

## 11. Post-communism is the place to be

Over the past few decades, actually since its very inception, communism/socialism has earned itself a pretty bad reputation. There's really nothing wrong with it other than the fact it has never worked out. In theory it's great. Fairness, the well-off helping the needy, etc. But Marxism seems to have been done in by Leninism. In reality, communism/socialism goes hand in glove with governments that make a mess of their political, economic, social, agricultural and just about every other type of system they lay upon their hapless citizens. Perhaps the exception will be China of the future. Over the past half-century the PRC has moved from totalitarian to authoritarian to what it is now calling market socialism. If what exists now gives way to liberal democracy, call it communism/socialism/capitalism with Chinese characteristics, China of the future may well serve as a model for the developing world. You may feel this is a bit optimistic, my suggesting that China is centimetering toward becoming a liberal democracy, but I ask you to grant me this small bit of optimism in my vision of the world's future, which you must have figured out by now is bleak if its anything.

I am not sure if Chinese communism's reinvention of itself will be the model of future development. If this were to be the case, however, the countries that China might influence are those that have already gone through the agonies of the communist/socialist stage (like China itself). Generally, I am bullish on these types of countries, Vietnam, for example. Another such country is the Republic of Guinea, in West Africa. It is a country that through thick and thin has looked up to China as a big sister, and still does. Guinea resembles Zambia, my favorite country of East Africa and another China admirer, in that for me they are the real Africa. Both are former communist states (still friends of the almost ex-communist China). At the moment they both exist without much tourism, and thus without much tourist culture. In this regard each is a pleasure to visit. No one runs after you yelling, 'Hey, white man, I have a bargain for you.' There not much for the sight-seer to see in Guinea (Zambia at least has Victoria Falls), but just being there is sufficient experience. To walk around, observing, witnessing, pondering, without touts is indeed a vacation from the rest of West Africa.

There are three Guineas in Africa. There is Guinea-Bissau, a former Portuguese colony, located next to the Guinea which I visited. Given the glowing descriptions of Guinea-Bissau I find in guidebooks (and the desire to find Portuguese food at African prices), I really want to visit this country, but the week after I arrive in Africa some sort of political trouble begins in Bissau, the capital, with Senegal sending in its French-trained troops to put down a coup attempt. Even though fellow travelers assure me that there is no gunfire reported outside of Bissau, I decide not to take the risk, not to visit even the rural areas (which in any case are hard to access without going through Bissau). The third Guinea is called Equatorial Guinea and is located next to Cameroon, on the other side of West Africa, not on this trip's itinerary.

The Republic of Guinea has gone through the usual name changes that characterize African nation-states, which a quarter century after independence are still in a perpetual search for identity. At one time it was called the Revolutionary Republic of Guinea, and today it is usually called Guinea-Conakry, after the capital city which holds about 10% of the country's population. I have no desire to visit the capital which by all accounts is a most dismal urban entity, even by African standards. So I plot a trip from Basse in the eastern part of The Gambia that will take me through the southeastern corner of Senegal and then through Guinea on the way back to Cote d'Ivoire, thus completing the left loop of my figure-eight. Most of this trip, over 1000 kilometers, will have to be by bush taxi, the only available means of transportation.

This leg of my African adventure puts my ever modest French language skills to the test. During this period I do not meet a single English-speaking or Caucasian tourist. Guinea is not even listed in the Guide Routard's Afrique Noir, the bible of French travelers in West Africa. It takes me some five days to get back to Abidjan, and during that time I don't speak English to anyone. Some people (French natives) might say I don't speak any French, either, during the period. But my French manages to find me transportation, allow me to eat well and to secure decent accommodation, with perseverance and the help of a guidebook (in English). The previous week I had been traveling with the widow Ann-Marie. She spoiled me. We communicated with one another in a combination of bad French (mine) and limited English (hers). When I lost my temper, I only spoke English, and during our time together her English level advanced extraordinarily. She never lost her temper, though, and she managed to abase her French to my quasi-fluency level. She spoiled me in so far as she could understand my drift as I strung together nouns and verbs, little concern given to tense, number, conjugation, declination, agreement, mood, or even word order. I guess I have been in China long enough to realize that vocabulary is what's important in communication. If you have a vocabulary of a few hundred key words, you can communicate at a most basic level with anyone (who is sort of educated and tolerant of foreigners) who wants to take the time to unravel your syntax and decipher your accent. Of course, more is needed if you want intellectual discussions. Fortunately, my listening ability exceeds my speaking ability, and I can more or less get the gist of what French speakers say.

