

**May 19, 2003**

## **Mauritania**

Meet Aw (pronounced Ow). Aw is a Mauritanian who works in the Peace Corps office in [Nouatchouk](#) – the capital city of Mauritania, the country that bounds Senegal to the north. Aw is Anzie's primary liaison at this office, and he has an interesting story to tell.

First of all, we arrived in Nouakchott at 2:30AM last Tuesday. The 50-minute flight on Air Mauritania from Dakar was six hours late. Having lived here for centuries before either Christ or Muhammad, the Mauritanians have a different sense of time than we do. We're living in an apartment, which is located in the Peace Corps compound. Actually it's quite nice.

Nouakchott was established as the capital city way back in 1960, when Mauritania gained its independence from France. In 1960 the town had 300 inhabitants. Now there are 750,000 – one third of the country's population. The citizens of this country are comprised of primarily white and black Moors (descendants of the Moroccan invaders in the 12<sup>th</sup> Century), with a minority of black West African tribes – mostly Pular and Wolof.

The Arabic influence is startling. The men wear the long, flowing robes (boubous) and turbans reminiscent of Lawrence of Arabia. Likewise the women wear beautiful robes and veils that cover everything but the eyes when they're outside. Although French is widely spoken, Hassaniya, a form of Arabic, is the most common language. [Wolof](#) is also spoken. Most signs are written in both Arabic and French.

The dramatic increase in the city's population reflects the change in the Arab lifestyle. They were rural farmers and wandering tribes until serious droughts forced them to move to the city. Droughts of the early '80's are now being repeated. Last year's rainfall is almost 70% less than the preceding year. After I learned this, I started taking "GI" showers.

We visited a few of their tents. Rectangular with a hip roof, the outside is muslin beige, while the inside is covered in a myriad of multi-colored fabrics. Their houses reflect a similar design: a large, rectangular entrance hall with an ornately decorated ceiling. Smaller rooms surround the main hall..

Aw invited us to his home for dinner. Anzie cautioned me to remove my shoes before entering any room with a carpet on the floor. We were entertained in the formal parlor. Every house has one. It is carpeted with several overstuffed two-person sofas positioned around the walls. Madam Aw, informally known as Janie, arrived with beverages: bissop (made from the hibiscus flower), Coca Cola and bottled water.

We were then served a traditional Mauritanian meal, on the floor. The meal begins with a ritual washing of the hands using a silver pitcher and bowl. We then all hunkered down around a plate of hors d'oeuvres, followed by a shared platter of beef and rice. One eats with the left hand only, no utensils allowed. It took me a while to get the hang of it, but I managed to get through the meal without any food stains!

All evening long members of Aw's extended family entered the room, shook our hands, muttered greetings and left. Aw's extended family numbers up to 25 children, sisters, brothers, cousins, nieces and nephews – all living under the same roof. Apparently this is the norm in Arab families. It is common to have several people sleeping in the same room. Anyone's possessions are the possessions of the family. Much as I love them all, I would have a big problem living under the same roof with my extended family. I can just imagine having the same fights as I did with my brothers over clothing, for instance.

It's a problem for Aw, too. You see, he has experienced the American lifestyle. He lived in Flagstaff, AZ where he received a master's degree in Agri-Forestry from Northern Arizona University. He knows what it's like to have his very own room, to have possessions that he could call his own.

"What are you doing in Mauritania with a degree in forestry?" I asked. Mauritania is the Sahara desert. The streets of the capital city are covered with fine sand. The doors to every room in every house we visited have a sweep installed on the bottom in a vain attempt to keep out the fine dust that coats everything. Even though Nouakchott is located on the ocean, the only trees are palm. "I plan to plant trees here" Aw replies, and laughs. His real interest is the environment. His dream is to complete his Ph.D with a thesis on the subject of an environmental disaster, which is located at a new dam on the Senegal River.

Aw is a bright, handsome Pular with blue-black skin.. He told us the story of ethnic cleansing in Mauritania. The story goes that a young contingent of Pular government officials attempted a coup. It went badly. The leaders were jailed. The Moorish government then decided to prevent further uprisings by deporting Pulars to Senegal.

Senegal responded by kicking out the Mauritians. Mauritians possess a well-deserved reputation as goldsmiths. Their jewelry is easily identified by the filigree. They are able to weave gossamer-thin gold filament into amazing designs for earrings, necklaces, bracelets, etc. As Dakar was a major jewelry market, the end result of the deportation process was that the baby was thrown out with the bathwater. Things have calmed down somewhat since then. Many of the jewelers have moved back to Dakar. Fortunately, Aw's immediate family was not uprooted. However, some members of his extended family lost everything.

We're in Mauritania for two weeks. Tomorrow we're off on a three day site visit to the interior. A la prochaine!

Chuck

## May 26th

I attended Anne's classes on the first three Covey Habits at Peace Corps HQ in Nouakchott. After all these years I was finally able to see her in action. She's good! I got a lot out of it.

