he nodded. 'Anyway, it is good to be meeting an Englishman who does not care about the colour of the skin, I think, and it is good to know you think from the heart and from the head, and that you are welcome to my country.'

'Thank you Falou,' I said. 'It's great to be here, and who cares about the colour of people's skin?'

'We are all the same colour underneath,' he said. 'Please, put out your left hand. Here is a gift, from my heart and my head, not for money.' And into my left hand he put a necklace of a simple design that I'd seen in Dakar, consisting of a shell implanted in a small block, painted in the Rastafarian colours of yellow, red, black and green.

'I can't take this,' I said, automatically assuming it was going to lead to some kind of scam. 'I really can't.'

'This is a present from my peoples to you, welcome in my country,' he said, and when I continued to protest that he was too kind, he started getting annoyed. 'I give you this, I never want money, it is the African way for visitors in my country. I leave you to explore my town, and I give you this present. If you want later I can show you my shop, but I no take money from you.'

With that he clipped the necklace round my neck

and wandered back to the square, leaving me feeling a bit guilty. ‘Perhaps he’s genuine,’ I thought. ‘Things might be different in Senegal.’ And seemingly the recipient of a free necklace, I went off to explore the north end of town.

About an hour later, after an abortive attempt to get connected in the town’s less-than-reliable internet café, I bumped into Falou again, and this time he persuaded me to visit his shop. I knew I wasn’t going to buy anything, but out of politeness I went along with it and started talking about the internet café and how I’d been trying to contact my girlfriend. And that’s when I realised, with some relief, that Falou wasn’t the utterly selfless man he claimed to be.

‘You are missing your girlfriend,’ he said, ‘so you take this for her.’ He handed me a half-finished ebony carving from his stall, but again I protested and said that I wasn’t able to carry too many things around because I already had too much stuff and was planning to travel for a year, but he wouldn’t hear of it and again repeated that it was from the heart, and not for money. Again I wondered whether my cynicism was unfair; he was making it crystal clear that he wasn’t going to try to take any money off me, and he seemed genuine.

‘Tomorrow is my son’s naming ceremony,’ he continued. ‘Perhaps if you have time you can come with me, maybe we drink some African beers, and you take

photos, we have a good time.'

'That's a shame,' I said. 'I'm going back to Dakar tomorrow.'

'Oh,' he said, and put on a sad face. 'Well, tomorrow I buy sheep for ceremony, perhaps you like to give me small money for this, from the heart and from the head, for my son? Like I give you present from the heart and from the head to take for your girlfriend.'

Aha, I thought, at last! He'd finally got to the point; of course he was being friendly for business reasons, and of course this was just an attempt to get me to buy something, albeit in a roundabout way. I had to give him credit though; he'd spun a good yarn, but I didn't travel round Asia without learning a thing or two, and I now was on home ground. I relished the thought of running rings round him, now I knew he was just another salesman trying to squeeze money out of dumb tourists like me.

I was kind, though, and only strung him along for ten minutes or so, waxing lyrical about the heart and the head and steadfastly refusing to commit to anything other than handshakes, good wishes and pleasantries. By the time I'd finished he was thoroughly frustrated, so I took off the necklace, handed back the ebony piece, looked him in the eye and said, 'From my heart, and from my head, thank you for the game, but I will not give you any money, you will not give me anything

from your stall, and we will both be happy.’

And finally Falou looked at me as one scam merchant to another, smiled, shook my hand, and gave up. It looks like Africa is going to be just like Asia after all, and I relished the thought as I wandered back to my hotel along the fish-strewn beach, past the wreck and into the safety of my beach hut.

After all, it’s a fun game when you treat it as such, especially when there’s precious little else going on in town. And in a sense the cut and thrust of bartering is the *real* heritage of the developing world: people have been fleecing and bargaining for millennia, though in the West we’ve pretty much managed to eradicate it. It’s a more interesting piece of world heritage than the architecture of St-Louis, anyway.

## The Language Barrier

*Written: 14 October 2002*

Thinking about it, Senegal is the first country I’ve been where the *lingua franca* between fellow travellers hasn’t been English. It’s often struck me how lucky I am to be able to speak English, not least because international travellers often speak English when they get together because that’s the language they all have in common. In Senegal, though, it’s completely different, and I get the feeling that this will be the case for all of the

Francophone countries in West Africa, because the cultural mix of tourists is different.

Of all the countries in West Africa, Senegal plays host to the largest number of foreign tourists. This is due to the fact that it's relatively safe (if you ignore the Casamance region in the south, which is off limits at the moment due to an over-zealous separatist movement), it's not far from Europe, French speakers can survive with a minimum of fuss, the euro is easily changed, and it's hot in November and December when Europe isn't. This means Senegal attracts high numbers of French and Belgian tourists, with a handful of French-speaking Swiss thrown in for good measure, and their common language, for obvious reasons, is French. In the same way that the English think of Africa as Kenya, Tanzania, South Africa and so on, the French think of Africa as Senegal, Morocco, Mali and the other ex-French colonies; it's all down to colonial history and popular tourism.

The upshot is that I am a stranger among tourists here. I can manage the pleasantries in French, but I can't eavesdrop on conversations (and therefore I can't butt in), I can't swap detailed travellers' tips with other tourists, and I can't even exchange books when I've read them. It's not even that good for my French, because, just like the English, the French aren't terribly good at including strangers in their conversations,

especially English strangers, and they talk so fast I can't understand a word.

Don't think I'm complaining, because that would be grossly unfair. English is without a doubt the most useful travelling language there is, and outside South America and West Africa it's the most useful communication tool there is (apart from the local banter, of course). I now understand exactly how the French feel when travelling through India, Malaysia, Australia and so on, and I now understand why there aren't that many French travellers in those ex-English colonies. They're all in West Africa, and quite right too; this is payback time for all the ease with which English carried me through my previous trips.

