

**A Million Mosquitoes
Can't Be Wrong**
Travels in the Gambia

Mark Moxon





C O M M O N S D E E D

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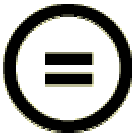
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A Million Mosquitoes Can't Be Wrong: Travels in the Gambia, v1.1.1, November 2004

Cover Photograph: A monkey in Bijilo Forest Park, near Fajara

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Foreword

This book is a collection of writing from the road, covering a two-week trip I made to the Gambia 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**, 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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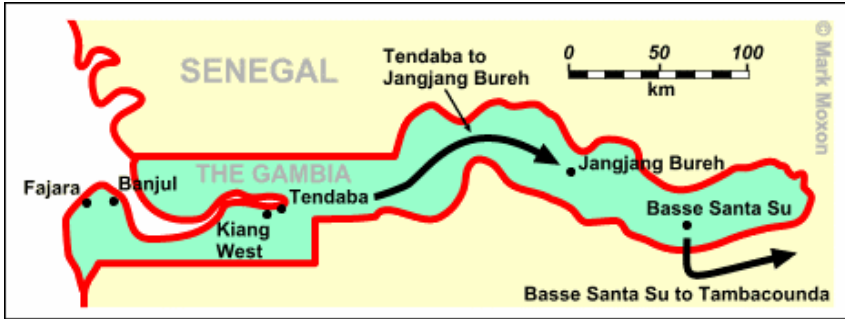
Finally, please be aware that this book is highly satirical, which means there's a slight chance that it might cause offence those who think my sense of humour is amusing as a puddle of mud. On top of this,

some parts will be out of date – which is why each article is dated – and others will betray the naivety of a traveller who discovered his way in the world by throwing himself into it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



The Gambia

Banjul

Written: 24 October 2002

I'm a little loath to ascribe such importance to the language barrier when travelling, but it's amazing how much difference crossing the border from Senegal into the Gambia has made. The Gambia – one of the few countries whose official name starts with 'the' – is a long, thin and very small country that follows the bends of the River Gambia due east from the river's mouth on the Atlantic coast, and apart from this coastal region, the country is entirely surrounded by Senegal. From end to end the Gambia is about 300km long but it only averages 35km in width, but even more bizarre is the fact that they speak English here, as it used to be a British colony.

At the border the linguistic change is instant. In Senegal, English isn't a great deal of use, and without at least basic French, communication is tough. But as soon as you cross into the Gambia, English takes over with an almost imperceptible transition; signs are in English, the locals speak English, and for the English-speaking traveller it instantly feels less alien and more comfortable.

The difference it makes is amazing. Within a couple of minutes of entering the Gambia I felt completely at ease, and it wasn't long before I was joking with the Gambian touts as they tried to sell me dalasis, something I'd find hard to do in French (the dalasi is the local currency in Gambia; being an ex-British colony, it doesn't use the CFA). When you're speaking your native language it's so much easier to understand subtleties of communication, and for the first time in a fortnight I feel as if I can actually *talk* to people. Irritating salesmen stop being annoying and become targets for a bit of banter, and I immediately feel happier and more relaxed in the Gambia than I did at any time in Senegal. I'm looking forward to exploring the place.

Capital Village

Our first destination was Banjul, capital of the Gambia, though it's hard to believe that this compact town is actually a capital city. The Gambia is a small country but Banjul is tiny, especially by African standards, with only 50,000 inhabitants (the whole county is home to around 1.2 million people). The result is a pleasant, hassle-free city that's clean, friendly and quite unlike large cities like Dakar.

We stayed in Banjul for one night, eating well, drinking well and feeling pretty buoyant. I was in Senegal for just two-and-a-half weeks, but that was long

enough for me to find Banjul almost nostalgic, especially when I discovered that they sell Guinness Foreign Export here, a pleasant version of the black stuff that makes a welcome change from the ubiquitous lagers of Francophone Africa. Indeed, adverts for Guinness are everywhere; evidently a clever advertising executive has persuaded the West Africans that not only is Guinness good for you, but it also improves your sex drive, resulting in such slogans as ‘Guinness – The Power’ and ‘Guinness is Good for You’. Even Guinness TV adverts are an art form, based around a black James Bond figure called Michael Power, who ends up performing superhuman feats of daring and cunning while rescuing his beautiful girlfriend from the clutches of an evil gang... all while under the influence of Guinness, of course. It’s hilariously unconvincing, and as a role model Michael Power owes more to western capitalism than African tribalism, but Guinness still sells by the bucketload, so they must be doing something right.

So Banjul feels nothing like the capital city of a West African country, and it’s a huge relief. I’m not going to need my French dictionary for a while, and that feels damn good.

Bumster Trouble

Written: 26 October 2002

Speaking the official language of a foreign country doesn't just make life easier; it also makes life more amusing, not least because you can understand the local media. As I strolled round the Gambia's Atlantic beach resorts this morning, the headline of the local newspaper caught my eye: 'Mass Arrest of Bumsters' proclaimed the front page of the *Sunday Observer*, while inside there were plenty of other notable headlines, including 'Football Witchcraft Palaver', 'Surgeons Deliver 46-year-old Foetus' and 'Student Surprised to See Black Hole Eat Star'. What a paper; I just had to buy it, if only to find out what a bumster was.

Touts are a basic fact of life in the tourist areas of Africa, but in the Gambia they're infamous, not so much for their voracity as for their nickname; everyone, from newspapers to policemen, calls them 'bumsters', which makes it practically impossible to take them seriously. Bumsters are young, unemployed youths who hang round the beaches of the Gambia, hustling tourists and trying to make money any way they can. The Gambia has high unemployment and no welfare system, so for school dropouts it's not easy to make ends meet, and being a bumster is an obvious temptation. Tourists are rich, stupid and easy meat, and it sure beats having to work the peanut fields for a living.

It does make wandering around the beaches challenging for visitors, though, as we found out yesterday within a few minutes of arriving in Fajara, one of the resort areas on the Atlantic coast. The taxi dropped us off at a pleasant-sounding hotel, but unfortunately it hadn't got enough room, so we started wandering round the area, peering at the map and generally looking like little lost *toubabs*.

One guy latched on to us and said he knew a great place just down the road that might be suitable. The map in my guidebook seemed to bear no relationship to reality, so we figured we might as well go along with him, but by the time we decided to follow him, the word had spread. As if by magic, bumsters started materialising out of thin air.

'Hey, how ya doin', you wan' room, I have good room, give you good price, where you from?' they chanted, by now numbering eight with others homing in, seemingly appearing out of thin air from under rocks and from behind bushes. 'This place you go, very good, we show you good place, no?'

The problem was I couldn't take them seriously at all. One guy, a particularly ugly specimen, was wearing a red string vest and baggy shorts, and he couldn't have looked more gay if he'd tried; given that this guy was known to everyone round here as a 'bumster', I had trouble keeping a straight face. Surely even the baking

sun of the Gambia isn't strong enough to make people think that red string vests are *cool*, is it? I idly wondered if Fajara was the seaside equivalent of Soho; these guys certainly looked sleazy enough.

'If you want another place, I find you good place,' the chorus continued, and meanwhile our initial guide, who was keeping quiet and seemed almost as irritated by the bum-boys as we were, led us to the hotel he'd mentioned. In we went, trailing an entourage that positively reeked of 1980s gay chic, and found a lovely apartment for four at D850 per night that sported satellite TV, air-conditioning and loads of space. We took it.

However, it looked like the bumsters were still interested in hanging round with us, and they loitered outside the apartment, looking like they might start break-dancing or moon-walking at any moment. The lady renting the apartment explained that they wanted some money for their help, but we told her that apart from the initial guy they'd been nothing but a bunch of rude louts, so she told them to leave, and we slipped the guy who'd shown us the hotel a D10 note as a thank you.

Five minutes later, as we basked in the warm glow of CNN, the lady came back and said the guide was outside, and wanted a word with us. It seemed our bumster friends were proving harder to shake off than

dog shit in the tread of your Doc Martens, but when Chris went to investigate he found out that our guide had been rolled by his bumster friends, and they'd stolen his D10 tip. He wanted another one, and as he seemed genuine enough we handed it over, resigned to the fact that we'd never know if this was yet another scam.

Toubab tax is a funny beast...

Apart from one niggling bumster who tried to talk to Sarah and got soundly ignored by all of us, we haven't had any more hassle from the local irritants, which is weird after yesterday's baptism by fire. But today's paper explains all; yesterday more than 200 bumsters were arrested by the Gambia National Guard, which was deployed in the tourist area following increased reports of hassle. According to the report the bumsters are being detained before being 'transferred to Sapu, Jahali and Pacharr Rice Development Fields to engage in meaningful agricultural work', which sounds pretty extreme, but at least it means that our newfound string-vested friends are probably digging paddy fields by now. Happily, the guy who showed us the hotel is still kicking around, so it seems justice has been served and the bumster threat has been eradicated from the Atlantic coast... for now, anyway.

