

January 2004

Pink Lake and other strange French customs: Lac Rose/ Lac Retba:

Two weeks ago we decided to take in this site to see what everyone was talking about. 45 minutes and 30 kilometers later, we arrived at the edge of this small lake that is, indeed, pink. It's not huge. It stretches about 1½ miles long by 300 yards wide, surrounded by sand dunes and occasional groups of shacks.

The pink color comes from the presence of microorganisms combined with a high salt content. The water gets pinker when it is stirred up by wind, an oar, a foot or a shovel, because the microorganisms change color as a defense mechanism. The lake lies about 200 yards from the ocean. Since the lake lies below sea level, the seawater feeds the lake from underground streams. As the water evaporates the salt "falls" to the bottom. We could see several flat-bottom rowboats on the lake with men standing beside them in chest-high water. They were harvesting salt cake, which covers the entire bottom of the lake up to a meter thick. The harvesters use long metal spikes to chop up the salt cake. Then they fill their boats until the gunnels are at the waterline. They push their boats to the shore, where they are unloaded.

Mustapha was leading a team of harvesters. He explained the operation. We asked him how much a harvester was paid for each boatload. Answer: 1000CFA -- about \$1.90 for two hours' work.

Les Abreuvoirs:

Remember Yves Marlière? He's our neighbor, the Hungarian consul, a painter of 18th and 19th Century landscapes ala the Old Masters. He also belongs to several associations having to do with drinking and eating, e.g., The Knights of Bordeaux, The Knights of Bourgogne, The Knights of the Rotisserie, The Fraternity of Armagnac, The Brothers of Vodka. He introduced me to another association on the Saturday after Christmas - Les Abreuvoirs. It translates into "Places where animals drink abundantly". He picks me up along with Olivier Carduner, relatively new director of USAID here. Olivier's mother is French, so he parle bien francais. He met his lovely wife, Pat, while they were students at U. of Michigan. We drive downtown Dakar to the Novotel hotel.

There's a comic strip that's been famous in France since its inception in the '60's, "[Asterix](#)". The hero is an aging Gallic/Roman warrior who sports a helmet with horns. He wears his blonde hair in braids. This is the theme of Les Abreuvoirs annual banquet. The yard behind the hotel is decorated as a village scene from "Asterix". On two sides are these 4 x 8 ft. connected panels stretching about 80 ft. with the 8 foot sides on the vertical. On them is painted with air brush a huge mural of all the society's members bedecked in Roman regalia ala "Asterix". In

one section of the mural are the deceased members dressed in white robes and sitting on clouds overlooking the scene below.

On the other two sides of the yard are arranged in stage-set fashion houses of the various comic strip characters, including Asterix's dog. Tethered next to the houses are assorted sheep and two very large Brahma bulls. One of them pawed the ground and lunged as I sauntered by. Other sheep were tethered around the yard. In the center stood a large tent that covered tables arranged in a U-shape for 100 banqueteers.

Immediately upon entering the yard, Yves introduced us to the President, Jean Pierre. Of course he made a great to-do about my being a Kennedy from Boston. We were then presented with our headgear. Yup, a helmet complete with horns and blond braids.



A whole lot of drinking and eating went on from that point forward for over three hours. I was surprised to meet some people I know: Alan Latimer, Deputy Chief of Mission at the Embassy; Alain Asix, friend of Yves and a commercial building contractor (he's got a place in mind that may be an ideal replacement for our Marine House). I also met a lot of new friends. It was a great mix of Senegalese, French, Lebanese, Cape Verdeans with a smattering of other nationalities. I dined next to the Romanian Ambassador, for instance.

The menu consisted of huge hunks of grilled meat - lamb, beef and pork - salads, cold cuts and cheeses. The meal ended with espresso and a generous snifter of 25-year old Armagnac. The president introduced us guests. Then we rose for several toasts and singing the theme song of Les Abreuvoirs, which consisted of "Fa la la" repeated several times, followed by rhythmic handclapping. Remember Jackie Gleason and Art Carney on the "Honeymooners"? They were members of the Ancient Order of Raccoons (or was it Woodchucks?) That's what this felt like.

We all went home for a nap.

A la prochaine, Chuck