The local language is often a godsend, because somewhere in there is bound to be a word that even tourists use. For example in Wolof, the main indigenous language of Senegal, that word is *toubab*, which is the local term for the white man. It basically means 'civilised man', and isn't a particularly derogatory term, but as you wander round Senegal the kids run after you shouting, '*Toubab! Toubab!*' followed by the obligatory '*Stylo, cinq francs, bonbon*' mantra (that's French for 'pen, five francs, sweets', the secret to a happy life when you're a kid). I quite like being a *toubab*; it makes me feel like a cross between an African tree and a rap star.

But back among the *toubabs* it can be bloody

lonely, being the odd one out, and it makes you really appreciate anyone who can speak English. Roll on the Gambia, Ghana and East Africa, where I'll be able to understand what on earth is going on...

## **Toubab Dialao**

*Written: 18 October 2002*

When you're travelling in the developing world, the threat of getting ill lurks beneath the surface like a cracked paving stone on a busy pavement; you know you're going to trip, you just don't know when. Before flying to Dakar, I put serious effort into building up my body's natural defences, ready for the inevitable attack from Africa's overly friendly population of local bacteria, and after four weeks of bitter-tasting Echinacea and a couple of months of Acidophilus, I felt as ready as I could be.

It's taken precisely nine days for Africa to score the opening goal. I've been as careful as possible without straying into paranoia, but on my second day in St-Louis I made the mistake of ordering the hotel's special prawn sandwich for lunch, as (according to my guidebook) it was good enough to keep me going all day. 24 hours later I realised the book was uncannily accurate.

Before I found out exactly how accurate, though, I finally accepted that St-Louis just wasn't going to light

my fire, so I hopped in a bush taxi for the picturesque spot of Toubab Dialao, a little village south of Dakar along the beach-strewn coast known as the Petite Côte. It was on the way that I realised I wasn't alone, and that a few million local inhabitants had decided to hitch a free ride south too; judging by the gurgling in my stomach it looked like my newfound friends knew how to party, and by the time I arrived at Toubab Dialao I knew that life was about to take a turn for the worse.

By the will of Allah I managed to get a room that was right next door to the shared toilets; I wouldn't normally regard this as bonus, but it ended up saving the day. For the whole of the afternoon and a good part of the night I suffered from my first African bout of vomiting, diarrhoea and low, low patches.

Being ill abroad sucks, but being ill abroad on your own is awful. I lay there and tried to work out what the hell I was doing in this place; so far in Senegal I'd seen precious little that had even elicited a response in me, I'd found the country to be incredibly expensive, and I was already being knocked down and kicked around the pitch by the local bacteria. Add to that the seemingly incessant pangs of homesickness and my isolation at being the only English-speaking traveller stupid enough to visit West Africa, and I think you can safely say I was feeling pretty down. I curled into a ball on my sweat-soaked bed, tried to sip water that tasted like tepid tea,

and dreamed of going home to green grass, real ale, cool weather, cricket and my girlfriend.

## **The Peace Corps**

By the next morning I had nothing more to give and no energy to give it with. I was, however, no longer throwing up, so I ventured out to explore the hotel into which I'd booked without so much as a glance the previous afternoon. It turned out to be quite wonderful; perched on the top of a small cliff above the gentle beaches of the Petite Côte, the Sobo-Badé hotel is as close to an idyllic Mediterranean hideaway as you can get in a continent that considers the beach to be nature's own garbage disposal unit. It had comfortable chairs, it had pleasant views north to the distant skyscrapers of Dakar, and it had plain, boiled rice served with sympathy. I settled in for the recuperation period, alive but depressingly lonely, for everywhere I looked the other travellers seemed to be barking away in super-fast French. And then I heard the bass-heavy beat of a boom box and the lilt of an American accent cutting through the air, and life suddenly started to turn around.

There were three of them, two men and a woman, and I just knew they were from the USA, even before the sound hit me. The shades were either wrap-around or with wide, Navy-style lenses; the boom box pumped out rap music, pushed to a volume that wouldn't be out

of place in a Senegalese taxi; and the beer flowed like White House rhetoric. But the most surprising thing of all was that the loudest of the troupe was talking to the hotel's staff in Wolof, the local language. I couldn't work it out; Americans aren't known for their command of Wolof, but there they were, classic US exports, yet speaking in tongues.

It turned out that Mark, Pete and Emily were Peace Corps workers, out in Senegal for a two-year tour of duty and taking a couple of days off to kick back on the coast. The Peace Corps is the US equivalent of Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO), in which people head out for a couple of years to work as volunteers in developing countries. It's basically a Good Thing, and these guys were energetic and partying hard, but most importantly for my recovering psyche they spoke something approaching English. They invited me over for a chat and I leapt at the chance.

So it looks like Toubab Dialao is going to see me through my first bout of intestinal football with flying colours, and I'm sending up a silent prayer to whichever god happens to be floating over Senegal today. I might still be weak and I might still be uninspired with Senegal, but I've stopped throwing up, I can stomach plain rice, and I can now communicate with someone at a level beyond O-level French. To me, it feels like Christmas has come early, and I'm soaking up Toubab's

beach life with glee.

## **Senegalese Transport**

*Written: 19 October 2002*

Wise men say that it's not the destination that counts, it's the journey, but obviously Senegal isn't the preferred holiday destination of wizened old sages. Here, the journey is a complete pain in the arse.

In most parts of the developing world that I've had the pleasure to explore – particularly Southeast Asia and the Indian subcontinent – transport is cheap and nasty, but fascinating and effective. India's trains are a marvel, catching buses and ferries round Indonesia is easy, and in most places all you need to do to get from A to B is to rock up to the bus station, smile, mention the name of your destination, and watch as the locals usher you onto the right bus. You may have to wait for a short while, but more often than not you get where you want to go, and for a very good price. Not so in Senegal.