Like 1980s gay fashion, though, I have a bad feeling that they'll be back...

Two Days Later...

Unfortunately the effects of the police swoop on the bumster population are starting to wear off. The path from our hotel to the beach, previously a pleasant stroll through trees and past hotels to the white curve of the Kotu shoreline, has started springing ugly surprises every few paces. One particularly repugnant troll has taken up residence in the bushes by the road, and whenever any of us walk past he springs out, yelling, 'Hey, hey, how you doing?' Ignoring him elicits louder protestations, until you have no choice but to acknowledge him; I had my first experience of our new neighbour as I wandered down to the beach this afternoon.

'Uh,' I said without breaking my stride.

'Hey, where were you yesterday?' he asked.

'Yesterday?' I asked, thinking that I might be able to string him along by simply repeating the last word he said each time. Deep in my mind, a voice said, 'Do not feed the monkeys.' I tried to ignore it.

'It was my wedding yesterday,' continued the bumster. 'Where were you?'

'Where was I?' I repeated, sticking to my guns.

'Yeah. I got married.'

'Married?'

'Married. Why weren't you there?'

This threw me, and for a split second I forgot all

about repeating things. This perfect stranger was asking me why I hadn't been at his wedding – this required further investigation. The voice in my head repeated its warning, but I'd been bumstered, and I heard myself engaging before my brain could step in.

'But I don't know you. I've never seen you before,' I said.

'Yes, from Friday, I showed you to your hotel, Golf Apartments, you remember.'

Oh god, I thought, this was probably one of those string-vested morons from the other day. 'Sorry mate, I don't know you,' I said, and strode on.

'You come and meet my wife,' he said. 'She's just over here.'

'Listen my friend,' I lied. 'Perhaps *you* should go and meet your wife, because it's a little sad to be inviting perfect strangers round the day after your wedding. Now I *don't* know you, and I'm going to the beach. Goodbye.'

'You're very rude,' he said.

'You should hear me when I'm angry,' I said, and hit the road, only to find the guy who'd found us the hotel a few yards down the road. I thought I could trust this one; he'd been rolled by the others, for a start, and he had a happy face.

'Hello', he said.

'Hello,' I said. 'How are you?'

‘I am well,’ he said. ‘I am working over here.’

‘That’s good,’ I said.

‘I am making tea’, he said, ‘but I have no sugar. Can you help me?’

‘Um, sorry, I’m clean out of sugar,’ I said.

‘Perhaps you can give me five dalasi for sugar then?’ he tried.

‘Oh really, not you as well’ I thought, and repeated my get-out clause: ‘No thanks, I just don’t have the time. Sorry, I’m off to the beach.’

This time I ran. And to think, this was the *off*-season...

Fajara

Written: 27 October 2002

The thing that surprises me most about the Atlantic beach resorts of the Gambia is how unlike most beach resorts they are. When reading about them beforehand, I’d envisaged high-rise hotels, nightclubs spilling onto the beach, and fat tourists with their arses hanging out of their swimming shorts. The only one I’ve managed to find is the latter, and that only once (though it was a depressingly memorable sight).

Once we’d shaken off the bumster curse and found our home for the weekend, we decided to explore and soon discovered that the coastal resort towns of Bakau,

Fajara, Kotu and Kololi, which from south to north make up the Gambia's Atlantic tourist area, are tiny. Perhaps it's the effect of the off-season, but these places feel nothing like beach resorts in the same way that Banjul feels nothing like a capital city. They're far too laid-back and pleasant for that (bumsters notwithstanding).

Unable to get my head round the relatively clean streets, the lack of bumster hassle and the ease with which I can communicate with the locals, today I decided to walk 4km inland to Serekunda, which the guidebook says is the unofficial capital of the Gambia, the transport hub for the whole country, and 'a taste of unrelenting in-your-face urban West Africa.' It actually turned out to be a relatively docile African town, with hardly any touts, an interestingly squalid market and shops selling everything from electronics to furniture, but it wasn't anything to write home about, and I can only assume it's a different story in the tourist season. In October, Serekunda, like Banjul and the Atlantic resorts, is a taste of unrelenting, in-your-face, chilled-out West Africa.

Perhaps the insanity lurks just beneath the surface, waiting for the tourists to scratch it into life. Bumsters are one thing, but it seems that even officials can be patently idiotic. Yesterday morning, for example, we visited Bijilo Forest Park, a pleasant stretch of rainforest

to the south that's home to lots of tourist-tainted wildlife. The monkeys of Bijilo are fun to watch as they're completely used to humans and don't run away as soon as you see them, but this isn't necessarily such a good thing; feeding monkeys in parks like this can make them dependent on the generosity of tourists, and this can lead to violent behavioural problems, which is why there are signs plastered all over the park entrance asking people not to feed the monkeys.

But this is Africa, and putting up signs doesn't really amount to much. I saw two groups of tourists feeding the monkeys peanuts, and when we stumbled across the third bunch happily handing over the monkey's lunch, I noticed they had an official guide with them (we'd declined the offers of a guide at the gate, figuring we could work the paths out ourselves).

'You're feeding the monkeys,' I said.

'Yes,' the guide said gleefully. 'The monkeys love it.'

'But you aren't supposed to feed the monkeys,' Sarah said.

'But they love it,' he repeated. 'Do you want to feed them?'

'No,' I said. 'It isn't good for the monkeys.'

'Are you forestry people?' the guide asked.

'Yeah,' we chorused, hoping this would scare him into submission.

‘Then *you* should not feed the monkeys,’ he said, and turned back to his troupe of pasty *toubabs*, who by this stage were dangerously smothered in peanut-grabbing simians. Faced with such bizarre logic, I just shrugged my shoulders and headed back to the beach, making a mental note not to believe officials any more than bumsters.

Tendaba

Written: 28 October 2002

The Atlantic coast resorts might have been pleasant, but two days into the relaxing beach lifestyle, I was already champing at the bit. CNN and BBC World take only a couple of days to go from elixir to irritant, so despite the sinking feeling that I get whenever I think about long journeys and African public transport, I persuaded myself to leave the cosy glow of our bungalow for eastern Gambia. Happily Chris decided to come with me; public transport is not only cheaper with two, it’s easier to bear. Just.

The first step – getting from our hotel to the bus station – was a fairly easy taxi ride, and by now I’ve got the hang of the buses too: you pick the one that’s going to your destination and which has got the biggest number of people in it, ignoring the touts who will try to steer you to their bus despite the fact it is completely

empty. You pay for your seat (a fixed price) and for your luggage (whatever you can get them to accept), and sit and wait for the bus to fill up.

‘Fill up’ is the right phrase, because there’s always room for one more. The average Gambian minibus sits around 30 people, plus driver, screaming babies and squawking chickens, but it’s hard to be exact, as they’re not designed to take that many. If the same minibus were being used in the West, there would be the driver plus two in the front, then four rows of four people, and then two rows of two down the sides at the back. That’s a total of 22 people plus the driver, but in our minibus I counted 30 people, a driver, two babies and occasionally a tout hanging off the back on the lookout for more fares.

Not only are the buses in this part of the world crammed to bursting point, they’re also decorated with the most intriguing collection of stickers and posters. Along with the taxis, the buses have stickers plastered over the backs and sides, most of them proclaiming allegiance to a *marabout* brotherhood (in which case the sticker is of a guy looking suspiciously like the evil Emperor in *Star Wars*), or to Allah (in which case Koranic quotations are the order of the day). But a hugely popular and completely mysterious sticker is of Madonna in her ‘Material Girl’ period, bending her head back and blowing a kiss at the camera. She’s dolled up

in clothing that screams ‘1980s!’ at you, and every time it’s exactly the same sticker. It’s a really common picture, and it’s faintly disturbing; religion and politics I can understand, but 1980s Madonna? Goodness only knows where *that* fad came from.

Whatever the logic behind the bus decorations, the Gambians more than make up for it: they’re a delightful bunch. We had to stop at six police checkpoints on the way, with everyone having to fish out their identity cards or passports before we could move on, adding five minutes to the journey for each checkpoint; the police are being particularly paranoid at the moment because the Casamance region of Senegal, which lies to the south of Gambia, is suffering from a fairly messy separatist movement and the Gambians don’t want to be blamed for harbouring terrorists. This didn’t seem to irritate the locals one bit; they just kept on smiling as the bus jolted along the road. The last third of the journey was along a road that looked like it had been carpet-bombed, and the bus bumped and ground through dusty potholes like a demented shopping trolley, and still the woman next to me cuddled her baby, breast-fed it every now and then, and smiled her sweet maternal smile. I even smiled myself, though sometimes it was hard to tell if I was smiling or grimacing from the pain of the nails that were thoughtfully protruding through the seat cushion beneath my battered bottom.

