

May 2003

Settling in and first Peace Corps Trip

Hi everyone – now from me.

As Chuck said things are going well and we are getting settled. I can't wait until our airfreight arrives (600 pounds) – clothes, stereo, TV and kitchen stuff mainly. I did include a large box of wall hangings though, so we can start to make the house more homey – I hate blank, white walls. En principe, our boxes are now (Sunday) at the air cargo place, but getting it through customs and to our house could take a couple of days. Chuck is great at trying to get all the details of starting life in a new place going. He has been on the phone several times with the cable (satellite) TV people and we hope to be all set up by the time we get our air freight. UPDATE: the airfreight is here and just has to go through customs, so in the next day or two we'll have it. Amazing - the shipping company said the 3rd and it was actually there.

We are also looking very hard for a car. Yesterday we went downtown to the market, and as we drove along, if we saw a car with a for sale paper stuck in the window, our taxi driver would pull up at the light next to him as we'd discuss price, mileage, etc. It's funny. Yesterday afternoon we looked at a car owned by a French couple, and thought it looked good – a very tiny 4 door Peugeot, a little more than we wanted to spend, but it is in good shape, so Chuck will take it to the mechanic tomorrow to check it out. Ideally what we want is a small car for around town and a larger, heavier 4 x4 for traveling in. You really do need a 4x4 to go anywhere off the two or three principle roads. Right now I have found a very nice taxi driver who has a cell phone and we have arranged for him to take me to and from work each day – a 20 to 40 minute trip depending upon traffic – about 8 miles. I think when we get a small car, we'll hire him as a driver. It really is pretty hairy to drive in the crazy traffic.

Work is going well as I settle in. I have done a couple of things for the Senegal office. I facilitated a two-day planning meeting, and this week I'll co-facilitate a 3-day eco-tourism focus group with a wide variety of stakeholders – government, tour operators, local people and volunteers. Should be interesting.

A couple of weeks ago I went up to Mauritania to work on a volunteer conference. Mauritania identifies itself as Arabic and not African, and was originally settled by different groups from Morocco and Yemen (yes, I know that is a long way away!). The dominant population is Moor (both white and black – those who have some African blood) and their language is close to Arabic. During the Iraqi war, anti-Americanism ran high and many of the American volunteers were harassed and threatened. Thus the purpose of this conference was to give the volunteers and staff a chance to distress.

Because of the Iraqi war all staff were on a no fly restraint. So we (the PC regional medical officer – a lovely American woman doctor and I) were driven by PC Senegal about 4 hours up to the border and a car from PC Mauritania met us there. It was just like out of a spy novel – walking across a long bridge in a fog of blowing sand from one car and country to the other. The conference was held at a simple “resort” about 50 miles from the border. On the way we saw a

family of wart hogs that ran across the road, a fox and wonderful birds (blue herons, pelicans and other colorful ones I don't know) – in fact we were very near a major bird sanctuary. The lodging consisted of small bungalows that had water and air-conditioning when the generator went on, and a dining room next to a large pond. The facility was originally built for executives of an airline company as a hunting retreat. I called Chuck in the U.S. from a cell phone, but to get a connection I had to stand on the top of a sand dune, surrounded by goat poop!

The coolest thing about the conference were the tents. Mauritians are for the most part nomadic and the country is mainly desert, so many of the rural people live in large tents. And at the conference site, tents of different sizes were set up for workshops, language lessons and meetings. There was one very large tent, maybe 75 feet long where major meetings involving everyone were held. From the outside it was a tannish, muslin color with a large central pole and several secondary poles, and sand bags around the outside to keep the tent walls from blowing. But the inside – WOW – was a mass of color. The whole interior of the tent (roof and walls) was lined with fabric – in all different patterns and colors. On the floor were bright oriental rugs and along the sides were two-foot high rectangular foam “benches” and pillows all covered with bright non-matching material. The first time I went in (there was an opening about 3 feet high that one stooped through) I was so visually assaulted I almost lost my breath. The wild colors and patterns everywhere with a soft light filtering through. And the amazing thing was it all worked visually. What struck me was the radical affirmation of life through the riotous rainbow of colors. Here are people who live in the desert, surrounded by only beige sand and yet they surround themselves with vibrant color! When I did my sessions (I did the first three Covey habits) it was a bit disconcerting since the participants just lounged everywhere, on cushions and on the rugs. And one afternoon when I was teaching, one of the hotel staff came in with small glasses of very strong sweet tea and just walked around to everyone giving them out, regardless of what I was trying to do upfront! So I am learning to expect the unexpected.

Chuck and I are going back up there in mid-May for 10 days. I am going to do some management training and work with one of the staff to facilitate a participatory evaluation and planning seminar for his agro-forestry project. Though we will be in the capital, Nouakchott, for most of the time, we are going to go over the weekend up to the north central part of the country to visit some volunteers who live in the middle of the desert in oases. It should be really cool (or very hot as the case may be!!!). PC Mauritania is giving us a car and a driver for the 3 days.

Well, time to stop. I am typing this out on a balcony over-looking our garden. There is a breeze and I am actually cold! The first of our visitors arrives this week. Debbie Fredo is a friend of mine from graduate school and she has been working in Mali for the past couple of years doing very interesting work with primary schooling. We can't wait to see her. Then a friend from home, John Hutchison, is coming the end of May on his way home from a consultancy in Africa.

Think of us tomorrow night - we are going to a gorgeous restaurant on the water to celebrate our third anniversary and 11 years of being together - and we are happier than ever!

We both send love – Anne (Anzie)