For reasons best known by the locals and best kept to themselves, Senegalese buses only leave the station when they're full. This might not be such a problem when you want to go from one major hub to another, but if you're hoping to take the bus to a small village out back or beyond, you can find yourself waiting most of the day for the bus to pull out. It might be a cheap way

to get around, but the problem is that it takes an absolute age before the bugger's even started up, let alone pulling into port. If you have to link up three or four bus rides to get to where you're going, you're going to be drawing your pension before you get anywhere.

Another solution, the bush taxi, has a similar philosophy, though with only seven seats they theoretically take less time to fill up. The only problem is they *still* take ages before they leave, and in the off-season there aren't many tourists trying to see the sights and the sights themselves are as quiet as hell, so you often end up waiting for as long as you do for the bus.

The only other option is a normal taxi, which is hugely expensive in comparison with other methods, and involves bartering in the extreme. Either Senegalese cab drivers are the world's laziest or the world's greediest; it wouldn't surprise me if they're both.

It also wouldn't surprise me if the Senegalese for 'no' turns out to be '*oui*'. It's uncanny the number of taxi drivers I ended up bumping into who said they knew exactly where I wanted them to go, and who later turned out to know Senegal about as well as your average Icelandic fisherman. Pulling over and asking the locals for directions is par for the course and adds to the excitement, as it seems most of the locals haven't a clue where they are either. Blank stares, scratched heads and slow, thoughtful chewing seems to be the local dialect,

and I've seen a lot more of Senegal by taxi than I've paid for. I wish I could say this represents value for money, but it doesn't.

Perhaps the worst thing about getting round Senegal is the feeling of aggression you get from taxi drivers, bush-taxi touts or bus boys. There's none of the wide-eyed fanaticism of India, where you get swept onto your bus on a tide of smiles, head wobbles and cheers; instead it feels like Senegalese drivers regard you as an inconvenience, something that's keeping them from doing something far more important, like sleeping or drinking tea. Trying to get round Senegal makes you feel as if you're committing some kind of *faux pas*, and it's not cheap either. If life is a journey rather than a destination, then in Senegal, life obviously sucks.

## **Joal-Fadiout**

*Written: 19 October 2002*

One of the best aspects of the Peace Corps invasion of Sobo-Badé was the roundabout way in which it introduced me to Jeremy and Sarah. On the road as in normal life, people understandably tend to coalesce into groups that are bound by a common language, and my newfound Peace Corps friends soon introduced me to another American couple, who were planning to head south in the morning. I had a choice between sitting

round for another day on the sun-soaked beaches of the Petite Côte, or latching on to the only moving company I could find, and the homesickness bug won; I wanted to share the road for a while, at least until I was firing on all cylinders, and Jeremy and Sarah were only too happy to let me tag along.

Our destination, for want of a better one, was a twin town called Joal-Fadiout some way down the Senegalese coast. In Senegal it makes sense to travel in large groups because it keeps the transport costs down, but the fun part of travelling with Jeremy and Sarah is that they can't speak a word of French, so all of a sudden I have become the group's communications expert. I might have been feeling language-lonely over the last few days, but at least I can string a few words together; Jeremy and Sarah are having a tough time with no French, but they're winning, and I can't help feeling complete admiration for them, not to mention some shame at the self-pity I've been feeling at being isolated from other non-English-speaking travellers.

So with the blind leading the blind we finally managed to get to Joal, which was described in our guidebook as 'interesting'. Obviously journalism isn't an exact science, but Joal is probably more correctly described as a 'shit-hole'. There was indeed a beach, as promised, but the sea was black (I kid you not) and the sand barely peeped out from under the rubbish; our

hotel, which the book described as having ‘soul’, had power failures, mosquitoes, birds cooped up in incredibly tiny cages, two poor pelicans locked in grotty cells in the corner of the restaurant, and rooms that made the hole in Calcutta sound positively bright and breezy. I noted for future reference that ‘soul’ was probably something I could do without during my West African sojourn, and I thanked my lucky stars that I wasn’t enjoying this unique cultural experience alone.

For nothing quite brings people together like scraping the bottom of the barrel. Having exhausted the delights of the beach, making sure we kept our shoes well and truly on, the three of us sat in the hotel’s pelican-flavoured restaurant, enjoying our meal while the local insects enjoyed theirs, and reflecting on our good fortune that, despite the fact that we had obviously ended up at one of the arseholes of the earth, at least we didn’t *live* here.

Credit must go to the local cockroaches, too. That night I put up my mosquito net and made sure I’d tucked it in carefully under the mattress, ensuring that nothing could get in overnight. Imagine my surprise, then, when I was woken up at 2am by a buzz, a thud and a gnawing suspicion that I wasn’t alone. Grabbing my torch, I shone it in the direction that my instincts told me to, and came face to face with a two-inch-long cockroach, squatting inside my net and looking at me as if to say

that this was *his* room, and I wasn't welcome. I couldn't believe it; there was no gap in my net – I checked again – so I can only assume that I'd been sharing the bed with him all this time. Luckily Senegalese pillows are traditionally made from concrete, and a swift lob in the direction of my newfound friend proved that cockroaches may be tipped as the species with the best chances of surviving a nuclear holocaust, but even they can't survive the impact of a Senegalese pillow.

## **Fadiout**

The reason that Joal-Fadiout is on the tourist map is because Fadiout, the second half of this excitingly duplicitous town, is perched on an island that's made almost entirely of clam shells. This, coupled with a strong Christian influence, makes Fadiout a slightly off-key destination (for Senegal at least), and even more interesting is a second clam-shell island, linked to Fadiout by a second bridge, which is home to hundreds of Christian graves, each marked by a cross and a pile of shells. In such a predominantly Muslim country this whiff of Christianity is not only bizarre, it's positively welcoming.

Unfortunately, so are the local guides, who insist on accompanying you for every step along the rickety wooden bridge to the island, irrespective of how many times you say '*Non merci*'. The island itself is, frankly,

just an island with a small town cramping its style and a bunch of clam shells crunching underfoot. It genuinely isn't anything else; it has atmosphere, but most of that is provided by the decomposing rubbish that gets dumped on the island's long-submerged beaches.