Getting to Tendaba

I'd picked Tendaba as a good-sounding spot because it's isolated, being perched on the banks of the River Gambia some 5km north of the main road, along a dirt track. If ever anything sounded tranquil, Tendaba did, and as the bus dropped us at the village of Kwinella, at the southern end of the dirt track, things looked good. All we had to do was to get to the camp, so slinging our packs on our backs, we set off for the long haul to the river.

Not ten seconds into our jaunt we were met by Kwinella's bumsters, who insisted that Tendaba was a really long way away, and that unless we were completely crazy, we'd be much happier if we took a donkey cart. They said they'd charge D75, and we laughed; the bus ride had only been D45, so we said we'd only pay D20. They laughed and came down to D60, and we moved up to D30, but then the bartering suddenly stopped. 'You come talk to the man with the donkey,' they said. 'He make you good price.'

The man with the donkey, though, turned out to be a complete wanker. He sat there, sucking on a filter cigarette, and refused to even look at us. He spoke in Mandinka to his bumsters, who relayed the message, 'He say D100.' We said we'd pay D30, and the donkey man gave a shrug that said, 'Stop wasting my time and get out of my shop,' so we did just that, leaving him

with no money, no business, and nothing to do but sit there, sucking on his filter.

It's weird, this aspect of Senegambian bartering. In Asia there's a definite desire to make a sale, to the point where they'll run after you if you walk out of a bartering session in mock disgust; unless you are really hard-nosed, there's always a price that everyone's happy with, and it's much more of a game to get there. In Senegal and the Gambia you're made to feel as if you're an inconvenience, someone who's stopping the vendor from doing something far more important, and that unless you pay their price, you're just being rude. There's no feeling of the game, and it's really wearing, especially when there are middlemen involved. Stomping off doesn't seem to work; it seems that people round here are happy to let sales go if they can't be bothered to haggle, even though everyone is depressingly poor. It's odd, but if they don't want to play the game, that's fine; it's their country, after all.

Despite the irritating arrogance of the donkey man, I was looking forward to Tendaba. Here we were, striking out along a 5km dirt track to a lodge on the river, and it felt good to be on the move again; I really didn't mind a walk to get there. It was almost a shame, then, when we wandered past the local school and got accosted by children, who tried to persuade us to take *their* donkey carts to Tendaba; they said it would cost D75, we said

we'd pay D20, they came down to D40, and we met in the middle at D30. Before we knew it we'd found transport, and our drivers introduced themselves as Yahya (17) and Abdoulie (18), both of whom were in Form 9R.

'You come this way for donkey cart,' said Yahya, turning off into the centre of Kwinella. On the way he bumped into his dad and we shook hands, his dad looking as confused at our English 'hellos' as we were at his Mandinkan '*al be ñaading*', and after a short wander through the surprisingly clean village streets, we arrived at Yahya's house. He showed us into his bedroom and said he'd be back in five minutes with the donkey cart.

Yahya's bedroom was both typically teenage and totally African. The blue whitewashed walls were mostly bare, and his bed was nothing more than a concrete base with a hard, lumpy straw mattress on top, but dotted round the walls were posters and magazine cuttings that were strangely familiar. Two posters of black American rap stars proclaimed that Monica, Usher and Romeo were 'bad boyz' and 'hot stars', and that the Californian Boyz (that's Shaggy, Snoop Dogg, Mystikal, IMX, Lil Bow Wow, Master P and Lil Romeo) were 'fabolous', while the Jamaican reggae star Capleton looked mean and moody next to a picture of fellow singer Luciano in a garish Ethiopian shirt. Stuck

on the wall above a stack of blue UNICEF exercise books was a cutout of pop idol Gareth Gates being drooled over by two pubescent girls, with a caption proclaiming, 'Female fans look to have their wicked way with the ex-choir boy.' Hiding among the snippets were shots of Posh and Becks sporting tattoos in Hindi, an action poster of the Brazilian footballer Rivaldo, and beneath a clock that was stuck on 12 minutes to three was the obligatory shot of Madonna, this time in a thankfully modern pose. There wasn't one African singer in the whole room; the US, the UK and Jamaica dominated the entire collection.

While we waited on the bed admiring Yahya's posters, the women of the house shyly poked their heads in and giggled, shaking our hands when we beamed hello and made our best efforts to show we wouldn't bite. They were delightfully confused as to what two *toubabs* were doing in Yahya's bedroom, but we obviously provided them with a fair dose of entertainment, as they made sure everyone from the immediate neighbourhood came round to take a look. We smiled, we sweated, and we fervently prayed that Yahya wouldn't take too long, but true to his word he was back in five minutes, and he showed us to our transport with Abdoulie in tow.

It turned out to be a bloody good job that the boys had persuaded us to hop on the cart, as it took us about

an hour to rattle along the hot, dusty road to Tendaba, and although we would have made it by foot, it would have been a hard slog in the hot sun with a full backpack. As it was, for D15 each (about 45p) we had a wonderful time bouncing along the dirt track to the sound of clip-clopping donkey hooves, and by the time we rocked up at Tendaba, we were ready for a shower.

It was a bit of a shock, then, to hear those chilling words, ‘We’re sorry, we’re full.’ My heart sank; we’d got this far, and our plans lay scuppered at the bottom of the River Gambia.

Conference City

It turned out that we’d timed it badly, and Tendaba’s 150 beds were currently hosting two conferences, one a training week for Peace Corps volunteers, and the other a conference for the UN Peacekeeping Force. I couldn’t believe it; instead of arriving at an isolated paradise, we’d taken a taxi, rattled for three-and-a-half hours on a bus and bumped for an hour on a donkey cart to arrive at a bloody conference centre.

I looked at the wall, where a sign pointing to the ‘Conference Hall’ proclaimed, ‘For your dedication, devotion and development by action, we wish you a successful implementation.’ This cheered me up, as I love the way Gambian English sounds like it’s been put through a computerised translation system, but I guess

my face must still have looked rather miserable, because the man behind the bar asked us to wait; thankfully he returned a few minutes later to say that the boss had said we would have somewhere to sleep, and that we should stay here for a while. I could have kissed the man; the thought of having to head back to the road was more than I could bear.

I felt a little differently two hours later, when we were still waiting for signs of activity. The Peace Corps had broken for coffee and returned to their riverside flip charts and we'd had an extremely leisurely lunch, but still there was no sign of a room. And then the man signalled us over to the bar.

'You know that I say we are very busy,' he said, and my heart sank into my boots again. I looked at the man's hotel T-shirt, which amusingly boasted, 'A million mosquitoes can't be wrong – Tendaba Camp is fabulous!' and figured that sleeping out under the stars could turn out to be a life-threatening experience. 'Well... I am afraid we can only offer you one room for the night. Is this OK?'

'Great! No problem!' we chorused, happy that at least we'd have a bed. I'd have taken anything at that point.

The 'one room' turned out to be a tiny hut housing the smallest double bed on the planet and precious little else, but fixing our stiff upper lips in place, Chris and I

settled in, counting our blessings that we had a room at all. It was a long haul, but we got there.

Kiang West

Written: 29 October 2002

One of the things that amazes me about West Africa is how difficult things are for independent travellers. I didn't expect there to be any kind of backpacker infrastructure – this is the developing world, after all – but not only is getting around a pig, exploring the destinations can be a real pain too. The tourist industry here is aimed squarely at people taking tours, where companies run air-conditioned buses from the hotels to the tourist attractions and back again, but I prefer to explore on my own itinerary, if only because tours are rarely realistic for single travellers; they're often based on having four or six people, and if you don't have that many like-minded friends, the only way to take the tour is to pay for the empty seats yourself, and that's expensive.

Unfortunately it's really difficult doing it any other way, and sometimes you have no choice but to take a tour to see what you want to see. Kiang West National Park, a haven for ornithologists a few kilometres downstream from Tendaba, is one such place; the only way to get there if you don't have your own transport is

to hop in a four-wheel-drive or *piroque*, but even with two of us the price was steep. We asked about walking into the park, and it seemed that this didn't compute; all we got in the way of response was, 'It is much better if you are taking a guide, so you do not get lost.' Given the complete lack of maps of the area, we had no idea what to do.

Luckily this morning a safari was going out with three spare places, and after a bit of bartering the price came down an acceptable D150 per person, so after breakfast Chris and I hopped aboard a jeep with Sally from Sussex, Joan from Wales, Lamin (a boy from a local village whom Sally and Joan were taking out for the day), a driver, and our guide, the intriguingly named 'Wicked Wild', a nickname that he'd apparently got because of his penchant for partying.

The idea behind the safari was to track down some baboons in the National Park, but in the end what we got was a bumpy ride through the heart of the park to the River Gambia, a few minutes at a beautiful viewpoint over the river at an escarpment called Toubabkollon Point, and precious little else. The baboons proved elusive, but luckily there was far more amusement to be had in the company of strangers.

