

Bonjour from West Africa (16)

## 16. Leaving Abidjan

My guidebook is wrong in stating that there is a direct bus link between the Adjame gare in Abidjan and my intended destination, the city of Kumasi in south-central Ghana. (The last such bus left six years ago, I am told). The hotel staff first suggest I take a bus to the Treichville gare (an hour away), where the busses to Ghana depart from. Then I could take a direct bus to Accra, Ghana's capital, and then another one up to Kumasi. Treichville is where I stayed when I first arrived from the airport, and I had no great desire to return. This route also seems really out of the way resulting in unnecessary backtracking as I am expecting to come back through Accra on the last section of the figure-eight which will take me along the Gulf of Guinea.

I am puzzled. When I had checked in this hotel last night, the clerks on duty had assured me that there was a direct bus to Kumasi. It now turns out that they thought I meant I wanted a bus to Koumassi, which is one of Abidjan's arrondissements. My French has let me down: I had failed to (or they had failed to hear me) distinguish between Kumasi and Koumassi. I look at the map. There is a paved road link to Kumasi from Abidjan; there must be a bus. The staff tells me that what I want is a bus that will take me as far as the Ivorian border town of Agnibilekrou, where transport into Ghana will be 'easy' to arrange. I shutter when someone tells me something will be 'easy.' In any case, what won't be easy to find is the bus to Agnibilekrou, although it is parked in the immense Adjame gare just a few hundred meters from this very hotel.

The hotel staff cannot explain the precise location within the immense Adjame gare of the bus company which goes to Ghana. Trying to get them to draw me a map proves fruitless. (I have rarely met locals anywhere in the world who can read, much less draw, a map of their own locality). It's not that they don't know where the appropriate bus should be parked, just that directions I can follow are really not possible. The gare is not sign posted, and there's no apparent logic to how it is organized. There are hundreds of busses, dozens of bus companies. If busses are parked according to some sort of order, it's not apparent to me. The station looks like a tornado came in, picked up the busses and tossed them back down, random but all landing upright. Despite instructions from the hotel clerks, I doubt I could find landmarks such as Pierre's tire stall or Abdul's cassette stand or the shop that sells those tasty little fritters. Foreigners are not the only ones who have difficulty negotiating this station. Locals have problems, too. Thus, the station is home to hundreds of facilitators, self-employed guides and porters who lead dazed travelers to and from the busses they desire. The hotel staff suggests I take as a guide a man who just happens to be hanging around the reception area. I just hate accepting recommendations like this when I have no other choice. I accept.

My facilitator is certain he can guide me to the bus I need. He wants to carry my rucksack; I insist on taking it myself. This man, his legs deformed by polio, uses a sawed off crutch as he slides himself over the ground. He is friendly, beaming, happy to assist

me; he says he knows exactly where I want to go. Off he scrambles; I have difficulty keeping up with him. Nothing seems to slow him down: not the ruts in the road, not the thick crust of hardening mud (it has not rained for weeks; one wonders what the station is like during the wet season), not the vehicles moving in all directions, not a baggage-laden throng of pedestrians, not the piles of smoldering debris that accumulate and must be burned nightly right in the middle of the bus lanes. My guide finds the Agnibilekrou bus, helps me buy the ticket (#31) and load the rucksack. I give him whatever change is left over, about US \$.50. He is embarrassed; not being in the habit of tipping, I have apparently overtipped to an extraordinary degree. He hugs me, startled by his appreciation. My eyes start to tear, perhaps from sentimentality or perhaps from the funnel cloud of dirt that has arisen to see me off.

In contrast to what happens in the anglophone countries, this bus is scheduled to depart on the hour, whether the tickets have been sold out or not. I take my assigned seat #31, anticipating the trip to take 4-5 hours (the ticket cost US \$5). Right on the hour, the driver gets aboard. Actually, he's not the driver who will take us to Agnibilekrou. He's the man who will maneuver us out of the parking spot. Getting out of the parking spaces in the Adjame gare are jobs for specialists (just like ocean liners are guided in and out of port by skilled port pilots). I had wondered how the bus would ever extract itself from its lodgings, for no more than a few centimeters of space exist between us and the adjacent busses, and the lane ahead is crammed not only with pedestrians and baggage carts but also busses. The driver pulls forward a few meters, then backs up at a slight angle, lessening the gap between the next busses to millimeters. Then forward again, back again, about a dozen times as our angle steadily increases. Almost as if on cue, several busses that were blocking the lane remove themselves, leaving more space for our driver to maneuver. Another dozen ups and backs and we are now, fifteen minutes later, perpendicular to where we had parked. The specialist dismounts and our new driver comes aboard.

