Dawn Travel Feature: A Visit to Senegal, W. Africa

Whenever the question comes up: "How was your trip to Africa?" the answer is usually, "I found Senegal depressing."

This usually comes as a shock, for you are expected to be wildly enthusiastic about visiting "the Motherland," and all manner of excuses will be offered for the things you found upsetting.

But, to begin at the beginning. Back in August, a letter arrived stating that the Sigma Gamma Rho sorority was sponsoring a trip to Senegal in October, which would include some travel writers.

Seems that Mrs. Mildred Thomas of the Wilmington, DE chapter of Sigma Gamma Rho, took a trip to Senegal a year ago. That trip, as this one, was handled by the Bartlett Travel Service in Philadelphia, which was under the personal supervision of Mrs. Alma Molock.

So impressed was Mrs. Thomas, that she immediately plunged into setting up this year's trip, which all came together this past October.

When the word went out, the usual details consistent with making a trip out of the country immediately became priority items. Those without valid passports had to do so, as well as arranging for the necessary immunization shots.

The day finally arrived, and the group assembled in the lounge of Air Afrique in New York's Kennedy Airport, for a final briefing before the plane took off for African shores.

The trip would take 6½ hours, and the wide-bodied jet was filled as the group settled in for the flight. Air Afrique provided a really delicious meal, and the movie enroute was available with both English and French audio tracks.

It was here that the realization dawns that Senegal is a French-speaking country. That now is the time to brush up on those two years of high school French most had suffered through. Unfortunately it didn't help much, for you couldn't understand them, nor they you.

On flights heading to West Africa, Dakar, Senegal is the first stop. On deplaning, a blast of heat and humidity immediately engulfs you letting you know that you have arrived on the African continent.

The heat was surprising to some of the members of the group — in fact, one newspaper man perspiringly admitted that he was wearing long johns. A condition he hastened to remedy.

There is a 24 hour guard in front of the President's Palace. One of the spots most tourist take time to see.

It was now that the "hurry up and wait" snydrome, indigenous to tropical regions, went into effect. First order of business was to get inoculation certificates checked, then acquire visa stamps from custom authorities.

Next order of business was rescuing one's luggage, which was a time-consuming business, since the mass confusion in the baggage area was completely frustrating.

At long last, we were bundled into buses, all the while fighting off the many would-be helpers who were imploring anyone who would listen for "une dollar." Although we didn't know it then, this was to be the pattern each time one ventured into public spaces.

Following a short ride, we arrived at the Novotel Hotel, which would be our residence for the week-long stay. It was a modern facility, with air conditioning, elevator service, two restaurants and a swimming pool.

The cashier's position was equipped to handle money-changing chores, with a sign conspiciously posted declaring the exchange rate for the day was 370 CFA (Senegal francs) for one American dollar.

When changing say $20 American into francs, you receive bills counted in thousands. It isn't long before you get used to thinking in terms of such things as 250 francs for a simple bottle of water.

And bottled water is an absolute must in most African countries. You soon get used to using it for drinking, washing one's teeth, and even shaving.

It's not that the local water is impossible, but American systems take a long time to adjust to the bacteria present in the water. Results, for those imprudent enough to ingest the water, is a touch of what is called in Mexico, "Montezuma's revenge."

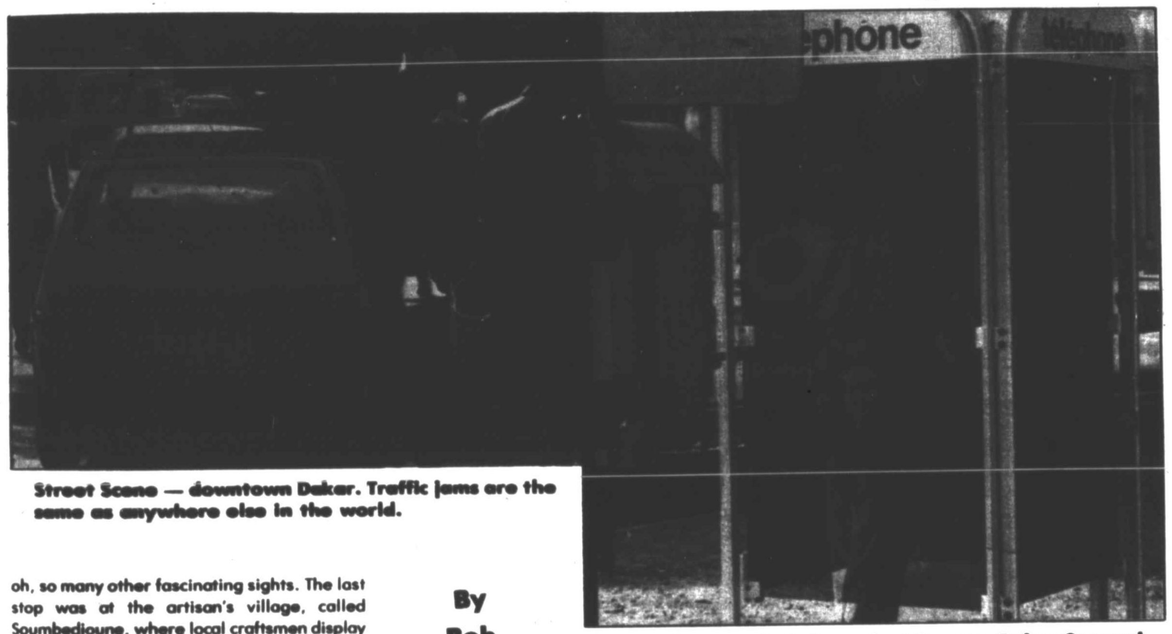
After a restful night — everything seemed to be working perfectly, a problem arose with breakfast. Although the travelers were guaranteed an American breakfast — it was impossible to get eggs in any form.

The continental breakfast is considered a standard breakfast in Dakar, which consists of croissant, coffee or tea and juices. This led to a minor flap, which was solved by simply arranging that this particular tour group have a special breakfast served in a separate enclave.

It all worked perfectly.

First order on this first full day was a tour of the city. We dutifully climbed aboard buses provided for the occasion, and did the usual sightseeing bit.

We saw the University of Dakar, the halls of the legislature, the president's palace, and



Street Scene — downtown Dakar. Traffic jams are the same as anywhere else in the world.

oh, so many other fascinating sights. The last stop was at the artisan's village, called Soumbedioune, where local craftsmen display their wares for sale.

It was here that visitors get a chance to exercise their haggling skills, for no one accepts the first price given for anything.

Silver and gold artifacts, wood carvings, paintings, and all the usual African arts are sold at this marketplace, with the blessing of the tour guide who helped steer us away from the "ripoff" artists who prey on the tourists.

It was about now that we discovered that the unemployment rate in Dakar was close to 65%. A truly frightening figure, but a help in explaining the plethora of hustlers, beggars and hangers on who dogged our footsteps at every turn.

It took a while to realize that there is no such thing as Social Security, AFDC, welfare payments, food stamps, and all the things Americans take for granted.

Unemployed Africans in the cities endure poverty that Americans cannot imagine. Trying to merely exist is an all-consuming problem, with hunger a condition with which they live constantly.

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By Bob Matthews

Street Scene — in Independent Square, Dakar Senagal. They too have outdoor phone stalls. Note ad for Afro-American jazz Center.

The University of Dakar