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Gambia -- The Country the World Forgot

Gambia is such an interesting country. Look at a map and you'll see that the country looks like a smiling, or grimacing, mouth on the face of Senegal. It is surrounded on three sides by Senegal. It extends along each side of the Gambia River, which defines it. The country is about 250 miles long by an average of 15 miles wide. It starts out wide at the ocean, then after about 30 miles, it narrows down. It should be perfect territory for spaghetti plantations. History has it that the British military contingent charged with mapping out the territory sailed up the river in a gunboat. The boundaries were determined by how far they could fire a cannonball from the river.

Gambia was a British territory from 1820 until 1965. The British didn't do much to improve the country during their tenure. Peanuts constituted the single important export product. They even tried to trade it to the French, who occupied Senegal, for more favorable territory. The French weren't interested. During the first part of the 20th Century, India and other parts of Africa dominated British colonial policy. Gambia became independent in 1965. The capital city of Bathurst was renamed Banjul.

Beginning in the '70's Gambia became a tourist destination, offering wide, sandy beaches, great fishing and beautiful, sunny weather during the winter months.

Banjul, the capital city, resembles some of the poorer sections of downtown Detroit. Some streets are impassable due to flooding. Trash is everywhere. We noticed one dramatic difference from Senegal as soon as we hit the highway to Kololi. The Gambian drivers are so civilized. They drive slowly. They stay in line. They give way to cars entering from parking lots or driveways. They are courteous! Perhaps their good driving manners stem from their long association with the British. When Gambia became independent in 1965, the turnover of power was apparently amicable. Since then Gambia has experienced three bloodless coups.

The uncertain governance has not helped the economy to revive. The main export is still groundnuts. Tourism was hurt by the unrest, and is just beginning to revive. There is talk of Sheraton building a resort just south of the airport. On one hand, it's too bad. It's a beautiful area: lush, tropical vegetation -- exotic birds-- wide sand beaches -- plenty of bars, restaurants, niteclubs and hotel accommodations -- a friendly, laid-back population. On the other hand, it's a good deal. The dearth of tourists has kept prices reasonable. And, as Dez and Sylvia discovered, the prices of housing are cheap, as is the cost of living. Wages are low. The average monthly wage is \$100.

But, I digress

We arrived at our digs, the **Coconut Residence**. Anzie has stayed here several times because of its style and elegance. Plus, it's not very far from the Peace Corps offices. I was struck immediately by the fact that there was no sign. It implied that if you didn't know where it was, you had no business being there. The warm, welcoming attitude of the staff belied this implication. They greeted Anzie as a long lost cousin.

Coconut Residence can best be described as a "boutique" hotel. It consists of 28 rooms that are located in separate bungalows and villas. These are surrounded by jungle gardens. Our room was half of a duplex bungalow, complete with a large furnished veranda. The furnishings exhibited a refined taste, British Colonial with Moroccan accents, and included a queen-size four-poster canopy bed. The owners are Moroccan. I thought the room was just fine. Not good enough for Queen Anzie. She kept whining that it wasn't romantic enough. I don't know - the bed looked good to me. I kept saying, "... but this room is great!" She kept saying "No, this is a simple room. We can do better." I kept saying, "It'll be a hassle to move." She said, "No, they do it all for us." She was right. She asked for, and we were given for our next two nights, the room she had stayed in during her last visit. Our "final resting place" was located on the second floor of a six-suite villa: a living room, huge bedroom beautifully decorated with Moroccan rugs, and a balcony overlooking a swimming pool.

The staff of 110 is inculcated with a true service mentality. They see a problem, they own it until it's taken care of. I was climbing out of one of the several swimming pools as a staff member was passing by. As soon as he saw me he stopped, reversed direction, and appeared a minute later with a towel for me. They seemed to be just looking for ways to serve us. Everyone knew our names. Of course, I was "Mr. Dodge".

The bar is another plus. After 10 hours on the road, I looked forward to a stiff drink. David, the bartender makes an excellent martini! So good I had two! It was the first bar I found in Africa that made an acceptable martini. I made a toast to the British influence.

The restaurant is well-appointed. Normally, tables are set alongside the swimming pool. Unfortunately, construction activity precluded this. They were adding a second floor. The food is nouvelle cuisine and excellent. One day Anzie ordered a Moroccan dish of lamb, prunes and almonds for that evening. She remembered eating it there during an earlier trip. It wasn't on the menu. The chef made it up special. It was excellent!