Leaving the station takes another ten minutes. The road, more accurately described as an alley, snakes around the various bus company depots and ticket kiosks. It is about 5 meters wide (busses are about 3 1/2), one way apparently, and at various intersections there are shops selling not just items relating to transport or travel but virtually everything related to human existence. The station is indeed a market in its own right. Want a sack of onions or pots and pans for the kitchen, or cloth or shoes or transistor radios, come to the Adjame gare, one of the largest shopping malls in Africa. The usual vendors stationed along the route, their wares atop their heads at the level of bus windows, are omnipresent. Water and fruity drinks are sold in bags (the type like you buy goldfish in); fruit and all sorts of snacks are available. We finally reach the perimeter of the station and hit a highway which is lined with stalls catering to the transport industry. These shops specialize in axles, doors, windshields, batteries, etc. Sort of a well-sorted, well-arranged automobile junkyard. All this ends with lots that specialize in chassis. Then we are in rural Cote d'Ivoire and on our way to my next country, Ghana.

Next: Jumping hoops in Ghana

Bonjour from West Africa (17)

## **17. Jumping hoops in Ghana**

Ghana is one of the most popular travel destinations for white foreigners in West Africa. Not because it has many tourist sights; it has fewer than most of francophone Africa. Not because it has beautiful landscape. It is flatly ugly. But perhaps because it is English-speaking and not French-speaking; the world seems to have more of the former tourists than the latter. But I think the real reason that Ghana is so popular is the very fact that it is not francophone Africa. It lacks the oppressive tourist culture of its neighbors. There are few touts, even at tourist attractions like the slave forts on the Gulf of Guinea. In short, Ghana provides the hassled tourist a place of escape from the harassment dispensed by natives of the neighboring countries.

This is the first English-speaking country I am visiting in four weeks, unless you include The Gambia an English-speaking country (I consider it not much of either). Ghana has a post-colonial pseudo anglicness, a fetor which although interesting tends to wear itself thin in short order. I should have known that Ghana was going to be different from the moment I applied for my visa at the Ghana high commission in London. Most African countries are pretty efficient in granting visas. For example, I went to the London agents for the governments of Burkina Faso and Benin and was issued visas on the spot. Those countries are represented in the UK by honorary consuls, who function as agents, rather than by full-fledged embassies. I assume that the agent keeps a large percent of the visa fee; still it is a nice service for a country to provide for a tourist. Ghana also issues visas but it makes you jump through hoops in the process.

First, there are the forms. Four identical forms that must be filled out identically in black pen in block letters (photo-copying not permitted). To each of these forms (an odd size, neither A4 or 8.5" x 11") must be attached a passport-sized photograph. Several countries have let me give them thumb-sized photos (never more than two, China and other reasonable countries only want one), but Ghana requires the passport size and will not budge a millimeter one way or the other. Each of the forms is two-sided and requires you to identify two contacts within Ghana as well as the place of residency inside the country. None of this information I could provide, so I was told by the helpful clerk (three-piece vested suit with what I would imagine is an Oxford accent) to jot down the name of the US ambassador, which of course I didn't know but he did. I found a cheap hotel listed in the Rough Guide, so I put that down for contact address. Then I was required to show an airlines ticket to show my means for leaving the country (Is illegal immigration of Americans from the UK to Ghana a serious problem!). The facts that my airline ticket (purchased but not yet received) was from Abidjan and that I would be departing by some sort of ground transport were not important. Finally, I had two choices for visa: single or double entry. I chose the former, figuring that I would not need the latter, an assumption that is now proving to be wrong. To add insult to injury, Ghana

makes you wait 45 minutes for an interview after you queue to submit the form and then requires two full days to process this information.

