

January 5, 2004

A Night on Goree Island (click to follow link)

Meet Florence, a.k.a. Salimata (all Peace Corps Volunteers are given a Senegalese name by their host family during Pre-Service Training), a.k.a. Mama Africa (the name by which she's mostly known on Goree). She's a 67 year old African American Peace Corps Volunteer. She's lived on Goree Island for three years. She's become a legend.

Florence retired at the age of 50 from Citibank in NYC with the rank of Vice President. Her job was to fix ailing departments. In the end she was commuting from Long Island to her office in NYC, then on to New Jersey -- every day. She left home at 6 AM and returned home at 7 PM. She took early retirement. She recently learned that they hired four people to replace her. Three couldn't stand the pressure and have left. The fourth one asked for a demotion.

Upon retirement she decided to renovate a brownstone in a tough area of Brooklyn. Although she bought at a good price, the materials she purchased disappeared faster than she could replace them. The neighbors were stealing her blind. After six months of this she decided to get out. That, coupled with an unsolicited mailer she received advertising the availability of a farm for sale in upstate New York outside of Massena, confirmed her decision to make a radical move.

She made an offer on the property and sold the brownstone. In response to her incredulous friends and relatives, especially family, she said that she believed this strange opportunity had to be a message from God. You will assume correctly that Florence is deeply religious.

She arrived at the farm with her reluctant family to discover that:

1. They were one of only two black families in the area.
2. Their property was very close to a large Mohawk Indian reservation.

Florence and her family, she's divorced, worked hard to get the house, out buildings and farmland into shape. In the meantime she had met a white lady whose energy and beliefs matched her own. They proceeded to build an organization whose purpose was to develop a localized "rainbow nation", as it were. They had come to the same conclusion that the whites, the Indians and the blacks didn't know each other. Therefore they didn't trust each other. Together the two of them created a series of programs and activities that brought these diverse groups together.

It was at this point that Florence received another inspiration -- to join Peace Corps. Once more, everyone, especially family members, questioned her sanity.

To shorten the long story, Florence arrived as a volunteer on Goree Island. Goree is infamous as the final embarkation point for 15 million African slaves, who were sent from here to the Americas over a period of five centuries. The Portuguese started it in the 15th Century. Then the Dutch, the British and the French took turns supervising this lucrative trade until its official demise in the mid 19th Century.

The remnants of the slave trade, along with the fortresses, the topography (great cliffs with views of the Dakar skyline and the Atlantic), the narrow streets (no cars allowed on the island), the picturesque houses, courtyards and gardens (built mostly by the French) attract many thousands of tourists each year.

Including George W. He spent a couple of hours here during his African swing last summer. During our stay at **Auberge Keur Beer**, a great little B&B, we got the details of Pres. Bush's Goree visit. The U.S. security cadre was allowed to virtually take over the island. They elected to evacuate all citizens of Goree to the mainland for the day. They were kept in a soccer stadium until our Pres. left the Island. The Island is home to many artists, many of which sport the "Rasta" plaited hair-do. You can bet that our Security people looked upon them as "Level Orange" alert status materiel. A few stalwarts voiced their refusal to leave the Island. After many strong recommendations went unheeded, they were advised that they were under house arrest, and they could not make their presence known during "The Visit".

Pres. Bush arrived along with Colin Powell and Condi Rice (catering to the Black Vote? As well he should.) Mama Africa was invited to meet him. She was so incensed re the treatment of Goree citizenry that she refused to leave her house.

So... what has Mama Africa accomplished during her three years on the Island? As soon as she arrived she noted that the street vendors were overly aggressive, as are their brethren in Dakar proper. She decided to give the vendors lessons in "Customer Service" and "Quality Control". It took her a while, but eventually it worked. Now we tourists don't feel harassed by the people wanting to sell us things or else to be our guides, as we do in Dakar. She taught them that it turns people off to be hassled. It's working. Guide books now comment on the lack of pressure compared to the vendors downtown. They've also seen increased sales. The quality of the goods has also improved.

