

An Irish anarchist in Africa

Chekov Feeney

11 Dec 2000

Contents

Gambia: Missive from the dark continent	6
Senegal: More tales from the dark continent	7
THE TRIP TO CASAMANCE	7
EASY LIVING IN THE CAP	8
CAP SKIRING - THE VILLAGE	9
CASAMANCE - THE WAR	10
THE JOLA - PEOPLE AND PLACES	12
FRANCE'S COLONIAL LEGACY	14
You don't want to go to Dakar	16
I YOU DON'T WANT TO GO TO DAKAR	16
II GOING TO DAKAR	17
III DAKAR, CAPITAL OF FRENCH WEST AFRICA	18
IV DAKAR STREETLIFE	19
Bana Bana	19
Beggars	20
V. COUPE AFRICAINE de NATIONS - CAN	21
VI SENEGAL'S MODEL DEMOCRACY	21
Transhumance	23
Corruption and Clientelism	24
Petty politics	25
Mali - Take one large desert, one large river...	27
Health	28
Glorious mud	28
Poverty and Culture	29
Djenné & Timbuktu	30
Timbuktu	31
Travel & Comfort	31
The Baché lesson of Sibi	32
Timbuktu - up the Niger	32
Hostility	34
Guides	34
Scarcity	35
Burkina Faso - Big men and Little people	36
I. GETTING THERE	36

II. TRADITIONAL LIVING	37
Dogonia	38
Lobonia	39
III. THE LAND OF THE NGO	40
IV. THE BIG MAN	42
V. CULTURE WEEK	43
VI. SINDOU'S LITTLE BIG MAN	45
The Cote de Khaki	47
I ROADBLOCKS - THE BENEFITS OF MASS PRODUCTION	47
II MILITARY RULE	48
III QUICK TOUR - FORESTS, HILLS & BEACHES	50
Man	51
San Pedro & Sassandra	52
IV ABIDJAN - PAVEMENT CRACKS	53
Pray for Ghana	56
AXIM	56
Clap for Jesus	56
Read for Jesus	57
Get better for Jesus	58
II EUROPEAN RELICS OF THE GOLD COAST	59
III GHANA TODAY	61
The English legacy	61
Accra	62
The Flight Lieutenant	63
Kumasi	63
Winneba	64
IV THE BEACH	65
Busua	65
Ada	67
Togo - Four glorious days	70
Togo's Finest	71
Benin - sightseeing	73
Stilt living	73
Snakes 'n slaves	74
Dahomey - skulls	75
Lagos the great	76
I IN AT THE DEEP END	76
II THINGS FALL APART	79
POWER	79
PHONES	80

A TO B	81
CASH	82
III EXPATONIA	83
IV ALAGBON: DANGEROUS LIKE A LIONS DEN	84
V THE GENERAL STRIKE	88
THE STRIKE BEGINS.	89
THE STRIKE CONTINUES	90
Nigeria, bubblin’	92
1 CRISES WITHOUT END	92
Labour.	93
Government	93
Violence	94
Sharia	94
II OSHOGBO - HOLY SMOKE	95
III BENIN	97
IV PORT HARCOURT OILFIELDS/BATTLEFIELDS	100
V CALABAR	101
VI THE TROUBLE WITH NIGERIA	103
VII OUT OF NIGERIA	105
Cameroun - Cameroon - Kamerun	107
II South West Province	108
Kumba	109
Mundemba	110
Limbe	111
III Two French cities	112
France’s Civilizing Mission	113
The Post Office	115
IV Into the Central African rainforest	116
Crossing Central Africa?	117
Illness	118
V INTO THE FOREST	118
Yokadouma	119
Mambele	120
Lake Lobeke	121
Back to Yokadouma	122
Central African Republic: You see how we suffer?	124
I TRIP TO BERBERATI	124
Gari Gombole	125
CAR - first blood	125
lunch	127
arrival	128
II A DAY IN BERBERATI	129

III BERBERATI - THE BUS PARK	130
Attack - wave 1	131
Wave 2	132
Wave 3	132
Final assault	133
IV THE ROAD TO BANGUI	134
Arrival	135
Central African Republic: Bangui, capital of misery	137
I BANGUI, a tragedy	137
II ACROSS THE RIVER	140
III SIGHTSEEING	143
IV ESCAPE FROM BANGUI - ATTEMPT 1	144
V TREADING WATER	147
VI PRESIDENTIAL DECREES	148
Friday	150
VII ESCAPE FROM BANGUI - ATTEMPT 2	151
Military games	152
Getaway	155

Gambia: Missive from the dark continent

Happy to report our safe and comfortable arrival in Africa, Gambia was our arrival point and we have spent the first few days resting at a beach resort here (nice and hot). This has served as a good and not too difficult introduction to Africa.

The coastal region of Gambia in which we are staying is a classic example of a third-world tourist enclave. There is a paved road running along the beach front (tarmac is very rare here). On one side of the road there is the beach and every few hundred yards there is a 'luxury' tourist hotel, complete with barbed-wire, security guards, high prices and sun worshipping Europeans. On the other side of the road there is the 'village' where the natives live (and the lodge in which we stay). In between the two are crowds of young men who have gravitated to the area from all over the country in search of mammon. They are here known as 'bumsters' here, they survive by hustling cash off tourists - understandable since the Gambia is a country with no industry except farming and tourism and the unemployment rate must be massive.

The really galling thing about it is that the bumsters seem to have adopted various rituals of self-abasement. We have heard countless tales of how happy the Gambians are despite their poverty, and how generous the various developed nations of the world are for sending aid to the Gambia. The resort area is promoted as the 'smiling coast' and the local catch phrase is 'its nice to be nice' the government has even broadcast sets of instructions for dealing with tourists containing such lovely bits of advice as: It is rude to remind our visitors of colonialism and it makes them uncomfortable...

On the other hand this is by no means typical of West Africa. Gambia is, by far, the number one tourist spot in the region and the tourist region in Gambia consists of less than 20 hotels. A tiny part of a tiny country. A mere 10 kilometres back from the coast white faces are unknown and tourism is irrelevant. Even here on the coast they are not all too familiar with white people, The two theories for Deirdre's freckles seem to be A) leprosy, B) a vicious attack of mosquitos.

Indeed the very existence of this country is an absurdity, the sense of it being a colonial backwater and oversight is overwhelming. The main story on this evenings main national news was: "China has donated 2 landrovers to the Gambia", another example, in every one of this weeks papers, the same half page add has been carried inviting (in very great detail) companies to tender for the contract to supply the government with two bog-standard pcs.

Anyway tomorrow we leave for the much more secluded beaches of Southern Senegal to rest up before starting our journey into the interior. Next time we encounter another internet cafe we'll let y'all know what is new.

Senegal: More tales from the dark continent

Hello again all, just arrived in Dakar, the capital of Senegal, after spending the last month in the South Western region of the country called the Basse Casamance, shielded from the rest of the country by the Gambia. The region is something of a backwater and we weren't able to find an internet connection there, hence the delay in sending news of our adventures, and the length of this mail, because I wrote things down as I went around. First of all, both of us are very well, neither of us has been ill (except for 1 day of an iffy tummy) and in fact I'd say that we're both healthier, fatter and fitter than when we left Ireland. A hammock under a palm tree makes a nicer environment than an office desk under a fluorescent light. However, heretofore we've basically just been holidaying, taking things as easily as possible as soon our journeys will take us towards more rigorous spots.

THE TRIP TO CASAMANCE

After spending about 5 days in the banana Republic of the Gambia, we had seen pretty much the only 3 tourist attractions in the place, namely the beach, the nature reserve and the brothels (Gambia's only cheap hotels are also knocking shops). Day 4 of our stay coincided with the start of Ramadan and Gambia is heavily Muslim. This came as something of a surprise and posed some difficulties as, at certain times, the entire place would hit the deck for mass prayers - which hinders your passage along the streets as it apparently isn't done to step over praying muslims. So we decided to cut our stay in the Gambia short and head down to Cap Skiring, a beach town in the Casamance, the place we had selected to lay about on the beach for a few weeks before tackling the interior.

In most parts of West Africa buses are unknown, people travel by bush taxis, which are cars and vans which have basically become worthless in Europe. There is a small community of Europeans who survive by driving bangers from Europe, accross the Sahara to West Africa where cars are considered to have a considerably longer life than in Europe. Apparently a 200 pound car can sell down here for 2 grand. However, it is apparently tricky to cross the roadless Mauritanian wastes in a 200 quid car. Still some 100 cars make the journey each week, the majority of them go from France to Senegal, but we did come accross a Limerick guy who regularly commutes in this way from Limerik to the Malian capital Bamako!

The combination of these seriously old vehicles and roads which are vastly inferior to those of Cavan make for some pretty slow transport. It is not unusual to have to drive for several kilometres on the verge of the road, since the road itself is full of potholes several feet deep. Cap Skiring is about 250 Km from Serrekunda, Gambia's major town. So to make sure of getting there in one day, we stayed in a hotel right beside the station and got down to it by 9a.m. Our first crucial mistake was getting on board a 'car' instead of a '7-places'. Cars are old Mercedes vans which are stuffed full of 36-40 people and are cheaper and slower than the 7 seater converted Peugeot 504 estates, the luxury bush-taxi. All transport only leaves when full, so despite us arriving at

the station at 9, we didn't leave until about 11 and when we did leave, it took us about 2 hours to make the 40 km journey to the border. Unfortunately, the road on the Senegal side of the border was just as bad and added to this we had the extra problem of military checkpoints every 10 minutes or so. These were truly painstaking as they normally consisted of 3-4 Uzi-toting young fellas ordering everybody off the bus. All the passengers then have to line up to have their papers checked. The soldiers also randomly ask to check people's baggage which is very inconvenient since the baggage, tied to the roof of the bus, often consists of goats, hens and sheep intermingled with the large tied-up bundles.

By about 4pm we were still some 100km from Cap and still not even at Ziguinchor, the regional capital where we would have to change taxi. Then we got a puncture. As we stood at the side of the road the day's seventh Peugeot sped by us, spraying us with dust. At this stage we were wondering if we'd ever make it to Cap especially since our ever-helpful fellow passengers were warning us that the military closed the road from Ziguinchor to Cap after dark. Nevertheless, when we finally rolled over the vast Casamance river into Ziguinchor at 6:30 with the sun waning, we decided to try to make it on to the cap that night. This was the second big mistake of the day.

We entered the hectic bus station of Ziguinchor tired, dirty and sore from the bone-shaker of a bus ride. The station's hustlers, porters and helpers were on the point of packing up for the day when we, fresh out of Dublin, the last chance of a hearty dinner tonight, emerged from the bus. It was a feeding frenzy. There were about 5 guys trying to sell me "Bob Marley Cigarettes", inviting me to their houses to eat Barracuda and offering to get me drinks while I tried to mind all of our baggage? In this situation the only possible solution is to flee, but Deirdre was off trying to organise a taxi to Cap. We had been told by our fellow passengers that the fee to Cap was 1250 CFA (about 1.50) but it turned out there were no more taxis to Cap and so a "helper" was trying to negotiate a charter taxi for us, the asking price for which was 15,000 CFA, way too much. This was the situation when Deirdre returned to me, still minding the bags and fending off hustlers. Then began a 20 minute long battle between us and 2 factions of hustlers. One of the factions was trying to get us to pay for the charter, while the other was telling us that the first faction were crooks and we should instead come with them to this nice little hotel they knew of down the road. Anyway I finally persuaded Deirdre to abandon the idea of getting to Cap that night and simultaneously escaped the hustlers by screaming "whores, cunts, bastards" at the top of my voice, grabbing the bags out of the taxi-mans hands and storming down the road into the town centre.

In any case, we tried again the next morning clean, rested and well-fed after a night in the local colonial-style hotel. We got a seat in a Peugeot with no problems and 2 hours, 50km and 6 military road blocks later we arrived at the idyllic coastline of Cap Skiring and walked down a little sandy track to the 'campement' that was to be our base for the next month - Auberge de la paix.

EASY LIVING IN THE CAP

Our lodgings consisted of a large African-style 'compound' about 1 mile south of Cap and 2 miles north of the border with Guinea Bissau. The compound had about 20 rooms in 4 different buildings, each room being very simple with concrete floors, a bed, a mosquito net and perhaps a shelf. The tourist rooms had also a toilet and shower en suite. The rooms are all built for coolness,

no direct sunlight enters and the walls are very thick. The roofs are of tatch or corrugated iron. The tourist season peaks in January and February here and the when we arrived on the 12th of December, the place was occupied by Africans only, there being no other 'toubabs' there. We stayed there on a half-board deal for 8 quid a night each, for which we got breakfast and a 3 course dinner as well as our room. Breakfast was coffee, baguettes, butter and jam while dinner was normally fish or chicken with pasta, rice or chips.

The auberge was situated on the seafront at the top of a low cliff behind the beach. Steps from the auberge led down onto the beach which is spectacluar, lined with palm trees and coconut tree, in a 6 kilometre long gently curving bay. The entire coast has soft silver sands and ,even though this is one of West Africa's 3 foremost tourist spots, the beach is mostly deserted except for the occasional herd of cattle. During the 4 weeks that we spent here, our days fell into a very leisurely pattern. Up at about 9, breakfast, than a few hours of lazing on the beach. Then a stroll into the village for a lunch of rice with fish(50p) in a local restaurant. The afternoons were spent reading, writing, sleeping or playing footie on the beach with the locals. At 8pm we'd eat and after that play cards with the workers from the auberge or occassionaly go into town to a club with some of them. We were normally in bed by midnight. These lazy days made up the majority of our time at the Cap although we spent several days on excursions to neighbouring villages and about once a week we'd have to go to Ziguinchor to the bank.

I had been anticipating problems with adjusting to this pace of life after the hectic pace of working in the Irish computer industry, however happily it proved to be no problem at all, although it took me a few days to cut my walking speed by a factor of about 10 to a more normal pace around here. The other factor that was worrying me slightly before coming was the difficulty of adapting to the climate. Fortunately the change from Irish Winter to Casamance dry-season hasn't caused too many problems. The daytime temperature usually hovers between 30°C and 35°C, dropping to about 20°C during the coldest part of the night. This is not as hot as it sounds due to the very low humidity and cool sea breezes in Casamance and after the first few days we ceased to be perturbed by the heat. All in all, were it to be considered purely on physical factors, Cap Skiring could be considered about as close to paradise as you could ever hope to get. Unfortunately the social aspect of the place were a differenet story.

CAP SKIRING - THE VILLAGE

The village of Cap Skiring has a permaeneent population of some 800 souls according to the locals. The village's economy is overwhelmingly dependant on the tourist industry and in particular the 'Club Mediteranean' holiday resort which makes up th emajority of tourists in the area. The club provides 200 jobs to locals as well as being generally beleived to be the reason for Cap Skiring being connected to the national road and electricity networks (this belief is very likely true since there are neighbouring villages without roads or power). The village has some 5 bars, 4 night clubs, umpteen souvenir shops and informal restaurants, an artisinal market and an airport. All of them are very much focused on the 'club'.

The club itself owns some 2km of the shore and has a golf course, tennis courts, catamarans, wind surfers, beach sailing (sailboats with wheels), communal activities and is strictly off limits to outsiders. The guests are shielded from the environment to such an extent that they don't even

make it to the airport terminal. They climb off the plane onto a bus which goes directly to the club. Their baggage follows on a bus of its own and must be reunited with its owners in the club.

In the shadow of the club over the last 2 decades a number of other hotels and campments (local hotels) have sprung up, which have been made feasible by the unusually high level of transport and electricity infrastructure in the village. In total, along the coastline near the village there are 3 hotels, 4 campements and several single room 'clandestine campements' which are basically people just renting out a spare room for 2-4 quid a night. In all there must be housing for about 500 people at full capacity in all of these hotels and lodgings. It is to cater for these people, rather than the several hundred sheltered guests of the Club, that the dozens if not hundreds of unemployed guides, salesmen and artists flock to the area during the tourist season.

