

July 22, 2003

Sine-Saloum Delta

Meet Sylvo. He's our guide through the bolongs of the Saloum. Confused? So were we.

It all began last week when I met up with Anzie in Saly-Portugal. Anzie had the somewhat enviable duty of facilitating a Peace Corps-sponsored three-day workshop at a beach resort. The work was demanding but the location is beautiful. Saly is located on the Atlantic Ocean about two hours south of Dakar.

It reminds me of a Caribbean resort like the Dominican Republic. It consists of a series of resort hotels strung along a beautiful white sand beach landscaped with palm trees and bougainvillea. The tourists appear to come from France, Spain and Italy. Americans are a rarity.

We took a stroll along the beach. As we passed each hotel we could hear the frenetic rhythms of the French disco music over the sound system, along with the announcements from the activities directors: "Water polo starts in ten minutes in the main pool!" ... "Dance lessons on the patio at four o'clock!" ... "Bus leaves for the M'Bour village market in 30 minutes!"

We continue our stroll.

Anzie: Don't miss those bare ta-tas to our right.

Chuck: Thanks, Hon.

(Ah, those European women.)

We're approached by several "vendeurs" selling sunglasses, jewelry, coconuts and hair braiding. I exhibited an interest in the latter, but Anzie said I didn't qualify. Henna tattooing is also popular. Women have their hands, arms, and legs tattooed with this red stain that lasts for about two weeks. To me it looks like dirt.

The next day we traveled south – destination: Dionwar Island in the Siné-Saloum Delta region, about 116 miles south of Dakar. 70 miles from Dakar to Saly was a 1 ½ hour drive. The 46 miles from Saly to Djifer, our port of debarkation, took 3 hours.

The road was paved until we arrived at Joal, celebrated as the birthplace of Senegal's first president, Leopold Senghor. We then became a bit lost, arriving at a parking lot for the long wooden walking bridge to the island of Faidhout. Faidhout is worthwhile seeing. All of the houses, tombstones, everything is made out of seashells. We had one goal in mind – to get to Djifer. We asked a young man to give us directions. He explained that it was a difficult road, that he knew some shortcuts, and that since his father lived in Palmarin, which was close

to our destination, he would be happy to act as our guide. Anzie and I gave each other that raised eyebrow glance followed by an imperceptible mutual nod. I said, "Get in."

One mile out of Joal the road turned to unpaved "laterite", a crushed rock the color of Georgia red clay. The rainy season began two weeks ago. The landscape has turned a luscious green. This road has turned into a washboard. The first two miles were absolutely bone jangling, teeth-chattering. I drove no more than 15 mph. Finally our guide told me to turn right off the road onto a sandy salt plain. I followed a set of tire tracks across this barren, flat landscape thankful for the smoother ride, but I had no idea where we were in relation to the road. Eventually we entered a pastoral setting of lush green fields of millet dotted with majestic baobabs, past the occasional herd of long-horned gray cattle called "zebu", through a few small thatched hut villages and, after 40 minutes or so at 10 mph, back to the washboard road. Five miles of bone jangling then another right took us out onto a sandy plain again. This time we went only a mile before we came upon an impassable (in our little Nissan) water-filled ditch.

Back to the washboard. All three of us had different ideas on how best to navigate this "road". None of us were right. It was Murphy's Law revisited: "The other side of the road is always smoother". Ultimately we discovered that, if we drove at a constant 55mph, the tires would touch just the tops of the undulations and minimize the teeth chattering. Of course, that speed made it more difficult to evade the large potholes. We dropped off our guide, Boboucar, in Palmarin with a \$2.00 tip to take a bus back home. After Palmarin the landscape changed to a narrow sand spit with water on both sides for the last 15 miles of our trip.

When we arrived at the Niominka parking lot an attendant dressed in Army fatigues greeted us. He asked how our trip was. I asked him to check out our car. As he gave it a once-over I asked him if we still had all four wheels.

We took a motorized launch for the 30-minute ride to the island of Dionwar. The island is about ten miles long and three miles wide at its widest point. It is edged in white sand beaches and mangroves. One side of the island faces the Atlantic; the other borders the mouth of the Saloum River. The interior is pastoral: cultivated fields of millet, maize and other vegetables, along with kapok, baobab and palm trees. Dionwar village has 3000 inhabitants. Our resort, Niominka, is the only resort hotel on the island, and is located about 3 miles from the village.

If you look up the phrase, "tranquil island paradise" in your Funk and Wagnall's, Niominka is sure to be pictured there. No vendeurs, no frenetic disco music, no loudspeaker. Just white sand beach, calm aquamarine water, palm trees and beautiful gardens. The rooms are individual bungalows of an extraordinary design: round, white cement walls with a thatched roof. The interior ceiling mirrors the outside in shape except that it is woven of inch thick circular reeds, much like a basket. Large windows look out onto the beach. We slept on a queen-size bed with mattress and pillows soft as a brick.