Sally and Joan fascinated me. Larger than life in more ways than one, they were prime examples of the British abroad. Sally got married just down the river

from Tendaba (to a Gambian, I presume, but she never said), recently bought a house not far from Banjul, and spent her time flitting back and forth between the UK and the Gambia, working in England because there wasn't any work to be found in the Gambia; and Joan was a well-travelled hoot, and I smiled at the thought of her crammed on a Gambian bus, chatting to all the locals. I never worked out how Lamin fitted into the picture – he seemed completely bemused by the whole thing and didn't say a word through the whole trip – but going on safari with Joan and Sally was like going bush with the cast of *Birds of a Feather*.

'Ooh, this road's awful,' Sally would cry, as we hit another bump. 'They do live all primitive out here, don't they?'

'Gawd, I keep expectin' natives to jump out of the bushes,' Joan would pant, as we wandered through the bush on the way to another unsuccessful attempt to spot baboons. 'Have we much further to go, Wicked, ma boy?'

'Oh, look at little Lamby swatting those flies,' Sally would say. 'I hope he don't fall out of the back of the jeep. He don't 'alf give me the worries, that one.'

And so Sally and Joan piled on the Cockney and Welsh clichés as we bounded through the beautiful bush of Kiang West. We didn't find any baboons and only saw a few pelicans and birds, but I couldn't care less.

Instead I was lucky enough to behold a couple of real British characters in the West African bush, and they were *far* more interesting than the native wildlife...

Tendaba to Jangjang Bureh

Written: 30 October 2002

Tendaba Camp, for all its pleasantries, refused to let me leave gracefully. Chris decided to head west back to Banjul and I opted to head east, so after nearly two weeks in the company of others I was going to be on my own again. The thought filled me with dread, because the next leg of my journey sounded terrible. Tendaba might be a conference centre but it's still out in the middle of bloody nowhere.

The first hurdle was to get back to the main road. We asked about transport back to Kwinella and the woman behind the bar said that it was certainly possible... but in Africa *everything* is deemed 'possible'. It's turning the 'possible' into the 'definite' that's the real challenge, it seems.

So we got up at 6.30am, grabbed breakfast and asked the staff to arrange a lift to the road, if they would be so kind, and they wobbled their heads, grinned that special grin that's reserved for idiots like me who think things might actually go according to some kind of *schedule*, and said we should wait for the driver. So we

waited.

And we waited, and waited, and waited, wondering if Tendaba was the African equivalent of Hotel California and whether we'd ever get started on the trek out of conference centre hell. The staff just kept asking us to wait a little longer, and every now and then our hopes would rise a little when we'd see someone who looked like a driver, but who would turn out to be nothing of the sort. One by one the minutes slowly ticked by, and I idled time away by counting the extra hours I could have spent in bed. Eventually at 9am, as I was nodding off on the table, our lift turned up. So much for the ultra-early start we'd hoped for.

We'd heaved ourselves out of bed at the crack of dawn because Tendaba has no bus station; Kwinella, the village back on the main road, is nothing more than a spot on the main highway through the Gambia, and whereas in the West there would be a bus stop with a timetable, in Kwinella there's precious little more than a shelter made from branches and woven sticks. If the Gambia had tumbleweed, it would blow through Kwinella like an old friend, but even the breeze sits like a dejected hitcher on the side of the road, too hot to do anything but wait.

The idea is that you stand on the side of the road and wave at every bus that goes past until one stops. There are quite a few problems with this, though; as I

may have mentioned, buses only leave Gambian bus stations when they are packed to the gills, so for a bus to pick you up in a place like Kwinella, someone needs to have got off the bus before they get to you, and that space still needs to be vacant by the time the bus reaches your neck of the woods. The roads of Africa are smothered in people waving down buses – or, more accurately, people waving at full buses as they rattle past, showering them in dust – and as the first, second, third, fourth and fifth buses rolled past, indicating with a hand signal that they were already full, my heart began to sink.

Add to this the fact that I wasn't the only person trying to get a seat on an eastbound bus – there were about four locals heading the same way – and it doesn't take a statistician to work out that I was in for a long wait. And this was only for the first leg, to the junction town of Soma, from where I'd have to catch another bus to Jangjang Bureh, my destination. I didn't even want to think about how long I'd have to wait in Soma for the second bus to fill up, so to pass some time I thought I'd ask one of the locals how long we'd have to wait.

'It is very tough,' he said, shrugging his shoulders in a manner that I'm starting to recognise as the African Way. 'Not enough buses, too many people, it is very tough.'

Just then a bus bumped into view on the horizon,

heading west, and Chris jumped up, waving at the bus for all he was worth. It slowed to a halt, and with a yelp he grabbed his bag and ran to the back of the bus. There was one space left, but even quicker than Chris a local teacher had nipped in the back door, and leaving a gaggle of dejected hopefuls standing in the middle of the road, the bus pulled out, heading for Banjul. Chris slumped back to the side of the road; this interesting queuing technique added a further dimension to the task at hand.

‘It is tough,’ repeated my friend at the bus stop.
‘Very tough.’

‘You’re not wrong there,’ I sighed, and settled in for the wait.

An hour later things were no better. The sun was getting seriously hot, baking the road and making the air shimmer in the distance. After two hours and another rattling collection of full buses, I couldn’t help wondering whether we were going to end up slinking back to Tendaba with our tails between our legs, ready to try it all over again tomorrow.

Then a bus appeared on the horizon and I leapt up, grinning in what I hoped was a reassuringly friendly manner. It slowed down, I yelled ‘Soma! Soma!’ at the top of my voice, and the driver indicated there was one space. I grabbed my bags and leapt for the back of the bus faster than a bumster at the rustle of dollar bills.

‘One for Soma?’ I asked, trying to look like the sort of person you’d really want to have on your bus. The crowd behind me tried the same trick but Allah was smiling on me, and the ticket man pointed at the spare seat and pointed at me, and I jumped on and sat down before you could say, ‘You’ve saved my life!’

Shouting goodbye to Chris, I squashed into my row, handing over D10 and thanking my lucky stars that I’d managed to escape from Tendaba. I still had some way to go to Jangjang Bureh, but the first hurdle was behind me.

Shooting Through Soma

Half an hour later the bus arrived in Soma and I hopped off, shouting ‘Jangjang Bureh’ in the hope that I’d be steered towards the next bus heading that way. A couple of likely lads tried to persuade me to hop into their totally empty minibus, but I laughed and said, ‘There are no people in this bus – I want one with *people!*’

‘OK, over here,’ they said. ‘One place free.’

I couldn’t believe it. There was the bus for Jangjang Bureh, and it had just one seat free, a seat with my name on it. I bought my ticket from the ticket man, squashed into the front row, and two minutes after I’d arrived in Soma I was heading east again. This was too good to be true – in the space of 50 minutes I’d gone from standing dejected on the side of the road to sitting on a bus that

was going right where I wanted to go.

A couple of hours later the bus arrived at the ferry crossing from the south bank of the River Gambia to MacCarthy Island, home to the town of Jangjang Bureh. At precisely the same time a bus full of tourists pulled up at the ferry, and as they piled off their air-conditioned bus onto the tiny two-car ferry, I hauled my pack on my back and wandered among them, a smelly traveller among pressed and clean *toubabs*. They completely blanked me but their tour guide, a happy-looking Gambian, struck up a conversation, and we whiled away the two-minute crossing with friendly small talk. On the other side I started looking for something to take me the final 2.5km to Jangjang Bureh, but I couldn't see anything anywhere, and I wondered what on earth I was supposed to do now that I was so close to the end.

Seeing no option, I sidled up to the tour guide and asked him if he knew of any buses to the town. 'I tell you what,' he said, 'I'll give you a lift.' And with that he hauled my pack into the bus and I plonked myself down among the sullen-looking collection of scrubbed tourists, wondering whether I really smelled as bad as I thought I did. Pulling into Jangjang Bureh the guide pointed me to various accommodation options, and beaming my best smile at him and his grumpy cohorts, I stepped off the bus and kissed the ground.

Phew.

Travelling Cushion

Written: 30 October 2002

Even though I've only been on the road for just over three weeks, I think it's safe to say that travelling in West Africa is hard going. A Spanish guy I met in Tendaba Camp summed it up rather well: 'I think travelling here is for masochists,' he said. 'If you visit once, you can put it down to accident, but if you keep coming back, you must be a little bit crazy.' I couldn't agree more; travelling here hurts.

The pain is both physical and mental. The physical demands are pretty obvious: buses are hellishly crowded and travelling through the heat of the day is a real test of endurance, and that's before you consider the awful state of the roads and the hours you spend waiting for the bloody things to fill up; eating healthily is challenging, and there's always the hidden threat of something dodgy lurking under the surface of every meal; you need to drink buckets of water throughout the day, and it needs to be clean and bacteria-free; mosquitoes are absolutely everywhere, and although malaria is the constant worry, the bites themselves itch for days and are fantastically irritating; and as if the days aren't testing enough, it takes ages to get used to the concrete-base beds and rock-hard pillows, so getting a good night's sleep is never guaranteed.