My first glimpse of Guinea a week before I enter the country was not a pleasant one. As with most countries I, a USA passport holder, need a tourist visa. Since I had a day layover in Bamako, Mali (the city where I failed to cash my Euros), I went to the Guinean embassy there, filled out the forms, and paid my US \$20 for a visa. By the way, visa purchase is the fifth largest expenditure I have on my West Africa trip after, in order: international travel, accommodation, local travel, food, and tourism-related activities. The Guinean embassy official was a helpful facilitator. He gave me the forms and took my money, told me to come back in an hour. When I returned, my passport, with visa without receipt, awaited me, as did the facilitator with his hand out for compensation for his 'doing business' with me. He got exceedingly upset with me when I refused to pay him a bribe (I already had the passport securely in my possession and I refused to give it to him when he asked for it back to examine). The guide books mention that the price for

Guinea visas varies from embassy to embassy according to unknown criteria. Well, I know the criteria. It's how much the facilitator thinks he can get out of you. He figured me (a backpacking teacher) good for US \$20. He had asked me whether I was a businessman. I now assume he was trying to figure if I was worth more. Since there was never a receipt given, I am not sure of the official charge for a Guinea visa. The facilitator may have pocketed most of my money and then reached deep into his soul to find the chutzpah to get more. In any case, I certainly was not going to acquiesce to a bribe. Ah, the free market of post-communist regimes.

Next: It's Thursday, it must be Guinea I

Bonjour from West Africa (12)

## **12. It's Thursday, it must be Guinea I**

Many of my fellow backpackers are young men and women in their twenties, sort of the age of my former students and foregone children. Most of the African backpackers are European, and they travel at a leisurely pace. Either they stick to one particular country for a month or so, or they take six months to a year to see West Africa. They can't believe that I am covering nine countries in eight weeks (and would cover more if I could.)

These twenty-somethings are not what I call an especially responsible breed. It's an age when maturity has set in as much as it will, but also a time when one's own mortality has not come into question. Most of these backpackers have not experienced the death of anyone close to them, and death seems to hold little relevance to them. Many but not all young Europeans come to Africa for its cheap drugs and sex; but as stereotypes go, this is not all that inaccurate a description, either. In Burkina-Faso I met three Flemish twenty-somethings who had reconditioned a truck which they were driving around West Africa and would sell to pay for their airfare back to Belgium. One of them was in the early stages of malaria, pale and emaciated, walking death personified. Previously the trio had been in Mali for three weeks, during which time they had never hung mosquito nets, or dabbed on insect repellent, or swallowed anti-malaria drugs. Granted, this is the dry season in West Africa, as opposed to the wet when breeding frenzies of mosquitoes darken the skies, but since it takes only one mosquito-carrier to pass on malaria, the literature advises taking as many precautions as possible. I myself carry my own net for sleeping, which I arrange in a Rube Goldberg fashion with strings tied to any anchor I can find (I also carry twine and scissors). I have repellent, the most effective available, the kind with the chemical Deet in it. And I take the most effective malaria prophylactic on the market, a weekly pill under the brand name Larium. Many twenty-somethings can't be bothered with nets or repellent and are put off by Larium, which I think is banned in several European countries as is Deet, because it (Larium) has unknown long-term effects. (Deet is not suitable for infants). Larium produces extremely vivid nightmares (I had several) and has other unappreciated side-effects, such as edginess, insomnia, poor vision, dryness of the mouth, etc. The bout of malaria experienced by the Flemish lad served as a

wake-up call to his companions, and they had started to take more care, using nets and repellent and a drug, not Larium but one less intrusive to the body, but also one less effective (60% versus Larium's 90%).

