

Report by Carina Watney*

I would look back fondly on my sheltered childhood memories of Africa with nostalgic reverie, and ten years later, the time had come to return. The sex-crazed drunken beach holidays that plagued my teens was now anathema. This year, I had a tripartite mission: research, internship, and holiday. But I knew that this time if I wanted to learn something I would have to open my mind a bit and heed Achebe's caveat that "travellers with closed minds can tell us little except about themselves" however difficult it would be to shake off the egocentric hubris that hung like a fardeau around my neck and had conditioned by whole education.

My colleague, Karina, an attractive brunette from Canada, and fluent in four languages, met my arrival in Dakar and drove me to meet my host family. My host family lived in the well-to-do residential area of Mermoz. The kitchen was a tiny, primitive mess with two stoves and plastic plates and jugs placed awkwardly on the floor. The broken sink was over-spilling with plastic bottles, which were to be filled with purified tap water, having not been given the choice to opt for mineral water. The bathroom was a nightmare, the only thing that works being the door, and occasionally the shower head that dripped pathetically. I could fathom how they could possibly live in such conditions. In spite of this, I make an effort to get along with the family, and broke the ice by giving them some gifts that I had bought in England, and watched TV with the youngest family member, Xena, whose French was very well-articulated. My first meal was a shock, for not only did I have to wait until past 10pm, and the food horrible, but we ate on the floor out of a common pot. It felt very uncivilised, and even more so as the girls preferred to eat with their hands. Afterwards, they peeled small yellow mangoes with their teeth, like rabid animals.

3rd July

If hospitality, human warmth, solidarity, unity and tolerance were measures of wealth, Senegal is not a poor country. They call it "le pays de la teranga" and it is what brings visitors back time and again. If you ignore the city touts and the rip-off merchants that inhabit the tourist spots, the Senegalese have an incredible joie de vivre, tenderness and affection. It is a warmth that they will never experience in Europe, a palpable, yet amorphous, human bond that

makes even the most distant stranger your family. And in an Africa where the family is sacred, and uncles and cousin do not take second place, there is always someone to turn to for help.

8th July

The city roared and heaved. Amid a dazzling maze of market stores, noisy buses and taxis belching out black fumes, Dakar appeared tumultuous babel, raw and chaotic. The furiously busy streets stank of rotton cheese and worse, and the rush of people and vehicles in the roads was overpowering that I was constantly looking over my shoulder to check the traffic situation and ensure no one was trying to pick at my rucksack.

9th July

Inquisitive about the toubab, the two boys, aged 5 and 3 wandered into my room and had a look around. I let them wear my oversized sunglasses, which they adored playing with. Thinking I was going to be taken to the beach, I contented myself with teaching the eldest boy, Ibou, to play cards. I soon realised, however, that he is not a strong counter so I use the cards to teach him how to count. I later introduced him to the art of watercoloured pencils and he drew colourful blobs into my notebook, having not yet mastered the ability to draw. As they prepare to leave, I hold Assietou in my arms, perching her on my knees as she chews on my necklace. Ibrahima pursues his polygamous banter. "Ca" he remarks, pointing at the baby girl, "c'est ma femme".

15th July

Every Saturday morning, the women of the house prepared meals for the weekend, grounding spices with an oversized pestle and motor, apparently giving them the liberty of a free Sunday, which one spends with the family anyway.

19th July

I woke up with the most excruciating pain. "Europeans are not strong. Africans are strong. We can take pain" grand-mère chanted as I lay in a sticky pool of sweat in my bed. I was insulted but too weak to argue back. Karina came over, and I admitted that I was not at ease any more. She kindly offered for me to stay at her villa, and I cherished the idea for the next couple of days.

20th July

I proceeded to pack my bags, while Xena lectured me, the glimmer from the candle highlighting a more sinister side to her character. I could no longer unure

myself to the primitivity and anti-teranga of this household, and needed to escape.

It was 11pm, and I walked to the office, feeling very vulnerable, knowing how clear it was that everything I had with me was on my back. The power had just come back on, and Karina was working, so I waited patiently for her, grateful for her hospitality. Her attractive palatial villa was minimalistically decorated with tropical plants, bamboo and cashmere cloths. Her boyfriend came over much later, and we drunk wine until 4am.