The mental pain is sometimes harder to bear.

Travelling is an emotional roller-coaster, doubly so when you're travelling on your own, and sometimes finding the mental strength to get up and go is a real struggle, especially when you know your journey from A to B is going to involve police checks at C, D, E, F and G, a change of bus and a two-hour wait at H, a flat tyre at I, touts flocking round you at J and K, and a bony neighbour's elbow in your ribs as the bus ploughs through potholes at L, M, N and most of the other letters through to Z (and that's without considering all the extra characters on those bloody French keyboards).

Somehow when there are two of you it doesn't seem half as bad, as you can wallow in the masochistic absurdity of it all; but when you're on your own, it's hard to do anything other than just wallow.

There are two things I find essential when trying to cope with the stress. The first – a simple psychological tool that sounds slightly obsessive but which really helps – is drawing lines on the map. After a long, bone-shattering rattle across the baking semi-desert, the first thing I do after showering off the detritus of African transport is to grab my map and draw a thick, black line along the route I've just taken. It's strange how such a little thing can mean so much, but it does all sorts of things; it makes me feel as if I've just achieved something, it makes me proud that I've risen to another chunk of the challenge, and it puts the day in context

with all these other black lines I've drawn. Sometimes the line is short and sometimes it's long, so to make sure I get the maximum effect I carry two maps with me; one is the Michelin 953, the classic travellers' map of northwest Africa, and the other is a locally bought map of whichever country I'm struggling through. The line on the local map is normally quite impressive and the line on the Michelin map is always minuscule, but together they work as a record of my trip, a confidence boost, and an *aide-mémoire*.

Ah, the Memories

Having an *aide-mémoire* is important because the second way I cope with difficult travelling is by building up memories. I know from previous trips that one of the most magical aspects of travelling is the wonderful store of memories it gives you, from horror stories to mind-blowing experiences. You don't remember everything, by any means, but the mind has a delightful habit of storing the best memories at the top of the pile, and it even manages to conjure up happy memories from places where I *know* I was totally miserable. It's a clever bugger, the mind.

The best thing is that these selective memories help to cushion the physical and mental stress of difficult travelling, and this cushion kicks in incredibly quickly. For example, as I write this in a delightful riverside

camp by the River Gambia in Jangjang Bureh, I cast my mind back to places like Dakar and St-Louis, some three weeks away, and I remember good things about them. I remember the cosy little Via Via hotel in Yoff, the atmosphere of Île de Gorée, my first bush taxi ride, the beach huts on L'Hydrobase near St-Louis... and I think of these as good things, though my travelogue tells me I was completely bloody miserable for the whole first week. I was totally homesick, missing Peta, full of doubt, isolated by language difficulties, not terribly enamoured with either Dakar or St-Louis, and I got bitten to shit in my lovely beach hut... but my brain seems to have filtered out the bad bits. This always happens; I find myself thinking happy thoughts all my travels, even those that I absolutely hated at the time.

But travelling is like eating loads of Christmas pudding to get the charm (or it is for me, as I'm not that big a fan of Christmas pud). You have to put in the time, and you know that there's a chance your bowl will contain absolutely no charms at all... but it's worth all the effort to get the bachelor's button, the traveller's aeroplane or the silver sixpence. So even when things are going badly, and I'm left wondering what on earth I'm doing struggling round this infuriating, frustrating and downright obstructive continent, I conjure up my memories, and it cushions the blow. I still get bus bruises on my arse, but I know that eventually it'll all

seem *worth* it...

London Calling

Written: 31 October 2002

It was Chris who set me off when we were still back on the Atlantic coast. I've never been terribly interested in the radio – DJs never seem to play the music I like, and I've only recently matured enough to appreciate Radio Four as something other than 'the station my mum listens to' – so when he announced he was going to pop into Serekunda to buy a radio, I didn't bat an eyelid. But that was before I discovered the joys of travelling with a short-wave in your backpack.

Chris returned that afternoon, D250 lighter and 200g heavier, and sitting down with a copy of the BBC magazine *Focus in Africa*, he started hunting the airwaves for entertainment. Hidden behind layers of static and rhythmic washing sounds, a voice struggled through the haze with, 'This is the BBC,' before fading into the ether. That was enough to get me hooked; I'm not that bothered with the concept of actually listening to the World Service, but I do like the idea of spending hours trying to track down a signal from home. I've just spent the last year working among the multicultural staff of the World Service in Bush House, and the thought of being stranded in the middle of nowhere and being able

to pick up signs of life from back home gives me a thrill. As a weapon against homesickness, it doesn't get much better than hearing from home, even if it's via the BBC.

Chris' experiment was enough to persuade me into Serekunda the next day, but it was a Sunday, and all the shops were shut. I asked around and managed to find nothing but shutters under the electronics signs, but then I spotted a little shop selling TVs and fans, and wandering over I found an Indian man minding a counter full of pocket radios. At first he tried to convince me to pay D350, but I told him I was going to pay D250 because that's what Chris had paid, and that I wanted that model just *there* – a multiple-band model with a digital display, alarm clock, and a natty little carrying pouch. He valiantly tried to distract me from my choice with a whole range of radios, so I politely smiled as he fished out models from the likes of SONY, Philips, Toshaba and countless other brands that sounded strangely familiar but which were clearly nothing to do with SONY, Philips or Toshiba. I guess the intellectual property laws in the Gambia aren't that sophisticated – either that, or nobody's counting – so I picked a brand that didn't sound so blatantly illegal, and two minutes later I was the proud owner of a Techtron Japan eight-band FM/MW/SW radio. I couldn't wait to get it home.

Having played with my new toy for the last few

days, I can report that it works a treat, though sometimes the reception of the BBC is practically unlistenable. But this is half the point: struggling to hear the odd word is part of the fun of listening to the radio on the road, and trawling through the airwaves is a fun way to kill an hour or so. An added bonus is that as you move through the continent, the range of available channels changes completely, and in English-speaking countries like the Gambia, the local stations are often in English, and if you're really lucky they're in an English-patois hybrid that's intelligible yet exotically African.

I doubt it'll turn me into a radio fan back at home, but having a radio is a hoot on the road. I am most definitely a convert.

Jangjang Bureh

Written: 1 November 2002

The old colonial town of Georgetown – now officially renamed Jangjang Bureh after its pre-colonial name – is a delightful spot, perched on MacCarthy Island in the middle of the River Gambia. Like St-Louis it's the location rather than the town itself that lends the place such a pleasant ambience, and after the stress of the journey from Tendaba, ambience was exactly what I needed.

Jangjang Bureh Camp, which I plucked randomly

from the book, has turned out to be a fantastic little place to stay. On the north bank of the River Gambia, a free ferry ride away from Jangjang Bureh itself, the camp has no electricity and oodles of charm. My hut is large and airy and is sheltered from the baking heat by huge trees, and as the sun sets over the river and the mosquitoes come out to party, the staff bring out kerosene lanterns to cast eerie shadows through the long night. Only one other guest shared the tranquillity on my first night, a friendly Dutchman who was cycling from Banjul, through the Gambia, into southern Senegal and back up to Dakar.

It turned out that Chris and I had spotted him a couple of days earlier, as we rumbled along on the bus from Fajara to Tendaba. ‘Look at that’, I said, pointing to the lone white guy, swerving round the potholes on his heavily laden bicycle. ‘Mad bloody *toubab*,’ said Chris, and although I was tempted to agree with him, the Dutchman turned out to be amazingly sane and excellent company. We happily chatted away as the river flowed gently past, its peaceful waters looking more like a lake than a river (the river drops only 10m in its 450km stretch through the Gambia, so it’s hardly a fast-flowing torrent).

As I raised my glass to wish my cycling companion a safe journey to Dakar, I suddenly realised I’d drawn the lines on my map, survived the Tendaba bus

experience and landed in a lantern-lit paradise. God, it felt good.

The Freedom Tree

The next day – yesterday – I set off to explore the old colonial town of Jangjang Bureh. MacCarthy Island was bought by the British in 1823 at the request of a local king as a way of stamping out domestic slavery in the area; although slavery in British colonies was abolished in 1807, for years afterwards there were still large numbers of slaves kept in captivity, often as a result of inter-tribal rivalry. To help put an end to this, the British built a military base on MacCarthy Island called Fort George, and set it up as a place to which slaves could escape and be declared free by the colonial government.