The cemetery is interesting though, if only because it's crammed with graves, a lot of them quite recent additions. From the cemetery island's modest hill you can see the town's food store – a bunch of huts perched on stilts in the lake to make sure that fire can't destroy them – and the large crucifix on the crest of the cemetery almost manages to pull off an atmosphere of colonial times gone by. It isn't worth the journey, but it's a pleasant escape from Joal.

By the afternoon we realised Joal's soul wasn't quite soulful enough to persuade us to stay, and we made plans to head further down the Petite Côte to the beach paradise of Palmarin. Before finding a taxi, though, I stopped off at a pharmacy to buy some mouthwash to combat a mouth ulcer that was threatening to take out my entire upper jaw. The mouthwash seemed to do the trick, though I was more than a little concerned to read the following on the bottle: 'There is a risk of seizures in young children and infants, and agitation and confusion may occur in older patients.' I wondered if I'd accidentally bought a bottle of the local moonshine instead; it would explain a lot

about Joal.

## Palmarin

*Written: 20 October 2002*

As soon as we got back from exploring the delights of Fadiout, Jeremy, Sarah and I tried to track down transport to Palmarin, a pleasant-sounding spot down the coast that the *Lonely Planet*, bless its cotton socks, describes as ‘superb’. After shitty accommodation, a squalid beach, awful humidity and an island made of shells that turned out to be little more than an island made of shells, our spirits needed lifting.

I’ve looked it up in the dictionary, and the French for ‘superb’ is *superbe*, or at a pinch *magnifique*. This rather scuppers my theory that the author of my guidebook asked the locals for a description and lost something in translation, because however poor your French, you can’t get confused about the meaning of *superbe*. Whatever the explanation, Palmarin isn’t *superbe* and it isn’t *magnifique*; it’s awful.

I can’t be too critical of my guidebook as the researcher would have visited Palmarin at least three years before we did and three years is a long time, but when we finally rolled up at the *Campement de Palmarin* – after our taxi driver took us for a number of detours on the way, none of them intentional and none

of them adding anything in any way to any of our lives – I couldn't help wondering why the guidebook had gone for 'superb' when 'run-down', 'dirty' or even 'desolate' would have been so much more accurate. And I've never thought of toilets *that* dysfunctional as being superb, but at least it was better than Joal, because the beach at Palmarin had hardly any litter. It did have a strange kind of red seaweed that made the sea look like as if there'd been a radioactive spillage nearby – and indeed there was the rusting hulk of an old fishing trawler aground just south of our section of the beach, which was a nice touch – but the beach itself was passable.

The rest of the *campement* was slightly worse for wear, though. The 37 huts arranged in rows behind the beach were functional but hardly luxurious, and the concrete beds we dumped our stuff on had obviously been built some time ago. The one shower that managed to produce anything other than a slight drizzle was fine, if you like showering in salt water with an appreciative audience of mosquitoes, and toilets are always much more fun when they don't flush, but at least the proprietors were keen. It felt like we'd woken them from hibernation, which we quite possibly had as we were clearly the first tourists to stumble on the *campement* for some time, but they smiled, they brought us reasonably cold beers from the fridge, and they only

tried to sell us boat tours a couple of times every half an hour. Things could have been much worse.

Irritatingly, a few hours later they were just that. We'd explored the beach, eaten the evening meal of chicken and chips and were looking forward to a good night's sleep before heading further south in the morning, when we realised that our rooms weren't actually rooms after all, they were saunas. Concrete bunkers are fine if they have fans and windows, but if they have nothing other than a couple of portholes, they're, well, concrete bunkers. If people actually *liked* concrete bunkers then those bloody inner-city architects from the sixties would all be OBEs by now, but history shows that we don't like concrete bunkers, and the architects have never been allowed to forget it. Concrete bunkers in hot, humid climates are a step beyond even tower blocks, and Palmarin's huts are superb and magnificent examples of how concrete can be successfully used as a psychological weapon. It was a long night.

## **The Beautiful Coast in Danger**

At breakfast the next morning – if one can call dry baguette, frozen butter and instant coffee 'breakfast' – I spotted a possible explanation on the wall for the dilapidated state of Palmarin. Instead of the normal posters depicting beautiful *pirogue* trips through

luscious mangrove swamps or idyllic shots of beaches with clean, golden sands and stunning blue water, the *campement*'s restaurant walls sported a hand-painted montage of three beach scenes, ominously entitled *La Belle Côte en Danger, 1995-2000*. The top scene, captioned with the year 1995, showed a nice little beach-hut complex, with tourists splashing around in the sea, lying on the beach reading, and generally having a good time; indeed, one guy looked like he was rolling a spliff, though this was possibly an indication of the artist's lack of hand-painting skills than a true representation of life in Palmarin, circa 1995. Even the fishing trawler was in one piece, though the fact it was in the picture at all implies it had run aground even before these halcyon days. Perhaps it doubled as an aquatic adventure playground back then; whatever, it looked like a positive addition to the scene, so rosy were the artist's coloured spectacles. One could almost call it *superbe*, or at a pinch, *magnifique*.

The second and third paintings, though, told a very different story. They showed a sorry scene in which the fishing trawler had broken in two, the trees had blown down, the huts had been smashed and pushed into the sea, and not one tourist could be seen happily rolling on the beach. It clearly implied that some kind of natural disaster had hit the place between 1995 and 2000, which probably explained why things were a little run-down in

Palmarin.

It didn't take long to get confirmation. I decided to wander down the beach to get a photo of the beached fishing trawler, it being the nearest thing to a tourist attraction in Palmarin, and a few hundred yards south of the *campement* lay the ruins of a bunch of concrete huts, the same ones that were depicted in the painting in the *campement's* restaurant. A large concrete disk lay smashed on the edge of the sea, once home to an idyllic seaside hut but now home only to some hardy sea-faring weeds and the rusting remains of the concrete's reinforcements. The whole place looked thoroughly forlorn, and suddenly everything made sense.