These migrants come from as far away as Dakar, but mainly from Ziguinchor, hoping to earn some money to supplement their bare subsistence survival. Some of them are 'banibani' - wandering salesmen trying to sell sculptures, masks, fruit or other tourist items. Others are artists, trying to entice tourists to get the real 'African experience' by learning to play the Djembe drums or to dance tribal dances. They also earn money by putting on shows in the tourist hotels. In all there were probably 4 dance troupes and 8 drum bands active in the Cap when we were there, each having 5-10 members.

The final category of migrant worker is the 'guide'. These are jacks of all trades, who will try to find any service that a tourist might want and to organise it for them. From showing them around the village to taking them on a boat trip to getting them a bag of weed or lobster dinner. However in recent years it seems that business is getting worse and worse for these migrant labourers and they certainly must have some pretty lean days when on a typical day there might be about 30 of them on the beach scouting for work and perhaps 10 tourists! Why such ratios? Well, even though nobody would admit it, it is hard to think that the war might not be a significant factor.

CASAMANCE - THE WAR

Our guide book, the 'Rough Guide To West Africa' did contain some info about the conflict in the region. Casamance, largely animist and christian felt neglected within Senegal, overwhelmingly muslim. This was not merely a matter of sensibilities since political power in Senegal is intimately intertwined with islamic brotherhoods, the support of powerful marabouts - muslim holy men - is widely believed to be crucial for electoral success. This combined with the unashamedly clientelist and regionalist nature of Senegalese politics means Casamance has legitimate grounds to complain of serious neglect. In 1983 a demonstration calling for greater autonomy for the region was machine-gunned by police causing 200 deaths. Since then the MFDC (movement of democratic forces of Casamance) has been sporadically waging a guerilla war against the army. However tourists continue to flock to the region and there is no real grounds for concern. This much our guidebook told us, at least the 1996 edition of our guidebook....

The day before we left London, I had noticed that a new edition of the guide had been brought out researched in 1999, which I duly purchased. It was only on the night before we left the Gambia for Casamance that I had a fresh look at the section on the Casamance, only to find a highlighted box with a large heading "WARNING" against all travel to the region as of mid 1999 because of the risk of land mines and violent clashes. It advised intending travellers to keep their ears to the ground as the situation could improve. Anyway, we were certainly concerned but after asking a

number of locals in the Gambia, we decided to go anyway since it appeared that there had been a ceasefire since June of this year with more negotiations on the 26th of December, although we resolved to steer clear of back roads and inland villages with their high risk of mines.

So, already slightly nervous from the guidebook warning, the 6 military roadblocks between Ziguinchor and Cap skiring, complete with machine-gun nests, sandbags, APCs, tanks and artillery proved somewhat unnerving at first. However, as we went on to make the journey several times, we became quite used to showing our ids to the soldiers (although on the one occasion that a soldier said "Oh Ireland, you are rebels there too", we were a little worried). When we asked people in Cap Skiring, nobody would even admit that there was a war, attributing all the problems to "bandits", the hotels were empty, not because of the war, but because people in Dakar tell tourists not to come to Casamance because there is nothing there but forest!

Over the 4 weeks that we were there, we gradually elucidated some information from people, although they still claimed that there was no war, nor had there ever been. However, the incidents that we learned of painted a somewhat different picture. 4 years ago the nearby fishermen's village was burnt down by the rebels (as the fisherman belonged to a non-indigenous tribe) with the loss of dozens of lives. All of the inland villages along the Guinea Bissau border had been emptied of inhabitants by the army. This was probably an example of the classic counter-insurgency tactic of creating an uninhabited 'free-fire zone' between the rebels' theatre of activity and their reverse bases (the MFDC is supported by the new military government in Guinea-Bissau and apparently fought in the mutiny that toppled the Viera regime towards the start of 1999). We also heard of summary executions in the villages by the army and we were warned not to venture inland for fear of mines and on this score some NGO had obviously been in the area since there were dozens of t-shirts to be seen with the slogan "don't touch mines or any unknown objects".

Still, according to absolutely everybody we asked there was a ceasefire in the region. Then, one evening we heard a report, on the BBC world service, of a gun-battle at one of the checkpoints between Cap and Ziguinchor in which some soldiers were injured. At this point we decided to minimise the frequency of our trips into Ziguinchor. When we told the locals about the report they said that the BBC were obviously lying since they would have heard about such a battle (it did actually appear in the Senegalese papers the next day) Then, 2 days later we heard another report of a 2 hour long artillery battle in a village called Bigunda on the Bissau border. According to the BBC; the rebels had opened fire with artillery and machine guns on the village which housed a military checkpoint and the army had responded. After a 2 hour battle the village was in ruins and the entire population had fled across the border before the rebels escaped back into the bush. It must be said that this version of events did sound extremely unlikely since it is barely conceivable that a peasant based guerilla army could mount such attacks more akin to conventional warfare. The fact that the BBC's correspondent claimed that the damage to the village was exclusively caused by the rebels and that the major political problem in the region was that the backward peasants insisted on harbouring the rebels made me a little suspicious of the report and it seems possible that the story was a cover up for the army's continued creation of free-fire zones.

In any case we never saw any first hand evidence of fighting although we were constrained to stay out of the active zones due to the danger of mines which had apparently been laid by rogue elements of the MFDC during 98 and early 99/ Although the leadership of the MFDC had denied responsibility and condemned the laying of them, mines were according to locals easily and cheaply available as a consequence of the long wars in Guinea Bissau and cost only 1500 CFA each

, less than 2 quid. Also it was widely believed that rogue MFDC elements were involved in drug-running and protection rackets. On the other hand, I did encounter one Casamance separatist who claimed that the army and provocateurs were laying the mines, to undermine the rebellion.

The attitude of the locals to the war was very hard to gauge since they wouldn't even admit it existed and were understandably reluctant to discuss it with tourists. However nobody seemed to blame the rebels for the drop in tourist trade, instead blaming the people in Dakar and the resentment towards the capital did indeed seem widespread, although everywhere in the world, and especially in Africa, it is common for the urban, Westernised capital to be resented by the backwaters. This would have been particularly marked in Casamance where peoples beliefs and lifestyles were extremely traditional and 'backward' from a European's point of view. The one professed MFDC supporter that I did meet expressed this well in saying "The real rebels are in the fields, they change their shapes into fish and birds...".

The MFDC demands an independant Casamance, A Jola state for a Jola people (the locally dominant tribe), rather than being part of Wolof dominated Senegal. However, this type of nationalism is extremely crude in this context, where the actual amount of tribal intermingling is amazing. We came across at least a dozen "tribes" in Casamance, with their own languages and what's more it seems that almost nobody is descended from a single tribe. Even in the most isolated villages, a Jola might have a Peul mother, Mandinka grandfather and Wolof husband, speak Kreol at home, understand 5 or 6 different native languages and mix them together in conversation.

Although it seems clear that Senegalese people are terribly repressed by a small Dakar based military-religious clique, and that the peripherality of Casamance means that they receive even less consideration than others, it is also clear that Nationalism is a crap response which fails to go to the heart of the matter; that the nation state is and has been a particular disaster in Africa.

THE JOLA - PEOPLE AND PLACES

To get back to the point of our travels, apart from the Cap there were 3 other towns which we visited for some length of time, in the Casamance. They are all quite different from the Cap since they were economically based on traditional pursuits, chiefly subsistence farming and fishing rather than the tourist based economy of the Cap. We visited 2 small rural villages: Diembereng and Kabrousse, and the regional capital Ziguinchor. Despite the difference in size, all three were traditional Jola settlements having a lot in common.

The first thing that is noticeable about all 3 settlements is that farming and in particular live-stock breeding is integrated into the settlements. Each house is itself a farm, set on perhaps a quarter to a half of an acre and almost always containing a fruit rearing tree which provides fruit (mango, baboab, palm, coconut) and crucial shade. Most people also keep livestock, sheep, goats, cows, chickens, geese and ducks which in the dry-season roams free around the village and feed off the undergrowth in the bush. These provide supplementary food in addition to the staple which is rice. As soon as the village stops the paddy fields start, set among the various creeks of the Casamance river, among the mangrove swamps. The rice is harvested by the women and dehusked by pounding with sticks in large mortar and pestels implements. The men are concerned with constructing the buildings, fishing and harvesting palm wine from the palm forests (although they can occasionally be found lazing around in hammocks).

The houses themselves are generally brick and cement constructions, rooved with corrugated iron or tatch. Their interiors are universally sparse, each room containing a bed, and perhaps a chair only. The compound area is surrounded by a wall and it is outdoors, in the yard that people spend all their time. The family groups are generally large, comprising several generations and including cousins, uncles and even more distant relatives. It is considered to be an obligation of a householder to house and feed any relative in need, although the government is apparently trying to change this tradition as it apparently has an adverse effect on tax-receipts. The Jola families abide strongly by this tradition of hospitality as they do to other less commendable institutions like 'bride prices' and female genital mutilation which was only banned in Senegal in 1999.

These Casamance settlements are wonderfully pleasant places to walk about. The large number of trees and natural vegetation as well as the dispersion of the houses give a pleasant green appearance to the towns, even the regional capital Ziguinchor. The settlements have a number of large central clearings underneath ancient massive silk-cotton trees, the clearing houses the ceremonial drums of the village, used to announce deaths and other events, and are the location of the traditional ceremonies and dances which are still very much alive and kicking, complete with costumes and fetishes, even among the hip-hop loving youth. The Jola are nominally christian but their traditional superstitions are much stronger. Everyone wears fetishes for various purposes. One young man explained the purpose of his three fetish belts to me. One was to protect against curses, one was to attract women and the third gave him immunity against landmines! It was truly amazing to hear people earnestly explaining, without a hint of scepticism, the power of their charms. Even though the idea of an "immaculate conception" or turning water into wine is no less crazy, it is hard to find people who actually believe in those.

The traditional beliefs of the Casamance people go hand in hand with a high level of hospitality and sociability. The entire group eats out of a common bowl at meal times and it is considered obligatory to invite all of those present to share. Indeed although people were obviously extremely poor, we saw almost no evidence of hunger and malnutrition. The greetings between people are elaborate and can take about 5 minutes, involving enquiries about family, health, home and are interspersed with words from several languages. Nice is a particular favourite English word as in:

- Kassoumay? (how are you - Jola)
- Kassoumaykep (fine) -nice? -nice, nice.
- Nanga Def? (how are you - Wolof)
- Mangi fii rek (I'm good - Wolof) -nice.

However it can become trying to go through the full formality in order to say "no thanks, I don't want any".

Nevertheless, the hospitality is genuine, In Ziguinchor, after missing a boat to Dakar (actually the boat never showed up, no reason was given) some friends put us up in the master bedroom of their family house, fed us 6 meals, gave us expensive soft-drinks and escorted us around the town explaining all the features of the town, all the while absolutely refusing any recompense. People are particularly interested in our marital status and religion. Our rejection of marriage and atheism prove fascination to people who often launch into theological arguments on the spot, however they never seem to hold it against us.

They are essentially subsistence farmers, having a minimal connection with the cash economy, however this is changing quickly as there are certain items which are very much desired by them for which money is required. These would be, in order of importance:

1. Anything with the Nike Shwoowshtika
 2. European Soccer Jerseys, most popular is Manchester United, in black, white or red (sometimes with Beckham on the back), then The French international jersey with Zidane's name on the back.
 3. Any clothing with a prominent trade mark (Kappa, Fila...)
 4. Anti-malarial medicine (everybody has chronic malaria, many children die of it every year)
 5. Power - electricity and batteries.
- It is in search of money to get these things that many of the men leave home to join the masses of the Dakar unemployed.

FRANCE'S COLONIAL LEGACY

It is amazing how nice the people can be to us Europeans after the history of colonisation. Indeed in Casamance today the colonial relationship continues. It is France's favourite Winter sun spot and almost all of the white people here are French tourists after the sun who see the natives as a bit of a nuisance (although they do have some lovely primitive dances - black people have such rhythm, although you just can't trust them, born liars...). There is also a significant element of French tourists who come here to have "integrated", new-age, back-to-Africa holidays. These are if anything worse than the others.

The first example of this type of tourist that we came across was at an African drumming night. He attracted our attention due to his unusual style of dress, "African plus". He wore a long Islamic-style robe, dreadlocks and a rasta-hat which made a curious melange of 2 mutually incompatible elements of African culture. Eventually we managed to get talking to the gentleman, who became henceforth known to us as "the muppet". Here is the content of our conversation:

US: So you're French, whereabouts are you from?

Muppet: A little bit of everywhere, I've got relatives in Algeria.

US: Oh

Muppet: I've been living here for 5 years, I live a couple of kilometres outside the village, it's more African there.

Later on that evening we saw him pay for drinks with a 200 Franc note, which he certainly didn't earn in Cap Skiring! Looked like we had a back-to-Africa rich buffoon. In any case he somewhat redeemed himself later on by giving the most amusing interpretation of African dancing I've ever seen, somewhere between Russian folk dancing and serious diarrhoea.

The second appalling "integrated" French person we met was a middle aged woman named Françoise, who came to Cap 4 times each year, in search of the real Africa. She was clearly loaded since she bought loads of sculptures, clothes, masks and other souvenirs at crazy prices. She also kept a retinue of Africans with her, some were guides who she employed for weeks on end and others were locals who she 'patronised', perhaps helped their families with money for medicines or education or stuff. In return she had absolute rights to their obsequence. She constantly spouted theories about Africans, things like "the problem with Africans is that they just don't understand what tourists want, I mean you feed us spaghetti, which is shit to us, what we want is real integrated experiences, to eat with the family. And another thing, the so-called integrated campements are a sham. Last year I was staying in a supposed-integrated place, I ran

out of money and they wouldn't feed me until I got money for them. I mean when have you ever seen an African turned away from the table hungry? That's not integrated".

Another of her favourite themes was France's magnificent history; the resistance, the special relationship between France and Senegal, and even bizzarely the story of Asterix and the Romans. She'd spout off these tirades in front of a load of economically dependant Africans and on the one occasion that we saw somebody show dissent by saying that in his opinion France had robbed Africa blind, she had a tantrum and ordered him from the table. Hopefully somebody will emulate France's proud history in Africa soon and rob all her money, enslave her, destroy her culture and finally cut her throat.

You don't want to go to Dakar

I YOU DON'T WANT TO GO TO DAKAR

"You don't want to go to Dakar" was the reply that we heard time and again when we told people in rural Casamance that we were going to go to the capital. "It's the city of crooks, thieves, cheats and swindlers, aggressive and noisy - no good for tourists". They were generally unconvinced when we'd reply that we came from a big city and were used to the hustle and bustle - "so have you heard about the attacks?" they'd respond.

When we asked people about their experiences of the city, it turned out that the dislike of most of them was based around the economic conditions which they had experienced there. Dakar is, by a long way, the biggest city in Senegal having over a million inhabitants. In the villages and rural areas wage labour is almost non-existent so young men, without property and with no chance of finding work often have no choice but to go to Dakar if they wish to earn enough money to get married one day and become householders themselves.

Almost all of the young men that we talked to had spent some time working, or seeking work in Dakar. They complained in particular about the constriction of living space that they had to endure. In Casamance they were accustomed to live in spread out compounds with many rooms where each adult has their own bedroom and new rooms can be constructed to handle expanding families. Dakar, on the other hand, has a housing model typical of Western cities with most housing consisting of flats, in large complexes, designed for occupation by individuals or couples.

However this housing model exists in a society whereby much larger family groups are the norm and each householder is under an social obligation to provide hospitality to relatives who arrive penniless from the villages at regular intervals. Thus, in many cases, a traditional sprawling family group will live within an individual housing unit, necessitating shift sleeping and putting great strains on sanitation and hygiene. Added to the difficult housing situation, were the problems of low wages, high prices, noise, pollution and inadequate public transport, all of which must have come as quite a nasty shock to those arriving from the idyllic, leisurely villages of verdant Casamance.