The twenty-somethings are on my mind, in part because they are about the only travelers I meet, until the widow Ann-Marie came on the scene, and because their carefree attitude toward life (and their ignorance of death) reminds me of my former student Liu Xu (or Sean Liu the name he acquired in the US, where he had emigrated). Just before this trip to Africa, when I passed through California, I had dinner with Liu Xu, as I do every time I go to LA. One of my favorite students, Liu Xu was on his way to becoming a successful businessman in the US, importing eyeglass parts from China and wholesaling them in the western US. I gave Liu Xu copies of my books on Shenzhen University; he had been one of my informants. After we had dinner, he was planning to drive all night to get to a business meeting the next morning in Phoenix. He loved to drive, had owned five different cars in his seven years in the US, and he loved to drive fast (I don't like going under 90 on a long trip, he told me) and didn't like to be confined by a seat belt. A few weeks later I learned that Liu Xu had been killed in a traffic accident, a few hours after I had seen him, my books found in the mangled wreck. I was apparently the last friend to see Liu Xu alive. Liu Xu was almost thirty. To have to bury one's child (Liu Xu's father went to the US to collect his son's remains, close down his business and tidy up his affairs - the son left no will, which is to be expected of twenty-somethings) is probably the most difficult event in anyone's life, which although not a rationale is certainly a good enough reason, I think, for one to be childless.

Thinking about, grieving for, Liu Xu is one of those make-think activities that I construct in order to pass away the hours in a bush taxi. The single ride I am now experiencing will end up taking 22 hours, although the entire journey in various vehicles will last 36 hours. Grueling and uncomfortable and interesting is how best to describe it. Traveling around a country this way lets you see a place from the local perspective.

I am leaving Basse, The Gambia, in a pick-up truck. This bush taxi runs a shuttle service from Basse to the border, about twenty kilometers away. I go to buy a ticket and pay for my luggage, which should be priced at about one-quarter of the fare, but something which is always subject to negotiation. In some cases, drivers want to charge almost the same for the rucksack as for me (passenger fares are standardized; luggage fees are not). I explain that my sac weighs only one-fifth of my body weight and should be priced at no more than one-fifth of the fare. I lift up the rucksack with one finger to prove how light it is (I think I sprain the finger) and gesture for him to do the same. A crowd gathers. The driver comes down a bit in price. The next haggle is up to me. Note that these negotiations are a bit one-sided as they always favor the driver. What am I to do, as there is no other vehicle going to the border? I have learned that the next best step is to wait him out, watch him collect money from other passengers with luggage. They pay much less than I am being charged. I then go back, indicating the other people's baggage and ask him if he is trying to charge me some sort of 'white man's surcharge.' The race card is always worth playing, I have learned, because the Africans are not by nature a racist

people (nor is theirs a race-oriented culture like Asian societies), and Africans do not like being thought of by white foreigners as racist (Chinese don't seem much concerned with such a characterization). My strategy usually reduces the price for my luggage to about one-third of the fare. Whether I continue to hassle in order to get it reduced to one-quarter depends on my stamina. This morning, I decide it is not worth saving another US \$ 0.15 and agree to settle for one-third. The driver figures he has made a killing, I guess.