The story goes that when the slaves arrived at the fort, they had to touch a tree in the town centre, and then their names were recorded in a register and they were deemed to be free. Unfortunately the original tree is no longer there, but a month before I arrived, on 12 September, ‘the Jangjang Bureh community held a ceremony to plant a new tree at the site, to celebrate a rebirth of our town and the freedom we all share’ (according to the brand new monument in the town centre). As I stood there admiring the Freedom Tree – or should I say the Freedom Twig, as that’s all it is at the moment – a man wandered up.

He introduced himself with some polite small talk, and pointing to a name on the monument he said, ‘That is me.’ I looked, and underneath the explanation of the tree planting ceremony was the name FMJ Manka, Committee Chairman and Town Historian. It seemed I was talking to the Big Cheese, and what a lovely man he was. He explained all about the new Freedom Monument and the ongoing work in renovating Triangle Park (so called because – wait for it – it’s shaped like a triangle). It all came about through a collaboration between the Jangjang Bureh Town Development Committee (his committee), the US Peace Corps and the National Council for Arts and Culture, who built the walls round the park and helped plant a new tree. As I talked with Mr Manka a workman was laying a concrete path between the tree and a small building to the south, and Mr Manka told me that in two months’ time the garden will be full of flowers, and the building where the registrations of freed slaves took place will house a display all about the slave trade and the history of the local area. There will even be official guides to explain what was going on, and I hope it works out as planned; currently the lightning tours that most people take from the Atlantic resorts tend to whistle through town without stopping, but hopefully this development will give tourists something to stop and think about when they visit Jangjang Bureh.

Down by the Docks

It's a different story down by the northern ferry jetty, where there's a collection of old warehouses decaying into the river. These warehouses were built in the latter half of the 19th century, but that doesn't stop the locals calling one of them the 'slave house' and trying to drum up business. A young lad sauntered up and introduced himself as Alex, and memories of the publicity stunt on Île de Gorée came flooding back; this looked like it could be fun, so I smiled and waited for him to make his move.

Alex insisted I come with him to check out the underground prisons in the slave house, and eager to see how the Gambians would compare with the Senegalese at this game, I followed him down into the basement of the strangely modern-looking house. As with Gorée, if I'd gone in there genuinely believing that this had been a slave house, it would have been pretty atmospheric, but seeing as I knew he was being economical with the truth, Alex wasn't exactly convincing.

He warbled through stories of how men and women were tied up here and there, and were tortured in various horrible ways, and pointing to a puddle on the floor he explained how the chained slaves knelt down to drink there at high tide, the only time the puddle filled up. He lit candles and he tried his best to create an atmosphere of doom and gloom, and finally he showed me a guest

book in which various visitors had written their names, along with the size of their ‘donations’ to the renovation fund. I still wasn’t convinced but I put D10 in the donation box, gave Alex D5, and told him it had been entertaining, but that I didn’t believe his stories. He looked a little surprised, but when I told him that I knew these buildings were built after the abolition of the slave trade, he faltered. He then corrected himself to say that all his stories were about the time before the abolition, and were about black men taking other black men prisoners to sell to the British, but by this stage even he realised he’d missed the boat. He half-heartedly tried to explain a bit more about the house, and offered to show me round the other buildings on the river bank, but I told him I was perfectly happy wandering round by myself, so thanks very much, it’d been fun, and I’d see him around.

It didn’t stop him shadowing me as I explored the rest of Jangjang Bureh, but the spell had been broken. I believed in the Freedom Tree and I believed Mr Manka, but I didn’t believe Alex and his slave house story. And when I looked into his eyes when we said goodbye, he knew that I knew he was making it all up. It was a nice try, though, and I had to give him ten out of ten for inventiveness. If tourists are happy to shell out hard cash for a good yarn, then it’s not my place to stop people spinning them.

Lazing on the River

Last night a tour bus rolled into the camp and filled it up with Dutch tourists, and half an hour later five people turned up whom I'd met in Tendaba (though they'd managed to get a lift from Tendaba to Soma with the UN, so they looked a little less shell-shocked than I had when I'd arrived). Although this shattered the camp's peace, it was a welcome turn of events, as it meant I could join in with some of the tourist activities on offer.

The first event was last night's African dancing round a fire in the camp's back garden. Either the dance was supposed to be choreographed and the dancers were hopeless, or the dance was improvised on the spot and they were great, but whatever the truth the women dancers kept howling with laughter and collapsing into giggling fits throughout the performance. I loved it, though I drew the line at being asked to join in; I'm far too English to want to actually *participate* in anything like this, so I sat on the sidelines while the Dutch contingent demonstrated exactly why fat, pale women shouldn't dance in shorts.

The second event was today's trip up the River Gambia. I thought it might turn out to be pretty boring, but actually it was quite idyllic. The boat was large and comfortable, the scenery was tranquil and beautiful, and I found myself reminded of the backwaters in Kerala in south India, where palm trees line the still waters of the

placid backwaters in a surprisingly similar way. I saw a crocodile swimming alongside the bank, monkeys leaping in the trees, eagles perched in the trees and – after we’d dropped the Dutch contingent off at a place called Sapu, from where they were taking the bus back to Banjul – we saw three hippos blowing bubbles near the bank, their cute ears sticking up out of the water as they barked their strange bark. As if the wildlife wasn’t amazing enough, I also spotted a man climbing a palm tree to drain palm wine from the top. Palm wine is a bizarre drink that proves Mother Nature is a party animal; it’s a naturally occurring liquid that’s collected by men who climb up palm trees and cut holes just below the fronds, into which they insert bottles which slowly fill up with sap. The sap is so high in sugar content that it starts to ferment naturally with yeast from the air, so by the time it’s collected it’s mildly alcoholic. As the day wears on, it gets stronger and stronger, so it’s one of the few drinks that keeps pace with you as you drink more and more throughout the day. As a result it’s lethal, and some countries even add extra yeast for an extra-special kick. It’s yet another reason to love the good old palm tree.

The river trip was a delight; the River Gambia is a wonderfully peaceful place, and without a doubt the best way to appreciate it is by boat.

One Pen, Gambian-Style

Written: 1 November 2002

West Africa, India and Southeast Asia might be a long way from each other, but there is one cultural aspect that transcends geographical boundaries. I'm talking about the One Pen Brigade.

I first met the One Pen Brigade in Indonesia. As a white person wandering through Indonesia there's no way you can blend into the background, and the local children swarm round you like baby birds at feeding time. The chorus kicks in with 'Hello mister, hello mister!' and once you acknowledge them with a 'Hello' back, it's time for the kiddies' mantra. '*Satu stylo, gula-gula, rupiah,*' they chant; 'One pen, sweets, money.' It's the same all over Indonesia, the result of tourists handing out pens, sweets and money in a vain attempt to redress world poverty (though if you really want to help, it's better to give your donation directly to the local school, rather than the kids themselves).

In India the story is the same. 'One pen, sweets, rupees,' they chant after the initial 'Hellos', though it's so quick it comes out as 'Wunpensweerupees'. I have a vivid memory of a crowd of boys running on top of a wall alongside our boat as it sailed the Keralan backwaters; they continued to shout 'Wunpen, wunpen, rupee, rupee' as they ran out of wall and fell into the water, laughing and spluttering.

Similarly Senegal was home to lots of children chanting ‘*Un stylo, bonbons, seefa,*’ but in the Gambia the One Pen Brigade shows a level of sophistication that’s impressive. Children come up to me, introduce themselves with the usual census questions of ‘What your name, where you from, how long in Gambia, is first time here, where you stay?’ and then move on to their own version of the One Pen conversation.

‘I am a student,’ they say.

‘Ah, that’s nice,’ I reply.

‘I do lots of writing,’ they say.

‘That’s very good,’ I reply.

‘Do you have a pen you can give me?’ they venture.

‘I’m sorry, I don’t have one on me,’ I reply.

‘Then give me five dalasi to buy a pen,’ they say.

‘Sorry, I can’t,’ I say. ‘If I give you five dalasi I’d have to give five dalasi to everyone, and I can’t do that.’

‘Then please give me a pen *and* five dalasi,’ they try.

‘No,’ I say. ‘I’m afraid I don’t have a pen to give you.’

‘Then please help me buy a football for my school,’ they say.

‘Blimey, that’s a new one,’ I say, and dissolve into good-natured back-slapping, making it quite clear that I’m happy to chat to them, but I’m not going to hand over any pens, any money, any footballs, or indeed

anything else.

But good for the Gambians. I like people who add a local twist to an international game like One Pen, especially one as bizarre as asking for footballs...

Blister Bug

Written: 2 November 2002

I woke up this morning with a sore right knee and a burning sensation in my left ankle. I initially thought I'd got sunburn from the riverboat – the sun was certainly strong enough – but I'd worn long trousers and socks all day, so it couldn't be that. On closer inspection, I found a string of blisters in a neat line along my left shin, as if someone had stubbed out four small cigarettes just above my ankle. They felt like burns too, and I found an identical collection of blisters on either side of my right knee.