Considering the reality of the economic situation in Dakar, it was no surprise that those we asked expressed dislike for the city. Therefore, seeing as our relative extravagant wealth would allow us to avoid most of these problems, we were not unduly perturbed by all the warnings. On the other hand Dakar does have a reputation for crime, especially muggings, hardly surprising considering the constant influx of dispossessed youth. So we decided to take all possible precautions in preparing our trip. We took the unprecedentedly organised step of booking rooms a week in advance and planned our trip to be absolutely certain of arriving in daylight hours even though this meant adding an extra 11 hours of ferry ride to the trip. Then, when the boat failed to appear, we suspended our journey until the next day rather than taking an afternoon taxi. We wanted to get the very earliest taxi rather than risk the possibility of being dumped at a

bus station in suburban Dakar in the middle of the night, our backpacks gleaming brightly with promises of expensive foreign goods, a beacon to every bandit in the city.

II GOING TO DAKAR

Thus we were to be found at 7 a.m. at the side of a street in one of the Ziguinchor suburbs waiting for a taxi to the bus station. By 8 a.m. when we finally caught a taxi, we had already lost some of our cushion. However the journey was reputed to take 6 hours in a 7-seater and since night doesn't fall here until about 7 p.m., we were still feeling confident. This naive confidence further evaporated when we arrived at the bus station to see a shouting match between several gentlemen, one of whom was trying to explain that it wasn't his fault that there were no 7 seaters left to Dakar - there was shortage due to the holidays for the end of Ramadan. The fare collector of the old and battered 35 seat minibus which was the only transport available, failed to restore our optimism when he declared that due to the patently superior quality of this minibus, we would arrive by 3pm. By 11 am when the bus actually left the station, we had lost all faith in our ability to influence the times at which events occurred and by noon, 2 military checkpoints later, when we actually left Ziguinchor, we were beginning to see the funny side.

The Dakar - Ziguinchor road is the main transport axis in Senegal. It is known as the 'transgambienne' as it slices across a section of the Gambia. It is renowned as the best road in Senegal as it allows transport to drive on the road itself most of the time and keep a reasonable pace. However the Casamance section of the road contains about 10 military roadblocks with full identity checks and searches in the first 80 kilometres. From Ziguinchor the road veers inland to cross the narrow part of the Gambia (The Gambia's borders mirror the course of the Gambia river, apparently set at a distance from the river equal to maximum range of the 19th century British naval guns). As we made our way inland, the temperature got hotter and hotter and by the time we reached the Gambia river at about 2.30 pm, the sun was beating down mercilessly and the temperature was in the high 30's. The combination of the heat and our hangovers from the previous night's celebrations of the end of Ramadan had created a strong desire for cold liquids by this stage.

Since there are no bridges over the Gambia river, all transport must use a ferry to cross. The ferry terminal has become a particular hub of commerce as do all such spots on the route where the bus must stop. However, while most of these informal markets are based around fruit, snacks and refreshments, these were nowhere to be seen in the 20 or so stalls gathered around the ferry departure point. Instead the produce seemed to consist entirely of replica football kits. This proved something of a disappointment to us since we had been hoping to see the normal rush of vendors pressing plastic bags filled with chilled water and fruit juices through the bus windows. The infant sized Aston Villa kit complete with jersey, shorts and socks that one woman persistently tried to sell to was a poor substitute. At least we did get to see the provenance of the vast number of Manchester United tops in the region. Apparently Gambia has no import duty on clothes and this section of the Gambia - being a Senegalese road - serves as the natural distribution point for Senegal.

An hour later we had crossed the Gambia river, sped through the other half of the country and reached the Senegalese border post. As we waited for the guard to stamp our passports, we observed a Mauritanian smuggler pull up outside in his car, run in, hand a few notes to the guard, then without a word being exchanged, jump back in the car and continue into Senegal.

The system of bribes is obviously organised in a highly efficient manner in these parts! However tourists were obviously off limits for bribes and we duly received our stamps and left the office none the poorer, only to be greeted by the forlorn sight of our bus, jacked up, with 2 wheels missing and all the passengers sitting under a tree nearby. The bus had picked up two punctures at once and we had no spares!

According to some of our fellow passengers, we would have to get new tyres from Kaolack, 50 kilometres away and this would take several hours or even days. Fortunately this turned out to be an example of the law of travellers pessimism, whereby all fellow passengers on public transport will answer all enquiries about length of journey or arrival time with the most pessimistic estimation possible and a certain expression of resigned fatalism. This phenomenon has its inverse in the law of non-travellers optimism, whereby every enquiry, prior to a journey, from people who will not be travelling will be met with the most optimistic estimation conceivable. So while we only had to wait one hour for the new tyre, by the time we were back on the road, with scarcely a third of the journey completed, we were already later than any of the estimations we had received prior to starting!

Thankfully the rest of the trip passed much more smoothly and while we did get another puncture, this time we had a spare with us. Nevertheless it was 11pm when the bus finally spat us out into the wilds of the Dakar bus-station, exactly the situation that we had wanted to avoid. Our fellow passengers all showed considerable concern for our safety, repeatedly advising us to be careful, which had the effect of making us paranoid to such an extent that we felt as if we had been deposited in no-man's land in the middle of the first world war. We grabbed a taxi, agreed instantly to an extortionate price and, as we drove through the Dakar night, we were constantly expecting hordes of heavily armed bandits to launch an assault on the vehicle. We reached the hotel, dashed inside and almost collided with a chubby little middle-aged Frenchman with a big moustache accompanied by two tall, thin, young, exceedingly nubile African women, who was negotiating the rent of a room for a few hours. We waited impatiently for him to finish, our backpacks feeling like timebombs waiting to explode but eventually we got our key, got into the room and barricaded ourselves in against the swarming hordes without, safe until the morning.

III DAKAR, CAPITAL OF FRENCH WEST AFRICA

During the next few weeks that we spent in Dakar our paranoia about our security quickly evaporated. Indeed we even found that the Dakar hustlers were easier to deal with than those in Cap Skiring. Whereas in the Cap, we would be obliged to spend several minutes rebuffing guides, in Dakar you could easily just ignore them and keep walking when they tried to stop you with their various ruses - "hey, it's my friend from the airport"... "maybe you don't recognise me without my uniform". What's more Dakar is much more familiar to us coming from Dublin than Casamance was.

It is a city constructed very much in the European conception with the whole gamut of shops, hotels, restaurants, cafés, imported fineries, suit-wearing businessmen, cinemas, cybercafés, traffic jams, parks, universities and crowds hurrying about their business. Physically it is a good example of French colonial planning and architecture. The whole city is located on a peninsula, the westernmost point in Africa. The centrepiece of the city is the impressively Mediterranean Place d'Indépendance surrounded by grand hotels, bank headquarters and other symbols of capitalist

power. To the South of the place is the wealthiest area of the city, housing the main administrative buildings as well as being home to many of the white inhabitants. It is located on the highest area of the peninsula - emphasising the colonists domination over the natives. The original inhabitants were evicted at the start of this century on the pretext of sanitation concerns, a device that was very popular with colonial administrations. This area is partly made up of broad tree-lined avenues and partly of a relatively upmarket commercial area, almost entirely European in concept.

North of the place, there is another commercial district which is increasingly African as you go away from the centre. The enclosed shops are replaced by pavement stalls and the size and energy of the throng increases. This whole central area is relatively compact and little more than a mile from the place, the residential Medina begins and these suburbs sprawl from here several miles along the coast. Increasingly, as you go from the centre, you come across sheep, goats and chickens, foraging among the rubbish and patches of bush, evidence of recent rural migration and a different concept of urban space. The pace of life slows and the European centre seems a million miles away.

Dakar was the capital of French West Africa, and one of the factors which caused Dakar to be chosen as a colonial administrative centre was its climate. It is relatively cool with light breezes and notably less susceptible to malaria than most parts of West Africa. However nowadays, the combination of dust, pollution and very low humidity during the dry season means that much of the population permanently have sore throats and blocked noses. During the 3 weeks that we spent there I had a persistent sore-throat and eventually had to go to a doctor who barely had to examine me to know what to describe - it cured me almost instantly and I didn't have to resort to the inhalation of smoke from sacred wood which many people were advising. Nevertheless the relatively benevolent climate is one of the reasons why Dakar still houses a large population of French expatriates, numbering several thousand. They remain very much an elite in the city, owning many of the businesses and working as management in many of the multi-national companies and NGO's which have their West-African headquarters in Dakar.

In addition to the colonial remnants, Dakar has a relatively large class of wealthy Africans and nowadays they probably outnumber whites among the rich class in Senegal. However this class is rarely seen wandering around the streets, they are occasionally spotted in taxis, 4x4's or in shops but to see them in any number it is necessary to plunge into one of the exclusive French restaurants or cafés where they can be found, besuited and cultured, quaffing imported luxuries. The streets, on the other hand are the domain of the traders, beggars, hustlers and holy-men who make up an incredibly colourful and energetic patchwork of streetlife.

IV DAKAR STREETLIFE

Bana Bana

One of the first thing that one notices about Dakar are that there are people literally everywhere selling things, things of every size, shape and variety. It seems impossible to cast your eyes in any direction without finding a product thrust into your view by a hopeful salesman. Within the first 5 minutes that I spent in Dakar I was offered a bathroom scales, the latest copy of Paris Match magazine, a giant bath towel with the Welsh flag printed on it, a wall clock, a 2 foot long model wooden canoe complete with 12 individually carved oarsmen as well as a host of more

mundane fare. Each of these products has a salesman attached, some of whom will have a single item to sell while others are weighed down by massive bundles of seemingly unrelated goods tied to their backs or balanced on their heads. These are the 'bana-bana', the wandering salesmen who occupy the economic margins of the city and form the bulk of the informal economy.

It is hard to know how many people are engaged in this informal commerce - some estimates are as high as 80% of the cities labour force - but it is certain that they are legion. They are visible in every neighbourhood seeking customers, offering goods and services, delivering sales patters again and again - 'hey whitey. Sunglasses. Raybans. Cheap. Only \$5. Okay how much will you give?' - as passers by walk past without registering their existence. They sell goods and services which are no more expensive or hard to find in the shops and stalls. Their only economic advantage is their mobility and their desperation - they seek the customers out. They trail customers into the forbidden sanctuaries of cafés and restaurants only to be shooed away to reappear at a window, desperately pursuing that one sale which can mean dinner tonight.

Beggars

Almost as numerous and visible as the bana-bana on Dakar's streets, and no less desperate, are the beggars, many thousands of whom hold out hands, buckets or bowls to passers by hoping for a few pennies. After spending a while in the city it is possible to recognise several distinct categories among the beggars. First and most eye-catching are the invalids especially the numerous lepers and polio-victims. The sight of stumps where one expects to see hands and their straw-thin legs often proves visually shocking, stopping you in your tracks as you walk past. The locomotion of the polio sufferers can be a particularly tortuous sight as they drag, swng and haul their wasted legs over the uneven, obstacle-strewn terrain. In many cases their unassisted progress appears as a miracle of mechanics.

The destitute form another distinct group of beggars. They can be any age and sex but by far the most commonly seen are the mothers with young children, probably not because they tend to be more often destitute than others but because others would have even less chance of begging enough to survive. They are often dressed in rags and occassionaly use an infant, trained to hold out a hand to passers by, to collect their alms. Apparently many of these are women who have been abandoned by their emigré husbands or partners.

The third and most numerous category of alms-seekers are the talibés or disciples. These are children aged between 6 and 16, pupils at the traditional Koranic schools. These schools are common all over muslim West Africa and are run by muslim holy men, the marabouts. These marabouts are a particular West African feature of islam. They combine a lifetime of study of the koran with many of the features of traditional beliefs and superstitions. They are commonly credited with powers of divination and the ability to interced with allah on behalf of the faithful. Especially in the more traditional rural areas, many of the faithful believe that trusting one's children to a marabout, to take care of their education and thus add to god's army, is a way of winning brownie points with god. These unfortunate children are the talibés, they must endure years of instruction in the Koran consisting largely of transcribing and chanting verses.

In return for taking care of their upbringing, the Marabout gets to use his talibés as virtual slaves. In rural areas they will often perform hours of unpaid farm labour every day, tending the crops and gathering fruit and firewood. In urban areas they spend a lot of their time collecting alms for their marabouts and it is in performing this function that they are seen so commonly on

the streets of Dakar. They are very often barefoot, always dressed in rags and characteristically they carry a bucket dangling from a string with which to collect food. Notwithstanding the importance of charity to islam, it is hard to see how many of them could collect much since they are many thousands competing for every morsel of pity. The marabouts have a reputation for using corporal punishment against those who do not adequately perform their alms-collecting. All in all it sounds about as pleasant an education as the christian brothers used to provide in Ireland. Funny they way these religions have so much in common.

Finally, among the ranks of the beggars are the members of the Baye Fall, a particularly slavish islamic brotherhood which emphasises hard work as a route to salvation. These dread locked disciples, dressed in patchwork cloaks laden with prayer beads, spend much time collecting alms, holding their calabash bowls out to passers by. They are probably the most persistent of the various mendicants, which is convenient since they are also the only ones who elicit contempt instead of sympathy. Thus I was able to relieve some of the frustrations caused by the ever-present demands for cash by being rude to these holy-men. Persistent demands for cash were met with 'Satan is lord' or some such response.

V. COUPE AFRICAINE de NATIONS - CAN

Another thing that was very noticeable in Dakar was that at certain times economic activity would suddenly slow down almost to a standstill and the streets would empty except for bunches of people, here and there staring fixedly into shop windows. It was the African Nations cup - the continents football championship.

Having experienced football mania in Ireland many times in the past, there was nothing unusual about the widespread interest in the tournament, nor in the fervent support for the Senegalese national side. On the other hand a couple of factors did seem particularly noticeable. Firstly the shortage of televisions was amazing. Every screen in the city seemed to host a huge crowd, gathered in an arc around it. A 12 inch screen in a shop window could hold the attention of a 50-strong crowd, many of whom would simultaneously hold portable radios to their ears to hear the commentary. These pavement crowds were as replete with comedians and 'expert' pundits as any soccer crowd, but I couldn't help being struck by the civilized way in which they reacted to the rollercoaster of fortune. When Senegal lost to Egypt by a single, extraordinarily dubious goal, there wasn't a single expletive hurled at the screen. When, against the odds, they qualified for the quarter finals for the first time ever, the crowd cheered, clapped each other on the back and went smilingly back to work. Eventually I figured out that it wasn't merely a more civilized nature which was causing them to act so differently to an Irish soccer mob, it was the fact that they were watching these matches without the blessing of alcohol! Even when I watched matches in the dingiest dockside bar, packed with sailors and prostitutes, it was difficult to find a single drunkard among the amassed muslims. A strange cultural experience.

VI SENEGAL'S MODEL DEMOCRACY

Over the few weeks that we spent in Dakar I began to notice that an unusually large number of businesses in the central commercial areas of the city seemed to be having facelifts. The pavements in front of them were being ripped up and teams of workmen were hammering away at

the storefronts. However, it soon became clear that steel bars, their foundations planted 4 feet deep into the pavement, hadn't suddenly become the height of shopfront fashion. Rather, these businesses were busy fortifying themselves behind cages of reinforced steel bars. Why? Well, it just so happened to be election time and the cities' merchants seemed to suspect that things weren't going to pass entirely peacefully.

Senegal undoubtedly deserves to be classified as West Africa's model democracy, but, in this context, democracy certainly doesn't mean that the mass of the people have the faintest say in what goes on. What it does mean is that an event, called an 'election' by the ruling class, is held every so often. In Senegal these events have been held relatively frequently and there have been no military coup d'états since independence (Robert Guei's recent coup in Cote d'Ivoire gives Senegal the distinction of being the only West African 'nation' never to have enjoyed military rule). On the other hand, the same party, hand picked by the French colonial power, has ruled since independence in 1960 and the country has managed to evolve multiple parties, all with largely the same policies. This combination of regular, multi-party elections, without any danger of political change is what makes the country a model of 'democracy' in the region.

