

DISCOVERING SENEGAL'S SINE SALOUM

March 11, 2011

Dear Friends and Family,

When the Nile Cruise scheduled with Nouvelles Frontieres cancelled, my friend Jacqueline and I looked about in their catalogue for a suitable replacement. We lucked out! During the same week they were offering a tour (by canoe/pirogue and open air 4x4) in the delta of the Sine Saloum, Senegal, just north of the border with The Gambia. The focus was on meeting local people, traveling by local transport and eating local food. The tour succeeded in providing all three. I was thrilled to have the opportunity to return to West Africa for the first time since leaving Benin in 2006.

The start was a bit rocky since our flight (a full 747 to Dakar) departed Paris 3 hours late putting us on the ground at 3 am just in time for two other large full flights to arrive, all disgorging their baggage onto the single conveyor belt at Dakar airport. Pandemonium reigned for about an hour, but eventually we found our bags, loaded our open-air truck and (happily smelling Africa en route!) arrived at our cabin at Lac Rose 40 km northeast of Dakar at 5 am. Then up at 8:30 am for 9 am breakfast and 9:30 am departure. We were thankful for the enclosed cabin as the night air was very cold during the truck ride.

Lac Rose is the world's second saltiest lake after the Dead Sea, its rose color is due to an algae and salt mining is the major activity. It is also the termination point of the annual Paris-Dakar road rally. The salt mining is accomplished by workers wading in the lake, filling canoes with shovels full of the lake bed, then, once ferried to shore, other workers empty the canoe by loading buckets which they pour onto piles marked with initials of each salt merchant. The salt is then bagged and collected daily by middlemen – each 25 kg sack brings about 25 cents to the seller.



We arrived about 2 pm (via Mbour) at our gite in Simal to a wonderful lunch of lightly fried local shrimp, round (Thai) rice with onion sauce and a whole sautéed fish each – sitting open air adjacent to the inland waterway. Of course, being a French tour group, we had wine as well as water with every lunch and dinner. Then a free afternoon to nap in hammocks, or enjoy the calm of this 30x50 km inland branch of the Atlantic with its many islands of baobab, bordered by mangroves, and villages of Serer and Nguinka



tribes.



(I was reading an excellent biography of Leopold Sedar Senghor, Senegal's first president and a poet, whose birth village we visited).

This evening was one of the highlights of the trip as we walked to a nearby village for the first night of



three days of Senegalese wrestling competition, leading ultimately to the next national champion. Wrestling in Senegal is the number 1 sport – more important than football – and the winners are heroes and very well off! The competition was in an “arena” surrounded by canvas on the beach as is customary. Constant drumming and a chant (by the local women) went on the whole time (about 6 pm to 10 pm). It caused the competitors to strut in a particular gait

individual competitions were happening. time to mention that later in the trip I delete the first 600 photos I took (new including everything on the wrestling gathered doing hair extensions, etc.



which they continued to do in the arena even as the Unfortunately, now is the managed to inadvertently camera, wonderful zoom), evening, village women (photos courtesy of MG)

The rest of our group (7 total) arrived morning and on Saturday afternoon we next stop. French is an official language, franca in Senegal as there are many distinctive languages (our guide from the south in Casamance plus several other local languages we encountered en route). Although Senegal is 90% Muslim, many families have both Christians and Muslims, and underneath it appears the historical animism is still very present (as was the case in Benin).

that evening and the next set off by pirogue to our Wolof is actually the lingua

En route to Mar Lobj, we stopped at the birth village of Senghor and visited the museum. Everywhere we noticed that the domesticated donkeys, sheep and goats roam freely during the day to graze and return to their respective homes at night. At Mar Lobj our thatch roofed cabin had a small porch overlooking the water. A pair of red birds were busy in the bushes and a hummingbird busy in our thatched ceiling (I got a photo of the hummingbird – darn to have lost them!). We visited an interesting village with a small Catholic church and school (as it was Sunday we could hear Christian music coming from some houses), a Virgin Mary statue was in a shrine in the shadow of the Mosque's minaret. We visited a sand painting artist – very interesting as no dyes are used, just the natural colors of locally available sands. I bought “freedom” which also looked to me like a modern stylized baobab tree (6th



from left in top row in photo). Women were making jams and syrups from local fruits. Another major women’s activity in this region is gathering the oysters which grow everywhere on the trunks of the mangroves, which they then dry.

We continued by pirogue, with a brief time stopping to try our luck fishing with hand lines, to our next stop in Palmarin, which is a local fishing “port”. The large bay is very shallow so the catch was being offloaded from the pirogues into buckets carried on men’s heads as they waded to shore where a refrigerated truck was waiting.

We needed to be “ferried” to shore, which turned out to be a horse drawn flat cart to take four of us at a time (and later our baggage) to shore. I was surprised at the prevalence of horses on the trip, including our second night when we watched them being bathed and cared for in the bay adjacent to



our huts.

We walked a short way to Campement de Palmarin, and then spent the afternoon and evening with a



family in a nearby village. This village happened to be 80% Christian, with a large church. We saw an old man transferring thread onto the weaving spindles (a weaver creates about 7 meters of cloth per day on

a narrow loom) and visited the church with its lovely stained-glass window. We learned that there is a catholic school, infirmary and nuns who are nurses as well as midwives. There are also government run schools and a medical clinic.