I don't know what this is, but I've had it before when travelling. It's got to be some kind of biting insect, because the blisters are in patterns that can only be made by bugs of some kind, but I have no idea what causes them. They go away after three or four days, just like normal blisters, and don't require anything other than antiseptic cream and regular washing to prevent infection, but somewhere out there in the bed linen of the world lives a bug that gives me blisters. What a

bastard.

Just wait 'til I catch the bugger in the act. He'll rue the day...

Basse Santa Su

Written: 3 November 2002

The blister bug bites I discovered on my last morning in Jangjang Bureh were just the beginning of a strangely frustrating day. I'd decided to head east to Basse Santa Su (commonly known as Basse) so I could cross the border into Senegal and then head northeast to Tambacounda to catch the train to Mali... and luckily the five other guests at the Jangjang Bureh Camp fancied a day out in Basse too. I say 'luckily' because travelling as a group makes things much easier in Africa, not just because the onus of the trip is spread among the whole group, but because buses and bush taxis fill up much quicker when a group of you turns up at the station. I reckoned that it would take no more than an hour and a half to get to Basse, a very short trip by African standards.

Things went wrong pretty early on. One minute we were bargaining with the taxi man to take us the 2.5km across the island to the southern ferry, and the next thing I knew the other five threw up their hands in disgust at the amount the taxi man was asking and stomped off

down the road, happy to walk to the ferry rather than pay. I had a full backpack; I wasn't terribly thrilled by the idea of walking 2.5km in the hot sun, but the others had already faded into the distance. Suddenly I'd gone from being one of many to being just one again. Great.

I managed to get to the ferry without waiting too long for the taxi to fill up, and as soon as it landed I leapt at the nearest bus tout and asked which one was heading for Basse. Surprisingly it seemed none of them were; instead I was ushered onto a bus for Basang, a junction town on the way to Basse, where I would have to change. While I sat there waiting for the off, another bus pulled up, and the rest of the group appeared off the ferry and hopped straight into the new arrival, which sped off straight away; I was to learn later that this bus was going straight to Basse, and the arrival of five people had meant it could head straight off to Basse without further delay. Meanwhile I'd already paid and was stuck on the Basang bus, waiting for the empty seats to fill up.

When we finally pulled out and I got to Basang, I had to change to a minibus and wait for an hour for enough people to come along who wanted to go from Basang to Basse. Finally the second bus left, and around two-and-a-half hours after the others had ditched me in Jangjang Bureh, I was in Basse. Typically, I bumped into the others straight away, and learned that they'd

already been here for ages. Such is the power of travelling in a group, assuming it actually sticks together.

Basse

‘Never mind,’ I thought, and picked a decent-sounding hotel from the book before heading off to explore Basse. Wondering what I could find to do in the Gambia’s easternmost town, I started wandering round at random.

Basse is nothing special to look at, but the people are simply wonderful. It’s obviously a long way from the bumster areas of the Atlantic, because in Basse people are genuinely friendly and I didn’t get any hassle from anyone about anything. I even walked through the bus station without any touts grabbing me and trying to persuade me to go somewhere, which was a first for me in this part of the world. I warmed to this dusty dump instantly.

My initial impressions were proved correct as I munched through some lunch at a restaurant called Traditions, pleasantly situated on the banks of the River Gambia in the north of town. My portable palmtop computer is the ultimate ice-breaker, especially when the fold-out keyboard comes out, and as soon as I started typing in the tranquillity of the restaurant, I noticed the young waiter looking over.

‘It’s a small computer,’ I said, and showed him

what I was doing. I demonstrated typing ‘My name is Mark’ on the screen, and then asked him how to spell his name, so I could type that in too. His name was Hamadi, and his friend who also wandered over for a look was called Mamoudou. They were delightful people, and apart from a quick bout of shopping and a short phone call home, I spent the whole afternoon chatting away with them. They were typically friendly Gambians (well, Mamoudou was from Guinea, but had lived in Basse for the last eight years, so the Gambian way had obviously rubbed off on him) and they were thrilled to get a reaction out of a *toubab*; too many tourists just ignored them, they said, and it was lovely to meet someone who was happy just to chat.

And I was happy to chat, too. The Gambians are delightful conversationalists and it was all too soon that I had to go back to my hotel for dinner, which I’d ordered for 7pm.

Beginning of the End

Things started to go wrong as soon as I got back to the inaccurately named Jem Hotel. The women who ran the establishment knocked on my door at 6.30 to apologise, but it turned out she couldn’t cook me dinner after all, because the boy who had been supposed to paint the kitchen that morning hadn’t started painting until the afternoon, and he wasn’t going to be finished until

tomorrow, so the kitchen was closed. I'd ordered dinner at the hotel because I hadn't been able to find any decent-looking restaurants in town, so this was a bit of a blow.

I had no choice, then, but to follow the concierge's advice and to wander south out of town until I found F&B's Restaurant, which she said might be able to serve me some food. I eventually tracked it down, well outside the town limits, in an unlit bar that was blanketed in empty bottles and a feeling of complete and utter desolation. I asked if they did food; they said they might be able to rustle up some fried chicken and chips if I wanted. There was nothing else for miles around; sure, I wanted.

The Bière la Gazelle they brought me was cold and smelled of fish, but I didn't care; this Senegalese brew isn't that great, but its saving grace is that it comes in a big 630ml bottle, which always helps to cushion the inevitable blow of the kind of establishment that serves it. I sucked on my beer, and when it arrived I devoured the chicken and chips so quickly I thought I'd celebrate with another beer. This time I got a Julbrew, Gambia's finest beer, though the smell this time was of offal rather than fish.

While I ate and drank as if it was the end of the world – which was what it felt like – I noticed that F&B's was filling up with some distinctly shady

customers. I don't have a sixth sense for these things – lack of exposure, I guess – but even I realised I'd ended up in the local knocking shop. When I went to pay, the chunky lady behind the bar was quite dismayed that I was leaving, as I'd obviously lent the place an air of respectability; I'd wondered why they'd shooed me out onto a table by the road so everyone walking past could see me enjoying my fishy Gazelle, and now I knew why. It was definitely time to go, and in my rush I didn't notice they'd forgotten to charge me for my food. Perhaps it was for the best...

By this time it was pitch black outside, and with a shock I realised that Basse isn't exactly flooded with mains electricity. At night the lucky shops with generators throw pools of strip-light onto the road, but most places are lit by kerosene lanterns, which makes wandering round the town a delight. It also meant my *toubab* status was hidden by the night, so I could stalk the streets like an invisible man – not that Basse was any hassle anyway, but it still felt refreshing not to be gawked at all the time.

Family-sized Bed

That night, as if to make sure I left Basse with only the best impressions, a family of fleas hopped out of my pillow and bit me to shreds. It was quite fascinating; at first I thought it was mosquitoes, as the fan was directly

above the bed and it was impossible to put up my mosquito net. I lit a coil and tried to relax, but the sound of the hotel's generator at the end of the block kept nudging me awake, and the bites didn't stop, so by the time the generator was switched off at 1am and the fan died, I'd hardly slept at all.

Things didn't change. The generator had been masking the pumping bass from a huge sound system down the road – some kind of Saturday night bop, I presume – so for the next hour I was entertained by Gambian pop music at full volume, while what I thought were mosquitoes continued to lacerate my arms. I slipped into my sleeping bag liner in a vain attempt to stop the biting, but all it did was make me sweat more. I wondered if I would ever sleep.

Luckily the plug got pulled on the nearby rave at 2am and an eerie calm descended on the town, broken only by spasmodic barking and the odd truck bombing past. To my amazement, in the gloomy silence I heard clicking in my pillow; there it was, a definite regular snapping, a sound that reminded me of the seawater shrimps you hear when you're bunked down in the bottom of a steel-hulled yacht. In the context of my bed it sounded strangely like something... um... jumping. Yes, definitely jumping.

You've never seen me move so fast. Close inspection of my pillow with my torch showed that my

bed had what looked like fleas. The little blighters were white and the size of pinheads, and when they bit it felt like a mild prick with a needle. I draped my sarong over the worst area and lay back, trying not to think about it too hard. Instead I idly wondered what would happen if a flea started biting me on my blister bites, and with this happy thought on the edge of my dreams I slipped into a long night of short bursts, wondering how the people of Basse could be so lovely when they were surrounded by such shit. It's not the first time I've found the most wonderful people in the armpits of the Earth, and I doubt it will be the last.

Basse Santa Su to Tambacounda

Written: 3 November 2002

I wasn't too annoyed that the fleas woke me up at the crack of dawn, because today I had to cross the border. Most travellers in Africa have a horror story or two about borders, bribes and bureaucracy, so I tend to assume that any journey that includes a border crossing will require more effort than normal. How right I turned out to be, though this time it wasn't down to the politics.