Senegal has a population of some 10 millions. 1.3 million votes were cast in the previous presidential election in 1993. In a country with high levels of illiteracy, poor communications infrastructure and minimal state services, a very small minority of the population are even on the electoral register. However, in the run-up to this presidential election it was looking unlikely that very many of the 2.7 million registered voters could really be happy with the status quo. Unemployment is officially about 40% and a third of the population live below the poverty line, in reality both of these figures are probably higher. 40 years of socialist party rule since independence have produced little improvement in people's lives. The youth of the country are particularly disenchanted - according to official figures 62% of the 4.2 million people aged between 18 and 25 are unemployed. For those lucky few who do have jobs, things are scarcely much better. Wages are appalling, especially considering the relatively high cost of living. A casual construction labourer in Casamance earns \$1.50 for a 10 hour day while a state-employed teacher makes just \$75 a month. While the recent structural adjustment program may have impressed the IMF and foreign investors, the series of privatisations, cutbacks and downsizings has not made life any easier for most people. In the run up to the election a great desire for change could be felt among the masses. Unfortunately, in this model democracy, 'change' was not one of the choices available.

There were four major candidates for the presidency and it was widely predicted that the incumbent, Abdou Diouf, was in serious danger of losing to his perennial opponent Abdoulaye Wade. Many political figures and commentators were trumpeting this possibility of 'alternance' as a democratic triumph which was crucial for the country's emergence as a model for francophone Africa. If Senegal could achieve a peaceful electoral transfer of power, then perhaps it could avoid the cycle of corruption, autocracy, instability, military rule and civil war which have become par for the course among the nation states of the region. This reasoning caused many of the opposition figures to form an alliance behind Wade, the most likely looking opponent, including most of the parties of the left. However, despite the fact that the desperate economic situation of many of the nation's people meant that, in the absence of massive fraud, it was looking very plausible that the government might lose, it was also looking almost inconceivable that the election might change anything for the majority of the people.

or the Senegalese elections were centred not around politics, nor policies, nor even personalities, but around shepherding. The rises and falls in the leading candidates' fortunes were gauged not by opinion polls, but by lists of defections of the personnel from the various parties. As recently as 1998 all 4 of the leading candidates were members of the same government and 3 of them were in the same party. Two were recently barons within the governing Socialist Party whose ambitions had been frustrated prompting them to defect and create their own parties, along with various other power-hungry barons with regional bases. These new parties were purely vehicles for personal ambition, bereft of policies or politics. The election campaign consisted of the various parties attempting to entice barons and important regional figures away from each others' parties. In fact this practice of switching political sides has become so common in Senegal that it has been given its own special name 'transhumance'.

Transhumance

Now, in geography class in school I remember learning that transhumance is the shepherding practice of Alpine farmers who would lead their flocks onto the high pastures every Spring, and bring them back down in Autumn to spend the Winter in shelter. In a similar manner the Senegalese politician shepherds his flock of voters into the PS camp, until one day a PDS leader arrives with promises of an important position, or better still, a large budget for a development project. The politician then simply has to herd his flock into the PDS pasturage, at least until the URD leader arrives with promises of even juicier morsels. In the year before the election at least a dozen senior national political figures switched parties, some even yo-yoed between parties, switching backwards and forwards for shamelessly self-serving reasons. In the weeks preceding the poll, the pace accelerated with entire regional branches of political parties switching allegiance en masse.

So rather than trying to convince the electorate to vote for them, the candidates concentrated on trying to attract shepherds who come in a number of different guises. Firstly there are the traditional leaders, descendants of chiefs or tribal leaders. Secondly there are the large capitalists, often owners of groundnut plantations, which are Senegal's major cash crop. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, there are the religious leaders, the marabouts, the hierarchy of the muslim brotherhoods which wield huge influence. Unsurprisingly these 3 categories often coalesce in one person. The local Marabout may be a hereditary chief and a large landowner who is capable of mustering near hundred percent voting loyalty from his flock due to the multi-faceted nature of his power. It is these figures that are fought over by the candidates in the election campaign since, by switching sides, they can turn an area from blanket loyalty to the government into an uncontested stronghold of the opposition overnight. The most important of these figures are the leaders of the two biggest brotherhoods, the Mourides and the Tidjanes. Traditionally, on the eve of the elections, the marabouts give a counsel or 'ndiguel' to their members about which way they should vote - of course after having consulted with the big man upstairs.

In the weeks before the poll there was a huge amount of lobbying and negotiating between the principal candidates and the principal religious leaders. For example, Moustaphe Niasse's opening campaign rally was visited by a Mouride delegation consisting of 32 buses and 44 cars filled with the councillors of the Khalife Serigne Saliou Mbacké. This time round the ruling Socialist party was looking in trouble since many people attributed their previous election successes to their ability to win over the Marabouts en masse, this time the opposition had succeeded in

getting some of the important marabouts to call for a vote against the government, or to refrain from giving any advice.

Corruption and Clientelism

The transhumance of the politicians goes hand in hand with rampant corruption and deep-rooted clientelism, both of which allow individuals to take large chunks of voters with them as they wander between parties in search of greener pastures. The corruption runs from registering scores of deceased or infant voters, to the purchasing of voters' cards (market price \$7.50). The clientelism starts at the level of party activists who are recruited with the promise of jobs in the event of eventual victory. Given the vast reserves of unemployed youth, it is relatively easy for political figures to gather sizeable bodies of activists. The fact that, for these activists, it is a winner-takes-all situation combined with their personal dependence on their political patron, gives these militant organisations an added fervour and they often serve as personal militias: breaking up opposition meetings, burning down opposition buildings, ripping down posters, intimidating dissenters... Although the governing PS was for a long time the leading player in this field, the opposition parties are increasingly enthusiastic practitioners. Also, the government barons are faced with the problem of having to live up to their promises. This can lead to serious embarrassment. For example, less than a month before the presidential elections, the Socialist party youth branch in Kolda distributed leaflets which said in essence "We've done all the electoral work we said we would, now where are the jobs we were promised? If we don't get jobs we're defecting".

Another aspect of clientelism is the promising by local barons of development projects for their villages and regions. Typically the local politician will tell the villagers that if X party is elected then he, because of his good connections, will ensure that they will be given electricity, running water and a paved road. Yet again, on this aspect, it seemed that the government's chickens were coming home to roost after 40 years of promising the earth; On the 21st of December the 21,000 strong rural community of Kounkamé, hitherto solidly government supporters, released a statement saying that unless the promised electrification was completed (the pylons had been put in place around the time of the 1998 legislative elections) they would defect en masse to the opposition. Again on the 17th of January, 43 'pro-government' villages of the Gandjolé region released a statement declaring their intention to vote for the opposition as the electrification - guaranteed to be in place by 2000 - had never been carried out.

The opposition candidates and their regional power figures were no less shamelessly clientelist, however, they were able to make promises without ever having had a chance to deliver. Indeed Wade relied throughout on the simple slogan 'Sopi' - meaning change in Wolof, rather than delivering any real policy proposals. Vote for Wade and everything would be different - the long promised electricity and running water would arrive, jobs would be available and politicians would keep their promises... The opposition alliance's paper was packed with outlandish promises. "When Wade is president all of the villages will get electricity, our army will be the most modern and best equipped in the region" and so on.

Petty politics

Paradoxically, because the elections were entirely devoid of ideological and political content, they were all the more viciously fought. The candidates didn't even pretend to be driven by anything other than personal ambition and powerlust, thus nothing prevented them from using dirty tricks, intimidation and violence in trying to win the race. In every single step of the process: the creation of the electoral lists, the printing of voters' cards, the distribution of the cards and the voting itself there were political crises, accusations of fraud, counter accusations and secret negotiations as all of the candidates looked for any means of giving themselves an advantage. The saga of the "Israeli cards" exhibits this very well.

After months of arguments about the content of the electoral lists, the interior minister, General Cissé, was given the task of producing unfalsifiable voters' cards which he duly set about doing and a Dakar-based firm was contracted to carry out the task and print the cards. Then, less than two months before the vote, the opposition discovered that the general had secretly ordered a second set of voters' cards to be printed in Israel. The general claimed that this was as a precaution in case there was any problem with the Senegalese cards, but, realising that the game was up, he declared that he would publically burn the cards. The opposition then released statements of outrage that the government was willing to burn \$100,000 of taxpayers money in such a fashion and announced that they would boycott the burning. The burning was then called off due to lack of interest at which point the opposition changed tack to accuse Ousmanne Tanor Dieng, the government's chief of staff, of having paid for the cards. Dieng promptly launched a court case for defamation against the leading opposition candidate. Then another opposition candidate caused a huge stir by declaring that he had evidence that general Cissé was preparing a coup d'état - only for him to clarify this the next day by saying he had been referring to an "electoral coup d'état" (i.e. the Israeli cards). Wade, the opposition frontrunner, hoping to take advantage of the ripples from the Cote d'Ivoire coup, then declared the government could only win if they resorted to fraud and in the case of such an "electoral coup d'état" then he would call on the army to carry out a coup d'état on the people's behalf. President Diouf responded by declaring that, in the case of post-election violence by the opposition, he, in his capacity as commanding officer of the armed forces, would call upon the army to 'restore order'.

The candidates culminated their campaigning by holding a series of rallies around the country. In the tense atmosphere, these rallies often ended in violent clashes between the 'youth organisations' of the various parties. In Dakar we happened to witness several of these rallies. About 2 weeks before the first round of voting we happened to pass through one of Diouf's rallies on a bus. The rally was marked by the fact that virtually the entire audience was wearing outfits with the image of the president's face printed all over them. As a promotional measure he had produced thousands of metres of cloth with his face emblazoned all over it and the enterprising tailors of Dakar had fashioned this cloth into every conceivable style of dress, suit, shirt and blouse. The sight of the many acres of the president's serene countenance was quite a sight to behold as our bus slowly inched its way through the crowd and we were quite enjoying the experience until a few people on the bus shouted 'SOP!' out the window and the crowd began to hurl projectiles at us - thankfully we got away quickly since at various stages during the campaign numerous people were injured or killed during clashes at these rallies. Purely by coincidence, less than 5 minutes later on the same bus journey we encountered Wade, the opposition front runner.

Wade is 74, bald, with a face set in a permanent grimace, he commonly dresses in a power-suit and tours Dakar in a cacalcade of open-top Mercedes. On this occasion he was in his most characteristic pose, jacket off, braces over his white shirt in the style of a Wall street stockbroker, his fist in the air as he stood upright in the back of the car, punching the air and crying 'SOP!' to the passers by. He was followed by several more cars, full of fierce looking young men waving their fists and snarling at the crowd as if challenging any government supporters to try to stop them. The sight of Wade seemed to electrify the crowds on the streets and on the buses who echoed his slogan back and punched the air with their fists. If nothing else, he certainly has a talent for showmanship.

The week before the election saw a large exodus of expats towards the resort areas of the Gambia and the Cote D'Ivoire. However, while the tension did mount with more violent clashes, bannings of radion stations and burnings of party buildings, the situation didn't escalate into the widespread violence or even civil war which many people feared. The elections were organised according to French system. In the event of no candidate achieving a majority in the first round a runoff is held between the two leading candidates. As many had predicted there was a runoff between Wade and Diouf. The period between the two polls saw an intensification of the wheeling and dealing between the political figures as Wade negotiated for the support of the eliminated candidates in return, of course, for a share of the pie in the form of senior government positions. Although president Diouf did succeed in creating one last act of transhumance by prompting Djibo Ka, the 4th placed candidate to dramatically switch sides, it was too little too late. Wade duly completed his victory with the backing of the rest of the candidates. We can expect him to be busy over the next few years attempting to share out the spoils of his victory among all those to whom he has promised favours. The uninfluent and disenfranchised masses will have to wait a long time indeed for their voices to be heard.

Despite the fact that the Senegalese seem to have so little to hope for from their model democratic process, things are not entirely gloomy. The autonomous unions, grouped into two federations: the CSA and UNSAS have been fighting a series of battles against the privatisations and for increased wages and living conditions. These campaigns have been bitterly fought and relatively radical. The independant press is reasonably lively and the venality and vacuity of the political class seems to be widely recognised. Finally the very weakness of the state infrastructure, especially in areas like education and health, means that there is some space for self-organisation. Various initiatives of communally organised education and health clinics have emerged especially from trade-union circles. It is these types of organisations have some chance of ending the vicious circle of under-development rather than the self-interested political parties.

Mali - Take one large desert, one large river...

Most tourists who go to Senegal go for hedonistic reasons, lying on the beach with fine French dining amid lush tropical scenery. Nobody goes to Mali for hedonistic reasons. The dust, sand, poverty, underdevelopment, poor transport, scarcity of 'luxury' manufactured goods and the heat, especially the heat, mean that it is always a difficult place to travel around. In some parts the afternoon temperatures regularly exceed 50°C, although the low 40's is more normal.

The fact that the country consists of desert and semi-desert means that there is a distinct lack of trees for shade, so walking around generally means enduring the full weight of the fierce sun. The wrong turn taken by the Niger river, which starts a couple of hundred kilometres from the Sierra Leone coast but flows thousands of kilometres East into the sahara, is probably the only reason that Mali has a population to speak of. The country is very much defined by its two prominent natural features, the sahara desert which makes life difficult and the Niger river which makes life just about possible.

We got a speedy introduction to some of the difficulties of surviving in Mali on our train trip to Bamako, the Malian capital, from Dakar. This bi-weekly 'Ocean-Niger' train is basically the only way to get into Mali from Senegal apart from flying since there is no road, only rough dirt tracks. The train theoretically takes 30 hours to cover the 1200 kilometres but as soon as we got aboard, we started hearing dark rumours of potential 5 day delays. It had taken us about 10 hours to secure tickets and reserve seats on the train in the absolute chaos of Dakar's train station. The company was recently privatised which seems to have had the effect of closing almost all of the rail routes and firing almost the entire staff, leaving one gentleman behind a ticket counter to run the whole operation. So, once we had finally got our tickets and boarded we were very disappointed to discover that we had reserved seats in the only carriage on the entire train which had both of its windows welded shut, especially since the tracks pass through Kayes, the town with the hottest average temperature in the world, and the rest of the route is fairly warm as well.

The train runs across the monotonous plains of eastern Senegal, a relentlessly flat, sparse and dusty landscape punctuated by the occasional hamlet of the typical conical thatched mudbrick houses. The train stops at every conceivable opportunity and is engulfed by merchants selling bags of water, snacks, chickens, plates of rice and cups of tea. Simultaneously merchants on the train attempt to sell manufactured goods to the villagers, especially plastic buckets in lurid colours. In addition to the regular stops there were numerous unscheduled stops, once when a carriage became derailed and once when the train hit a herd of cows. Thankfully due to the slow speed, these incidents were time-consuming rather than life-threatening.

Considering the rate at which we were perspiring it was fortunate that the journey only took 40 hours to complete since a second sleepless night being drenched with sweat would have been hard to take. On the other hand it did mean that once again we found ourselves arriving in a capital city, in the small hours of the morning, in a station replete with gangsters, hustlers and bandits without the faintest knowledge of the city. Predictably the taxi driver who we finally

procured attempted to charge us a month's wages for the short trip to the youth hostel. Nevertheless, we still managed to make it to our beds alive after a half-hour shouting match with the driver that just about failed to turn into a fist fight.

Health

Having already spent 2 1/2 months in Senegal, eating the local street food and drinking the water, we thought that our bodies had adapted to the region. We were soon proved wrong. Mali continually managed to conjure up conditions which meant that it was crucial to know the location of the toilet. Our health scorecards for the month that we spent in Mali were as follows:

Deirdre

2 doses of diarrhoea (6 days) - cause: one omlette and one plate of egg mayonnaise.
1 case of nausea with vomiting (2 days) - cause: omlette as above
1 case of heat exhaustion (1 day) - cause: sitting hatless in swimming pool
1 Sore throat (5 days) - cause: excessive dustiness
1 Blocked nose (constant for the month) - cause: excessive dustiness

Chekov

1 dose of diarrhoea (2 days) - cause: dodgy water
1 case of heat exhaustion (2 days) - cause: sitting hatless in swimming pool
1 bad cold (7 days) - cause: excessive variations between daytime and nighttime temperatures in the desert
1 Sore throat (10 days) - cause: excessive dustiness
Frequent nosebleeds & constant blocked nose - cause: excessive dustiness
1 Wierd infection which caused a fingernail to die and for a new one to grow in its place - cause: unknown

Although none of these maladies was in any way serious they compounded the difficulties of travelling and sapped our strength in the already difficult conditions.