Now in Ghana, I have come to realize that jumping hoops is part of the national culture. The informal negotiation and bargaining that characterizes francophone countries, making them both interesting and tedious, rarely exists in Ghana. Take the bus, for example. Tickets are sold in advance with assigned seats. Just before the bus is scheduled to depart, all baggage must be weighed on a scale; each passenger is charged by the kilogram. You are given a baggage tag and carry the bag to the baggage attendant who puts on the tag and stows the bag aboard the bus. All this is done in the space equivalent to that of a small water closet. While this chaos is underway, passengers try to board the bus. A conductor tells you where your assigned seat is located. The bus has four seats in each row, two on either side of an aisle. There will eventually be a seat in the aisle which is composed of a bottom and back that springs down from the aisle seats. Thus, the person in the aisle seat (literally the seat in the aisle) is sitting on a spring based mechanism which, every time the occupant rises, tries to retain its natural position, at the armrest for the adjacent seats. In many places it is not unusual for busses to have these types of seats, but they are usually taken by late-comers, as all the desirable seats are filled up by the first passengers to board. Ghana busses assign seats but passengers load on a first-to-elbow-the-way-in basis. Thus, taking one's seat means that aisle-seat passengers (late to buy tickets maybe, but early to board) need to get out of their seats to let passengers through to the back seats, or in the cases of long-legged youth, they just hurdle over the seated people. In contrast, passengers on busses in francophone countries take their seats on a first-come, first-served basis (no seats assigned), and the bus leaves when it's full. Loading may take longer, but there is less chaos. I suspect that the Ghana system (which I experienced on four different busses) used to work in colonial times, before busses started using scales to weigh baggage and before aisles were taken up with springy seats. The earlier system has been tampered with and what results is chaos, and no one has taken the initiative to invent a more reasonable method. I note that initiative is something in short supply in Ghana.

This example is illustrative for Ghana. On the surface this is an impressive country in many regards. But once you scratch the surface, the veneer dissolves. I have never been to a country, for example, where menus so fail to reflect what actually is available from the kitchen. After a few days in Ghana, I learned to dispense with menus totally and just ask what could be prepared. I then learned to qualify this with the phrase "in the next ten minutes." What you think you see in Ghana is not often what you get.

Next: A superficial university

Bonjour from West Africa (18)

## 18. A superficial university

One of the reasons I went to Africa, both this year and last, was to discover if the continent held any opportunities that could be so appealing that I would be willing to make yet another locational change. I have moved around a bit in the last few four decades: Virginia, New York, Massachusetts, Peoria, Berkeley, Washington D.C., Los Angeles, and now China. With my Hong Kong visa expiring, I realize I have outlived my usefulness here. I have done all I can in terms of my scholarly interests in Chinese education (which virtually no one cares about). Few in this field are interested in my research, which is deemed too critical by most, and in any case there are no job opportunities that interest me. Not to mention that I don't fit the profiles desired of new staff in North American universities in terms of age, race and sex. So for the past few years I have been looking for either another career or another location. Teaching in a university in Africa was one of possibilities I was considering.

The best universities in Africa, and the only ones that can be considered even third-rate in research or teaching by the standards of Europe and North America, can be counted on one hand. They are located in Egypt and South Africa; none has posts in my field. The other universities on the continent are struggling to be post-colonial institutions, searching for not just identity but also for a *raison d'être*. During colonial times, universities served a single purpose: to train the civil service elite. To a large extent, that is still what they do, but many African countries have adopted the notion (put forward by international organizations) that universities have more expansive roles, especially training specialized personnel for the market economy and serving as places of critical and creative thinking. (The other side of the argument is that this can be better accomplished at the secondary level, which is cheaper and generally more effective). These are the major purposes of the post-colonial universities of emerging democracies. I found such a transitional setting in a Chinese university for six years to be both interesting and intellectually stimulating. (The period of transition in China's case is not post-colonial but post-communist.) Perhaps Africa could offer a similar environment.

I suspected that Africa's transitional universities might resemble their Chinese counterparts, which employ foreigners for the prestige that comes with having expatriates on staff. Jobs are often available to those with lesser qualifications (an education Ph.D. from Hong Kong University is by world standards a considerably lesser degree) because those with higher qualifications simply do not want to work in the developing world. So I decided to take a look at what is reputed to be one of black Africa's best institutions of higher learning, the University of Ghana.

