

September 12th, 2004

Getting There

Meet Dez. He's a transplanted Brit who now resides in Gambia. Dez is a compact, muscular man in his 60's who retired to Gambia because he and his wife, Sylvia, can live well for less.

Dez and Sylvia are not alone. Many people have come to Gambia to vacation on its wide, uncrowded beaches, and then decided to live there permanently. Life in Gambia has its good and bad sides, like everywhere else, as Anzie and I were to discover.

I've been working fulltime at the Embassy since mid-June. Lemmetellya, fulltime work isn't all it's cracked up to be. Sure, it's been interesting work in real estate. I get to visit some pretty awesome houses. I negotiate with landlords and realtors (In Dakar the buyer pays the commission. Can you believe it?). I inspect houses when tenants leave and before new tenants arrive. I share in the stress of getting properties ready within a time frame that is never long enough. I get to work closely with some pretty fantastic, dedicated people. Believe me, for the most part, they dispense the taxpayers' money wisely.

But, I digress Anyway, these last two months have been hectic with people moving in and out. Finally, last week I went back to part time. Dieynaba, my funny, beautiful Mauritanian colleague came back from two months home leave. Her husband, Kevin, was born and raised in Syracuse. Anzie had some work to do in Gambia, so I agreed to act as driver and boytoy.

Getting There

We left early Thursday morning. Friends had estimated the trip to take 5-6 hours. As we drove south of Dakar we both were taken aback at how beautiful the country had become with the advent of the rainy season, or l'hivernage. The season usually lasts from June to October. Last year it rained too much. Everything was so green! Just a few miles south of Dakar we traveled through a baobab forest. These huge trees that look like they were planted upside-down, were absolutely bushy with leaves. The further south we drove the greener the countryside became. The town of **Kaolack** lies about three hours drive from Dakar. South of Kaolack we left the green but arid countryside, which is punctuated by the occasional tree, and entered the lush verdant country of tall millet and cornfields, green rolling hills dotted with a wide assortment of arbor vitae.

The downside of traveling during the rainy season is the horrible road conditions. Actually Senegal's highways south of Dakar have improved tremendously over the past year. The trip to Kaolack that took four hours last year is now down to three. Nonetheless, the detours are still killers for a normal car. Mud wallows and knee-deep, pond-sized puddles caused us to sing the praises of Karen Lass,

who sold us her Toyota RAV-4 4 x 4 last May. Our little Nissan Sentra would never have made it. The road from Kaolack down to the border is 60% excellent. The rest is Pothole City, more hole than blacktop. We came upon some potholes large enough to house a Vietnamese family of four. South of the border city of Karang? - Forgeddaboutit!! You're now in Gambia where "infrastructure" consists of a sign saying "Welcome to Gambia". The only good road we found in Gambia was the one from the outskirts of Banjul, the capital city, to the beach resort area in Kololi.

South of Kaolack we stopped in the village of **Sokone** so Anne could do a little Peace Corps business. We lunched with volunteer Chris Murphy, who is working in the (SED) Small Enterprise Development Program. Chris is working with community leaders to build a tourism program. They are focusing on tourists from Europe who wish to have an authentic African experience. This includes an overnight stay in an African village, participating in village activities -- be it farming, herding, ritual festivities, fishing. Sokone is located on the Saloum River close to where it meets the Atlantic, so fishing is an important industry. Most of it is accomplished using nets out of the heavy wooden *piroque* boats. Deep-sea fishing is also good here. It is now the swordfish/marlin season.

Chris and Anne talked shop while I dined on an excellent plate of fish *thieboudien*, including rice, onions, cabbage, manioc root and a bouillion-based sauce. Chris has a good sense of humor. He described a fellow volunteer as "the little sister I never wanted to have". His narrative of his trials and tribulations trying to get his community counterparts to agree on common objectives and go about business in a professional manner made our lunchtime go by fast.

We bid "Au revoir" to Chris and continued our journey to the border. Our concern was getting delayed at the ferry that traverses the Gambia River. The road and the countryside is fantastic all the way to the border town of **Karang**. Anne kept busy with her bird book identifying the many exotic species we saw/ran across/ran over.

At the entrance to Karang we were stopped at a police roadblock. We had to enter the police shed and produce our passports and car papers. It was the first time since we bought the car that I realized our papers weren't in order. Even though we bought the car last May and had submitted all the appropriate paperwork, we still hadn't received the proper documentation. The real issue is the Carte Grise, the Grey Card, which serves as a registration card.