That afternoon we took off on a 4 ½ hour trip up country to [Atar](#). We were accompanied by Rhonda, a Volunteer, and Si, our driver. We passed two dead camels alongside the road, obvious victims of car collisions. Funny we didn't see the cars. A run-in with a camel has to be as damaging as that with a moose. Those babies are big!

[<view Mauritania map>](#)

After 100 kms. We run out of blacktop. The road turns to hard packed sand. It's not exactly smooth; we can't write or even read as we travel the washboard. Doesn't slow down Si any. We're still doing 70. We listened to Rhonda's tapes: Paul Simon's "Graceland" and Youssef N'Dor. Youssef is famous in West Africa and in Europe. He combines traditional West African "griot" music with rhythm and blues.

We move through sand dunes to rocky moonscapes to Arizona-like mesas. We pass snow shovels clearing the road of drifting sand dunes! We stop halfway in Adjout for water, pee and prayer.

We talked with Si about the prayer ritual five times a day. The definite advantage is that the ritual serves to focus and center a person. Might not be a bad idea if everyone did it. It would certainly help to reduce stress levels.

We arrive in Atar. We drop off Rhonda with her boyfriend, a Mauritanian high school English teacher. We also meet Meghan, a Volunteer from Lewisburg, PA, who is giving a haircut to a French Catholic priest from Normandy. I wanted to find out what he was doing living in a country where the state religion is Muslim, but we had to go.

Stayed at the MKT hotel. Room was furnished by the chief interior decorator from Sparta: a bed and a chair. (From Anne – by standards here it was a very nice room, colored curtain and a matching bed spread – Chuck is still adapting). But it had AC. The chef came to our room to ask us what we wanted for dinner. We chose to start with crudités, followed by grilled chicken and roast camel. For dessert we chose sliced pineapple. We then nursed a gin and tonic, knowing full well that our bottle of gin had to last us for another week.

Shared dinner with two Volunteers, Meghan and Adrian. It was fascinating to hear about their journeys. Just imagine yourself plopped down in a small village

in the middle of the desert for almost 2 ½ years, learning two languages – French and an Arabic dialect, foregoing creature comforts like air conditioning, hot baths (PCVs take cold bucket baths), cheeseburgers and beer; befriending people in the community so that you can convince them to allow you to assist them in accomplishing some project that will better their lives. “The toughest job you’ll ever love”, as they say.

During dinner the Mauritanian Minister of Health arrived in a convoy of five 4X4’s. We were to see a lot of this group over the next two days.

Off to [Chingetti](#) the next day. Chingetti is the real desert! Huge sand dunes surround the village of 6000 people, crouched like lions, ready to spring and devour the town. Turns out that the village was indeed a town of 20,000 inhabitants only 40 years ago. Desertification has taken its toll. The oasis used to be connected to the town. It is now 2-3 miles away.

As soon as we arrive in the village, Si puts the van in 4-wheel drive. We then spend the next hour careening about the village searching for Caroline, the local Volunteer. These are not roads; they’re sand dunes. At times we’re pitched at a 15 degree angle as we travel down lanes only 8-10 ft wide between ancient mud brick and stone houses. We leave a note on her door. We stop at a women’s artisanal cooperative. We see some beautiful rugs woven from wool, reeds and/or leather. “Have you seen Mlle. Caroline?”, we ask. “Yes, about an hour ago”, four of them respond simultaneously.

I have noticed that, when you ask a question of a group of Mauritanian Arabs, they all respond at once, talking over each other. It doesn’t seem to bother them. No one takes umbrage and demands that the others keep quiet while he/she speaks.

We stop at the Auberge Caravane for a drink. We climb steps to the rooftop lounge. We lounge on the cushions and carpets until tea is brought.

Did I explain the tea ceremony? Wherever you go you are offered this strong green with mint or red tea mixed with sugar. The server pours it into small glasses from a height of about a foot above the glass. This makes it foam. The custom is to drink three glasses. Each series is brewed separately using the same leaves. So, the first batch is the strongest; the third is the weakest. The ritual takes some time, but everyone seems to make the time.

After tea, we order lunch for 2:00 in the afternoon. The owner is very hospitable. This is not high tourist season, which runs from October through April.

We then head out to the oasis. It looks just like an oasis should: a bunch of green palms against a backdrop of café-au-lait sand dunes. Round thatched huts are intermixed with the same design done in mud. We are welcomed profusely by several Arab gentlemen (okay, they’re really white Moors. But they look so different from their counterparts in Nouakchott) dressed in their long,

flowing boubous and turbans. They show us their new well complete with gas driven pump. They usher us to a large lean-to tent, where we proceed to lounge once again on carpets and cushions. Although they are busy preparing to entertain the Health Minister and his entourage, they take time to serve us dates with crème fraiche along with sweet milk. This is followed by another mint tea ritual. Two of our hosts sit down with us and proceed to praise the work of the Peace Corps in their community, both talking at the same time, of course. Nice to hear. They end up by showing us their new two- room school building.