One morning I visit the University of Ghana at Legon, just north of Accra. The architecture is modern and the campus has a tertiary feel to it. Superficially, it is superb. Then I talk with a few of the foreign students who are here on exchange programs with North American universities. These Americans are extremely critical of the University. African students hardly ever show up for classes, they report. The professors themselves often do not attend. When they come they merely read from their lecture notes. The

students do not have textbooks, unless they are printed in Ghana, in other words for courses that involve Ghana history, politics, etc. Imported texts are prohibitively expensive; readings are not assigned from them. From these casual conversations, it seems to me that Chinese universities, where students do have texts and where teachers do at least show up for class, are far more advanced. This should not seem surprising, for Confucian culture emphasizes education, and China is a substantially wealthier country than Ghana and can better afford to fund higher education.

A few days later I visit the campus of Ghana's other university, the University of Cape Coast. The Faculty of Education is located on this campus rather than at Legon, so it is here that any opportunities for me would lie. Almost everywhere in the world, education is the least prestigious faculty at a university, perhaps one reason it is relegated to Ghana's second campus rather than placed in the capital. The scholarship undertaken in education colleges is mostly bottom fishing, using ideas that float into the intellectual sludge from other disciplines. Nevertheless, education is where I find myself situated, for better or for worse. The Cape Coast campus, in contrast with Legon, is full of crumbling buildings. I find Education, which was off a dark, dank alley. I locate the office and the staff shows me the course catalog. I am impressed with the range of courses available. The masters program, which had several hundred students, offers the types of courses that are found in the best schools of education in American and European universities (notably missing at Hong Kong University). The Ghana unit offers courses in the politics, economics and anthropology of education, none of which are offered in the mediocre education schools I am familiar with. I am then directed to the campus personnel office where I pick up employment application forms. I am told to fill out all four copies of the form, no carbons provided, and to submit three passport-sized photos. I decide to delay this hoop-jumping until I undertake a more in-depth investigation.

Knowing that first impressions (e.g., menus) in Ghana are often misleading, I go back to the Education Faculty for a closer look. I am told that the curriculum was set up in 1985 by a visiting panel of experts from UNESCO. What surprises me, however, is that there are only four faculty members assigned to the program. As I query staff, I learn that the course catalog does not reflect reality. Hardly any of the UNESCO-recommended courses are being taught; in fact the faculty members are much too busy with personal business and consulting (to organizations like UNESCO) to actually teach, and when courses are taught the lectures are for several hundred students each. I then go to the education library, dark because of the normal power-cut, which is empty of people save for a few staff. I look over the shelves and find no books with imprints after 1985. The current periodicals are only current as of 1985. I am told the university does not have funds to subscribe to publications. UNESCO set up a program that has never been implemented. For some reason, I am not terribly surprised.

In short, I suspect that the University of Ghana is a university in name only. It has too little funding to provide adequate salaries for teachers, so the teachers don't teach. There is little research, except that which has foreign aid attached. I doubt the teaching and learning that result encourage creative and critical thinking. Despite their chronic

underfunding, institutions of higher learning in poor countries suck up a large part of their nations' education budgets. I wonder if these funds would not be better spent in villages and towns on basic education. I wonder if it wouldn't be cheaper to send abroad for training individuals who are needed as professionals. Do countries where so few people can even read and write really need to bring in UNESCO to model their curricula on that of the countries of the developed North and West?

I find the Education Faculty at the University of Cape Coast so depressing that I cannot bring myself to apply for a job there. Which means, in mid-1999, I am still looking for somewhere to go and something to do after I get there. I will return to the US in September and try to find something to keep me busy for the next few years. Suggestions are welcome.

Next: Arrest in Togo

Bonjour from West Africa (19)

## **19. Arrest in Togo I**

Well, arrest is a bit of a strong word for detainment by the village police because of trying (allegedly) to sneak into the country without a proper visa. More about that later. This small tale begins when I enter Togo from Ghana at a northern border-post which is only frequented by bush taxis. At this point I am traveling with a French mechanic named Vincent, with whom I have shared a tent site in northern Ghana where we have gone to see wild animals at Mole Game Reserve. (We were a dozen meters from a troop of elephants but saw no big cats).

One of the nicest things about traveling - - actually perhaps the nicest thing besides not having to follow the news (I left the USA during Clinton's Senate trial; I still don't know, nor care, what happened) - - , and especially about traveling individually, is that you meet fellow travelers. Backpackers travel in similar circles and stay at hostels and brothels mentioned in shared guidebooks; I find these people interesting. Ironically, as travelers we meet more fellow travelers from Europe, Japan and North America than genuine African locals, as opposed to locals who are part of the tourist culture. In any case, Vincent and I take a bus directly from the Game reserve. This is a rewarding ride for it allows me to relate the following story.

