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Gambia Revisited

Meet Charbel. He's a 3rd generation Lebanese Gambian. He's tall for a Lebanese with a slender build. I find him to be an easy guy to know. He possesses a laid-back, humorous personality which belies his high pressure work ethic. He owns a multitude of businesses in Gambia and Senegal ranging from imports of steel, milk and sugar, currency exchange, supermarkets and automobile dealerships.

Anzie met Jodi, Charbel's wife for the past 11 years, about four months ago at a workshop that they co-facilitated for Peace Corps – Gambia. They became fast friends.

Whereas Charbel is a Catholic Lebanese Gambian, Jodi is a Jewish American, born and raised in Northern New Jersey. After receiving degrees from London School of Economics and Fletcher School of International Relations, Jodi came to Gambia as an intern with USAID. Within a short time USAID hired her full time, a job she loved. She met Charbel and they fell in love. Then politics came into play.

In 1994 a government coup occurred, and USAID closed the office. Jodi decided to remain in Gambia with Charbel, who was building a magnificent estate in the countryside considered far out of the capital city of Banjul. "What are you gonna do out there, farm?", asked his friends. Since that time Gambia's major tourist area of Kololi with its beautiful, wide beaches and resort hotels has grown up around him.

Up until the coup, the U.S. and the U.K. were major contributors of development funds to the Gambian government. These contributions ceased after the coup. The new President, Jammeh, at age 29, was in the Guinness Book of Records as the youngest head of state in the world. Charbel remembers Jammeh's televised address to the U.N. Security Council. He aimed his remarks at the U.S and the U.K. saying that, if they wouldn't continue to fund Gambia's development, "We have other countries who will."

Shortly thereafter, Taiwan established an embassy in Banjul, and proceeded to grant \$49 million to build a new airport. This new airport really helped to launch the Gambia as a tourist spot. I took the ten-mile drive out to see the airport. The bird-like architectural design, the size and the surrounding infrastructure are impressive.

Interestingly enough, Taiwan and the Republic of China compete to establish a presence in the countries of West Africa. You won't find the two with an embassy in the same country. China has built state-of-the-art football stadiums

in major cities throughout West Africa. Whereas, Taiwan has built modern and distinctive nursery schools in many villages.

Charbel's grandfather arrived in Gambia in 1910 along with four other families who left Lebanon to migrate to the U.S. They constituted the first Lebanese immigrants to Gambia. No one knows how or why they ended up in Gambia. Charbel pictures their tour guide landing them in Gambia saying, "Well, here you are. This is America. Have a nice life!"

The Lebanese possess a strong work ethic combined with business acumen. That's why they run most of the major businesses throughout West Africa. Families are very close and it is possible to see 3 or 4 generations out to dinner together. And many of the businesses are family-run with uncles and cousins.

We stayed a week in Gambia. Anzie was busy doing training sessions for Peace Corps staff. After completing the somewhat grueling 8-hour drive (we stopped along the way to visit potential conference sites), I was free to explore. I played golf at the Fajara course. An 18-hole course, they offer "browns" instead of "greens". One hires two people for a round – a caddy and a brown sweeper.

One morning we awoke early and took a three-mile hike around an animal preserve that borders the ocean across the road from our glorious hotel, the **Coconut Residence**. Although the park was lush jungle, there wasn't much to see except for vervet and colobus monkeys that lived right near the end of our tour. Our guide wasn't all that helpful: "That is a great white bird", he proclaimed with extreme profundity. We had vervet monkeys that were attracted to the lush plantings of mangoes and bananas around our hotel. We would watch them eating bananas from a tree just outside our window. They would litter the area with the peels.

Anne phoned Jodi as soon as we arrived. They took us out to **Shiraz**, a wonderful Lebanese restaurant. Charbel drinks Johnny Walker Black Label, so we made an immediate bond. Besides that we discovered that we had a lot in common. We both prefer to build businesses from scratch, and then turn them over to someone else after they're up and running smoothly. Also we're married to wonderful women!

We sat down to a *mezza*, a table full of at least 14 different small dishes, both cold and hot, that one samples like "tapas". Anzie and I thought that this was the meal, so we gorged ourselves. As we sat back on our low cushions, thoroughly sated, we were served the main course – marinated chicken brochettes and steak filet. Somehow we managed to find room for more. We met Miranda, the cook and manager – a delightful person and excellent cook.

The next day we visited **Le Salon**, a beauty salon, art gallery, bar and restaurant all housed in a four-story building of unique, funky architecture. Anzie decided to

get her hair cut. I needed one, too. I tried to negotiate with the two hairdressers, Serrule and Ryiad, re the cost of my haircut. I insisted that, if they charged me by the hair, my cut should cost much less than Anzie's. Serrule quipped that the charge is the same because it includes the cost of finding it. I slugged him; then we became friends. Haircuts in African salons always begin with a shampoo and head massage. In this case the massage extended down to the neck and shoulders. It was also extensive (15 minutes) and strong. I worried whether or not I would have any hair left. Anzie's haircut was the best she had ever had.

We ran across Miranda from the Shiraz. She also does hair. It's a small community.

That night we were invited to dinner at the home of Jodi and Charbel. Theirs is a lovely home filled with exquisite African Art. Our meal was also exquisite – gambas and steak filet. These gambas were scary! The biggest shrimp I've ever seen; just two of them made a full meal!

Though happy with Charbel, Jodi is frustrated in Gambia. Ever since USAID pulled out, she's had a tough time finding meaningful employment in her chosen field – international, economic development. She started a computer school in town with 8 -10 computers now. She gets occasional short-term consultancies. That's how she and Anzie met. But she usually does thing for free or for a token compensation. She also runs a small gift shop that sells T-shirts and local craft items. It's connected with Charbel's currency exchange. Despite all of this Jodi's feeling professionally unchallenged in this country that many might describe as a "backwater". Nice place to visit, but

Jodi was leaving for the States in two days. She returns at least twice a year, usually for the Jewish holidays, to be with her family. We met them the following evening as we were leaving the Coconut. They were on their way in for a "Last Supper". It may have been our imagination, but we both commented later that they both looked sad.

The next day we met Luke around our pool at the Coconut. Luke is a Belgian hotelier who has lived in Gambia for many years. He knows Charbel quite well. He claims that Charbel is the second richest man in Gambia.

A la prochaine,

Anzie & Chuck