

**December 2005**

## **St. Louis Re-Visited**

Giant warthogs, crocodiles, red monkeys ... Hey, this is supposed to be a bird refuge!!

Welcome to **Djoudj**, the third largest bird refuge in the world. Home to a few thousand white pelicans, just about every known variety of cormorant, heron and egret, along with eagles (I swear the "fishing eagle" is the same as the American bald eagle), kingfishers ... the list goes on and on ... it is well worth the visit. The problem is, it's located in a remote wetland area in northwest Senegal, just across the Senegal River from Mauritania ... not exactly on the way to anyplace.

On Christmas Day Anne and I headed to St. Louis. We've had mixed experiences there. It offers great scenery, plenty to do; however, the beggars and street vendors downtown are aggressive. They surround any toubab (white person) as soon as they exit from their vehicle or building. It was the same this trip, but it didn't seem to bother us as much. Maybe we're getting used to it. This time we stayed for three days, and it was spectacular.

It began with our hotel. Normally we stay at the **Hotel Mermoz** on the beach. When we phoned for reservations they were booked. We searched the web for alternates, and came upon the **Residence Diamarek**. Mme. Auzas was very accommodating over the phone. We asked for a room with an ocean view. She convinced us that we would prefer a river view. There's more to see. She even offered us an additional 10% discount since I work at the Embassy.

Diamarek is also located on the **Langue de Barbarie**, a sand spit about 400 yards wide. The Atlantic is on one side with the Senegal River on the other, about another kilometer south of Hotel Mermoz – a 15 minute ride out of downtown St. Louis. It consists of 15 round, thatch-roofed bungalows that are divided into two or three rooms, each with its own patio. The rooms are air-conditioned, a feature that we didn't need at this time of year. The hotel offers a good-sized pool, tennis and petanque (bocce). We had a very nice meal in the dining room the first of our three nights. They offer a good continental breakfast for \$5.

The French owners, Michel and Annick Auzas, were very outgoing and helpful. Annick gave us good advice on St. Louis restaurants. Also, the price is right: less than \$50./night/room.

Annick was right about the view. We could sit on our patio drinking a cocktail while we bird- and boat-watched through our binoculars. With bird book in hand we identified several types of heron we hadn't seen before.

We spent our first full day touring St. Louis. We checked out several hotels with future trips in mind. In the South end of the Isle St. Louis we visited **La Palmerie** and **Hotel Sidone**. We also toured **La Maison Rose**, where friends Rob and Babs were staying. This beautiful hotel just opened last year. It's owned by Mme. Diouf, who is the daughter of a former president of Senegal. The building stretches a city block. Three stories of rooms surround a central courtyard. Each room is different, with lots of tasteful artwork throughout. Mme. Diouf spared no expense. A lovely restaurant occupies the rooftop terrace, which affords a 360 degree view of St. Louis. The hotel really suits the New Orleans-like atmosphere of St. Louis .

We spent the rest of the day shopping, noshing and soaking up the atmosphere. As it was pretty cool (69°) and windy, Anzie bought a very nice hooded jacket – hand-woven and dyed cotton -- made in a village nearby. We noted several other buildings that evidenced recent renovation. We came away with the feeling that the town is slowly but surely cleaning up its act.

That afternoon we toured the “embouchure”. This is the name for the channel that was cut across the Langue during the summer of 2003. The north of Senegal experienced record rains last year. The Senegal River overran its banks and flooded many areas around St. Louis. Someone had the lousy idea of relieving the floodwaters by channeling through the Langue about 15 kms. north of the point where the River mouth meets the ocean. They cut a 50 meter-wide channel that did relieve some of the flooding. However, the resulting environmental damage is substantial. The channel is now ½ a kilometer wide. The resorts south of the cut can only be reached by water. Saline water now flows much farther up the river, damaging croplands. Finally, the tip of the Langue is now plugged with sand so that it is connected to the mainland. This means that the last 15 kms. of the River is now a pond with no outlet. All this stagnant water will eventually become swampland. Moral of the story: It's not nice to mess with Mother Nature.