They also serve an excellent breakfast, if you have the time. The breakfast staff was incapable of serving breakfast within a half hour, which is no problem if you're a tourist.

The hotel offers a cruise up the Gambia River on their private boat, including lunch. At \$90.00/person I thought it too expensive. The manager offered us a special rate of \$72.00. Anzie had heard good things about it, so we went.

The boat is vintage class. Commodore Vanderbilt would use this as his personal pleasure craft. About 50 ft. long, it consists of two decks. The lower has two bathrooms and a shower, a bar/kitchen and a lounge, all decorated with mahogany trim, cushioned chairs and couches. The top deck is designed for sightseeing and sunning. We set off with a crew of four. Picture Anzie sitting on the top deck, glass of white wine in hand, giving "queen waves" to the birds as we pass.

The banks of the river are all mangroves. At low tide we could spot thousands of oysters clinging to the roots. We anchored after about a half hour at the confluence of two *bolongs*, estuaries. We began to fish along with the skipper, Aliouf. Anzie quit after a half hour. Aliouf and I persevered. During two hours the two of us caught what looked like the same 8-inch long catfish a total of six times.

Take 3

This is my third attempt to write the following. I have lost about 3-4 hours worth of writing due to our sudden power cuts. They happen almost every other day. This is a new computer. We haven't set up "Automatic Save" yet. Here we attribute these problems to WAWA - West Africa Wins Again.

We sat down to dine on a platter of hors d'oeuvres, salad and fish brochettes. It was quite satisfactory. We had food aplenty, since the chef had ordered enough for four. The other couple had cancelled at the last minute.

We disembarked at around 5:00 PM after embarking at 11:00 AM. I'll tell ya, an hour of nothing but mangroves goes a long way for me. Even the birds were nothing exotic. Perhaps I've become jaded, or perhaps it was the on-again-off-again rain. I enjoyed our trip down the Senegal River out of St. Louis with El Haj much more. The birds, the scenery, the food and drink, the ambiance, the learning experience all seemed much better in retrospect. Perhaps it was the newness of everything. After all, I had been in Africa for one month. Nonetheless, in retrospect El Haj's tour was well worth the \$50.00.

The Coconut Residence isn't for everybody. A family with kids should probably stay at the **Kairaba Hotel**. It's right on the beach and offers plenty of activities. Next to it is the **Senegambia Hotel** - older and a bit more relaxed. For stays of a week or more take a look at the **Kololi Beach Club**. We did because we had exchange privileges at this time-share complex. It offers townhouse apartments with all the amenities, golf at a par-3 course and an isolated, wide, sandy beach. Meals at their beachside restaurant can be included.

For eating, a couple of must-do's: The **Butcher Shop** and the **Clay Oven**.

The **Butcher Shop** is basically ... well ... a butcher shop with an outside terrace restaurant. Open only for lunch in the summer, they begin to serve dinner in October. Theirs are the best hamburgers in West Africa. We also bought three kilos of Cumberland sausage, which we shared with Chanh, my boss and friend. It tastes as good as they claimed it would.

The **Clay Oven** is an Indian restaurant - the only one we've discovered in West Africa. Another toast to the British influence! The Clay Oven has an extensive menu, plus dinner specials. Good food at moderate prices washed down with several bottles of a good local beer, **Juhibrew**. Tastes like Heinekens. Clay Oven, my kind of place.

While in Gambia we stocked up on staples like pork products -- bacon and sausages, scotch, gin, rum and charcoal. We bought two 50# bags of charcoal. It costs 30% less than in Dakar. Barbara, a Peace Corps friend in Banjul, was amazed that we came to Gambia to shop. Usually Gambians travel to Senegal to shop.

Checked out two sports activities:

1. **Fajara Club**. 18 holes. Everything's green except the greens. They're called "browns" since they're a mixture of sand and oil. Dez is president of the Club. I didn't play. Maybe next time.
2. **Fajara Club**. Same place, different entrance. This is the British Club. Members only. Of course, we barged in as if we owned the place, and a nice place it is. Squash courts. Again a toast to the British influence. We bellied up to the bar and sipped a couple of beers while we watched the Olympics.

Bijilo Forest Park

This small wildlife reserve is located in the beach across the road from the Kololi Beach Club. Trails lead through lush and shady vegetation where you'll see three different types of monkeys and many exotic birds. Regretfully we didn't have time to visit. Next time.

A la prochaine,

Chuck