The big storm was back in 1997, during the year of El Niño, and it not only lacerated the Belle Côte round Palmarin, it also washed away a sizeable portion of the peninsula to the south of Djiffer, some 15km south of Palmarin. Djiffer now lies at the southernmost tip of this peninsula, and an island further to the south, perched in the mouth of the River Saloum, shows where the end of the peninsula used to be. No wonder Palmarin looks so forlorn; Mother Nature really hit it hard, and that's why it's anything but superb.

It still doesn't explain why they built concrete bunkers instead of beach huts, though...

# Djiffer

*Written: 21 October 2002*

As I peeled myself out of the basting oven that the Campement de Palmarin had amusingly substituted for a proper room, I found myself wondering whether I'm going to get the hang of Senegal, or whether I'm going to float out of the other end of West Africa's most popular tourist destination, still wondering what on earth the fuss is all about. So far I've been singularly uninspired by Senegal; I don't hate it, sure, but I don't really see the attraction either.

Djiffer hasn't made the earth move, but it has at least hinted at the positive side of Senegal. Back in Toubab Dialao, the only other place that I'd return to, I got horribly ill and wasn't really able to appreciate it, but Djiffer feels good... and coming after Joal and Palmarin, it feels like I've finally reached somewhere that's worth all the hassle.

It was pure luck that we managed to get here without another nightmare journey, for Palmarin isn't exactly a transport hub. We hauled our packs out onto the dirt road, found a baobab tree to shelter under, and sat down to wait for a bus, a bush taxi, or anything to get us to Djiffer, some 15km down the road. As Djiffer is perched right on the southern end of a peninsula, traffic doesn't exactly hurtle by, but we figured something would turn up, and it did, in the shape of a genuinely

friendly chap called Famara. Seeing us hanging out on the side of the road, obviously looking for a lift, Famara stopped his car, slammed it into reverse, and asked us where we were going. ‘Djiffer,’ we told him, and he told us to hop in. We offered to pay him, but he just shook his head, and off we went. We couldn’t believe it; we’d found a local who was not only happy to give us a lift for free, but who didn’t once try to sell us a tour, a wooden statue or a bag of peanuts. I’ve no doubt that *this* is typical Senegalese behaviour, rather than that of the touts, taxi drivers and generally grumpy salesmen who have overshadowed my visit so far.

Meanwhile Djiffer, or more accurately the Campement Pointe de Sangomar, has turned out to be wonderful (Djiffer itself is a smelly fishing village that suits its name; it looks and smells as if some local god sneezed it onto its little peninsula, and the less said about the place the better). This time the beach huts *are* superb, sandwiched between the sea to the west and the River Saloum to the east, and they not only have spotless *en suite* bathrooms and comfortable beds, they also have powerful fans and great food. I checked the *Lonely Planet*, which simply said it was the ‘smarter’ of the two places in town and that it was ‘popular with tour groups’, not something one would normally interpret as a compliment from an *LP* author, and I made a mental note not to take my guidebook at face value any more.

After all, I normally treat guidebooks with a huge pinch of salt, and after Palmarin that seems like the only sensible approach to take.

I can see why the *campement* is popular with tour groups, though; it's great, and I finally feel as if all the throwing up, sweaty taxis and sleepless nights are on the other side of the cusp. For the first time since leaving London, I feel as if I'm enjoying travelling again, and it feels good. And not only is the view from my bungalow beautiful, the company is impeccable; we've made friends with a lovely Australian guy called Chris, who is staying in the hut next to mine, and we're just lazing in the sun, putting thoughts of the road aside for a while.

What a huge relief that is...

## Foundiougne

*Written: 22 October 2002*

The thought of trying to get out of Djiffer – stuck there on its sandy peninsula where the River Saloum flows into the Atlantic – sat at the back of my mind like the promise of tomorrow's hangover when the night is still young. Senegalese buses are enough to make anyone go weak at the knees, but when you're sitting there watching the African moonlight play over a serene beach right outside your bungalow's back door, they're even less enticing. Luckily we found an alternative, one

far more suited to the lush surroundings of the Siné-Saloum Delta.

Sandwiched between the Petite Côte to the north and the Gambia to the south sits the Siné-Saloum Delta, a mangrove swamp formed by the Saloum and Siné rivers as they merge and flow into the Atlantic. It's a pretty area of islands, beaches, mangroves and mosquitoes, but it's not a lot of fun if you're a bus; there's a car ferry some 40km upstream from Djiffer, so from our beach paradise the only bus-based option was to backtrack some way north up the coast before heading southeast to go round the delta.

However, buses aren't the only way to get around, and the Siné-Saloum area is home to countless fishermen... and where there are fishermen there are *pirogues*. Your average *pirogue* is a long, thin canoe that's propelled by a stuttering outboard motor and a crazy local or two, and although it's about as far from luxurious cruising as you can get, it's a delightful way to navigate through the mangrove swamps. Within about five minutes of wandering into the bowels of hell that was Djiffer village, we were accosted by a hopeful young *piroguier* called André, who did his best to persuade us that his *pirogue* was the only sensible way to get upstream. Given the state of the belching hulks that were apparently the only buses heading north from Djiffer, he had a point, and we haggled for a bit before

settling on a deal of CFA8000 per person to get to Foundiougne, home to the car ferry and buses that would take us south towards the Gambia.

## Heading Upstream

This morning the four of us – me, Jeremy, Sarah and Chris – met André on the beach at 9am sharp, ready to head on up the river. We stowed our bags in the bows, wobbled into the middle of the boat as the waves slapped the sides, and waited while the three local crewmen heaved our *pirogue* into the slow-moving waters of the River Saloum. The motor coughed into life, and after a few precarious tilts that threatened to scupper our trip before it had even begun, we headed off in a northeasterly direction, against the flow of the lumbering river.