With our families (the women) we drew water from the well, cut up meat and vegetables, and prepared a traditional Senegalese sauce over the charcoal brazier. Once it was finished (at least an hour of cooking time) the local “couscous” was prepared which is a millet-based product mixed with ground baobab leaves. No resemblance



to Moroccan couscous, but eaten the same way with hands dipping it into the sauce. It was unusual that the sauce was meat-based, normally fish is the local diet. In this village most of the women we met had at least seven children, and we were surprised to see alcohol consumed, soum soum, a local very strong home-made liquor. We were given local clothes to wear for the dancing that followed, when our group and respective families came together. Although this village often entertains tourists with traditional dancing, this was the first time they had tried the host family/prepare a meal and share cultures together program.

Our next day was overland in a different open air 4x4 which actually had very comfortable seats (the climbing in and out was still a bit challenging). On land we saw the nomads and their cattle everywhere. The piste roads were rough (and together with the dust made for tired bodies at the end of the day). After taking the ferry across to Foundiougne (which used to be the primary peanut export location) we



had a wonderful lunch of free range chicken at a local gite.



We then bought rice which we were to take to the next villages we would visit. At the village that afternoon, as I was sitting down, a toddler stood next to me pulling at my arm hairs (I had forgotten that most Africans don't have body hair), seemingly more fascinated by the hair than the white skin. Our gite



this evening has cabins on stilts. The next day was peaceful, traveling by pirogue. After a couple of hours of fishing we had not succeeded in catching our lunch, but of course our guide had provided for that eventuality. We had a fabulous picnic of grilled fish marinated with a vinaigrette sauce, another sauce for the rice and fruit for dessert. Our guide provided not only wine for the meal, but aperitif of pastis, mint syrup

and juice. I was encouraged to add some mint syrup to the pastis and it was delicious! (I now know that is known as a perroquet). We sat in the shade in a former fishing camp were completely surrounded by a troop of cattle who were very curious about our lunch, but not at all interested in disturbing us, even the one who was the most curious.



Later in the day we visited a temporary village of migratory fishermen. The children remain in their permanent village to go to school and the young children, young women, men and older women spend about 5 months in the temporary village fishing, gathering shellfish (seemed abundant and quite a variety of species) which they dry for future consumption. Note the “mosque”. It was interesting to see men using the mortar and pestle to pound and we learned it was a product that they need for their pirogues, so it was their job to pound it, not the women’s.



We also visited a small village where spontaneously one of our group bought a pregnant goat for a child in the village which he could raise for the next 3 years until he was of school age and then sell it to pay for the school fees to allow him to go to school. The village women and children spontaneously started drumming and dancing, inviting us to join, to celebrate this unexpected gift.



That evening we were in Sokone, a port, where our cabins actually had electricity and air conditioning and we had a swimming pool. Dinner started with as many oysters as we could eat and continued



with fish steaks, dauphinois potatoes and a banana tart. The next morning we visited the weekly market at Sokone.



We visited a school outside of town where the classes were not too large. Arabic language (writing) was being taught (as well as French), so that the families would be willing to send their children to school. In town, there are often classes of 40-60 children each as I had experienced in Benin. The teachers, after receiving their degree must work as volunteers for 2 years in a village. Then they may receive a contract, but after another few years are permitted to take the exam to actually become professional teachers. At that point, when there are openings, they may get hired as fonctionnaires (employees).



One new thing to me were the sequined headscarves that many of the women were wearing.



Next day we were en route (4x4) to Kaolack, the export capital of peanuts (still the #1 agriculture crop of Senegal – most of which gets processed into oil). En route we stopped unannounced at a Peul encampment where the families of the herders build temporary villages for the women and the children. They are approximately 200 km from their main community. Physically they are of lighter skin and more chiseled features, much as I remember from Benin. I missed the chance to exchange my bead earrings, which one woman admired, for her authentic gold ones!



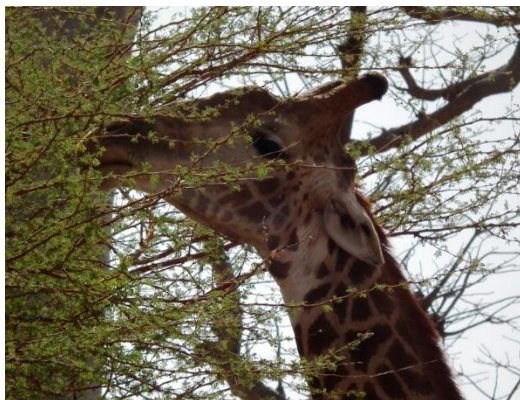
Kaolack is now the peanut export capital and there were building-sized mounds of peanuts all around the port.



After time in the souk of Kaolack (very traditional African market) our final day was a total departure with a visit to an animal reserve not far from Dakar.



We saw many ostriches (including babies) and many giraffes (including the youngest born February 22nd and next older two, born in November, who seemed to pose for a postcard photo).



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Other animals included a pair of white rhinoceros, zebras, warthogs, monkeys, buffalo and several species of antelope including one known as horse antelope, indigenous to Senegal.



We also saw a baobab tree (complete with skulls) where traditionally the Gigots (local animist wise men) were buried.



So, my friends, this was a most satisfying trip. Yes, touristic, but it didn't feel too intrusive.

Love to all,



Marilee