The ride starts out the usual way, with an argument. Usually, there is an unwritten agreement that, upon purchasing a ticket, a passenger can reserve a seat by placing on it a personal possession such as an article of clothing. The covered pick-up has two benches in the back along its sides that seat six people each; another four individuals will have to sit on the floor (or rather on luggage or people's feet). When I enter the pick-up, there is an unreserved place on the bench, where I plop down. Two Brits do the same. In the process someone's tiny parcel that was attempting to reserve a seat gets tossed aside. After the taxi fills up, a man comes in, claiming to have a seat somewhere on our bench, pointing to his reservation parcel, the size of a small book, which now resides on the floor. He argues with another person on our bench who is sitting where his reservation had apparently sat. Within a few minutes this argument involves several other people, who begin discussing the proper procedures for reserving seats (the size of the parcel, the length of time one can reserve, the importance of claiming one's seat in a timely manner, etc.) as if there were a written code known to all. The driver, who is now ready to depart, starts the engine, but the argument is nowhere close to being settled. He cuts off the engine. The man who feels he has been denied his rightful place demands a refund. Now, there are not a lot of rules governing bush taxis, but one thing is certain: NO REFUNDS. You can sell your ticket or transfer it if you wish, but there is no way that a driver will ever refund the purchase price. The man's luggage is on top of the pick-up, under everyone else's baggage and the driver refuses to remove it. It is paid for, it is going, he says. I am expecting a fight to break out at any moment. The only reason there's no fight is because the chief antagonist of the displaced person already has a seat and he refuses to go out the cab to argue with the man who feels he has been denied his rightful place. So now the entire lot of passengers are arguing with one other. Finally, one little girl who is occupying a seat is relocated onto the floor and the displaced man squeezes in, next to the very man with whom only a few seconds earlier he was having the most violent argument. Fortunately, the confrontation has ceased (which itself is a bit unusual as Africans seem to enjoy prolonging arguments - of which bargaining is a subset - as a way of occupying their time). I say, thank God for little girls.

Next: It's Thursday, it must be Guinea II

Bonjour from West Africa (13)

### **13. It's Thursday, it must be Guinea II**

We reach the border. Here the immigration/customs shacks of the two countries almost abut; The Gambia - Senegal frontier is actually in a single location without more than a few meters' stretch of no-man's land between them. Our bags are permitted to stay on the vehicle; neither customs office seems interested in checking them out. The vehicle will not unload us at the border, but rather it takes us to the nearest town in Senegal, from which transportation out is available. All this adds up to an excellent start for a travel day.

We reach the Senegalese border town named Velingara, a small forgettable entity, which thinks so much of itself that it insists on having more than one gare routiere. The depot I now want, of course, is the other one, located on the other side of town. Upon arrival from The Gambia our pick-up is beset by several town taxis which want to charge me a fortune (starting price is double what I just paid to get here all the way from The Gambia) to take me across town to the other depot. As I start to walk away, the cabby drops his price, plunging about 10% every meter of distance I put between us. I follow the crowd and walk about one kilometer to the other taxi station.

To get to Guinea, which is south of here, I need to pass through a junction called Medina Gounas according to the guidebooks, which also fail to mention that no taxi from Velingara goes there. Instead, everyone recommends that I head in the opposite direction, north to Tambacounda, which is a rail depot (I passed through it on the train from hell), where I can find a bush taxi for Guinea. I don't like backtracking, but in this case it is unavoidable. I get a seat in a Peugeot 505, and its kind driver upon reaching Tamba at noon introduces me to an elderly man on the side of the road (I cannot even guess what his regular occupation is, if indeed he has one) who will find me the taxi to Guinea. I wait. I finish Conrad. And I wait. I have lunch. I start Faulkner. I wait. I think about Liu Xu. I think about why I prefer living in China to living in the US. I am getting worried as it approaches 5 p.m. Finally, the man leads me to a bus which he says is the one I want. I get on, no receipt given, and tip the man for his trouble.