It was a scorching day, tempered only by the faint breeze caused by our movement through the tranquil waters of the wide river, so who can blame the boys for wasting no time at all in smoking three fat spliffs in quick succession, while they sat steering and grinning at the back of the boat? I figured that the river was wide, the visibility good and their experience probably greater than mine at steering a *pirogue* to Foundiougne, so the chances were that having stoned drivers wouldn't make any difference. I also figured that if anything was going to happen, it would be the will of Allah... and reassured

by this, I relaxed into it.

The trip was uneventful and gloriously chilled out. The sun reflected off the river and torched our eyes, and three-and-a-half hours later we were frazzled, but the scenery was pleasant and the graceful feeling of gliding upstream was most relaxing. It wasn't long before the village of Foundiougne hove into view on the banks, and we set a course for the Campement le Baobab, our chosen spot for the night. We congratulated each other; we'd managed to avoid the sardine sweatboxes that pass for buses round these parts, and we'd seen a fair bit of the Siné-Saloum Delta into the bargain.

And then André's brother, who had taken the tiller, misjudged the riverbank totally and drove us straight into the wall of the *campement*, smashing a chunk of wood off the front of the *pirogue* and throwing the whole caboodle dangerously off-balance. The crew suddenly woke up, jolted out of their red-eyed stupor as surely as if one of them had dropped a spliff down the back of the sofa, and it was only André's quick thinking that saved the day; he jumped onto the jetty and stuck his leg out in a karate pose, leaning out just far enough for his cousin to grab it. Slowly things stopped rocking, and we all breathed again; our landing might have been clumsy, but we'd finally arrived.

Interestingly, their rude awakening didn't dampen our drivers' enthusiasm for playing the *cadeau* game.

This appears to be obligatory for anyone who delivers *toubabs* to their destination, and starts off with the driver insisting on being paid more than was originally agreed; it's not couched in such rude terms, though, but takes the form of the taxi or *pirogue* driver asking for a *cadeau* ('present') on delivery. He might ask for a beer if you've just arrived somewhere that serves it, or he might just be after more money, claiming that it was a longer drive than agreed. For example, the guy who drove us from Joal to Palmarin tried to sting us for more cash when it was *he* who'd missed the turning and *he* who should have known where our hotel was, instead of driving around for kilometres trying to track it down; still, as the guys at the Palmarin *campement* said, these guys always ask for more, and 'that's just how it is.' And travellers like me always tell them to piss off from behind a glorious smile, which is just how it is from this end...

Luckily our hosts were too stoned to play *cadeau* for too long, and soon we'd booked into the *campement* and kicked back into the laid-back vibe of Foundiougne, yet another small village sitting on the tranquil banks of the River Saloum. Indeed, Foundiougne was almost too tranquil, as we discovered when we decided that a good way to kill the afternoon would be to take a short *pirogue* excursion into deeper into the mangroves forests. After waiting for André and his posse to leave –

we didn't fancy crashing into mangrove forests and capsizing among the mosquitoes, to be honest – we wandered down the main street of Foundiougne and waited for the touts to make their offers. And we waited, and waited, and even when we walked down to the nerve-centre of *pirogue* activity, the fishing beach, and wandered around like rich *toubabs* with money to burn, the offers completely failed to come in.

Faced with a village where even the touts couldn't be bothered to engage, we repaired to the bar and kicked back until the moon had risen, the mosquitoes had feasted on white man's blood, and the effects of the sun and fresh air had kicked in. Sometimes you just have to accept that doing nothing is the right thing to do, especially when nothing's doing...

## **Kaolack**

*Written: 23 October 2002*

Unfortunately we had to hop back onto Senegalese road transport to get out of the Siné-Saloum Delta, this time to reach the junction town of Kaolack. The plan was to head south to the Gambia, the thin, finger-shaped country that juts into Senegal like an argumentative finger into the fat belly of a belligerent taxi driver, and by far the easiest way to get there was via a night's stay Kaolack. This makes no sense on the map – going from

Foundiougne to Kaolack you're going in the opposite direction to the Gambia – but Kaolack is the nearest transport hub, so you have to head up there in the off-season to get your Gambia-bound bush taxi.

Two bus rides later, which were notable because the bus spent a large part of the journey driving *beside* the road on the dirt as the dirt was in better shape than the pot-holed bitumen, we rolled up to Kaolack to find that it was totally booked out (we never did find out why). Luckily the fourth hotel we tried had rooms, so without wasting any time we booked in and I headed off to explore the only tourist attraction Kaolack has to offer, the second-largest covered market in Africa (the largest is in Marrakech).

Surprisingly, it was great. I got absolutely no hassle at all as I wandered into the musty *souqs*, through the meat market with its friendly population of swarming flies, into the tailors' *souq* where clothes appear out of piles of material that would be cast-offs in the West, and eventually out to the odds-and-ends *souq*, which seems to be where old plastic bottles go to be reincarnated. It was bizarre, and it was alive in a totally different way to the Marrakech *souqs*; in Marrakech the little shops are for the most part pristine, highly polished to entice *toubabs* into their homely glow, but in Kaolack it feels as if everything's tarnished, hidden under a layer of grime and dust that's been accumulating for centuries.

Under this veneer of grot the *souqs* are buzzing with real business, and tourists don't even come into the equation; I got the odd yelp of 'Hey, *toubab*' as I surprised people in the gloom, but for the most part this was a real, working *souq*, and as such it felt much more authentic than in Marrakech.

The rest of Kaolack felt similarly tourist-free, which wasn't surprising given the lack of attractions. But as a junction town it served its purpose, and the next day we got up early to strike south for the Gambia.

## King of the Café

*Written: 23 October 2002*

I'd always believed that technology was one of the few international languages on this planet, along with Bob Marley and football, but when I tried to explain my plans to the woman behind the counter at the internet café in Kaolack, I realised that not only do the French have different keyboards, they have completely different terminology too.

'I wonder if you can help me,' I ventured in my best French, and she inclined her head in a noncommittal kind of way. 'I've got a little computer here, and a connecting cable, and I'd like to hook it up to one of your PCs, copy some files across, and then email them. Is this possible?'