We head back to the Auberge Caravane and pick up a guide. He takes us over to the ancient mosque. He unlocks the door to the Bibliotheque. Inside this 15'X 12' room he shows us these ancient books that he alleges are the oldest books in the Arab world – around 1450 A.D. Written in ancient Arabic, they are sections of the Koran, or Qoran. Chingetti is the seventh holiest city in the Arab World. Mecca is Number One. Chingetti is where people went to study in preparation for making their “Haj”, or pilgrimage, to Mecca. There are several of these libraries of ancient books in town, each cared for by a family who has guarded them through 600 years of generations.

We make one last sweep of the town looking for Caroline. We come upon the Health Minister’s convoy, wave hello, and head back to the Auberge Caravane for lunch. We’re just sitting down to Moroccan Cous-Cous when Caroline shows up. Our lunch takes three hours, during which we hear Caroline’s tale. She’s been through a lot both physically and emotionally. She is an environmental education volunteer, a new program. It is very unstructured and she has had to discover ways of getting the local primary schools and women’s groups to plant gardens. She is a very dedicated young woman and type A. It has been very frustrating for her to proceed at the local pace – hard for her to see the accomplishments she is making each day. Fortunately she’s broken on through to the other side. Her local language is great, several gardens are in place and she has many friends. Hopefully when schools reopen in September, she’ll be able to introduce environmental curriculum.

After lunch Anne decides she wants to buy a rug she saw at the women’s craft co-op. We find the lady with the key at a ceremony where the Minister of Health is celebrating the construction of a new hospital. The whole village is there. We are introduced to the Minister, the mayor and several others as if we are visiting dignitaries. The mayor asks us to stay. We beg off saying we must get back to Atar. Caroline appears to be known and loved by all. This experience has obviously been life-changing for her in a very positive way.

On our way back to Atar we take a short side trip to visit “Site Ruperte”, a rock overhang containing prehistoric pictographs, or cave drawings. Surprisingly the animals depicted don’t exist in this area: giraffe, elephant, lion, rhinoceros -- animals of the Serengeti, the savannah. These 6000 year old drawings give us a clue about what the environment of this arid landscape used to be. Perhaps it gives a glimpse into the future if desertification continues at its present rate.

We arrive back in Atar and search for a hotel. We end up at the Hotel WaHa. The rooms are individual stone cottages – round with thatched roofs. Nice-sized bathrooms, air-conditioned and cable TV! I visit the dining room to see about dinner. I am informed that they are full this evening. They are preparing a dinner for the Minister of Health and his party of 50. We can't seem to get away from this guy! He's following us all over central Mauritania!

We are discussing where to eat with Si when the head chef runs out to tell us that he would be happy to let us share in the "Meshoui" he is preparing for the Minister's party. He invites Si to eat with us gratis. Si begs off. He's staying with friends.

We adjourn to our room to prepare for dinner. We shower and change. We make gin and tonics, using the last of our gin. So much for rationing it over our stay. We take our drinks up to the roof dining area, where we view the preparations. The floor is covered in oriental rugs and large rectangular pillows. We are welcomed by the Director of Exploitation (P.R.), Mr. Amat. He explains that they have brought in seven sheep from Nouakchott, along with a team to prepare the Meshoui – barbecued mutton with grilled potatoes, vegetables and sautéed onions. We explain that we had left the Minister's party in Chingetti sometime ago, and that they looked like they were along way from leaving.

Mr. Amat appeared to relax. He directed a waiter to serve us the traditional mint tea. He also offered me a cigarette, a Marlboro, which I accepted as simply good manners. Anne informed me that I couldn't expect any lovin' with the smell of cigarettes on my breath. I gave the matter deep thought ... for a nanosecond. I surmised that one lousy Marlboro was no match for the fragrance of oniony meshoui.

Good readers, please don't take this one little slip as a sign that our love is on the wane, that I am too quick to forsake love for vice. It's just that I firmly believe that the sharing of a smoke with another man is a kind of bonding ritual. Creeping rationalism? I think not!

It was my first cigarette in a long while and made me light-headed. I still enjoyed it.

After the prescribed hour, we descended the stairs to the dining room. Dinner began with the traditional plate of crudités. Then the head chef arrived with two assistants to present and serve the meshoui. The large platter contained an entire leg of mutton together with the assorted onions, potatoes and assorted veggies. Chef carved the mutton and served our plates. It was very good, even though this particular sheep might well have died a natural death from old age and dodging a few too many cars on the streets of Nouakchott.

The Minister's party arrived just as we were finishing up at about 10:00. We went out to join the welcoming party. He was as surprised at the coincidence as we were. We joked a bit about following each other. He explained that he was

heading back to Nouakchott right after dinner. We bid him "Bon Appetit" and waddled to our cottage. We purposely didn't mention our meal, knowing full well that the chef had double-dipped. He had charged both the Minister and us for our meshoui. Still, the hotel and the dinner turned out cheaper and of better quality than the previous night.

The next we picked up Rhonda and headed back to Nouakchott, and back home to Dakar the next day. A great trip.

A la prochaine - Chuck