When we arrived, the front desk clerk suggested that we proceed straight to the outdoor dining room for lunch. We could sign in later. It was a welcome thought after our rough journey. During our gourmet lunch we noted our surroundings: swimming pool, bar, a “night club” that contained the only television (it also featured nightly dancing to either live or disco music), one other outdoor dining area, an indoor dining room, a small library and a “petanque” court (French lawn bowling), which is *de rigueur* for any resort that caters to the French.

Sports activities included sailing, windsurfing, canoeing and fishing. One could also join in the soccer game that the staff played on the soft sand beach each late afternoon. Most of us residents preferred to watch the game while sipping cocktails.

That first afternoon we elected to take a nap, followed by a swim and a walk along the beach collecting seashells.

The next morning we took a motorized piroque on a fascinating tour of the “bolongs”, the many estuaries that branch off the Saloum. Ishmael, our guide, is Sérér, as are most of the people of this region. Unlike the Senegalese further north, the Sérér are predominantly Christian.

We began our trip at low tide. We spotted thousands upon thousands of oysters that were attached to the mangrove roots. Oyster gathering is a huge industry here. The women wade along the shoreline with baskets, prying the oysters off the roots with knives. Our captain harvested a few, which he opened and offered to us. Fearing the strong possibility of the local version of Montezuma’s Revenge, we demurred.

We then landed on an expansive mud plain, which was exposed only at low tide. Ishmael advised us to remove our sandals. Good advice! Our feet sunk 2” into the primordial ooze at each step. After several steps the warm mud felt really good! Ishmael said the mud is reputed locally for its healing powers. Anzie coated my arthritic feet and ankles with it. I didn’t exactly shout “Eureka!”, but my sore appendages did feel better.

We did spot a few interesting birds: a fishing eagle, large white-breasted cormorants, a great blue heron with a dark red neck, a flock of red-winged flamingos and a few large white pelicans. As in St. Louis, we were advised to come back during the bird season of December-March when the birds are really plentiful.

We also came across the fresh tracks of a green monkey and a mongoose. Never did spot the creatures, though.

We then cruised up a narrow bolong, and landed at the Guior archeological site. We walked inland about a half mile, and came upon a roughly circular ravine about 100 yards in diameter and 50 feet in depth. Ancient baobab trees surrounded the area. At the edge of the ravine we could see that the baobabs

were rooted in seashell piles. On the ravine floor were what Ishmael described as “pyramids of seashells; some were 20-30 feet high. These pyramids, or tumuli, were ancient burial mounds. Yes, we did discover what appeared to be human bones, along with many terra cotta pottery shards.

The site was only discovered, or officially recognized, in 1980. Since that time people harvested the shells for sale in Kaolak, the closest town. Within the past five years UNESCO has declared it a world historic site in order to protect it from further damage.

According to Ishmael, the burial site was active during the years 2000 B.C. to around 200 A.D. He claims that the people came originally from Egypt. As evidence he points to the seashell “pyramids”, plus the many similarities between the Sérér language and ancient Egyptian. We did some checking on the Internet, and came upon a description of the Guior site. It made no mention of the Egyptian connection. Nonetheless, we don’t want to discount entirely the possible truth that is handed down through oral history.

On our return trip we had the chance to know Ishmael a little better. Age 25, he has worked on the Niominka staff for five years. In high school he had dreams of becoming a professional soccer player. Unfortunately his dreams were shattered by a knee injury that was the result of a malicious attack by another player who was jealous of Ishmael’s talent. He does participate in the daily soccer game. His knee did look swollen. Nurse Anzie Fuzzy Wuzzy proceeded to explain to him how to doctor it with cold compresses. She warned him to refrain from playing for at least two weeks. He agreed to comply.

That afternoon there was Ishmael playing his heart out in the daily soccer game. He even made a goal! He jogged over to our patio after the game, shaking his head with a shy smile and said, “I just can’t help myself. Soccer is in my blood.”

That evening we celebrated our anniversary. Our real anniversary is May 6; however, we had smuggled in a bottle of champagne. In order to have it chilled without getting everybody’s nose out of joint about not buying it there, I made up the story about our anniversary. Well, it got a little out of hand. That evening in the dining room we were escorted to a special table complete with candles and flowers. Our waiter, Samba, made a big to-do about presenting the champagne in a silver ice bucket. After dinner the lights went out, we were serenaded by the entire dining room to the tune of “Bonne Anniversaire” as a huge cake with candles was presented. We shared the cake with our fellow diners, a delightful group of Spaniards from Barcelona.

On Sunday we took the 11:30 boat back to the mainland. Driving at a constant 55 mph over the bumpy roads, we made it home in three hours.

We haven’t shared with you the most amazing thing about Niominka – the price: \$44.00 per person per night including meals! We met two groups who were regulars, returning each year. A Frenchman and his teenaged son were on their

third trip. Each year they stayed for a month and studied a new subject. This year they were learning Sanskrit together.

Yep, we'll probably go back.

A la prochaine,

Chuck