At 5:30 a.m. Vincent and I are the first on the bus, which has as its starting terminus the Mole Game Reserve. Fifteen minutes later, by the time the bus is outside the park limits, it is crammed with people. I have mentioned how the superficial orderliness of Ghana's busses obscures the raging chaos restrained by a tight veneer. Here's the perfect example. Today's bus seems as uncalm as most, but it is worst. Apparently, the service on this line has deteriorated, and a fleet of busses from competitive firms has recently been replaced by a single vehicle run by Ghana's omnipresent company OSA that is so crammed with people that it simply oozes profit. The locals are not a happy lot. They seem a bit

perturbed because this passenger bus is also a cargo vehicle, stopping at every hamlet to load in the weekend's supply of empty pop bottles. I suspect that the bus has no schedule. Just to finish a day's route is sufficient achievement to keep the powers happy. Apparently a dispute over fares has been escalating for the past several weeks, and passengers have been complaining about service. An older gentleman, one with a tie (who in scorching West Africa would wear a tie, I have no idea), refuses to pay the ticket taker. The driver halts the vehicle and the gentleman, the ticket taker, the driver, and several company employees who are along for a free ride hop out and begin what amounts to a pointless 30-minute discussion. We passengers remain in the heat tin, where temperature are rising every few minutes. Our 20 or so infant passengers get a bit more cantankerous. Eventually, people re-board and it seems that the old gentleman is being allowed to travel without purchasing a ticket. It just happens that this man is about the last person the ticket-taker needed to get money from; everyone else has already paid. And everyone else is now furious because they have paid. Refunds in the developing world do not exist, of course, so as the bus chugs along, passengers are now getting angrier and angrier. One woman in the back of the bus, sharing space with the drink bottles, is especially irate, and she starts a verbal argument, across a busload of passengers, including myself and Vincent, who are ensconced in our seats near the front, an argument with the ticket taker and his colleagues, the employer's freeloaders. She apparently wants the same treatment as the gentleman. You do not need to understand the local dialect to realize that pleasantries are not being exchanged. Hand gestures alone suggest various scatological motifs. The bus stops for more passengers and bottles, and the argumentative lady from the rear positions herself up front where she continues her argument in the ticket taker's face. You have to understand that modern Africa's strongest and fiercest urban warriors tend to be women, and this woman has a good 20 kilos over her male combatant. While the bus has stopped she has sat down where one of the employer freeloaders had stationed himself, and she now has several different arguments going on at the same time. She rises and as she turns to head in the direction of her seat in the rear, she thrusts out her right buttocks and connects with the ticket taker who lands a meter away. He charges her with his fists; she parries with pots and pans. As flesh hits metal (we have a front row seat, or rather the fight is now in our front row), somehow the parties become disengaged and go back to the verbal mode of argument. I am told you have not traveled adequately in Africa until you have seen first hand a bus fight. Africa is not a place where people keep their emotions bottled up.

So we arrive at the border town (150 kilometers from the actual border but the last town with banking services before Togo), a place called Tamale, where Vincent needs to find a bank so he could change his Ghanaian cedis into something useful outside the country (which means into anything except Ghanaian cedis). We have located a waiting area for the bus to Togo and while Vincent is trying to find a bank that can help him (the first three could not), I see the noon and 1 p.m. busses for the border leave. The next bus is supposed to show up at 3 p.m., by which time there are some 75 people waiting. There has been a reservation system which involves pieces of wood with marks on them, but this system that provided a bit of order to chaos is now abandoned. A crowd of 50 see a bus coming and run after it, forcing it several blocks away from the station, where it loads

passengers, not bothering even to return to the station. The crowd now grows to 100 and every time anything resembling a bus comes along, people run after it. In desperation, Vincent starts hitch-hiking. A bus ticket taker has assured me he can get us onto the next bus, but he now seems powerless to do much of anything. By 5 p.m. passengers are starting to give up. Some decide to hop on a goods vehicle that is parked across the road. While we are thinking about where to spend the night in Tamale, the ticket taker secretly ushers us to a bus parked a block away. A few minutes later we are heading to the next border town (still in Ghana) called Yendi.