26th July

After another two days of powercuts, I took a daytrip to Lac Rose with Charmagne and her host brother. I locked a girl I hired as a maid in the villa for the day. We took a bus out through the dilapidated bidonvilles, as a man fell asleep on my shoulder. As we left the grimey suburbs, we passed through green countryside which had been colonised by forests of Baobab, the mighty emblem of Senegal with a plethora of uses.

July 27th

The next evening I had to admit my mea culpa, for I wished to celebrate Charmagne's leaving with some sort of party, without thinking that she might not be that festive. I got a group of us together and went clubbing, despite it being a Thursday, and the Dakarois only go out at the weekend, what we call VSD (Vendredi, Samedi, Dimanche). I was frustrated to have to take on the onerous task of the toubab pays, especially when it is free for girls, but even more so two days later when I went clubbing with Bouba, who had barely 5000 in his wallet. The club was fancy, a place for *les branchés*, though the drinks were weak, and I was annoyed not to be with the rest of the clan.

3rd August

After a few last days working for my internship, I picked up Iain and Paddy from the airport, a move that signalled the end to my freedom as a single female traveller. What I was able to experience alone, enveloped in the teranga of my friends, was far superior to travelling with "the boys", two left-wing students I know through I common friend at Somerville College. In the first place, when they joined me in my villa in Dakar, they were "the Anglophones", more of an inconvenience than a hindrance, and I did all that I could to ensure that they got to taste what Dakar had to offer, the town, the sights, the stunning beaches, the magnificent views at Dakar's apogee, and found them some friends to take care of them. On our first evening together, after taking them to the beach, we visited my old family, whom I had not seen since I abandoned them. We then sat

outside drinking attaya, which they prepared over a small gas stove, with the humorous security guards who work near to my villa.

9th August

We left the next morning for the Gambia, taking a painfully winding road as our driver dodged the potholes and puddles that marked the orange-brown dirt track road. We got out at the border, went through immigration customs, negotiating this bilingual wedge of land. I was still in French mode, but the boys relished the opportunity to communicate directly with the Gambians, asking a plethora of questions and returning every salutation. Gambia appeared a muddy ruin of shacks, a dirty brown speckled with colour, like a Smarties cookie. A man tried to guide me to fetid public toilets, whose grotesque sight insulted me. "Who do you think I am?"

My waiter that night was also in love with me. This was getting ridiculous, but convenient in terms of manipulation. Since I was a little tipsy from the beer, and been sent off on a dare, I got him to scale a coconut tree, and half an hour later I retrieved two freshly skinned coconuts as evidence of my accomplishment.

12th August

The boys went to play golf, while I went on my beach date with Moses. Sunshine beach is where many of the larger luxury hotels are located, and it was a pleasant morning walk. Beyond his friend's restaurant, a wide and placid lagoon sparkled in the sunshine. A stray dog accompanied us as we walked along the oil stained beach among the prickly mangrove. A few solitary fisherman, and their blue boats stood quietly in the open ocean, Banjul's skyline hovering 20 km in the distance. After a frolic in the water, the sky turned a nasty grey, the colour of dirty dishwater. It started to rain heavily, and he took me to his hovel to sit out of storm that did not appease for hours. He bought me an egg baguette for lunch, and we listened to reggae music. As my top had been ruined in the rain, I got him to buy me a new one. I told him never to take an European there again because it fucked with my mind. It was unbearably primitive, and so he took me to his beach concert once the rain had stopped. He sat with four other drummers and they played the djembe for hours.

15th August

Pa drove Paddy and me to Tanje Village open air museum, after which he took us to the fish market, a rushed scene of prismatic phantasmogoria. Paddy is a raging socialist and was happy to speak to any helpless children that pleaded him for money. Scraggy kids, yelling and gesticulating at us and chanting "Toubab Toubab! Toubab!" would always accompany our walks through the

vibrant green village. A herd of cattle passed through. A small girl, with a tray on her head, grabbed hold of my hand and I walked with her for a while.

18th August

I left the boys in the Gambia, and Pa took me back to Banjul, accompanying me on the ferry to the other side. From here I caught a taxi, followed by a motorbike taxi and a horribly cramped Peugeot taxi back to Dakar.

I got back to Europe on the 29th.

**Carina Watney is a 20 year old British student at Oxford University where she reads geography. She has travelled across most of Europe, having organised a five-week backpacking adventure in 2005. She has always retained a passion for Africa, and this was her first solo trip.*

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