She looked at me as if I'd just asked her whether she sold rainbow-coloured camels, and burst into something that was once probably French, but which contained precisely no words that I could recognise. I took a deep breath, tried repeating my request, and again got nothing but utter confusion. This, I realised, was getting both of us absolutely nowhere, so I smiled at her as best I could and escaped into the road.

That evening I was at a bit of a loose end, so I thought I might as well try again. There's something about uploading my writing that combines satisfaction and relief; once it's on the server it's safe, and it also means people back home can get their heads round what I'm actually doing here (something I often wonder myself). This time there was a man behind the counter, so I tried my well-rehearsed French banter on him; yet again I got little more than a furrowed brow, though at least this time he looked more interested in what I was trying to say.

'OK, I tell you what,' I said. 'Can I show you what I want to do, and you can watch me do it?'

'All right,' he replied, introducing himself as Mustapha and pointing me towards his computer. I figured I had to get him interested on a technical level; if there's one thing that techies love, it's technology, and I doubted he'd seen anything quite like my pocket Palm computer before. I was right.

The first thing that blew his mind was when I wrote on the screen of my Palm; his eyes lit up as the word *bonjour* appeared in front of his eyes. The next thing that made his jaw drop was my fold-out keyboard, which he couldn't believe; he was so impressed he called his friends over, and they all ooh-ed and ahh-ed in chorus as I unfolded it and plugged it in.

Sensing the crowd's interest, I seized the moment by explaining in halting French that I was going to take the stuff I'd written on my foldout keyboard, copy it to Mustapha's computer, and then put it onto the Web, so anyone could read it from anywhere in the world. They all laughed, completely caught up in the game, and clearly thinking I was mad.

'I am keen to learn what you know,' Mustapha said, as I started copying files from my Palm to his PC. 'I only know about fixing computers, I don't know about what you are doing.'

'Well, it's quite easy,' I said, and started to explain how I was doing it, throwing in the odd bit of jargon that I hoped he'd recognise and generally involving him in the whole process. He loved it; I'd struck the raw techie nerve, and we were transcending cultural and language barriers.

'Now that I've copied the files to your machine, I'm going to copy them to my website like this,' I said, firing up a little window with which I could talk to my

server in California. ‘See? There, they’re copying. And now... look, there they are, on the Web.’

And with that I held up my Palm screen and showed him one of the articles I’d written, and then showed him the same page on the Internet. He couldn’t believe it – as far as he was concerned I’d just performed magic, and he looked at me, looked at the screen, and laughed his head off, explaining to his friends in Wolof what I’d just done. They murmured their appreciation.

‘Can you come back tomorrow?’ he asked. ‘I’d really like you to show this to the boss.’

‘I’m afraid I can’t,’ I said. ‘I’m off to Banjul in the morning.’

‘That’s a shame,’ he said. ‘I’d love you to teach us how you did that. I only know how to fix computers.’

‘Well, that’s an area I know nothing about,’ I said. ‘I have no idea how these things work inside, so you’re way cleverer than me in that department.’

‘The computer I have been working on was submerged in water for a month,’ said Mustapha proudly. ‘I have just got it working after two days’ repairing work.’

‘A month *underwater*?’ I said. ‘Blimey, now that really *is* magic.’ And I shook his hand with feeling, reckoning that anyone who can resurrect a computer from that sort of treatment is pretty good at his job. From computers to old cars, the West Africans manage

to keep things going well beyond the stage where they'd be thrown away in the West, and although portable computers and Internet publishing might be cool, people like Mustapha genuinely make the world go round.

What a pity, then, that the regulars at the café should find my magic more impressive than his; I guess familiarity breeds contempt.

*At this point in my journey I left Senegal to travel through the Gambia, which you can read about in another of my books, A Million Mosquitoes Can't Be Wrong: Travels in the Gambia (also available for free from [www.moxon.net](http://www.moxon.net)). From the Gambia I returned to Senegal, which is where the next chapter picks up the story...*

# Tambacounda

*Written: 5 November 2002*

I decided to get to Tambacounda with plenty of time to spare before the Wednesday train to Bamako, so I could make sure I got a seat. It's a huge journey from Tambacounda to Bamako, the capital of Mali – it says 20 hours and 30 minutes on the timetable, but it normally takes well over a day – and I wanted to try to get a good seat, preferably in first class, so there might at least be a vague chance of *some* sleep.

On the off chance, I visited the train station late on Sunday afternoon and found an official-looking railway employee sitting in the *chef de gare*'s office. He told me I could come back tomorrow and buy tickets then, and that both first and second class tickets were available. 'Excellent,' I thought, and celebrated by visiting Chez Francis, the friendly pub up the road from my hotel, where cold Bière la Gazelle cost CFA600 (60p) for a huge 630ml bottle and the smiles were free. The barman, Joe, was a delightful bloke, and I figured there were far worse places to be stranded while waiting for a train.

## **Ticket Trouble**

Tambacounda is a pleasant place, and it's far enough off the tourist trap to be free of hassle. I was able to sit by the road, scribbling away, and nobody hassled me apart

from the local beggar boys, who were more interested in my empty water bottles than giving me grief, and who were happy enough with the odd donation. My beggar policy, which I adopted from Chris the Australian, is to give something to the first beggar I see every day, and that's it until the following day, when the first beggar gets a few pennies again. Of course, if someone comes along with an awful physical disability, or some other good reason for charity, then I break the rule, but it seems that there are only three ways to give to beggars: you either give to nobody, which is between you and your conscience; you give to everybody, which is between you and your bank manager; or you give to somebody, which is a darn sight easier if you make up a rule and stick to it. As they say, a handout a day keeps the conscience at bay...

So assuming I can get my train ticket sorted out, Tambacounda will have been a perfect place to relax while waiting for tomorrow night's departure. But nothing is quite that simple; despite the advice I received on Sunday, I turned up at the station on Monday morning to find that it was all going to be left to chance, of course. The train is, after all, just another form of Senegalese transport.