It is after dark when we arrive in Yendi, and someone at the bus depot is kind enough to suggest and then lead us to the only formal accommodation in town, located at a newly built Community Center Guest House. (Unlike in francophone countries, facilitators in Ghana facilitate without expecting any compensation; I usually find a foreign coin to give them, which they sheepishly take after a minute's worth of rejecting). Only rather expensive air-conditioned rooms are available at the Guest House. After further investigation we learn that there is other accommodation in town, the Police Guest House, where we find a basic room for about one-third of the price of the community guest house. Throughout towns and small cities in West Africa, the police run guest houses. I don't think these are also jails, for there are no bars on the windows and they don't feel like a jail. Tourists don't know about these places; they are not written up in travel guides.

Finding the Police Guest House saves us US \$30. This points out the importance of travelers being able to communicate. At the Mole Reserve we met a Japanese fellow who is motorbiking around the globe. He has been on the road for 18 months and 100,000 kilometers and is only about half through his trip, which had taken him so far around North and South America, Europe and now West Africa. He was having some problems in West Africa, relying on a copy of the Lonely Planet Guide, which was out-of-date even when published six years ago. Japanese people seem to be prime targets for theft in Africa. This fellow had his wristwatch grabbed off him while he pulled up at a stop light in Dakar, and he had some camping equipment stolen somewhere else. But his major problem is language. The only French he speaks is "je ne comprend pas," and his English is only slightly better. He is spending about US \$20 per day, excluding costs associated with the motorbike. We meet up with him a few days later. The day after we stay in the police guest house, he has also stayed in Yendi but at the US \$30 Community Center Guest House. Not communicating well makes his trip more expensive than it should be. Still, I have to admire such an independent traveler, someone who had worked as a mechanic in Japan for five years, saving up funds, to see the world. When he runs out of money he will return to Japan and find a pretty boring job for the rest of his life. I don't think I could travel for such an extended period. Several months on the road seem to be my limit.

Next: Arrest in Togo II

Bonjour from West Africa (20)

## 20. Arrest in Togo II

The police at the Yenti guest house were insistent that we should get up early (5:30 a.m.) to catch the first vehicle from town to the Togo border. We decide to sleep a bit more and settle for a later vehicle. When we get to the long-distance depot at around 8 a.m., the reasons for the police's insistence become clear. Only the first vehicle each day is of the enclosed nature. I do not see that vehicle now, but I assume it is either a van or a sedan. The next vehicle, the one now filling up, is a goods flatbed truck, and the 50 kilometers to the border is probably the single worst trip I have ever had. The dirt road has so many holes, except when it is pure corrugation, that it is impossible to sit, so we have to stand, grabbing on to the side railing to keep from being bounced out altogether. The truck turns up so much dirt and is going so slow that those of us in the back can neither see nor breathe. By the end of the trip I am encased with a thick layer of dirt, much thicker than what had covered me during the earlier Bamako-Dakar train ride.

As bad as is the trip to the border, as easy is the border crossing. According to my guide book, Togo is one of the few West African countries that does not require (or charge for) advance visas from USA passport holders (Senegal and Cote d'Ivoire are the others). Vincent, traveling on a French passport, had bought his visa in advance. The border authorities fill out the various forms for both of us and, as our papers are in order, let us through.

Togo is a stellar example of a country that by all rights should not exist as a nation-state. It struggles as a nation, dependent on handouts from the West, its people lacking a sense of national identity (replaced by ethnic identity instead), and since independence it has been in civil war as often as out. In terms of ethnic groups and culture, Togo consists of two distinct halves, that have little in common. Both parts could easily fit into the adjacent countries, where the languages and ethnic heritages are similar. Aside from the voodoo in the south, which it shares with the coastal areas of Benin, its eastern neighbor, it has little to interest a traveler. If Togo has anything special about it, it is its degree of corruption in all aspects of existence, rivaling only Nigeria in this regard. The police and quasi-police road blocks in Togo are the most annoying in West Africa. Its police are considered among the continents' most corrupt - - and that is saying a lot.

