

July 2003

Cape Verde

Don't know about you, but June sure seemed to fly by.

Our household goods finally arrived a week ago last Friday. . . well, most of them, anyway. Missing a few things, like fishing poles and golf clubs. I've really been waiting for my clubs. Sure enough, Anzie's clubs made it. We were sure that they were destined for storage. She rarely uses them. Anyway, it's like seeing old friends again. We finally have rugs and wall hangings, so the house is beginning to look like a home.

We had a houseguest for a few days: Barbara Staller – Peace Corps Country Director for Cape Verde. When her work was done, Barbara showed me around the environs of Dakar:

- Village Artisanal: many, many little booths and boutiques selling handicrafts – baskets, clothing, leather goods, jewelry. Good quality, but the vendors are very aggressive.
- Village des Arts: long barracks divided into small art studios. Fine arts – mostly paintings and sculpture.
- Home for Abused Women: Houses up to 12 women. In order to cover costs, they produce batik cloth and products thereof – dresses, tablecloths, napkins, quilted pillow covers, etc. Nice stuff, reasonably priced.

Went to a Wine and Cheese gathering at the home of Nancy Manahan, Embassy doctor. Everyone brought either wine or an appetizer. Probably 70 present. Met some more interesting people.

We then moved over to the French Cultural Center for a concert. The music was “a la Youssef N’Dor” – Islamic Griot mixed with rock and reggae. Several band members wandered on and off the stage. One of the most interesting was a paraplegic. His withered legs were curled up under his body like those of a cricket. He got around very well using his hands and arms. He sang and he “danced”, swinging and turning using his fists as pivots and support. As a matter of fact he was quite an agile, rhythmic dancer.

Speaking of seeing old friends, guess who showed up? Sylvia Vriesendorp – all the way from Manchester by the Sea! It was the day after Anzie returned from Niger when the phone rang. It was Sylvia, and she was in Dakar. Turns out she was here to represent her company, MSH, at the funeral of an old friend and colleague, Pape Syr, who succumbed to cancer. Sylvia was planning to visit him in August in hopes of writing a book about him. He was a leader in reproductive rights / health and well known throughout Africa.

Sylvia stayed at our house. We had a great time discussing placement of paintings and tapestries, drinking wine. Lillian Baer joined us for dinner on Sylvia's second night. Lillian is another Peace Corps Volunteer from the 60's who never left. She's a co-founder of a consulting firm, ACI Baobab Center. Sylvia and Lillian have known each other for some years. It was a short evening. We had to pack and get up at 5:00 the next morning for our flight to Cape Verde.

The next day we arrived at the airport at 6 AM for our 8:00 flight, only to find out that it was cancelled and rescheduled for 4:00AM the next morning. African travel is like this!

It was then we met Kelly.

We spied this tall girl with flaxen hair carrying a backpack and a duffel bag and sporting a Peace Corps tee shirt. She looked a bit dazed. Anne confirmed that she was with PC and was returning to Cape Verde after a sudden family visit in Seattle. She went home for the funeral of her sister, who had died of a seizure at age 29. Kelly still couldn't talk about it without tearing up. Kelly returned home with us. We had breakfast. Kelly then went to sleep for about 12 hours. Turns out that she only had two more weeks in Peace Corps, but both she and Peace Corps felt it important for her to return to her site for closure.

Anne and I put our extra day to good use. We opened every box. We decorated the downstairs. Because our walls are all cement, I made good use of my drill and mason bits.

We drove downtown to Peace Corps and discovered that our car parts had just arrived from the U.S. As previously arranged I contacted Jean Baptiste, PC head mechanic, who agreed to install the parts over the weekend while we were away in Cape Verde.

Also our Petco order arrived. I still can't believe that we're importing kitty litter – aka "dirt" – from the U.S. Amadou tried to substitute local sand once. The cats' response was swift. One or both of them peed on a mattress. We've made several attempts to clean it, but it still reeks.

So, we took a cab back to the house carrying our cat litter and food. We also got to spend another pleasant evening with Sylvia, who left for the airport at 9PM. Our cancelled flight was just meant to be. We got to know Kelly. We made arrangements to have our car fixed. We made good progress on unpacking our house. We got to see more of Sylvia. Hopefully she's returning in August. Can Axel be far behind?