'Hello,' I smiled at the man now occupying the *chef de gare*'s desk, a different man from the Sunday shift. 'If it's possible, I'd like to buy a first class ticket for the

Wednesday train to Bamako.’

‘Ah,’ he said. ‘Come this way.’ And he led me outside and handed me over to a thick-spectacled man who didn’t look as if he worked for anyone, let alone the railway. I repeated my request, wondering who on earth this guy was.

‘You cannot buy tickets today,’ he said. ‘You should come back on Wednesday morning, but I will take your name for a reservation.’

‘Thanks,’ I said. ‘Can I reserve a first class ticket?’

‘No,’ he laughed. ‘All the first class tickets are gone, I’m afraid.’

‘They’re all *gone*?’ I said, caught completely by surprise; if there’s one thing I know about developing countries, it’s that first class tickets never, ever sell out before the second class ones. Something didn’t add up, but there was precious little I could do, so I gave the man my name and said, ‘OK, so I’ll come back here at 9.30 on Wednesday morning, and I’ll be able to buy a ticket here?’

‘*Inshallah*,’ he grinned, and wobbled his head. That was the sign to give up trying; *inshallah* means ‘God willing’, and is the Islamic way of saying ‘don’t ask me’. It looks like Allah is firmly in control of the Senegalese railways, unlike the railway staff, so I sent up a silent prayer, hoping that he’ll smile on me on Wednesday.

Luckily Chez Francis and the local internet café proved pleasant homes for the next few days, and I kicked back, ate well, drank well, wrote reams and studied the Mali chapter in my guidebook. Joe and the lunchtime barmaid Néné kept me company and helped improve my French small talk and drinking vocabulary, I watched Senegalese TV despite understanding precious little, and I forced myself to relax.

I might have missed the subtleties of most of the news reports on the French-language channel RTS 1, but I took my entertainment from the adverts and the weather reports. One advert in particular really surprised me; Ramadan, the Islamic month of fasting, starts in a few days, and during this time Muslims aren't allowed to eat or drink anything between sunrise and sunset (this is quite a sacrifice wherever you are, but even water is forbidden during sunlight, which makes Ramadan a major challenge in the African heat). It's a period of serious austerity, so I was more than a little surprised to see that the electrical firm LG was having a big Ramadan sale: 20 per cent off all fridges, no less, with glitzy adverts proclaiming the news. The weather report was similarly weird, as it not only contained details of the weather, it also listed the tide times, the time of sunrise and sunset, and the same times for the moon, which I presume is important if you're a devout Muslim, a devout fisherman, or both. Just to complete the

picture, the temperature in Tamba today was 38°C; I found this a perfect excuse to order another beer, especially as it appeared to help with the translation.

Unfortunately relaxing isn't something I do terribly well, even with beer and TV on tap, and by now, my last night in Tambacounda, I'm rested, settled, and thoroughly bored. I need to get moving into Mali before I start climbing the walls; I have high hopes for tomorrow's train journey being the start of something special.

## Thoughts on Leaving

*Written: 6 November 2002*

I didn't like Senegal much when I first arrived, but this was almost entirely down to me, not the country. I was horribly homesick (and I still am, every now and then), I was horribly sick, and I seriously wondered whether I was going to be able to get into the travelling mentality again. I was rather concerned that in the four years since the end of my last bout of travelling, I'd become *settled*.

I'm still not entirely in my stride, but I'm getting there, and although the difficulties I had with Senegal were far more to do with acclimatisation than difficulties with the country itself, I get the feeling that Senegal still isn't one of the world's great travelling destinations. It's pleasant and it's interesting, but it's not

mind-blowing.

If you ignore the city touts and the rip-off merchants that inhabit the tourist spots, the Senegalese are lovely people. In places that aren't on the main tourist trail, such as Tambacounda and Kaolack, the people are delightful and the hassle factor is minimal. Things are slightly crazier around Dakar and in places like St-Louis, but although I found dealing with taxi drivers a problem in the first week, things got easier the further I went from Dakar. I don't know if this is down to less hassle the further you are from Dakar, or me getting used to dealing with the transport system, but I think it's probably a combination of both.

If you like beaches and you speak good French, then Senegal is a great place to visit, which is probably why so many French tourists do just that. But if you're an English-speaking independent traveller in search of amazing sights, Senegal isn't that fantastic; it's OK, but it's not world class for travelling.

As a result I've found it a difficult place to start my trip; if I had been exploring the country with my jaw on the floor at the incredible sights and amazing culture clashes, I wouldn't have found so much time for missing my girlfriend, missing my home and missing my old life. Senegal is a great place to relax; it's not such a great place for providing a distraction. But I'm glad I came; the people are friendly, the music is good, the

markets are fun, the beaches are pleasant, the food is inoffensive, and combined with the different flavour of life in the Gambia, it makes a good introduction to West Africa.

Still, I'm glad to be moving into Mali. No offence, Senegal, but it just sounds that much more *interesting* for someone like me, with my low boredom threshold. We'll see.

**THE END**

## Further Reading

This story is continued in another of my books, *The Lapping of the Dunes: Travels in Mali* (also available for free from [www.moxon.net](http://www.moxon.net)). If you enjoyed this book, you might like to know that there's a whole series of free books like this available from [www.moxon.net](http://www.moxon.net), covering 16 countries and five continents:

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- *Roof of the World: Travels in Nepal*
- *Snaking Patterns of Sand: Travels in Morocco*
- *Snow on the Sun Loungers: Travels in Cyprus*
- *The Head and the Heart: Travels in Senegal*
- *A Million Mosquitoes Can't Be Wrong: Travels in the Gambia*

- *The Lapping of the Dunes: Travels in Mali*
- *A Town Full of Nothing to Do: Travels in Burkina Faso*
- *The Road to Jesus: Travels in Ghana*

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Happy travels!

Mark Moxon, September 2004

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