Vincent and I manage to get to Kante, in the north of Togo (after waiting for hours for our bush taxi to load, we pay for five seats so we can get underway), from where we want to view the famed tata, the two-story mud huts of the villagers that are quite distinctive (the tata can also be visited in Benin, but I am not planning to go far enough north in Benin to see them). Several touts have corralled us in Kante, and we are trying to get them to show us how to rent bicycles so we can cycle to the tata (and thus avoid having touts along). As we pass the local police station, we are hauled over and told to produce our identification. From all the roadblocks, I have come to realize that the police in West Africa are not respected. Most people do not even fear them. But they do carry arms, and it's best for a foreigner to heed their pomposity. They are considered people who are

not especially bright and who have obtained their positions by methods other than merit. In other words, most Togo cops have either sons or father or uncles or nephews on the force. In the pecking order of respect, they command more than pickpockets, but less than more accomplished thieves such as politicians and diplomats.

We produce our passports and the police inform me I do not have a visa. I show them the entry stamp and tell them that I am not required to have a visa; that's why I was permitted to enter without one. They tell me that the immigration officer had made a mistake, that USA nationals have been required to get advance visas for over a year. In a feeble attempt to back up their claim, they produce a photocopied document listing various countries and related visa fees. Next to USA is scratched in pen, as an apparent afterthought, the amount 10,000 CFA, or about US \$20. The document does not look official, it lacks an official chop, and neither Vincent nor I believe it. It seems like a fourth or fifth generation photocopy made for my benefit. If this policy has been in effect for a year, as they claim, why was I allowed in at the border? I ask. They say the border official made a mistake. After over a year, the border police still do not know official policy?, I ask. That seems to me extraordinary incompetence, something not even to be expected of a country that had no legitimate claim to be a country. Quite honestly, neither Vincent nor I believe them. This seems like the type of extortion so widely practiced in West Africa. I say I want to call the US government and if my government tells me I have to pay for a visa, I will do so. Not only will the local police not let me make the phone call, but when I ask for the phone number of their police station, they refuse to give it to me. At this point, Vincent whispers that he will go and make a call to the US embassy, which he does. After about thirty minutes of my refusing to budge on the visa issue, the US counselor official calls me (The US government knows the phone numbers of all Togo's police stations, as the country has a single phone book). He tells me, yes, indeed, that USA nationals have to pay for visas, that it does not really surprise him that border officials are not familiar with rules that have been in effect for over a year. Though he has more tact than to tell me what he thinks of Togo as a country, he seems to share my general condescending observations.

So I pay for a visa, which is good only for 7 days, rather than the 30 days, that USA citizens are entitled to. The staff of this police station tell me they only have one stamp, that for 7 days, so they cannot issue the visa I am entitled to get. They suggest that I get an extension in Lome, the Togo capital. (The US consular official tells me that the Lome office almost never issues extensions; people overstay their visas and nothing much seems to happen, he mentions). I had once met a traveler who had a similar problem in Ghana; he told me that the way you get an extension in Ghana is to hide an Andrew Jackson (US \$20 note) between the pages of the passport, in addition to the required fee. Togo is much less sophisticated than Ghana; I suppose that an Alexander Hamilton (US \$10) could buy a visa extension in Lome.

So that's my story about arrest in Togo. After Togo we visit Benin (it used to be called Dahomey). Its capital city, Cotonou, is the most disgusting and disfigured city I have ever visited. It is crowded, noisy and smelly (on its good days resembling Taipei or Bangkok

on their bad days). Cotonou has few busses or taxis; public transit is by way of motor scooters called zimi-djans (the drivers of these mopylettes wear official yellow jerseys with their assigned number), of which there are several hundred thousand producing plenty of fumes and noise and scary rides. As one who generally likes cities, I find this one to be the most distasteful one on the planet. We follow the Rough Guide's advice and stay 30 minutes a way in Porto Novo, the official capital of Benin, which seems to have captured all the charm that Cotonou lacks. Porto Novo has plenty of sights, good restaurants and is small enough to be easily navigated by foot. We take a day canoe trip up to visit one of Benin's villages that is built on stilts, a construction forced by rising and falling tides. These villages, for which Benin is famous, are quite isolated, reachable only by water, and located remotely so that warring tribes cannot easily attack. We choose to visit one of the least visited of the lake villages because those more frequented by foreigners emit a rather stenchful tourist culture.

As Vincent heads north to Niger, I spend the last week of my trip again traveling by myself, west along the coast, back through Togo and Ghana to Abidjan for my return flight. I stay in Lome for several days waiting for my Ghana visa; my Togo visa expires but their border officials do not seem much bothered and wave me out of the country. They ask me if I want to return; I tell them I think not. For the last few days in West Africa I stay in Grand-Bassam, a town on the Atlantic Ocean, in a hotel right on the beach, with a superb French restaurant (at African prices) not far from the Abidjan airport. A much more pleasant place than busy Abidjan.