From eastern Gambia, the geographically logical way to get into Senegal is to head south from Basse Santa Su, crossing the border south of Sabi and rattling on to the Senegalese town of Vélingara. From there a

good road connects you to Tambacounda in eastern Senegal, which is where I hope to join the Dakar-Bamako train, bound for Mali. On the map it looks deceptively simple... but it would, wouldn't it?

From Basse to Vélingara is around 25km, so at a brisk walking pace of say 5km/h, a not unreasonable speed without a heavy pack, one could theoretically cover the distance in just over five hours. If I ever have the misfortune to end up among the fleas of Basse again, I may well bear this in mind; it'd be a darn sight quicker than taking public transport.

But I didn't know this when I got up this morning; as far as I was concerned the fleas had given me a wonderfully early start to the day, and it was barely 8am by the time I hoisted my pack onto my back and struck out for Basse's bus station. I felt pretty confident that I'd reach Tamba in good time; the sun was shining, the people were smiling their *bonjours* all along the road, and I was about to change country, which always gives me a strange kind of thrill. What could possibly go wrong?

Rust Bucket

I'm glad you asked that, because one of the great things about being a writer is the therapeutic effect one gets from getting it all down on paper, and after the journey from Basse to Vélingara, a bit of therapy wouldn't go

amiss.

The first sign that things weren't going to be that easy was when I asked the station master where the bush taxis for Vélingara could be found. He looked at me with a surprisingly un-Gambian grumpiness and said, 'No taxis today.'

'No taxis?' I said.

'No taxis', he said, and waved me away with an almost Senegalese dismissal. But after an entire night spent partying with a pillow full of fleas, I wasn't going to take any shit from anyone, so I asked him if there were any buses I could take.

'Yes,' he said, practically drowning me in information.

'Can I buy a ticket from you, then?' I asked, and he grudgingly wrote a ticket out for me, took D35 from my balled fist, and turned back to something far more important, namely staring into the middle distance and smoking a stubby high tar cigarette.

'Um,' I ventured. 'Which bus is it, please?'

'Uh,' he grunted, pointing at the bus in front of him with an irritated wag of his finger.

'What, *this* one?' I said.

'Uh,' he said, and terminated the conversation with a withering look that barely concealed his smirk.

'Oh shit,' I thought as I turned to the bus. 'This is going to hurt.'

Cars gently rusting into nothing are a common enough sight in developing countries; cars come to places like Africa to die, but first they're flogged to within inches of their lives, and then a few inches beyond that. Most cars get stripped and their parts recycled – everything is worth something to somebody out here – but a fair number of vehicles simply grind to a halt and gasp their last gasps by the side of the road, and get left there for the sand to blast them into modern African sculptures for passing bus passengers to admire. I'd genuinely thought the bus opposite the grumpy chief was one of these vehicles, a sad little van with a history but no future, but it turned out that this rust bucket was supposed to get me across the border. I couldn't believe it.

Not only that, it appeared as if I was the only person idiotic enough to be heading to Vélingara that day. The bus was little more than an open-sided van with plank benches down the sides, and I felt a bit silly placing my hat at the end of one of the benches to reserve my spot. My backpack looked distinctly lonely perched on top of the rust-riddled roof, and I wondered if this little beauty was ever going to fill up, let alone start.

My ticket proclaimed that I'd bought a seat on the 7.30 bus to Vélingara, but it was already 8.15 and I was the only one waiting. This didn't bode well, so I idled away the time by changing my remaining dalasis into

CFAs with a tout, buying a bottle of water, and putting a brave face on things. People slowly trickled in, each of them buying a ticket and doing a double-take at the rusting hulk they'd bought a seat in. After an hour the driver cranked open the bonnet and filled the radiator up with water, and I marvelled at the optimism being shown in the various lumps of grimy rust, held together by all sort of makeshift mechanics. One guy in the queue caught my eye as I admired the mess under the bonnet. 'I am thinking you do not have vehicles like this in your country,' he said with a touch of pride, and I nodded. I guess being proud of your rust buckets is a good idea; it's that or get depressed about them, I suppose, and the first option is far more Gambian.

One by one the sarongs, bags and hats appeared on the seats, and by 9.30 the 7.30 bus was ready to depart. Perhaps it wouldn't be so bad after all; I'd been expecting a much longer wait.

Room for More

Without waiting to be told twice I leapt into our trusty rust bucket, and sucked in my ribs as we crammed six people along each bench, with another passenger sitting at the front of the rear cabin, his back to the driver. Two women hopped into the front passenger seat, one of them holding a child, and I did a quick body count: we had four in the front plus 13 in the back, making 17 in

total.

But it didn't stop there. Someone else climbed in and sat on the spare tyre in the back, followed by another hopeful who sat on my feet, and three more likely lads grabbed the roof at the back and leapt on the bumper. By now we were up to 22 people inside a tiny little van, and that didn't count the ticket boy whom I'd last seen on the roof; but at least we were ready for the off. A quick push start shocked the engine into life and sent a cloud of acrid exhaust into the back of the cabin, and like a lifetime smoker hacking the morning out of his lungs, we hit the road (though with the suspension as it was, most of the time it felt more like the road was hitting us).

I missed most of the countryside on the approach to the Gambian border post as all I could see was a bunch of crushed locals bouncing along with the potholes, but half an hour into our bumpy ride I got a chance to see what the fuss was all about, as the back wheel nuts fell off and rolled away into the desert along with the wheel. We piled out into the scorching heat and instantly ran for the shelter of the surrounding scrub, while the ticket boy went looking for the wheel and nuts. The tyre turned out to be completely flat, which had no doubt helped to loosen the nuts, so the driver rolled out the spare tyre and jacked the bus up on a log, while the other men squatted round the tyre, scratching their

Islamic beards and arguing over how to fix it, as men do the world over.

Luckily the ticket boy found the nuts in the middle of the dusty road, so after a pit-stop of only 15 minutes we were ready to pack back into the bus once more. A push start later we were on our way to the Gambian border post, where we had to stop, pile out again, and get our ID cards and passports out; then it was into no-man's land to the Senegalese border, where all the luggage had to be unstrapped, approved by customs, and the ID cards and passports handed to the Senegalese border official for stamping; and then all the luggage had to be packed onto the roof once again, ready for the final stretch to Vélingara. As border crossings go, it was really quite slick, but that's not saying much.

All the bumping and grinding did serve a purpose, though. When I got to Vélingara and had to wait a further hour-and-a-half for the bush taxi to Tambacounda to fill up (this time there were no buses), it seemed like luxury; the bush taxi was comfortable, the road was in excellent condition, and the journey much quicker. By the time I arrived in Tamba the feeling was starting to creep back into my buttocks, and I'd made it into eastern Senegal in one piece. Which is more than can be said for the battered old bucket that got me there...

Thoughts on Leaving

Written: 3 November 2002

I liked the Gambia, though I can't quite put my finger on why. There's not a great deal to see, and there's nothing world class in terms of attractions, but the people are delightful, the atmosphere is laid-back, and the fact that they speak English is a positive bonus for someone whose French is shaky at best.

I'm pretty hopeful for the place, too. It's a poor country and its international debt sucks up most of its income – no surprises there, then – but it feels optimistic, and I hope this optimism reflects a bright future for the place. As far as travelling goes, Gambia is great once you ignore the awful main highway and the complete lack of a boat service along the placid River Gambia, which conspire to make it a deeply unpleasant challenge to escape from the touristy west coast without taking a sanitised tour. Back in Basse, I asked Hamadi why there wasn't a regular passenger boat service along the river, and he told me it was because most Gambians won't travel by boat, as a lot of them can't swim and are afraid of water. I couldn't believe it, given the way the river defines the very shape of the country, but perhaps the river's crocodiles, snakes and hippos have something to do with it.

However it appears that things might change, as there are plans to resurface the worst stretch of the

highway, and a regular boat service might be starting up in the tourist season. The latter is a particularly good idea; given the Gambia's shape and the way the river wanders right through the heart of everything, decent river transport would transform the country. With places like Jangjang Bureh rediscovering their colonial past at the same time, tourism in the Gambia could really benefit.

I hope it does, because tourism that's run by local companies can only help the economy, and that's got to be good news for the locals. Tourism on the Atlantic coast mainly makes money for foreign companies – only 10 to 15 per cent of the Gambia's gross national product is from tourism, which is a lot lower than the turnover should produce. The lack of pleasant public transport helps to feed this stranglehold, but given a boat service and a decent highway, independent travellers could start spending their money here in sizeable amounts, and money spent locally goes directly into the economy.

If anywhere deserves this kind of break, it's delightful little countries like the Gambia. If it only had a Taj Mahal or a Timbuktu, it would be paradise.

THE END

Further Reading

This story is continued in another of my books, *The Head and the Heart: Travels in Senegal* (also available for free from 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, covering 16 countries and five continents:

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- *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*
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Happy travels!

Mark Moxon, September 2004

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