That night we joined friends Rob and Babs Jackson together with their houseguests Mike, Elaine and daughter Linda visiting from Brazil. We dined at the **Casino Terrace**, recommended by Annick. Good choice. “Petit Monde Syndrome” hit us again. Into the restaurant trooped a gang a Peace Corps volunteers there to celebrate one's birthday. Hugs all around with Anzie, of course. We went around the corner to our favorite 24-hour patisserie, **Les Delices Au Fleuve**, and bought a cake. Candles were lit, and we gathered around the table to sing Happy Birthday. These are some really great kids!

Up bright and early next morning for our trip to Djoudj. Son Rowan and I took a guided trip there last February. Cheapskate that I am, I decided to forego the guide and find my way there on my own, this time with Anzie. One big advantage this time: our Toyota Rav 4, in place of the old Nissan Sentra sedan. What a difference it made! The roads are miserable for the one-hour trip from St.

Louis. They get much worse once we enter the Reserve for the half-hour journey to the river cruise debark point. With the Nissan we felt every washboard ripple, every pothole. The Rav 4 smoothed the way to the point my kidneys were singing a hymn of praise!

On this trip we convoyed with a French family ... Jacques, Carol and their four delightful kids. How we met is an interesting story. The night before we were relaxing over a cocktail on the patio of our bungalow overlooking the river, when Carol and one of her teen-aged sons ventured across from the adjacent bungalow and introduced herself. "My daughter swears that we met you in South Africa a year ago last September." I began to vaguely recall striking up a conversation with some people in a cactus garden in the Karoo area north of Capetown one cold, rainy morning. Turns out that they were living in South Africa at the time. Last August Jacques' company moved him to Dakar. They are now living in our neighborhood. Talk about the petit monde! They are very nice people. I'm sure we'll become good friends. After all, Jacques plays golf.

The highlight of the trip is the two-hour ride in a motorized piroque, the gaily painted common fishing boat of Senegal. As we waited for the trip to begin, we noted that the king pelicans swam in groups, or rafts. Periodically they would assemble in a tight group. Then, as if by some silent signal, they would simultaneously go bottoms up with much flapping of wings. A few seconds later they would right themselves, and we could see that several of them would have small fish trapped in the soft, membrane-like bottom portion of their bill.

They flew the same way. Looking like so many B-52's with a six- to eight-foot wingspread, once they were airborne they glided majestically with only an occasional beat of their wings. With some magic signal they would all turn right or left at the same time. Their maneuvers would put the Navy's Blue Angels to shame.

On our way out of the refuge we stopped for lunch at the **Lodge de Djoudj**. The forty-odd rooms surrounded a swimming pool. The advantage is that it saves a one-hour drive from St. Louis. The disadvantage is that there is nothing else to do besides the Refuge. Apparently it gets very busy with hunters during the warthog hunting season.

When we arrived back at our hotel we fell into bed for a nap. The tough drive had taken its toll; we were exhausted. Woke up two hours later, played petanque and went into town for dinner. We ate at a Moroccan restaurant, **El Fallah**. Had a delicious tajine. Met the owner, Fousia, a delightful lady. She does all the cooking, including the bread and pastries. She used to work for the Senegalese government as an IT specialist. She was transferred from Dakar to St. Louis. Here she met and married her husband, who owns the youth hostel, **L'Auberge de Jeunesse**.

We were both surprised at the prices of everything in St. Louis. We remembered that restaurants were a bargain in Dakar when we first arrived 20 months ago. The two of us could eat a fine meal, including wine, for a little over \$20. Now it's practically doubled. Over 20% of the increase is due to the dollar devaluation. However, in St. Louis we could re-visit those good old days. Yep, back to \$20 meals for two.

The next morning we awoke at 9:00, checked out (they accept VISA/Mastercard), and were bid a fond adieu by Annick and Michel. We met the Jacksons and guests downtown, and convoyed back to Dakar. We stopped just north of Thies to buy baskets and pottery.

A la prochaine,

Chuck