The bus, which is definitely local transport, heads out of town, stopping every few kilometers to unload people or lumber or livestock, and about an hour later, after I have covered earlier-trodden roads, we reach Medina Gounas, which by road is only 60 kilometers (30 as the crow flies) from Velingara, where I was this morning. And all today I remain in Senegal, with the Guinea border still less than 100 kilometers away. For a day that started out so well with such an easy border crossing, today is ending up rather poorly, looking as possible candidate for the worst twenty list. All of a sudden, in the middle of nowhere, the bus stops. Only a few of the passengers remain, and the conductor sells us to a mini-van. We change vehicles; I don't get a new receipt. The sale of humans in Africa, of course, has much historical precedent; it is not unusual for bush taxis to transfer passengers among vehicles so they can always carry complete loads. I am adamant in explaining to yet another driver that I want to go to Guinea-Conakry. The driver nods. All day everyone seems to have understood my destination, but and I am still not getting there very fast. It is now nightfall, and I am expecting this new vehicle any

minute to pull up to the border on its way to Guinea. Instead, we stop at some sort of junction. There must be several hundred trucks and taxis at this gare routiere. Although I cannot even find mention of this place in the guide book, it seems to be one of the major traffic hubs in all of Africa. I am directed to another vehicle, the fifth today, and the driver of this one swears he is going not just to Guinea but into Guinea (which suggests I have been using the wrong preposition all day), to a city called Labe. He will begin the journey once he fills up the taxi with passengers. I pay my fare and haggle over the luggage (he senses my desperation and I pay dearly). I am passenger number three, which means he needs six more. For this trip there will be two drivers. Right now they are planning to catch some sleep, as prospective passengers float in; estimated departure is sometime after midnight, more or less, which translates as give or take six hours. I go with another passenger to seek out possible accommodation for the night; he has dinner; I am not very hungry. When we go back to the vehicle, it seems that enough passengers have arrived, but that the drivers have vanished, sleeping somewhere but no one knows where. We continue to wait; eventually we load up and depart around 11 p.m.

Driving at night, which is very low on my preferred options, is especially not desirable in the present situation. As soon as we reach Guinea, according to the guidebook, we will drive through the Fouta Djallon plateau, an area of rolling hills, in contrast to most of flat West Africa. This is definitely not an area I want to drive through at night. It turns out that is not a real worry. The Guinea side of the frontier does not stay open at night. So once we pass thorough customs in the Senegalese side, we queue up at the Guinea entry point. I follow my fellow passengers who head off to sleep outside a hut off the side of the road. Unfortunately, since my sleeping bag is still in the rucksack which is netted atop the taxi, I am left to shiver most of the night. On the bright side, it's too cold for mosquitoes, a fact I realize only after I dab globs of Deet over my exposed skin.

The next morning we head into Guinea. Several officials want to see my vaccination certificate. In West Africa the continual checking of the Yellow Fever certificate, which is officially required, has less to do with matters of health than serving as a means for extorting money from foreign travelers. This Guinea official tells me my UNESCO document is not a proper vaccination certificate, but retreats when I point out the word vaccination on it. One Japanese I met was told his vaccination certificate was invalid (it wasn't), and he had to pay US \$20 in order to get his passport back from the uniformed person (perhaps not even an official) who had confiscated it.

Guinea is beautiful. From the taxi the vistas of the Fouta Djallon are marvelous. The mountains, which remind me of the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia, include a series of switchbacks. The hills themselves are copper in color. We are in the middle of the dry season and the dust is awesome. It is definitely the wrong time of year to be here; we all wear bandannas or masks because it is too warm (about 25 C) to keep the windows rolled up and the dust out. The area is so lovely that I would like to return, right at the beginning of the dry season, and cycle this very route, which passes through a string of tiny hamlets. At about 11 p.m., we reach Labe. The driver drops each of us off on the doorstep of where we are going. I register in a cheap hotel (not a brothel) next to the

central gare routiere. The kitchen is closed but they have room service. I have been in five vehicles, over 39 hours, covering only about 500 kilometers. I don't know which day of the week it is. Maybe Thursday. I manage to take a bucket shower and string up the mosquito net. And sleep.