Two things happened in our favor. First Anzie did a shmooze job on the commandant. She discovered that he had a relation in Washington that did some work for the Peace Corps. Second, the police noted our green diplomatic plates. They sent us on our way after our promise to obtain our Grey Card just as soon as we returned to Dakar. It still took us about a half-hour. One of the cops took umbrage at the way I parked the car. I parked perpendicular to the road, instead of parallel. Of course there are no signs. You're just supposed to know! What's more, the kid peanut vendors there are a pain in the ass. They're all over you like

flies. Anne offered them a couple of empty plastic water bottles. They almost broke her wrist wrenching those bottles from her grasp.

On to the next stop four kilometers away, the Gambian Customs House, the *Douane*. There are no signs to direct you, only men in civilian clothes who act as officious as the parking *gardiens* around the Place De L'indépendance. One directs you to a parking spot. Another informs you that you must move your car. "It's in the way." The Customs House is filled with people sitting around waiting for Allah knows what, while apparatchiks behind a long counter thumb through huge, dog-eared ledgers. While I'm moving the car, Anzie, the only *toubab* lady in the house, steps to the front of the line. I enter carrying all the car papers I can find, including a couple of gas receipts. I'm worried about another problem with the missing Grey Card. I hope that maybe I can bamboozle them with an excrescence of paper work, and they'll let us go. Anzie turns to me, beaming. She says, "It's our official (diplomatic) passports. They let us through no problem!"

Moral of the story: Dip Plate and Dip Passports will speed your trip. It will help to have your car papers in order, including the Grey Card and an up-to-date insurance card.

We continue on our way searching for the next stop, the ferry ticket booth. The road turns terrible. What pavement exists is a combination of seashells and dirt. We begin to see groups of young boys pulling a scam that we haven't seen since last summer up north in the Fouta. One or two boys are shoveling dirt into a pothole while another waves us motorists down looking for tips for their work repairing the road. We wonder if they have an association that operates throughout the country or is that some kind of innate knowledge. We finally decided that it's the latter. It's similar to the reaction a youngster has when first confronted with an Oreo cookie. Nine times out of ten he'll pull the cookie apart and lick the icing. The other part of the pothole-filling scam is that, when you return over the same road, you discover that the road isn't any better. The "road repair gangs" are always on the same section of road, like it's their franchise. They simply remove dirt from one pothole to fill another. For the record, Anzie disagrees with me on this point.

So, we're traveling along this road, looking for the ferry ticket office, for 25 minutes. Navigator Anzie insists that it couldn't take this long to get to the ferry, that we must have taken a wrong turn. Driver insists that there's only one road to the ferry, so there's no wrong turn to take. Navigator insists that we stop to ask directions. We stop at the next gang of pothole-fillers, throw them some bon-bons we keep for such an occasion, and Driver asks them where and how far to the ferry. They act as if we came from another planet. They don't respond except for puzzled looks. Suddenly it dawns on Driver that perhaps these boys speak English, which turns out to be the fact. We discover that we are indeed on the right road and that we have another five kilometers to go. Navigator then decides to look at the map, where she discovers the reason that the boys speak English.

We've been in Gambia ever since we left the Customs House in Karang 40 kilometers ago. In fact, the ferry is about 45 kms. south of the border.

As we buzz by a truck weighing station on our left, we notice people signaling us. Since they weren't filling potholes we stopped. They tell us that this is where we buy tickets. Apparently there is a small sign just before it indicating that ferry tickets are for sale just ahead, but we didn't see it. Friend Chanh had warned us. He missed the ticket shed. When he arrived at the ferry, he was forced to return the two kms. to buy tickets. Tickets for vehicle, driver and one passenger came to 4500 CFA, less than \$10.00.

We arrive in the ferry port of **Barra** to find a long line of cars and trucks. We're motioned to a gate at the head of the line. An official inspects our tickets, and we're directed through the gate to the dockside. Lo and behold, a ferry is at the dock! We had heard that a ferry departs every hour on the hour. The time was now 4:10 pm. The official looked at our Dip. Plates, and directed us to drive on board. We couldn't believe our luck! The attendants maneuver the vehicles so close to each other and to railings that we were certain that our poor baby RAV would not escape injury.

The trip is supposed to take a half-hour. We finally arrive at the Banjul side of the River at 5:50, without damage. To this point our trip has taken 9 ½ hours. Even taking into account our two-hour lunch, it's still been a long trip.

Our return trip was a lot faster. We waited 45-minutes for the ferry. Because of our diplomatic plates we were escorted to the "express line". The trip took only 45 minutes. From the time we disembarked in Barra to our front door, the trip took five hours. We stopped only once, for gas.

So, we learned a few things that might hasten your trip:

1. Have passports and car papers in order (including insurance and gray card).
2. Although the roads are much improved all the way to Kaolack, a 4 x 4 is recommended, especially if you're traveling during the rainy season.
3. If you have diplomatic plates, use them. They will speed your trip both entering and leaving Gambia as well as at the ferry.

A la prochaine,

Chuck