Glorious mud

Coming from Senegal, it is scarcely believable that one could be struck by the relative poverty of another country, however Mali achieves this feat. As one gets further from the coast into Eastern Senegal towards the Malien border, the concrete and corrugated iron rural hamlets become replaced by mudbrick and tatch, certainly much more picturesque but also requiring constant maintenance as the walls dissolve in the rains. Despite the picture-postcard appearance of the conical tatched rooves, practically their only advantage over concrete and iron is that the materials cost nothing. It is hard to imagine that people would choose to use mud to construct their homes if they could afford the price of a couple of bags of cement.

In Mali we spend some time in the capital Bamako, the second city Ségou, the third town Mopti, the desert capital Timbuktu, Djenné the important merchant centre and numerous smaller towns and villages. Bamako was the only place where anything other than mud has a significant presence as a building material. The other important towns have typically a small central district, dating from colonial times, with a few solid administrative, commercial and institutional build-

ings. Even Bamako, which has several modern flashy glass and steel high-rises, soon lapses into mudbrick within a kilometer of the centre.

Poverty and Culture

As well as the predominance of mud, there are many other elements which testify to the accentuation of poverty when one enters Mali. Naked toddlers with skinny legs and bloated bellies are a common sight in every part of the country. The towns are squalid, replete with open sewers. Rats are a common sight and are remarkably bold, frolicking openly on Bamako's main streets. At one stage I was sitting at a restaurant counter, about to order, when I noticed 3 large well-fed rats playing hide-and-seek in the pots and pans of the kitchen, completely unperturbed by the presence of the cooks, who themselves seemed to take the rodents' presence for granted. This touching image of human rodent fraternity did not help my appetite.

Despite the squalor of the towns, at least they have the advantage that one can find a range of goods and luxury commodities available. In the rural areas there is less squalor but food is limited to staples, manufactured goods are almost completely unavailable, running water and electricity are non-existent, transport is limited to walking or donkeys and carts with an occasional bicycle thrown in.

Given the scarcity of commodities, ownership of any significant piece of property is equivalent to owning a small business. A gas-powered fridge, a small electricity generator, a television, a stereo system or a motorbike can provide the owner with enough income to be relatively well-off. In a situation where nobody has enough, everything costs something. The capitalist laws of profiting from scarcity are starkly visible as the price of goods rises in relation to the proximity of the nearest competition. Soft drinks can cost 3 times the city price in remote villages and transport can cost 10 times the normal rate if you find yourself stuck in a village with a single car-owner. This has the effect of making Mali a relatively expensive place to travel, despite the poverty, unless you're willing to lead the bare-subsistence lifestyle that most of the locals do.

The under-development and poverty have the corollary that the cultural experience of the country is unusually interesting. Aside from the pervasive Manchester United shirts (available in a blue and a green version), there is little evidence of modern civilisation in most places. The life of the rural population has undergone little change in the last few centuries. People must largely manufacture everything themselves, since many have no virtually no connection to the cash economy. Villagers can be seen winding individual strands of Baobab fibre together to make home-made rope. Blacksmiths are common, hammering metal into the shapes of spades and picks. Potters create bowls and jugs to be cooked in mudbrick ovens. Women and children can be seen walking huge distances with vast piles of firewood on their heads. All of these things can be found everywhere in Africa, but in Mali it is often hard to find anything other than these traditional ways of living, not because people choose to live in such a manner but because they have simply no money to live in any other way. As everywhere in Africa, there are a mix of different 'tribes' in Mali which each have their own particular way of living and in some ways it seems to be like visiting a living ethnological museum. Fula nomads herding cattle, Tuareg traders on camels, Bozo fishermen in dug-out canoes, Dogon witch-doctors and enslaved Bella nomads mining salt in the desert are everyday features.

As well as the voyeuristic interest in observing the rural absence of development, there are a number of towns which, unusually for West Africa, have a long history and remain relatively intact. Mali contains much of the territory which went to make up the ancient Mali, old Ghana and Songhai empires which existed at various times between the 4th century and 1591 when a Moroccan invasion signalled the areas demise as a power base. Two towns in particular, Timbuktu and Djenné contain much evidence of their history, their relative irrelevance in modern times has ensured that they still retain the physical appearance of medieval times.

Djenné & Timbuktu

Djenné is situated on an island in the Bani river and after its foundation in the 9th century became an important commercial centre. Even today, despite its supercedence by Mopti, it hosts an important weekly market and remains architecturally impressive. The town of some 10,000 people is built almost entirely of mud and includes the world's largest mud-building, the grand mosque. While most mudbrick building is extremely simple and basic - generally a one room hut with a door and no windows - Djenné's architecture is entirely different. Residential buildings are normally 2 storeys, incorporating several rooms with ornately decorated windows and spacious roof terraces for sleeping on whenever the weather gets too hot to sleep indoors. The houses are built in various distinct versions of the Sudanic style of architecture. There are numerous 'Morrocan style' houses, legacy of the Morrocan conquest in the 16th century. Other housing styles predate these as does the grand mosque, and are distinguished by the protruding planks of wood which serve as scaffolding, built into the houses, to facilitate the neccesary annual repairs after every rainy season.

Just outside the town of Djenné is found a site of even greater antiquity, the remains of a city thought to have been inhabited from the third century b.c. until the 13th century a.d., known as Djenné-Jeno. This site is the oldest known urban settlement in Africa, it spreads over 31 hectares and is amazing evidence of how little resources have been spent on trying to understand Africa's ancient history. The entire large area is densely carpeted with pottery shards which entirely obscure the earth beneath. There are numerous intact large funeral urns whose necks protrude above the ground, here and there the remains of walls can be seen, lumps of ancient iron, jewellery beads, pottery painted and decorated in a huge variety of styles is crushed underfoot as you walk around the site.

This wealth of evidence which all dates from at least 700 years ago is simply lying on the surface. Since its discovery in 1975 by Western science (locals must have always known about it since it is unmissable) there have been only 3 archaeological digs, all by the same American scholar. The site unmarked and unsigned, lying in the middle of fields, and is rarely visited except by the occassional looter who can earn a few dollars by unearthing millenia-old artefacts for sale to overseas collectors. What is particularly interesting about the remains is that, despite its large size and importance, it lacks any evidence of a central authority or hierarchical power-structure which long caused historians to underestimate the size, population and importance of the ancient town. It provided the first evidence that sub-saharan Africa developed iron-working before the advent of islam from the North. It is thought that this animist town may have been abandoned due to the rivalry of nearby islamic Djenné.

Timbuktu

Timbuktu (or Tomboctou), at the northernmost point of the Niger river, surrounded by the sahara desert, is also a town which lives in the past. It is again almost entirely made of mud, but here the sense of decline is much more visible than in Djenné. Formerly of great importance due to the trans-saharan trade and the salt-mines to the north. Its decline was probably rendered inevitable as far back as the 15th century when Portugese naval merchants managed to reach the West African coast and circumvent the overland route. It was certainly a slow decline, but it has been hastened in recent years by the expansion of the sahara, a Tuareg rebellion which effectively cut the town off from the rest of the country for much of the 1990's and the Algerian war which completely stopped the trans-saharan trade. Despite its decline, there are many signs of its ancient significance; a pyramidical mosque from 1327; a fifteenth century mosque which was formerly one of the most important universities in the islamic world and numerous important residences, all built in the Sudanic style mudbrick architecture. As regards the modern habitations, they are distinguished only by their doors, decorated with elaborate metalwork although many of the buildings themselves are now in ruins.

Travel & Comfort

Getting from place to place in Mali by public transport is by no means straightforward or easy. From the capital city there is one, remarkably good, paved road that cuts across the country towards the east. This road is served by frequent real buses, much like those found in Europe. There are virtually no police or military checkpoints and one can cover large distances at a speed consistently over 50 km per hour. There is also one good paved road which branches off this main artery towards the South and the Burkina Faso border which also sees relatively frequent, speedy and comfortable buses. Elsewhere since there is nothing that even remotely deserves to be called a road, I suppose it is not surprising that nothing that deserves to be called a vehicle can be found. Unfortunately on several occasions we had to make journeys off the main route.

Routes of minor importance are only served by vehicles known as bachés - generally vans with three people in the cock-pit and between 16 and 30 people crammed onto wooden benches in the back. The human passengers are normally joined by several goats, sheep and chickens and multiple tons of cargo on the roof. The vans themselves are invariably in a laughable state, they break down frequently, pieces fall off, the merest hint of an uphill requires everybody to get out and crucially they lack any suspension whatsoever. Considering that the secondary roads are similar in appearance to lunar landscapes, strewn with rocks, deeply rutted and often looking as if somebody has actually tried to plough them, the lack of suspension can do great cruelty to the posterior. This means that it is of very great importance to get a good position. In general, corner seats must be avoided as they mean that one's leg space gets reduced to nothing, while seats towards the back tend to be even more exposed to the bumps of the road. It is also very important to have something stable to grip onto. We learnt this lesson the hard way.

The Baché lesson of Sibi

Travelling from Sibi, a small village on the main road into Guinea, to Bamako, a trip of only 50 km, we happened to arrive just as the van was leaving and squeezed our way onto the back of the Hi-Ace van. There were 3 wooden benches in the back, one along each side and one down the center. They seated about 28 people altogether. We were seated in the last two seats of the central bench which meant that in the absence of any wall, we had to grip onto the upholstery on the roof to prevent ourselves from being thrown on top of our fellow passengers with the frequent bumps in the road. Whenever a particularly large jolt occurred, our heads were smashed against the roof. At random times the back door would fly open and we'd have to cling on for dear life to prevent ourselves from falling out. Initially we merely saw this trip as an interesting experience and even found the violence of the jolts amusing, a little like a fairground ride.

About 1 hour into the ride, having travelled a mere 20 km, we were already starting to ache in several spots when we hit a particularly big crater in the road and the upholstery on the roof unexpectedly collapsed causing several enormous cockroaches to be showered onto Deirdre's head. She was initially unaware of exactly what had happened so I desperately tried to brush them off her before she realised the full horror of the situation. Unfortunately one particularly large fellow, the size of a well-fed mouse, evaded me and raced up her back and around her neck, an event which she couldn't help but notice. Pandemonium ensued and it was unbelievable fortune which kept both of us from falling out the gaping back doors in the panic. At least our fellow passengers were amused and distracted from the discomfort of the trip for a short while. When, shortly afterwards, we broke down we were still too stunned to mind. By the time we finally arrived in the replacement vehicle, 2 hours later, the psychological bruises occasioned by the rain of giant insects had been joined by several physical bruises.

Timbuktu - up the Niger

While travel to most parts of the country is tricky, the time and discomfort involved in reaching Timbuktu makes the baché rides look like luxury cruises. Firstly there are no roads within 200km of the town. In the dry season there are occasionally old, battered landrovers which travel along tracks and dried-up riverbeds from Mopti. This trip takes upwards of 2 days in appallingly cramped conditions and is reputed to be uniquely uncomfortable. The only other way to get there is by boat along the river Niger, although between January and July the water levels become too low for the passenger steamer to travel. During this period the only boats that ply the river are smaller cargo boats called pinasses. These are anything between 20 and 200 feet long and are covered by a sloping tarpaulin roof. They are exactly the same style of boat that has been shipping goods up and down the river for centuries, although many now have engines.

We decided that the experience of travelling down the river would be interesting, even though the unpredictable nature of the trip meant that it could end up taking as much as a week to complete. Thus when we arrived in Mopti, the major port on the Niger, we negotiated our passage on board a pinasse carrying millet to Timbuktu. The boat was perhaps 50 feet long, 12 feet wide and held a cargo of 60 tons. There was a crew of about 15 people and about the same number of paying passengers. Everybody slept on top of the heaped up bags of millet and thankfully, in contrast to several other boats that we passed, there was enough space for everybody to lie fully

stretched out. There was an area in the middle of the boat which had no cargo in it and here 3 women cooked rice and fish in a large cauldron over a log fire for the crew and passengers to eat.

Breakfast was rice cooked in fish-oil. Lunch was rice with a tiny piece of fish. Dinner was rice with a bit of sauce and a tiny piece of fish. As there was no moon at the time, we were constrained to travel exclusively by day, starting just before dawn and stopping just before dusk. In between times we'd travel without pause except for 1 or 2 quick stops to unload cargo and twice when we became caught on sandbanks. There was no toilet facilities on board so one either had to perch precariously on the boat's rim to pee over the side or else wait till nightfall for relief. We brought mineral water with us as the only other alternative was to drink the river water, as everybody else did despite its muddiness.

All the other passengers seemed to be merchants from various villages in the desert. They were the owners of the millet which they had bought in Mopti and were now taking home to sell. They were dressed in desert garb, with long robes and thick head wraps to protect them against the blowing sand of the sahara. Most of them wore swords which they'd hang from the boat's roof above their heads every night as they slept. They spent all their waking time brewing sahelian tea and spoke little french so communication between us was limited to sign language.

The crew consisted of a captain, 3 navigators, a bailer, the cooks and several labourers. The captain was a friendly fellow who spoke good French and was a part-time radio disc jockey. He did nothing on the trip but devour countless fish. After several days of being limited to the tiniest morsels of fish with our meals this habit of his became somewhat annoying. The navigators took turns standing on the roof and steering the boat away from sandbanks. The bailer had the job of bailing any water out of the boat with a small bucket which was neccessary quite frequently as the boat was dangerously overloaded and the water level was only a few centimetres beneath the boat's rim.

The labourers had the hardest job, loading and unloading the cargo and freeing the boat whenever it became stuck. The loading duties involved placing a 50 kilo sack of millet on the head and walking through water up to the neck, back and forward between boat and shore. The freeing was no less demanding. It was achieved by jamming a huge pole underneath the boat and attempting to physically lever the entire 60 ton weight off the sandbank while standing in water up to the neck. They got paid less than \$1 a day for this job.

Our trip which eventually lasted 4 days and 3 nights, happened to coincide with a period of Harmattan wind which blows from the sahara and envelopes everything in a murky dust. This has the fortunate effect of reducing the temperature although it makes visibility difficult and rendered the scenery along the river was uniformly bland. Twice we observed hippos in the distance and there were herons everywhere but other than that the only life to be seen was around the human settlements. All along the course of the river small hamlets were visible along with herds of cattle and nomadic pastoralists.

When we finally made it to the port of Timbuktu (15km from town) we were desperate to get to the relative luxury of the town. Frustratingly we had to wait a further 4 hours until we managed to negotiate a reasonable price for a taxi-ride to town - a good example of inflated prices due to scarcity. When we finally got there we were happily reunited with showers and especially the toilets which we had missed so much.

Hostility

In addition to the difficulties concerned with the infrastructure, climate and cultural strangeness, there are also serious problems caused by one's relative extravagant wealth when compared with the vast majority of the population. Children incessantly asking for money, traders demanding inflated prices, various scam artists and con men are things that one quickly comes to expect when travelling in the third world, however in Mali, anywhere where the economy depends on tourist dollars, these are of an unusual intensity and persistence.

On the first morning that we spent in Bamako, we got a speedy introduction to the hostility which we were to meet. We wandered into the central market area where a young man approached me saying "Hi my friend! Don't you recognise me? Remember yesterday from in front of the Post office?". Now this is a common type of opening gambit from hustlers who have learned that white tourists: a) are not always very good at distinguishing between black people and b) Many people, especially when they are strangers in a place, feel awkward about contradicting such a claim especially when delivered in a friendly manner.

However, I had encountered such approaches many times before in Dakar and what's more since I had just arrived I knew that he couldn't be telling the truth. So I replied by telling him he was mistaken. When he persisted I said "You're lying buddy, get lost" assuming that he wouldn't waste any more time on me once he realised that I wasn't going to be taken in by his ploy. Instead I was shocked to find that he launched into an unrestrained torrent of abuse in French and proceeded to follow me for five minutes calling me a "fucking racist scum Front Nationale voter". I completely ignored him yet he persisted and when he heard me speaking English to Deirdre he switched to English and for the next 10 minutes proceeded to call me a "motherfucking American shit fucker" and other such charming names until I sought refuge in a shop. Afterwards I came to the conclusion, having consulted others, that he was trying to get me distracted enough to pick a pocket. This motivation served to explain his extraordinary hostility, nevertheless the experience was a tad unsettling.