Woke up last Friday, June 27 at 2:00AM to catch a 4:00 flight to Cape Verde. Kelly, Anne and I took a pre-arranged cab ride for the 500 meters to the airport. Our proximity is a good thing. Turns out that Anne had to return home to pick up her flipcharts. We ran into Josh and Adam, both retired PC Volunteers who work at the Baobab Center. They were going to Cape Verde on vacation. Kelly began to show renewed energy as she presented them with a travelogue of things to do and places to go.

We took off at 5:00 and landed 1 hour and 40 minutes later in Praia, the capital of Cape Verde on the island of Santiago – 400 miles from Dakar. Cape Verde consists of 8-9 islands. Like the Hawaiian Islands, they're the result of volcanic action. Unlike Hawaii, they're not very green. They average less than 4" of rain per year. The rainy season lasts from late August to early October. We did come upon the occasional green valley where bananas, mangos, sugar cane and maize grow.

Santiago is very mountainous. Back in the days of the slave ships, it was a stopping-off place for water. Many slaves escaped over the years and hid in the mountains. They became known as *rebellados*, because they refused to recognize the local Portuguese government. Rebellados still live in the high mountains separate from the rest of the population for these 400 years. Many of the former slaves and the local Portuguese intermarried, giving rise to an array of features that is known as Cape Verdean. Interestingly enough, there are more Cape Verdeans living in the U.S. – mainly along the New England coastline in towns like Fall River and New Bedford – than currently live in Cape Verde. Many of these expats return to Cape Verde upon retirement.

Barbara Stahler, Peace Corps Country Director, reciprocated our hospitality manyfold. The evening of our arrival Barbara, husband Mike and son Galen drove us to Cidade Velha, the former capital and busy slave port. At sunset we visited an old fort that overlooks the city. The fort is well preserved considering that it was built in the early 1500's. In 1585 Sir Francis Drake plundered the town. The fort was never fired upon, nor could it save the city below. We dined on octopus at an outdoor restaurant in Cidade V., which overlooked a rocky cove and crashing surf.

On Saturday we picnicked on a secluded, white sand beach, Sao Francisco, with the Stahlers and other PC and Embassy staffers. It's a small group here, so they do a lot together.

On Monday, Mike took me golfing. If Mike hadn't told me we were on the course, I never would have known. It was total desert – no green anywhere. Mike was angry because he forgot to bring his piece of Astroturf that he uses for fairway shots. The tee consisted of a raised 5 x 5 ft cement square filled with an oil-sand mixture. The fairway was the area without trees. The green was a 20 ft. diameter circle of oil-sand mixture. For fairway shots we just built a little anthill of sand with our feet to use as a tee. Due to time constraints, we played only six holes. Suffice to say, we had the course to ourselves.

That evening we were invited over to the U.S. Ambassador's residence for Mike's going-away party. Mike has worked at the embassy for the past year as Chief Liaison Officer. He's returning to Seattle on a career move. Ambassador Johnson and his wife were charming hosts. We drank wine made from grapes that are grown on the steep sides on the volcano on the island of Fogo, which is

located about 15 miles away. Mrs. Johnson is a marvelous cook. She made enough delicious appetizers that we didn't need dinner.

Sunday we hired a taxi to tour the island. We took the mountain route to the other end of the island, to the village of Tarrafal – about a two hour trip non-stop. Of course we stopped. Sylvo, our driver, took us to a grog "factory". Grog is made from sugarcane. It tastes more like White Lightnin' than rum. The factory, located in a deep valley accessible only by a donkey path, looks medieval. It consists of a bunch of thatched roof huts, a wood-fired still and a series of concrete water vats through which they filter the grog. Everyone seemed happy. Must be those coffee breaks.

Sylvo drove us over the high mountains. We broke through a bank of low-flying clouds. We entered a tiny village that was perched upon the steep mountainside. We stopped on the narrow two-lane road that divided the village at one point where either side dropped off into precipitous nothingness that was hidden by clouds. It was scary!