Next: It's Thursday, it must be Guinea III

Bonjour from West Africa (14)

#### **14. It's Thursday, it must be Guinea III**

I am not exactly sure why Guinea is so appealing. The absence of a tourist culture is hardly enough to recommend it. I think I like Guinea because it feels so real. The country is basic. Not very commercial. There are not a lot of shops. Instead various kinds of merchandise are sold by individuals, some carrying baskets atop their heads, others displaying their wares on blankets at the side of the street or road. Cigarettes are sold individually, not because the population is health conscious, but because tobacco is prohibitively expensive in this, one of Africa's poorest countries. Smokers can only afford one or two cigarettes at a time; or they don't want to invest in a pack which they would have to share with their friends. Probably the most expensive habit in Guinea is tooth-brushing. On trays atop heads as well as at roadside stalls, tooth-brushers are for sale for a few pennies. These are not manufactured brushes, but rather they are 5 inch long sticks, made from branches of a certain bush. The entire population of Guinea can be seen chewing on one of these at some time during the day. There is a method for chewing and brushing at the same time in such a way as to minimize the requisite spitting. Guineans have extraordinarily bright teeth, due I guess to a mix of good genetics and an abundance of this certain bush. From my vantage tooth-brushing is the nation's national pastime.

Children's toys and games are basic, too. I am watching a group of primary school age students (they do not actually go to school) who round up the tops of soft drink bottles, which are items of trade among kids of this age. They then bury the caps in the dirt and throw rocks at the dirt. The first child to uncover the cap wins the game. Children play tag and leapfrog; they do not watch video games; the television set is not used as a baby-sitter. A favorite game among pre-teens is the hoop and stick. Sometimes it's a bicycle rim, sometimes even a used tire, but any circle-shaped hoop that can roll will do quite well. The child holds a stick and pushes the tire along, poking at the inside rim. This is a lot more difficult than it looks, especially given that the landscape is a general obstacle course. The only paved road I find in Guinea is the national highway that runs down the country (one I want to cycle). Inside towns and cities streets are dirt or clay. I think I saw only two filling stations in Guinea. Petrol is usually sold in glass bottles of different shapes and sizes, obviously recycled, along the side of the road.

I stay in Labe for a day to recover from the previous ordeal of 39 hours, to do errands, and to prepare psychologically for the next journey which is expected to be equally grueling. I change money in the bank, which accepts US cash, but not travelers checks or

Visa. I look for toilet paper but cannot find any for sale, which is all right since I have another roll in the rucksack. Guineans use soap and water rather than toilet paper, which is for foreigners and can be purchased probably only in the capital. One task I have in every country is to find the main post-office and to purchase a particular type of stamp. One of my former students collects stamps with representations of maps or flags on them. I go to Labe's main post office; they have only two different stamps for sale. The cabinet containing philatelic sales is locked, the only key held by someone who is out of the office for the next few days. This reminds me very much of China of a decade ago, when office-workers were often specialized into little fiefdoms. At that time it was very difficult to get the necessary signatures and chops on forms because the persons responsible for the chops never seemed to be around. As it developed its market economy, China for the sake of efficiency then developed systems where the individual did not hold so much control over procedures. I guess the post office in Labe has not reach this stage of development.

Friday. I bring my rucksack to the gare routiere and find the bush taxi which is heading to Kankan. I have several travel options and I choose Kankan because there is a bus that leaves there every Monday morning which can get me into the Cote d'Ivoire. I also like the name Kankan. I am the first person who is interested in taking this taxi; I put my rucksack on the roof and continue Faulkner. By 5 p.m., I am still the only person interested in Kankan. In the next spot there is a van going to Nzerekore, which is in the very southeast corner of Guinea, and it needs only one more person so it can take off. The nine passengers in the van (they have been waiting all day, also) try to convince me why I should choose Nzerekore over Kankan (it's farther, it's cheaper for the distance, it's a nicer city, the road's better, the vehicle is newer - all of which turn out to be true). I check the guidebook. Nzerekore seems as good a place as any, so I remove my bag from the first taxi (I had not yet bought a ticket), buy a ticket for this new taxi and we take off. The fare amounts to about US \$19, which indicates this trip will take nineteen hours. One dollar per transport hour is a good rule of thumb in West Africa. This is going to be another all night ride, with a lot of rest stops for the two drivers who take turns at the wheel every few hours. Around dusk, we stop on the side of the road for evening prayers. Only two of us are non-Muslims.