Guides

We soon got very accustomed to dealing with hostile young men, although thankfully we didn't encounter any more outbursts of bilingual bile. Much of the unpleasantness came from 'guides' - young men depending on tourists for their living who were very often difficult to deter since they would meet polite refusals with increased aggression, hinted suggestions of racism, misinformation about one's intended course of action or other responses intended to pressurise the prospective client into employing them. In the most popular tourist spots, it occasionally seemed like the whole town was conspiring to put pressure on one to part with one's luche. Mopti, Mali's tourist capital, and Timbuktu were the worst examples of this. Both are inhabited by a vast army of guides relentlessly trying to sell camel rides, Tuareg jewellery, carvings and whatever else a tourist might want. Nevertheless the tourist sites in Mali are relatively few and despite the intensity of the attention, it is very localised to a few places.

However, even away from the guides there are many perils for the tourist to deal with. Short-changing is common and requires relentless attention, although this is a worse problem for the local poor who frequently lack the mental arithmetic ability to calculate when they are being

cheated. Any purchase, however minor, requires vigorous haggling. It is fairly frequent that merchants will attempt to gain the upper hand in dealings by showing contempt or aggressiveness towards the prospective customer. Therefore financial transactions are particularly liable to sap one's strength and require unflinching mental and moral energy.

The police, of course, also get in on the act by trying to get tourists to 'register' and pay a small fee in each town that they visit. Until fairly recently Mali was a paranoid, authoritarian, single-party state which considered all tourists as security threats who should be obliged to register their presence with the police wherever they went. Although the quest for tourist dollars in the new world order has caused this requirement to be dropped, this change in the law obviously wasn't very popular with the police who have numerous 'helpers' who still try to entice tourists to register in the commisariats of the various towns.

Scarcity

Above and beyond all of the other problems in Mali, the scarcity of goods was the dominant difficulty for us. Often, especially in remote areas, there is a very limited range of food available. The market in Timbuktu is a particularly extreme example of this. The colourful array of fruits, vegetables and spices normally seen in West African markets is absent. A few shrivelled tomatoes and juiceless oranges are a poor substitute. This scarcity is merely a fact of life to most Malians, many of whom eat little other than rice, yet for us it was difficult to put up with, especially when much of the food was impregnated with sand as was the case in the desert regions. Furthermore after a while staying in places without electricity or running water one starts to miss these 'luxuries' somewhat.

During the month that we spent in Mali, the various difficulties meant that it seemed to be an ordeal rather than a pleasure and I found myself often looking forward to getting out of the desert. It was only after we had moved on to the relatively fecund regions further South that I really began to appreciate the richness of the experience.

Burkina Faso - Big men and Little people

I. GETTING THERE

By the time we had completed our month in Mali, the 'hot season' had started in full. Apparently we had arrived during the 'cold season' when daily temperatures rarely go over 45 °C. Therefore it was with a certain eagerness that we embarked on our trip Southwards towards the coast and the cool, cool sea. However, the landlocked sahelian state of Burkina Faso lay in our way. Furthermore, we needed to acquire visas for the coastal states before moving on and these could only be had in the capital, Ouagadougou, so we decided to head directly for there from where we were, Mopti, and pass through the back roads of the 'Dogon country' - the tribal lands of the Dogon people - on the way.

The first leg of this trip was, by this stage, run of the mill, a 2 hour ride in a peugeot 504 with 10 people crammed in, across a 80km long appalling track from Mopti to Bandiagara. At this stage the transport infrastructure deteriorates and so the next 20 kilometres were achieved on a motorbike, or more accurately on a bicycle with a motor. These 50cc Peugeots are the most basic motorised vehicles known to man. They have no gears and are furnished with pedals for surmounting uphill sections which the engine can't manage. We rented 2 of these machines plus one driver (who gave Deirdre a lift as she sat on the back carrier with her backpack on her back) and one porter (who sat on the back of my bike with my backpack on his back). The road was impassible by cars due to frequent boulder-strewn stretches but manageable by a bike, although I'd say that the youth on the back of my bike had a sore bum by the time we got to Dguiguibumbo.

From Djuiguibumbo the road deteriorates, so the next 20km or so (including a few detours to visit villages, one of which we slept in) had to be completed on foot. While Deirdre managed to get somebody to carry much of her baggage much of the way, I was unfortunately obliged to carry all my belongings over the entire length of the walk, which happened to include stretches of climbing up and down cliffs, several hundred metres high, in the full heat of the midday sun. I can only assume that a passing witch doctor turned me into a donkey for a short time since otherwise I would have collapsed far before the end of the walk.

Having crossed the cliffs we arrived at the village of Kaini Kombelé where the road restarts. We had almost clinched a deal to rent a donkey and cart to take us to the next town when luckily a four wheel drive pickup truck happened to go by and we paid for transport 15km on to Bankass in the open back area, through a veritable blizzard of dust which necessitated keeping one's eyes shut for the entire trip. From Bankass we got lucky again, after hitching for only a couple of hours, a vehicle passed by and we paid for a lift to the last big town before the border, Koro, this time in the comfortable interior of a plush NGO owned four wheel drive.

In Koro our luck ran out, arriving 20 minutes after the only transport of the day left towards Burkina, for once on time. Thus we had to wait another 26 hours for the next one, passing the night in a dingy, battered campement with a swarm of depressed guides hanging around outside, in the forlorn hope of getting some business from the extremely infrequent tourists passing

through. The 26 hours passed very slowly - drinking tea with the guides and watching them torture their captive monkey to ease the boredom. When the 'bus' did arrive, it turned out to be a lorry with a few benches in the back, at least it did leave only a few hours late.

From Koro it took perhaps 2 hours to reach the border which we passed through surprisingly swiftly and were finally into Burkina! After the border, the tortuous road slightly improves although progress was still extremely slow until we reached the first major Burkinabè town, Ouahigouya, the fourth town in the country. Coming into town in the early evening at around 8pm it appeared like a vision of civilisation to us. The electricity danced along the wires, sparkled from the street lights, sang out from the stereos in a rhapsody to development. It takes a visit to Mali to be able to appreciate the sublime beauty of street lights. The other sight which warmed our hearts was the collection of open-air bars along the main street, filled with enthusiastic drinkers. The overwhelmingly muslim Maliens and Senegalese had nothing of a drinking culture and this was our first sight of popular bars since leaving Ireland almost 4 months before. Since it was already late, and we were thirsty, we decided to stay the night here and toasted the enlightened pagans of Burkina with a round of beers at 45 cents a pint.

II. TRADITIONAL LIVING

In reality Burkina Faso is poorer than Mali. In terms of GNP per habitant, it is the 9th poorest country in the world. Most of the bottom 8 are disaster sites rather than countries. Liberia, Sierra Leone, Ethiopia and Somalia are not good countries to have immediately beneath you in the global wealth league. However, the impression of development, when compared to Mali, is sustained as long as one remains in one of the 5 big towns. They are less squalid, more spacious, shadier, better lit and altogether more agreeable than the large towns of Mali. The markets are more bountiful, the street food more exotic. Luxuries like frozen yoghurt, avocado salad, and roasted pork are widely available on the streets. Cinemas are numerous, large and well attended, the open air bars are often full of people. Beer, accomodation and luxury foods are cheaper and easier to find. In short everyday living is relatively comfortable, although the temperatures remain punishing.

Starting from Ouahigouya in the North, we travelled to the capital Ouagadougou in the centre, spent about a week there, continued to Bobo Dioulasso, the second city, where we based ourselves for a few weeks, rented motorbikes and made several trips to surrounding areas. Finally we took a week long trip on a motorbike around the SouthWest, visiting Banfora, Gaoua, and many smaller places. In general, the towns contain a remarkable lack of 'sights'. Monuments, religious buildings, museums, palaces and brash 'presige' modern buildings, all of which provide a framework for a tourist's day, are notably absent. Neither islam nor christianity managed to become very widely believed here, doubtless why there is only one famous religious monument in the country (the mosque in Bobo, a whitewashed mudbrick building, pimped with the typical protruding sahelian wooden scaffolding, which gives the gently curving prayer tower an uncanny resemblance to a studded sex-toy). The French mostly accounted for the historical buildings. During the kind introduction of their 'protectorship' in the 1890's, all of the palaces, large buildings, forts and most of the towns were burnt down and destroyed. Poverty and lack of resources has limited the number of monumental buildings built since.

The countryside too, is somewhat colourless. The land is mainly flat and dry, sparsely covered with desert bushes and trees. The Southwest which is Burkina's hilliest, lushest area would be considered a gently rolling desert plain in Ireland. Nevertheless around water-sources there are often thick, tropical forests. Few of the water-sources run all year round, those that do are highly valued, especially those that allow swimming. We were there at the peak of the hot dry season there and well understood this importance since the heat and humidity are practically unbearable. The swimming holes were always crowded with bathers and many people would jump in fully clothed, to remain cooler a little longer once they got out. Apart from these natural swimming holes, the natural attractions of the countryside are limited to a few lakes full of hippos and the odd rock-formation or seasonal waterfall.

It is fortunate, therefore, that there is much of interest to observe in the people who live there. Signs of extremely different cultural practices are immediately evident. Ceremonial face-scarring is common. Even suit-wearing businessmen in Ouagadougou have often got elaborate patterns incised on their cheeks. These are the most visible bits of the various animist religious systems which abound. Many towns and villages have sacred spots around them. These could be simple features like a small hill or a grove of trees, or something more elaborate like a bat-filled cave. There are many sacred spots specially for sacrifices and the more important ones have pools of enormous sacred catfish or crocodiles to whom the sacrifice is fed. These can attract people from some distance around. We chanced to observe a chicken sacrifice at the home of Bobo's sacred catfish. It took place among a grove of trees around a deep pool, surrounded by steep cliffs. The ground around site was thick with feathers, blood, mud and chickenshit, as an antidote to the spectacular beauty of the place. The chicken's throat was cut over an altar while the supplicant chanted various things. The chicken was then allowed to tire itself out struggling about headless before it was carved open and its innards extracted. These were then fed to the catfish in the nearby pool, and the supplicant left with the rest of the chicken for his tea (the symbolism of the sacrifice being more important than the chicken). Since we had no chicken with us and were unwilling to effect a purchase from the resident chicken-hawker, we were luckily allowed to sacrifice a stale loaf of bread that we happened to have with us, which was just as good at enticing the hideous catfish, whose sacredness has protected them from fishermen and allowed them to grow to monstrous proportions, out of the murky depths of the pool.

Dogonia

These types of traditional beliefs and practices exist almost everywhere in Burkina, even in the sophisticated cities. However this animist culture is most pervasive in the remotest areas where people, often occupying the most marginal lands, have retained ways of living largely unaffected by the homogenising effects of a modern capitalist economy. The Dogon country, which is actually mostly in Mali, is one of the best known traditional people in Africa. Their villages are mostly clustered along a long escarpment, a 50 km long series of high cliffs. Many villages are made up of two parts, one on the plain, the other built into caves on the cliff, often making use of old 'pygmy' dwellings, remnants of a people who the Dogon annihilated when they arrived at the escarpment. These cliff-villages are mostly abandoned now, in these peaceful times the plains above and beneath the cliffs are more convenient and almost everybody lives there. The cliff part is now mainly used for sacrificial and spiritual matters. We saw a large collection of monkey skulls stuck to the cliff-face with mud in one of the villages, and also the bodies of a few cats,

dangling here and there from peoples houses. The old dwellings are tiny, 2 to 5 feet high, built into scars in the cliffs and sometimes 100's of feet above the plain so that it remains a puzzle how they got up there.

For several centuries the Dogon, protected by their marginality, inaccessibility and natural defence of the escarpment, have maintained an intricate individual culture, seemingly little affected by the more powerful muslim kingdoms along the Niger river a little way north, who periodically launched jihads to convert these heathen savages. The invading French colonial powers finally managed to 'pacify' the Dogon in 1920, but thereafter almost completely ignored this tiny, isolated, resourceless, semi-desert patch of the vast territory of French West Africa. While their distinctive civilisation was able to withstand these military onslaughts, modern tourism is proving to be much more powerful than any invading army, as a force for change. The Dogon villages are picturesque beyond belief, carvings and sculptures performing complex religious functions abound in the villages, the inhabitants perform elaborate dances and ceremonies wearing fabulous painted masks, in short they are everything that a tourist looking for the real Africa could want, a real living, breathing, dancing drumming primitive tribe! Like everybody else in the region, they are desperately short of cash and so are quite willing to part with pieces of their culture, such as their carved 'anti-witchcraft' doors, in exchange for some filthy lucre. Tour groups are bussed into some villages to watch the entire villages perform ritual masked dances that were formerly performed only once every 60 years. Unless something changes soon, the Dogon's cherished culture could soon become pure pastiche.

Lobonia

The Lobi country in a remote corner of SouthWestern Burkina is another area where people have retained traditional ways of living. Again it is the region's isolation - the main town is 200km from the nearest surfaced road - which has insulated the distinctive culture. Since public transport is very scarce in the area, we travelled there on a rented motorbike, an 80cc Yamaha moped which was totally unsuited to the dirt tracks dotted with patches of deep sand and gravel. Thankfully we managed to avoid crashing, despite a large number of skids and slides, since we were unable to locate any helmets after trying for a week.

The first Lobi village we got to was Loropeni, the site of one of sub-saharan Africa's only surviving ancient stone remains, a massive structure with walls almost intact to 20 feet high and 100's of feet long. The huge rectangular building, simply sits, 3km out of town, in the middle of the bush, in an area of thinly wooded savannah lands with tall trees growing everywhere in what was once the interior. In another sign of the lack of resources devoted to uncovering Africa's past, it seems that nobody has the faintest idea of who, when or how this structure got there. There do not appear to have been any excavations or digs on the site and the only evidence that anybody knows its there is a small signpost about 1km away on the main track.

After Loropeni, we continued North, along tiny tracks to the Gan village of Obiré, 8km away. Since it happened to be market day in Loropeni, there was a constant stream of women walking along the track with massive burdens of produce on their heads to be sold in the market. Occasionally a man on a bicycle or motorbike would saunter past. A local man had explained to us that this division of labour, whereby the women do all the hard physical stuff, was desired by the women, to keep the men fresh for sex. When we got to the village, it was almost deserted, save for a group of young men who agreed to show us around.

The people in the village are Gan (the Lobi country is occupied by some 13 ethnic groups, the Lobi being the most numerous) and live in polygamous compound groups. A man and his wives live around a courtyard together. The man has a rectangular hut while each of his wives has their own circular house, with cute overhanging porches over the door. All the houses are made of mudbrick and thatch. Unfortunately the king, who was I think the 27th since the tribe's arrival in the area, was not at home, but we did get to see the tombs of most of the previous 26, consisting of small huts with a statue of the king within. The only sign of external influence was a German development agency's concrete building housing a pump and a rice dehusking machine.

After this small incursion into the Gan country, we continued 40km East to Gaoua, the largest town in the area, blessed with its own electricity supply. Having travelled about 500km along dusty tracks in the last 4 days, sleeping in mosquito-ridden, sauna-like huts, we were relishing the prospect of a room with running water and a fan. We were disappointed to find that the taps in our rented hotel room ran dry but at least the fan worked. Then it started to rain, a vast tropical downpour, and the lights went out. 3 days later when we left Gaoua, the power had not returned. For those powerless nights, we had to either sleep outdoors, mosquito feed, or lie awake indoors trying to break the world sweating record. To make up for our discomfort, we were fortunate that Gaoua is famed for its cabarets, bars where home-brewed millet beer is made and served, and the drinkers engage in frequent bouts of traditional music and dance, played on balafons and calabash drums. We drowned our sorrows, and made a large collection of friends whose sorrows we also drowned, which was fine since the millet beer came in gallon portions, at the royal price of 25 cents per gallon.