Tarrafal is a quaint little seaside town. We parked at the public beach. It was white sand, a good swimming beach and, since it was Sunday, crowded. At the end of this beach was a large rock outcropping with a beachcomber-type bar perched precariously on top. On the edge of the beach was a complex of small bungalows nestled in a grove of palm trees. On the other side of the outcropping we discovered another sandy beach which wasn't as crowded. Reason: the water was filled with rocks -- not great for swimming, good for snorkeling. So, snorkel we did. We spotted several of the same types of colorful fish that we had seen last summer in Hawaii. Imagine them swimming all that way!

We ate lunch at a nice little restaurant that overlooked the beach. Octopus is very popular in Cape Verde. We also ate a dish they call "shari" (sp.?). Made from maize, it tasted like a cross between cous-cous and rice.

Remember Mateus, the Portuguese rosé wine? Haven't tasted it in years. Used to be popular during our college days. We ordered a bottle. It tasted wonderful: sweet, but not too ... cool as if it were chilled in a mountain stream ... perfect for lunch on a hot summer day. It was like rediscovering a childhood chum and realizing that, despite your matured taste, you still enjoyed him.

We returned to Praia via the coast, beautiful vistas at every turn. We were forced to slow down to a crawl as we passed through every village. It being Sunday, each town put on a fiesta: people, music, street vendors, animals.

The next day I discovered a terrific swimming pool at the Hotel Tropicico, an easy 10 minute walk from our hotel. Our hotel, the Mirasol, was priced right at \$65./night, but it really didn't hold a candle to the Tropicico. At \$85./night the Tropicico was more modern, cleaner and required a lot less climbing. We had to

climb up four flights of stairs to our room at the Mirasol. Unfortunately, the Tropico was sold out for a portion of our stay. Anyway, I swam laps every morning for the last four days of our stay.

I have to tell you about the two "specialists" whom I met in Cape Verde. One was a specialist in ants; the other specialized in worms.

I met Jim at our beach picnic. I saw this tall, lanky, bespectacled, sandy bearded thirty-something turning over rocks and collecting ants. He was using an "aspirator", a simple device consisting of a short length of flexible medical tubing with a small glass jar attached in the middle. He would put one end of the tube over the target ant and his mouth at the other end, and "suck" the ant through the tube and into the bottle. He's a professor at the College of the Atlantic in Florida. He was hired by National Geographic to do research on the ants of the Cape Verde Islands. The theory is that, since the CV islands constitute such a discrete land mass, the ants just may be like none found anywhere else.

Since Jim had just arrived, he hadn't experienced any "Eureka!"s yet. However, he had found one unique species just outside the local brewery. Jim is one of those characters whose enthusiasm for his subject is contagious. He spoke of various interesting ant species he has come across.

The "honey ant": members of a colony serve as storage bins. They store food for the other ants in their posteriors which, come to resemble small grapes. They hang suspended from the ceiling of the colony and feed their fellow ants by mouth-to-mouth. To some animals and humans honey ants are candy.

The "predator" ant: this yellow ant eats anything -- wood, clothing, animals, people even - anything organic. This species tends to break out in certain areas like a plague of locusts. It devours anything organic: wood, cloth, animals and humans. It's the size of our normal black ant, only yellowish. It is now a nuisance in two areas: Cape Verde and Key West, Florida.

Does anyone remember that great sci-fi flick, "Them"? It's about these ants that have grown to the size of Volkswagens due to nuclear radioactivity. The giant ants have taken over the L.A sewer system. I asked Jim about the film. He knew quite a bit about it. Two years ago some Hollywood types thought about making a sequel. They invited Jim to lunch a couple of times to discuss technical ant issues.

Hans the worm man: We met him during lunch at the Hotel Tropico. He was dining with his old friend, the former Cape Verdean ambassador to Senegal. Hans, an Austrian who now lives in Venice found out we came from the Boston area. A worm expert, he imports bloodworms from Maine for saltwater fisherman throughout Europe and Africa. His major income is derived from the sale of worms imported from China, and he has made a fortune. He asked me to be on

the lookout for a source of worms in Senegal. "We could make some good money together", says he. Hey, you never know.

A la prochaine Chuck