It is not unusual for long distance taxis to travel at night. As in today's case taxis can often take an entire day to fill up with passengers. Also, the drivers prefer to drive in the dark in order to avoid inspections. During an average trip, a long distance taxi is stopped usually about once every hour by an official of one type or another. Sometimes a man in uniform blows a whistle or waves a baton. He checks for travel documents, which in my case includes the yellow fever certificate. If someone lacks the correct papers, a fine (or a bribe depending on one's perspective) can usually be paid on the spot. Sometimes there's an official looking road block. These usually occur on the outskirts of large towns, the type that are large enough to be represented on my map (only 35 towns in all of Guinea, which has a total population of 7 million; this is a very rural country!). At these inspections, the officials look at the cargo. They don't care about personal belongings or individual consumer items. But for anything that looks commercial in nature (e.g., bolts of cloth, bundles of plastic sandals, liters of cooking oil), the owners must produce

certificates indicating they have paid customs duty. The catch is that paying customs duty in most West African countries is a real hassle, usually requiring company registration - a delay that is not days or weeks, but rather months - and a trip to the capital city in advance of each trip for which goods are to be transported. Thus, most businessmen and businesswomen (in bush taxis the latter outnumber the former) do not bother getting the necessary certificates. They are not doing this primarily in order to avoid fees, but rather to avoid bureaucratic delays. At these roadside inspections (which function mostly only during daylight) the business people pay the duty and a small fine for the goods they transport. That's the way it should work. More often than not, the inspector just looks at the taxi and tells the driver what customs duty he is supposed to pay. In most West African countries a payment of 1000 CFA (US \$2.00) is sufficient to get the official to wave the vehicle through the roadblock. No receipt is given and often the driver gives the official the money without leaving the vehicle. These costs are factored into the fare price.

I have no idea what portion of the fees paid in the ways described above finds its way into the national coffers. I suspect the figure is closer to zero percent than one hundred percent. If one had purposely set out to create an economically inefficient tax/duty collection, the policy-maker could not have achieved better. The current procedures delay travel, create confrontation between citizens and their government officials, and abet corruption. Guinea is notorious for its roadblocks because its revenue collection scheme is perhaps the least developed in all of West Africa, for it was one of the last countries in this part of the world to enter the free market. But these roadblocks exist in every West African country I visited. They are more intense around borders. On the border from Cote d'Ivoire and Ghana, for example, there were nine inspections within 100 kilometers. It took us 3 hours to go those 100 kilometers and by the end of the trip, my fellow travelers were so angry at their government that they swore they would never voluntarily pay another franc to the state.

I like Guinea, but I certainly wouldn't want to do business here.

Next: The basilica at Yamoussoukro

Bonjour from West Africa (15)

## **15. The basilica at Yamoussoukro**

Now I am not a religious person. I've never had a religious experience and I am not even a strong enough non-believer to be called an honest to goodness atheist. But even I succumbed to intense emotion when I visited the Basilique de Notre Dame de la Paix in Yamoussoukro, Cote d'Ivoire.

The emotion I am referring to is not Christian love or peace or charity or bliss. It is anger, anger that this country's dictator had the chutzpah to build a place of worship to honor himself (and ostensibly the God of Roman Catholicism), financed with US \$150-million (or about 2% of the annual GNP) that he raided from the national treasury. The man's

name is Felix Houphouet-Boigny. Once asked about the financing of the basilica, Felix said he used his own money: "I did a deal with God, and you wouldn't expect me to discuss God's business in public, would you?" Felix's name cannot be ignored in the Cote d'Ivoire. It appears everywhere in the country. On boulevards, on roundabouts, on government buildings, on shops and even cafes. Sadly, the Felix phenomenon (dictator/saint) is not all that special in Africa. Many countries have had long-lasting tyrants, some malevolent, some benign. As despots on this continent go Felix was rather benign. He oversaw the usual mass arrests and murder of opposition leaders, but his actions were tame by African standards. He was, however, one of the continent's more accomplished thieves, perhaps because he ruled West Africa's richest country (per capita GNP above US \$ 610).