The other place that we visited in the Lobi country was Doudou, a traditional Lobi village some 40km Southeast of Loropeni. Physically this was quite different from the Gan village since the Lobi, who only introduced the technology of clothes reluctantly under French colonial pressure, are only just introducing mudbrick building techniques and still mostly construct their large, wierd, rectangular houses out of large slabs of mud. When we pulled up on our bike, we were immediately surrounded by about 20 boys between the ages of 6 and 26, many ragged and barefoot. This entire group then proceeded to show us around the village and its surrounds, including a tour of the sacred hill. The people live in polygamous groups like the Gan, and indeed a nearby village is famed as housing a man with 27 wives. We saw women panning for gold, young men hunting for game with home-made rifles ressembling colonial era European ones, and were shown the deserted houses where white men, who had come in search of gold, had formerly lived. As we were about to leave, the chief announced that since we had seen the sacred hill, a very dangerous act for outsiders, he would have to carry out a sacrifice to appease the spirits for our safety. Therefore he needed \$5 to buy a chicken or else we would surely crash, breaking arms and legs, on the way back. After some haggling \$2 sufficed to lift the curse and we departed with the spirits on our side.

III. THE LAND OF THE NGO

It would be very easy to think of oneself as a great explorer when visiting these remote villages and people, far from the beaten track, was it not for one thing. Wherever you are, no matter how tiny, poor remote or ugly, there is bound to be a development worker close by. Burkina and Mali are the domain of the NGO. A vast proportion of the motorised vehicles, especially the flashy

new 4 wheel drives have the logos of a development organisation emblazoned on the doors. The most numerous are the big international, UN agencies: the WHO, WFP, UNDP and UNICEF each seem to have a huge fleet of Land cruisers, but there are also many others which are connected with particular countries, religious institutions, or private groups. If you are in a small village and you hear the sound of a car, you can bet that its a shiny new 4 wheel drive and you can double your bet that it belongs to some development group.

While it is the big international agencies which own the majority of vehicles, they mostly employ local labour and it is the American peace corp volunteers who are by far the most numerous foreign aid workers. They are volunteers who spend 2 years as development workers, normally alone in small remote villages. They are almost all college graduates but rarely have any particular development qualification. They are given a three month training course before going out into the field, to work on the health, education or small business programme. They are paid a living allowance of \$200 per month and receive additional travel allowances and a bonus upon completion of the programme.

Whenever we thought we were as far as possible from the beaten track, we'd suddenly come across a fresh-faced youngster from Ohio or Wisconsin; in Sibi's marketplace, in the back of a pickup on the way to Djenné, on a footpath between two Dogon villages, in a tiny Lobi village, as well as in bigger places. In general they were friendly to us, although it sometimes required some persistence to get into conversation with them, since they tend to feel differentiated and even superior to tourists as they, after all, are members of the community. This was no problem since us independent backpacking tourists tend to look down on them since we have to survive on our own without the help of a US government agency.

Curiously many of them appeared to be somewhat disillusioned with what they were doing. They often seemed disappointed that they didn't feel to be more 'part of the community' and that, despite the length of their stay and their immersion in the life of the people, they were still treated as a rich foreigner by some people. Some also expressed the opinion that their work was of limited usefulness to the people that they were living among and indeed a random straw poll that we conducted would seem to add weight to this impression. On many occasions we asked locals what the peace corp volunteers were doing in their villages, but on only one occasion did we receive a reply which reflected the aims of their program, regarding a nurse in a Lobi village. Other people either didn't know or responded that they thought that they were either here to learn the language or to do some type of research.

Few of the volunteers have any specialist skills and considering the fact that the streets of all the big towns are full of educated young Burkinabè, who have been forced to leave their villages due to lack of work, working as itinerant salespeople for a fraction of the \$200 that the volunteers are paid, one gets the impression that this type of development program is tackling symptoms rather than causes. Furthermore, most of the volunteers we met were working on developing small businesses, including some who were ostensibly engaged in other programmes, which involved anything from setting up eco-tourism schemes to convincing shopkeepers to put up coke signs outside their shops. Although many of the volunteers were obviously somewhat critical of American society, it inevitably forms the basis for their conception of a 'normally' functioning economy and normal social relations. Considering that capitalist relations are alien to many of these village societies, which contain complex hierarchies combined with broad systems of communal obligations, these volunteers could be seen as teaching capitalism, mopping up the few corners of the world where the capitalist value system is not seen as normal. Memorably one

volunteer complained to us about the villagers where she was staying by saying: "it's not true that people have a great sense of community here. Just try starting projects, as soon as somebody tries to get ahead, everybody gangs up to pull them back." Apparently she couldn't see the contradiction of her words.

IV. THE BIG MAN

Burkina's president, Blaise Compaore, is perhaps West Africa's least convincing democratic ruler. He attained power by means of the assassination of his predecessor Thomas Sankara, who remains to this day widely esteemed as a popular icon across the whole region. Sankara was a young, radical army officer who gained power in 1983 after a series of coups. He notably played guitar, rejected IMF policies, abolished rents and used a Renault 4 as his state car. Stickers of his face, against a red, green and gold background, are common alongside the images of reggae stars and religious sayings on the dashboards of cars and the fuel tanks of motorbikes. Compaore, who was not exactly popular over his method of attaining power, ruled as military dictator from 1987 until 91 when he was elected president, unopposed, on a turnout of 25%. This has largely remained the *modus operandi* since, a democracy which the dictator just can't lose since he gets to make up the rules.

Since Mobutu's demise, and Zaire's disintegration in the face of the onslaught of jackals attempting to grab a piece of the lucrative racket that he had going, Compaore is a serious contender for the biggest thieving autocrat of a ruler on the continent. He supported the wars of Charles Taylor in Liberia, Foday Sankoh's RUF in Sierra Leone and Jonas Savimbi's UNITA in Angola, by channeling arms to them and providing a transit point for the sale of their diamonds. In return for this service he personally got to keep the profits from this embargo breaking trade. Since Burkina lacks natural resources and riches, he was forced to turn to outside for opportunities to adequately feather his nest. While we were in Ouagadougou, the UN released a report condemning his part in the arms for diamonds trade with UNITA. Nevertheless, his uncomplaining adherence to IMF and World Bank 'advice', means that the international bodies and the imperial states are unlikely to turn against him, despite his international profiteering and domestic autocracy, especially when the alternative could well be some attempt at returning to Sankara's independent nationalism.

Compaore is one of Africa's big men, autocratic and self-important, authoritarian and brutal. While we were in Burkina, one of the regular political clashes occurred between the president and practically the entirety of society, over the 'Zongo affair'. In 1998, the president's brother suspected his chauffeur, Davide Ouédraogo, of stealing from him. This was obviously an affront to his status as a 'big-man' by blood links and therefore he naturally got the president's security service to torture the insolent chauffeur to death. Norbert Zongo, editor of 'Indépendante newspaper', started to investigate the case when the tortured body was found. A few months later, in December 1998, Zongo and 3 of his associates suffered a horrendous car accident, during which their car went up in flames. However, forensic evidence later showed that the stationary car had been deliberately burned with the dead bodies already in it. This affair has provided a focus for a broad-based protest movement, comprising trade-unions, human rights organisations and the political parties which have not been completely co-opted by Compaoré. Since 1998,

there have been periodic waves of strikes, demonstrations and protests demanding independent investigations of the killings, an end to impunity, and sweeping political change.

Over the month that we spent in Burkina, there were at least 2 protests organised by the 'too much is too much' collective about this Zongo affair, then on April 10th, the day after we left the country, the issue burst into flames again. The unions called a general strike, widely observed across the country and there were various demonstrations, often dispersed by the batons of the security services. In response the big-man, obviously outraged by the cheek of his subjects, arrested the entire opposition leadership and announced the indefinite closure of the country's only university and all of its secondary schools. "Due to the population's disgraceful misbehavior in protesting and going on strike, all education privileges have been withdrawn until I feel that the lesson has been learned."

In such an autocratic, top-down arrangement of power, the big-man syndrome is all pervasive. The rigid hierarchy inherent in such an organisation means that every official is both tyrant and slave. Terrified of the absolute power of his superiors, contemptuous and tyrannical of those beneath, big-men are everywhere. The majority of people are, of course, at the very bottom of this heap, powerless and neglected. As tourists, we had an ambiguous place in the order, sometimes having high status and at other times none.

V. CULTURE WEEK

We purposely timed our stay in Bobo-Dioulasso to coincide with the celebration of Burkina's national culture week. This is a biennial festival of national and regional dance, music crafts and culture, organised by the government and unusual in this, since most West African festivals are concerned with local or ethnic traditional groups and are only barely connected to the modern nation-states. The stamp of the 'big-man' Burkina state is firmly imprinted on the organisation of this festival.

We arrived in the town over a week before the festival was due to start. It took us several days of asking people to learn the exact date of its commencement, several more days to learn the location and, when we showed up at the prescribed time and place, we were turned away. It turned out that the opening ceremony was reserved for dignitaries, so we had to be content with catching a few glimpses of the president and his friends receiving praise songs and dances live on national television. The next day, when we arrived at the venue, we were again turned away on the grounds that it wasn't open to the public, but were assured it would be at 10 am the following morning.

Despite the fact that we were beginning to doubt the festival organisers' commitment to their public, we dutifully made our way to the venue well in time for the scheduled opening. There was already a large crowd of several thousand people milling about in front of the railings of the enclosure. 10 o'clock came and went, the sun grew hotter and hotter in the shadeless wasteland between the railings and the main road and the gates remained closed. Suddenly, inexplicably, the whole crowd seemed to rush towards a single point on the railings, forming a rough queue in front of one particular spot, a queue which mushroomed dramatically towards the front as people struggled to get at the spot. It is my experience that, when in strange parts when one is waiting for something with a crowd of people, when one does not understand how things work, if everybody suddenly starts running in one direction, then you should also run as fast as possible

that same way. After a few minutes wrestling with competitors, we gained a decent place in the queue, perhaps 40 feet from the railings.

The queue was at this stage 100 feet long and 6 or 7 people wide at the front, thinning to 2 or 3 people wide where we were. We remained in this situation for some time, in a subdued, slow, wrestling war of attrition with our neighbours, everybody constantly jostling and squirming to achieve a better position, more central and further forward. In Bobo late March is the hottest time of the year, the closeness of the crowd and the exposure of the terrain meant that we had to drink several litres of cold water to stay alive, bought from the numerous itinerant traders who were doing a roaring trade. As the minutes passed, the discipline of the queue started to ebb. Bunches of people, mostly young men, started hanging around the fringes at the front of the line and even barging into people's places.

We soon learned of the importance of a central position in the queue when, after we had baked for 20 minutes, without advancing at all, a group of 6 riot police launched a surprise attack on the crowd, apparently in an attempt to convince us to stand in an orderly single-file and to dissuade people from lurking on the edges of the queue. They simply waded into the crowd, swinging their long truncheons indiscriminately, despite the large number of women and small children present. The attack caused all those on the fringes to flee in panic and created a neat single-file line, except, since they had attacked from one side only, the encroachers remained on the other side and were joined by those fleeing the truncheons. Fortunately, during the melee which followed the onslaught, we managed to strengthen our position and thus avoid the blows. The next hour passed slowly. Every 10 minutes or so the police would launch attacks, always from the same side of the queue, and clear any people hanging about on the fringes on that side. The temperature continued to rise and the water hawkers kept up a brisk trade. All the while, the same person, with an unmistakable hat, was agonisingly visible at the very front of the queue - we had not moved at all. One of the policemen assured us that it would eventually open at 11.

Towards 11:30, something finally happened. A cavalcade of a dozen shiny mercedes and 4 wheel drives pulled up. The police quickly batonned the crowd away from the entrance and opened the gates. A procession of dignitaries in ceremonial dress, some military, some traditional, emerged from the cars and entered the gates. The gates were closed once more. Just then, the police cunningly mounted and assault from the other, hitherto unattacked, side of the queue, causing a mass flight of people. Some 20 minutes later, the dignitaries emerged, shook hands with each other, got into their various cars and drove off. Almost immediately afterwards we noticed that the hat had disappeared from the front of the queue, tickets were now on sale! Apparently we had been waiting all this time for these big-men, several ministers and a mayor, to arrive. They, being very important, had to be shown the venue without the annoying presence of the rabble. They had been due to show up a few hours earlier, but since they're the biggest men around - they'll show up whenever they damn feel like it, and everyone better be happy when they do.

By this time, when the tickets went on sale, the queue had been batonned into a very long, single-file line. As we slowly advanced, smaller queues started to appear at various spots along the railings, formed by sudden rushes of bunches of people who had been towards the back of the original line. We could discern no apparent reason for these sudden sproutings of smaller queues, but we learned later that ticket-sellers had set up shop at several different spots along the railings. It was too heartbreaking to try our luck in any of these smaller queues since we had put so much time, effort and especially sweat into hanging onto our spot. Almost as soon as the

tickets were on sale, touts started to sell the 15 cent tickets for 25 cents to people at the back of the queue. By 12:30 we had struggled to the front and bought our tickets. Finally, after waiting for 3 hours, we were admitted by the group of policemen through the gates and into the festival itself.

The festival area was a large, rectangular field, perhaps 80 metres squared, with various stands and booths scattered around it. The stalls contained displays by 'Burkina Aluminium', 'Frytex cooking oil' and various other companies, touting their wares to the public. The main popular attraction was a small number of 'throw the hoop over the prize' stalls, with thick crowds gathered around them. After investigating the whole area, we came to the inescapable conclusion that there was no music or dance and that the only culture available was from the souvenir stalls whose owners were very keen for us to view their wares. Upon enquiring from some people, we learned that there was a programme, containing details of the music and dance component of the festival. We managed to secure one of these after much searching and learned that the music and dance displays were on in a totally different place, and only on in the evenings. We had sweated in vain.

We eventually did get to see about 10 displays which were entertaining, although relatively high prices meant that the audiences were small, with a massive over representation of foreigners. Overall the festival had little to do with the public, being directed towards a small number of dignitaries and tourists. The one noticeable effect on the Bobo streets was the unusually large number of hustlers prowling around, attracted by the possibility of tourist cash, and made angry and aggressive by the lack of business due to the small number of tourists compared to hustlers.

VI. SINDOU'S LITTLE BIG MAN

After leaving Bobo, we had one more serious brush with the Burkina state machinery, in the person of the police-chief of Sindou, a small town in the extreme Southwest of the country, with the country's most famous rock formation nearby. As soon as we arrived in town on our rented motorbike, he spotted us, blew his whistle and ordered us to come over to him. He appeared very angry that we hadn't automatically come to report to him and started requesting various documents relating to the bike. He laughed contemptuously when we showed the rental receipt; declared the bike impounded and made us fill out 'ethnographic profile' reports which he claimed was compulsory for all passing through his town. For the next half hour or so he kept telling us how much trouble we were in, and interspersed these comments with lewd asides to an underling about Deirdre, based on the fact that we had both written 'single' as our marital status on the cards. "Funny the way a single woman is travelling around with a single man isn't it? Ha Ha Ha". As we pleaded for our bike back, this leering, lewd man continued to provoke us, knowing that we were utterly powerless to do anything about it. Eventually we persuaded him to give us the bike in return for my passport, so that we could go and see the rock formations. This was lucky since Deirdre was just on the point of getting us arrested by verbally or even physically attacking him. As we sped off to the rocks, she couldn't restrain herself from unleashing a volley of curses at him. Thankfully they were in Irish and while he knew she was insulting him, not knowing what she was saying, he couldn't really arrest us.

When I returned a couple of hours later to retrieve the passport, I came alone, since both myself and Deirdre agreed that there seemed to be a low level of tolerance between her and this cop. The

cop was no longer at his desk, he had moved outside, onto a hammock under a mango tree, by the village's central roundabout. Moustachioed, fat, sipping a beer, with 2 young men at his side to bring him beer from the bar and carry him mangoes as they fell from the tree, he was the big man in a small town. Sindou is a very small, quiet town. In the 2 or 3 hours that I spent beside its central roundabout, perhaps 1 motorised vehicle passed and 20 cyclists. On several occasions the passing cyclists were stopped and asked to produce various papers, some were detained for up to 20 minutes and continued on their way with lighter pockets. At various intervals, people would arrive with goods for the chief; beer, a chicken, fruit. All the while, for a couple of hours, I pleaded with him that I couldn't afford the fine he was demanding. He wanted \$7.50, we only had \$4. He refused to budge and so we had stalemate. We were 60km of quiet dirt track from our beds so we simply could not leave the bike. He showed me his book of fines to demonstrate his seriousness. The book was full of records of people being fined \$7.50 for cycling the wrong way around the roundabout. The roundabout in question is little more than a pole stuck into the middle of the junction of two dirt tracks with almost no traffic. This big-man seemed to have an easy life, lying on the hammock scratching his belly, clients waiting on him hand and foot, while he provides for his old age by extorting cash on the basis of a spurious traffic structure.