Florence has also initiated a Guide Training Program, whereby guides are certified and exhibit proof of such. With Florence's assistance we hired a guide, Amadou. We're glad we did. Amadou taught us interesting anecdotes from Goree's history, like:

- During the early part of WWII, Dakar was ruled militarily by Marshall Petain, the Vichy colleague of the Nazi conquerors of France. They sank a British ship, the Tacoma, right off the harbor. To this day, the Dakar-Goree ferry must round a buoy outside the harbor in order to avoid the wreckage of the Tacoma.
- Goree was the sight of the original French government, before they moved it north to St. Louis. The first French governor, de Boufflers, took himself a mistress, as did many of the other french officials. These women became known as *signares*, much like the Spanish word for lady, señora. They were important members of society. During their promenades, they were accompanied by servants who carried their jewelry on display. When their "husbands" moved back to France, they would grieve until the boat disappeared over the horizon. Then they would take another lover.
- Portions of the film, "The Guns of Navarrone", was filmed along the cliffs.
- The "Slave House" was the last point of Africa that the slaves saw as they passed through "The Door of No Return" to board ships for the long voyage to the Americas. The structure is interesting architecturally with its twin curved staircases leading up to the guards' quarters. The slaves were jammed into small, windowless cells below (See photos below).
- Kunta Kinte of "Roots" fame passed through here.
- Across the street is the Womens' Museum. Its exhibits portray the many roles of women in Senegalese society, both past and present. We learned that female circumcision was banned four years ago, although our guide admitted that the law is nearly impossible to enforce. One exhibit room was dedicated exclusively to the *signares*. Another exhibit covered famous ladies of more recent history. We were pleasantly surprised at the number of female political leaders since the advent of Senghor, the poet president.
- A lovely Cactus Garden next to the Slave House was initiated by the wife of Francois Mitterand, former president of France.

Florence has also initiated a website: www.goree.homestead.com, which not only presents the history of Goree, but also elicits comments from visitors. It's worth a visit.

We had fun wandering the streets. Every turn presented us with a new photo op, a scene that begged to be painted. We also discovered Florence's handiwork. She had printed up 8½ x 11 sheets in big letters:

GORÉE ISLAND

WELCOMES

ANNE & CHUCK

"COUPLE OF THE YEAR"

Of course, it was January 2, which made us the first couple of the year. These notices were posted all over the village.

Florence met us as we disembarked from the ferry, took us over to the **Auberge Keur Beer**, and introduced us to the owners - LuLu and his wife, Sophie. A warm and welcoming couple, they showed us to our room and the courtyard dining area. In response to our questions, LuLu gave us the lowdown on what really happened during George W.'s visit.

After a cocktail in the courtyard, we strolled over to the **Hostellerie Du Chevalier De Boufflers** - apparently the home of the first french governor. Sure enough, one of Florence's "Welcome" sheets was on our table. We had a wonderful dinner indoors, then had dessert outside at a table overlooking the harbor.

After dinner we wandered the streets, passing a huge complex of ancient government buildings that just begged to be renovated into a grand hotel/resort. We ended up in a square, which fronted the Church of St. Charles Borromeo. Inside a choir was rehearsing for a concert that was scheduled for the following evening. Those voices certainly set an appropriately heavenly atmosphere to our evening. Back to the Keur Beer for a nightcap, which we didn't need, a demonstration of table-drumming, which our neighbors didn't need. Then, to bed.

The next morning we ate breakfast, checked out and paid our bill: 25,000 CFA. It works out to about \$40-50, depending on how weak the dollar is that day. It has declined about 14% since we first arrived.

After our guided tour we visited Aicha, a boutique owner/chanteuse that Florence had introduced us to. Aicha is a hot ticket! She's pretty, sexy and very personable. She showed us her certificate verifying her attendance at one of Florence's Customer Service Workshops. We bought two sets of batik tablecloths and napkins from her for about \$12 each.

We met Florence for lunch at **Niwa**. This was the best find of all. Speaking of finding, Niwa is very difficult. It's located over the Post Office. There's no sign. You must go behind the building and peek in an open door. On the inside wall directions are painted:

<- Restaurant

You follow the directions left up the stairs and you are confronted with a marvelously decorated entranceway. The walls and ceiling are covered with plaited wedges of multi-colored fabric that join in the center into a large "monkey fist" knot. It conveys the same "Wow!!" feeling we get entering a Mauritanian tent. The walls and beamed ceilings of the restaurant are nicely glazed. The furnishings, the view of the harbor, are all spectacular. We were greeted at our table with another "Welcome Anne & Chuck" notice.

My first thought was: "Uh-oh! We're going to be paying for the décor." Not so. The prices are very reasonable: entrée, main course, bottle of wine, bottle of water -- all for \$30.

One week before Anzie had proclaimed our neighborhood Cape Vert Casino her favorite restaurant in Senegal. As we departed Niwa, she exclaimed to the chef that this was now her favorite restaurant in all of Senegal! Talk about brief loyalty. But, I have to agree with her.

We said our fond farewells to Florence – Salimata -- Mama Africa at the dock. We will see her in early March. She's going to the States for a short visit, and will again use our house as her airport departure lounge. We look forward to reciprocating her kind hospitality.

A la prochaine, Chuck