I guess one can argue that using unjust deserts to build a religious monument is better than sticking the funds in a Swiss bank account. Perhaps so, but I suspect that Felix also squirreled away funds offshore, consistent with the way dictators often behave. In any case, Felix did not just build a basilica; he built an entire city. What is today Yamoussoukro was only a small village named Ngorkro when Felix became the nation's leader at independence in 1960. By the time of his death in 1993 this place was named the official capital of the country although almost all of Cote d'Ivoire's business, including anything involving diplomatic missions and foreign aid, is conducted in Abidjan. Why, you ask, was Ngorkro then destined for such attention? It just so happens that Ngorkro had a very special resident, a little old lady named Nana Yamoussou, who happened to have the good fortune to give birth to none other than Felix himself. Felix's payback was to build his mom a city and throw in a basilica to boot. All mothers should be so lucky.

And what a building it is. Quoting from my guide book: There are 36 stained glass windows, in 4000 shades, each 30m high, covering an acreage of glass greater than that at Chartres cathedral. My favorite statistic is that the basilica's construction required the equivalent of an entire year's output of French white cement. (And you can guess which country was more than glad to supply the cement). I won't go into more details. Suffice it to say that the basilica is impressive in many respects.

Yamoussoukro as a city is weird; there's no better way to describe this aspiring metropolis. It is spread out, seemingly designed for a population of several million, at present suffering only about 100,000 people. Much of city remains vacant lots. The basilica is placed in what amounts to a large sandlot about 3 kilometers from the center of town (there is no downtown). Throughout Yamoussoukro you see the occasional government building scattered among single story residences; all the streets are macadam. I suspect the town has more kilometers of paved streets than Abidjan. There is a presidential palace, of course, where Felix is entombed. It is surrounded by a mote filled with crocodiles. I don't know why Felix's bones have not been enshrined in the basilica. It is certainly where he belongs.

I arrived in Yamoussoukro at 2 a.m. on the bus from Man, the city where the bush taxi from Guinea had deposited me. There's nothing special about Man but it is a quite

pleasant place to spend a day between busses. There are interesting places to hike to, including a waterfall, the cascade. This is the dry season, though, and there was only a trickle of water to be found. There were 20 touts and tour guides for me, the only tourist, to choose from. To their dismay I managed to escort myself.

From Yamoussoukro I want to head due east to Ghana, about 200 kilometers to get to Kumasi. But there's a hitch. There's not much of a road system in the eastern part of Cote d'Ivoire, and I am forced to return to Abidjan. I take a bus and arrive at the Adjame gare routiere, which is one of the largest public transportation stations in the world.

I arrive in the late afternoon at the Adjame gare routiere, Adjame being one of about a dozen districts of Abidjan (with a reputation for being more up-market than Treichville where I last stayed). The guidebook lists a cheap hotel (US \$6, bucket shower, fan, decent restaurant next door), appropriately named Hotel Gare located across from the UTB bus stand (UTB is one of dozens of bus companies operating out of this gare), which we passed on our way through the station. The guidebook mentions that the Adjame gare is immense, perhaps a square kilometer, an area prone to confusion and crime. Quickly grabbing my luggage away from would-be porters who are fighting over it, I scat away at double time, at a virtual run from the gare to get to the Hotel Gare. A sigh of relief. The hotel is located exactly where the guidebook says it would be. On several occasions during my trip hotels that existed six years ago when the guidebook was published are no longer in operation. Still I take my chances showing up on hotels' doorsteps rather than struggling to phone in advance.

Next: Leaving Abidjan