Next: Nigeria

Au revoir from West Africa (21)

## **21. Nigeria**

I did not visit Nigeria for several reasons. It is one country in West Africa which has almost no tourism. Too much crime. Nigeria's reputation may be worse than its bite, but I suspect the country really is as bad as most of the guidebooks suggest. I saw a documentary on Hong Kong television on Lagos, Nigeria's capital, that tried to show the city in its best light. It described various urban infrastructure projects and several projects funded with foreign aid. Near the end, the broadcast interviewed several successful entrepreneurs and a few middle class elite. They proudly showed off their walled compounds, guarded by attack dogs and armed militia, electrified by private generators, with elaborate security systems imported from the United States. They described how their children were driven to school by an armed bodyguard in order to foil kidnapping attempts. Probably no city in the world has a worse reputation in terms of crime and violence. Expatriate Nigerians, more than the nationals of any other country, are loathed in Africa; they are believed to run crime syndicates in most African capitals.

At one time Nigeria had the potential for being one of the richest countries in Africa. Yet the oil that was expected to make it so wealthy and increase the quality of living of its people turned out to be the very factor that has made it a corrupt, poverty-ridden country.

Oil produced easy money and became the lubricant for government corruption, as it did in Mexico, Indonesia and other developing countries. Rather than using oil profits to build infrastructure and secondary industries, Nigerians benefited personally and used their new money to buy imported goods such as Mercedes and Sony TVs and to send their children abroad. Stratification between the classes intensified.

The idea of quick money had an even more profound, and devastating, psychological effect on the populace as a whole. Nigeria, more than any country in the world, has developed commercial fraud, the business scam, into an art form. You might think this is a rather bold statement, but I give as reference a document from none other than the United States Department of State, which has published a brochure entitled "Tips for Business Travelers to Nigeria" (Publication # 10097). The entire pamphlet is addressed to "protecting yourself from business scams." Business investors from the US have been kidnapped and held for ransom; many have had their US bank accounts raided by their Nigerian partners. Seemingly legitimate meetings have taken place in government offices, after hours, when scam artists pretend to be official oil executives. I mention this pamphlet because it was given me by a US consular official in Togo who suggested I should substitute Togo for Nigeria, as business scams had crossed the border. Beware of anyone who speaks English, he warned me.

True enough, Togo had not only its fair share of tourist touts and prostitutes (walking down the street in Lome one afternoon I was physically attacked by one prostitute who tried to rip off my shirt before I outran her. The locals told me that this particular street had a more aggressive climate than most.), but I was approached by scam artists, too. One such con-man, whom I tried to ignore like all the others, followed me for several blocks, pitching his investment as I steadily increased my pace. In most countries I was viewed as a simple tourist, but for some reason Togo's underworld thought I was a businessman and I attracted scam artists like flies to merde.

I want to end my essays on West Africa with these comments on Nigeria because I think this country and its capital city especially are seen by Africans to be the model for the future of West Africa. I asked several Africans what city they thought was the prototype for African's urban development; the answer I often received was Lagos. I suspect that Lagos, based on the accounts I have heard, is a really foul place, but it is also the place associated with opportunity, manifested in their worse forms as quick money scams. I think that is why Lagos, this city of opportunity, appeals to West Africans. The urban migration that Africa has suffered the past several decades has as its foundation hope and the desire to escape rural life - both its lifestyle and its poverty. Young men migrate to cities. Some just hang out and become petty criminals. Others become petty entrepreneurs. Many sell wares from baskets atop their heads, saving their profits for future investments. Eventually, maybe they will earn enough money to buy a motor scooter and make a living taxiing passengers. After many years perhaps they can save enough to buy a Peugeot from a foreign traveler and set up their own long-distance taxi service. It's a shame that there's no economic system in place that can take advantage of this African petty entrepreneurship. It is clear to me that Africans, unlike Asians, do not

want to work 9-5 jobs in factories. They want to be their own bosses. They want quick results; they go to the cities in search of a brighter future; they do not want to stay in the villages. As this cycle replays itself in country after country, African's rural traditions deteriorate and its urban conglomerations become more and more unwieldy. Such seems to be the future of West Africa.

End of series