

September 14, 2003

Chuck working at the Embassy

Anzie flew in midnight Friday after a successful week in Niger. She's resting up as I write.

I just finished my first week on the job at the Embassy. As I am now your humble public servant, paid with your tax dollars, I thought you might be interested to know what I've been doing for your hard-earned dollars.

I'm working in the GSO Housing Dept. We - there are five of us - are responsible for locating living quarters for incoming U.S. employees of the Embassy, USAID and a couple of other related organizations. We also coordinate clean-up and fix-up of quarters between occupants.

Even though this is a part-time position I worked in excess of 40 hours this first week doing mostly OJT. I spent most of my time on the computer streamlining several reports. I'm no computer guru, but it turns out that I'm better than most. I have to thank Anne and Asahi for my expertise.

My counterpart, Dieynaba, pronounced Jenaba, is a buxom black Mauritanian with a great sense of humor. Married to an American, she's been on the job for about three months. So she's teaching me. We've been out a couple of times to visit properties to do final inspections, a.k.a. "walk-throughs", to make sure all work is complete and everything functions before the new tenants move in. We also visited a new apartment building with a realtor to see if it suited our needs. We measured the living space, checked for adequate storage space. Most houses here don't have much closet space. They use armoires. Americans like built-in closets.

We also did a security check. Security is important at all U.S. installations these days. When I drive into the Embassy compound I must turn off the car and give the keys to the guard. Two guards inspect the car. They open the hood and the trunk. They inspect the undercarriage with a mirror. Finally they take a paper disc and rub it around the steering wheel, the sideview mirrors, the front and rear edges of the car. I asked, "What's that for?" Answer: "Explosives".
Ya gotta love it.

Played poker Friday night with a bunch from the Embassy: 13 guys, two women. I lost \$15. Lousy cards all night, plus we had eight people playing at our table! Oh well, I had the chance to meet some new people. Besides, it's always good strategy to lose the first time you play with new people. There will be other nights. I must consider it an investment.

Since I arrived in Africa I've tried to learn something about African Art -- not paintings but sculpture, masks, wood carving and the like. Saturday night we were invited to a gallery that featured African Art. Corey, an American artist whom I'd met once before, is in business with a Senegalese. His partner does the buying. Corey does most of the selling. As a "toubab" (white person) he has found that his partner can get much lower prices.

Corey taught me a lot in one evening. He showed us these beautifully carved wall posts. They are used to hold up the roof beams in a thatched hut. These items are primarily from Southern, Central and East Africa. Apparently West Africa is not known for wood carving. The masks are amazing. Some cover the whole head (helmet masks). Some masks start two feet above the head and end around the shinbone.

Anne and I head to South Africa for two weeks starting Tuesday, Sept. 16. We'll be back Sept. 30. Should have plenty to write you about by then.

A la prochaine,

Chuck