Eventually I tried a very weak bluff, saying to him "okay, you can keep the bike, I'm going to ring the tourism ministry to tell them to come to collect the bike that I rented from them", and stormed off down the road. 5 minutes later I returned with my tail between my legs after discovering that there was no telephone in the village. Yet upon my return a miraculous change had overcome the chief. Whereas before he had been combative, contemptuous and provoking, now he seemed jocular and friendly. It quickly became apparent that my bike was free to go. "It was just to warn you", he explained, "not to trust these charlatans who rent motorbikes without the proper papers. It wasn't because I wanted to get money, oh no. In any case I wouldn't like to trouble the minister for tourism about it." Before I was finally released I was obliged to give my address to his son so he could come and visit me, then he waved me goodbye as if I was his best friend. Obviously the minister for tourism is a bigger man than the chief, the mere mention of his department was enough to reverse the situation.

The Cote de Khaki

I ROADBLOCKS - THE BENEFITS OF MASS PRODUCTION

The first thing that you notice after crossing the border from Burkina into the Cote D'Ivoire is the roadblock straight in front of you. It is of a style, solidity and professionalism that puts the efforts of the Burkina police to shame. Indeed not even in the war-torn Casamance region of Senegal had we seen such an impressive barrier. Most roadblocks in this part of the world consist of a couple of empty oil drums taking up half the road or, at worst, a board studded with bent old rusty nails lying on the tarmac; roadblocks that are effective in a psychological sense rather than physical. This was altogether a different story.

The bulk of the barrier consisted of a thick jumble of scrap metal. Car parts, twisted railings, battered containers, all bolstered by blocks of rubble. A small section in the middle of the road was clear, roughly wide enough to allow a bus to pass through. This gap was protected by an ingenious device which, although obviously based on the nail-studded plank, bore the same relation to that primitive item as a cannon does to a catapult. The base of this iron marvel was flat, 6 inches wide and perhaps 8 feet long, with dozens of metal spikes, each several inches long, welded to it. This base was mounted, about an inch above the ground, on 4 small rubber wheels, allowing it to be easily wheeled away from the gap to allow vehicles to pass through. At one end of the base, a hinged handle, four feet long with a molded plastic handgrip on one end, allowed the attendant soldier to move the barrier without having to stoop or otherwise inconvenience himself in the slightest. This was obviously a country where road blocking is taken very seriously indeed.

Within 100 metres of the border there were no less than 5 separate barriers, each equally impressive in terms of solidity and technological innovation. Although they each sported signs claiming to be operated by different authorities: police, gendarmes, customs, forestry police and national police, in fact the gentlemen manning them all looked to be wearing suspiciously similar uniforms, not unlike the khaki and camouflage outfit that is traditionally associated with the humble soldier. However, despite some threatening toting of machine-guns, we passed through these barriers without too much trouble; our driver exchanged a few words with the soldiers, while the 4 passengers remained unperturbed in the car. Overall these 5 roadblocks held us up for barely 20 minutes and we sped on towards Ouangaladougou, the first town in Cote D'Ivoire.

There we had to change vehicles, since the Peugeot 504 which we were in was returning to Bobo-Dioulasso in Burkina. We quickly found a minivan which was continuing to our destination, Bouake, Cote D'Ivoire's second city. It was still before noon and we had completed almost half of our trip, including the potentially difficult border-crossing, in little over 2 hours and would certainly have completed the remaining distance of good-quality, hard-surfaced road well before sundown, had it not been for the incessant roadblocks which infested the road like a plague. Every town of any size had a roadblock on entry and one on exit. In addition, there were roadblocks at random intervals in between towns. Each one was manned by a half-dozen soldiers or so

and necessitated lengthy delays of anything from 10 minutes to one hour, before the 'spikes-on-wheels' were rolled out of the way and we were allowed to pass.

The drill went something like this. Soldier waves us to halt. Soldier leisurely saunters up to van several minutes later and asks everybody to show him their identity papers. Soldier receives papers from the 20 occupants of the van, inspects them, hands about 15 back and puts the other 5 in his pocket. Soldier walks off. The 5 unlucky people then follow the soldier to his post and haggle over the size of 'present' which they will have to cough up to get their papers back. Meanwhile everybody else gets out of the van and hangs around by the roadside, complaining bitterly about the rapacity of the soldiers. After a variable period of time the unfortunate passengers return, having paid about \$2 each, and we carry on.

This routine had a number of variations. On one occasion a soldier took the papers relating to the vehicle instead of individuals' papers. This seemed to have been particularly expensive since the driver remained in heated argument for some time, causing a delay of about one hour. On two separate occasions, passengers whose papers had been confiscated failed to return to the van and we continued with a lighter load. Some of the passengers had to buy their IDs back on several different occasions, making the journey extremely expensive for them. We later deduced that these were Burkinabe immigrants. For our part, although our passports were scrutinised closely, they were always handed back directly after inspection.

While these numerous delays, which added at least 3 hours to our journey, did mean that we again failed to arrive in an unknown metropolis before dark, at least they gave us the opportunity to closely observe the landscape which changed dramatically as we went South towards the coast. The Northern extremity of the country was practically indistinguishable from the Sahel lands of Burkina; dry, dusty with little or no vegetation growing save for the scattered dry-land trees and bushes. Within a few hundred kilometres these savannah lands, parched by the long dry season, are replaced by the beginnings of the tropical rainforest belt, perennially green and fertile. A struggle against the arid environment is replaced by a struggle for existence amongst the plants themselves, filling every space, sprouting leaves upwards and outwards in a race to catch every drop of sunlight. The changes in the land and climate are also visible in the human and man-made landscape. In the villages concrete structures become much more common. On the roads, cars are more numerous and newer. At the roadside, the vendors' fruit is larger, juicier, more abundant and cheaper. Exotic wares appear like trays full of live, squirming giant forest-snails, each twice the size of a human fist, with which women try to entice hungry travelers. At the roadblocks, the soldiers have large, expensive motorbikes of a type unknown further North. In general distended bellies become less common and the sense of desperate poverty diminishes slightly.

II MILITARY RULE

Almost exactly 100 days before we arrived in the country, a new government had been put in place, the national committee of public salvation (CNSP), headed by general Robert Guei, following his Christmas eve coup. The military takeover was a consequence of the dynastic war of succession that had been raging, on and off, since the death in December 1993 of Felix Houphouët-Boigny who had ruled since independence in 1960. His godson Bedie, the speaker of parliament, succeeded in getting his hands on the reins of power ahead of the prime-minister, Ouattara. This squabble for power was based on no ideological or political differences, it was a pure lust

for power, where clientelist networks, emphasising regional and ethnic differences, were constructed as a means of clinging to power. Bedie invented the concept of 'Ivorite', meaning a pure Ivorian nationality - both parents being provably Ivorian, to disqualify Ouattara from the elections scheduled for 2000. The absurdity of this concept, in a country of purely artificial construction, where many of the population don't even know the exact date of their birth, never mind being able to produce birth-certificates for both parents, is hard to overstate. Furthermore, the Ivorian economy has long been underwritten by large quantities of immigrant labour from the impoverished sahelian states to the North. The French used Burkina as a reservoir of labour to work the plantations of the more productive coastal regions and even today as much as a quarter of the population were born in Burkina, Mali, Guinea or another neighbouring state.

The clientelist network that Bedie was using, to retain power and simultaneously enrich himself, is well known in Africa, from Liberia to Nigeria, and has been at the root of many of the continent's disasters in supposedly democratic regimes. For this region Guei's coup was overwhelmingly welcomed, not only in Cote D'Ivoire, but also all across the region. In Senegal, Mali and Burkina, we repeatedly came across expressions of support for Robert Guei. However, unfortunately, Africa's history does not lend weight to the idea that military takeovers, however well-meaning, can provide any positive alternative to venal and power hungry politicians. Ominously, Guei postponed the referendum on a transition to a new civilian administration and refused to declare his intentions on a candidacy for the promised elections, leaving one to fear that he might be becoming a little fond of power, despite his early intentions. Worse still, he seemed to be re-inventing the concept of Ivorite, under the guise of eliminating forged Identity cards.

We constantly got the impression of an extremely authoritarian and over-bearing security apparatus in Cote D'Ivoire while we were there, although this appeared to be an ingrained culture rather than a new development since the coup. In contrast to the countries which we had come through, dread locks and other signs of youthful rebellion were almost invisible, men having uniformly short cropped hair. We were informed that this was due to unrelenting harassment of those who showed signs of any 'rasta' sympathies, by the police and military. One young man told us of a time when a new youth hairdo had come into fashion based on an American 'rap' haircut, shaved at the sides and allowed to grow long in tufts on top. The fashion had come to an abrupt end when the police rounded up all those sporting the new style and publically shaved them, using pocket-knives.

Now with the soldiers firmly in control of the country, there was nothing to stop the full expression of this mentality which, in classic military style sees the major problems of the country as stemming from laxness and indiscipline. The sight of Guei and his ministers addressing the press, decked out in khaki fatigues, made one feel that they were just about to give the population a damned good dressing down, with a few circuits of the assault course thrown in as penance for their sloppiness in allowing the economy to reach such a state. The young mutineers, whose taking of Abidjan's armoury had been the first act of the coup, retained total impunity. When a national newspaper displeased them, they invaded its offices and forced the offending journalists to do press-ups as punishment. The junta's approach to crime was another example of their 'no nonsense' approach. Even before we arrived in the country we had been hearing persistent stories about the summary executions carried out by the security services against lawbreakers, especially thieves. This policy seemed to meet with widespread approval by the public and indeed General Guei, in response to criticism from the dismissed elected parliament, boasted publically

that his administration "had killed 66 bandits in its first 3 months as against 33 in the previous 3". However this public approval was starting to become strained; a few days before we arrived in Bouake, there had been riots by students after a drunken soldier had shot a student, apparently thinking that the student was harassing a girl, who was in fact his girlfriend.

Even if the junta had wished to control the excesses of the army, it would have been difficult since the junior ranks were conscious that they had toppled the old government and could easily topple this one in turn. The fact that the country's coffers were reportedly empty upon the takeover meant that, in lieu of being able to give them money, the army had to be given a free hand to extort cash from the hapless populace. This systematic racket was not only practiced on the major inter-urban roads, which we had seen on entering the country. In Bouake there were several checkpoints where taxis were stopped and we often saw pedestrians being randomly asked to produce papers in the working class areas of the cities. There seems to be a vast array of documentation which they must carry with them at all times, lest they infract some law and attract a 'fine'. National ID, carte de sejour, residency permit, evidence of address and vaccination card among others can be demanded at will. Much of the time the laws seem to be framed in such a way as to render it impossible not to break one of them. For example, foreigners from other West African states are free to visit Cote D'Ivoire, but they must obtain a carte de sejour. However, this cannot be obtained outside the country or at the borders, therefore visitors have no choice but to break the law when they enter the country, at least until they arrive at a major city and complete the lengthy application procedure. Considering the number of checks towards the borders, this is a very expensive law to have to break! Not surprisingly the immigrant workers whom we talked to were extremely pissed off with this situation, and for some of them it meant that they were effectively prevented from travelling outside the city where they dwelled.

It underlines how unpopular the deposed Bedie regime must have been, that 100 days into its reign, the Guei junta still seemed preferable to the independent media, trade-unions, students and all the people we talked to. Even the excesses of the soldiers were generally associated with the 'state of the country', a legacy of the old order, rather than the new military regime. Nevertheless Guei's popularity was always premised on the understanding that he was going to hand power to an elected administration within a short space of time and it is unlikely it will persist as he dallies excessively in handing over, as seems likely.

III QUICK TOUR - FORESTS, HILLS & BEACHES

We decided not to linger excessively in Cote D'Ivoire because heretofore we had been indulging ourselves, dawdling across the continent, seeing three and a half countries in four months (Gambia being the half) when we hoped to reach South Africa within 10 months, across at least 18 countries. Therefore after spending a single night in Bouake we hotted for Man in the rain-forested, mountainous West of the country towards the Liberian border. This region is famed for the singular culture of the indigenous Dan people, which includes such elements as stilted dances and juggling of small girls as well as strikingly sculpted masks, one of which Deirdre was keen to add to our growing collection of West African crafts. The bus trip was uneventful except for the military-extortion stops which we were quite used to at this stage, and the fact that we were travelling on a proper bus meant that the delays were somewhat shorter since the soldiers tend to pick on the cheaper minivans more. Along the way, the plant life continued to increase

in density and vigour; massive hardwood trees soaring hundreds of feet into the air, surrounded by thick tangles of jungle harbouring myriad colourful plant and animal life.

Man

We spent a few days in Man. The town itself is not especially captivating, although it is notable for having the most appalling streets that I have ever seen. The unpaved surfaces resemble dried-up river beds with channels eroded several feet deep into the mud, the lack of any drainage is quite an oversight in this climate with its frequent tropical downpours. We spent most of our time walking in the spectacular forested hills which completely surround the town. The highlight was the ascent, through lush tropical jungle, of a nearby rocky crag called "Man's tooth". The trek was some 15km, up a steep incline, and since, in our ignorance of the great distance, we had obstinately negotiated a very low price with the guide who was showing us the way, he was extremely impatient to get to the top and climbed the hill at a swift jog. The afternoon sun made this a very hard pace to follow and we were thoroughly exhausted well before reaching the summit. Just before the top Deirdre decided that she could go no further and, gallantly not wishing to be a burden, tried to persuade us to leave her there to die on the mountainside. Notwithstanding the nobility of her gesture, I declined to leave her there and eventually managed to pester her into completing the last, steep section. It was worth the effort since from the bare rocky top there was a splendidly clear view over the town and, in the opposite direction, over vast expanses of untouched mountainous rainforest, stretching towards the Liberian and Guinean borders. We released our guide, who set off at a sprint down the hill, so we could make it back at our own pace. After lying prostate on the mountain top for a good hour, we slowly retraced our steps back down the mountain, pausing repeatedly to take pictures of each other in 'jungle explorer' guise, heads poking out of the tropical vegetation. Several hours later, as dusk was falling, we arrived back at the town, drenched with sweat and parched with thirst since we had only brought 1.5 litres of water on the walk between us, which we had finished well before reaching the top. Happily the Ivorian geniuses have developed the fabulous concept of litre bottles of beer, served ice-cold, which we duly quaffed in the first bar we found.

When we finally arrived back at our hotel, we were surprised to be asked, by the manager, to fill in registration forms. These forms are ubiquitous in West African hotels. Before staying the night, every guest must fill them out, detailing their personal data, home address, passport number and various other pieces of information that the government decides it must know. On this occasion we were surprised at the request since we had already filled out a card three days earlier, immediately after arriving. When we queried the manager about this he explained that a soldier had come to the hotel that morning to collect all the completed registration forms. As usual, we had only filled out a single form between the two of us, and when the soldier saw this card, which I had filled out, he had immediately asked the manager: "what about the woman who is with him? where is her card?" Thus we now had to each fill in separate cards. The fact that we had been monitored in such a way after only two days in this large town, of some 150,000 inhabitants, made us a little uncomfortable. It also troubled two other guests who happened to be in the hotel lobby at the same time, but for different reasons. They complained, in shocked tones: "- What, does that mean that we have to fill in cards when we pick up prostitutes? - But that's an outrage, it amounts to banning hookers, they've gone too far this time!"

San Pedro & Sassandra

From Man we continued by bus 400 km South through the remains of rainforest. The giant hardwood trees have mainly fallen victim to the logging industry and what remains is mostly a thick jungle of secondary growth, interspersed by occasional coffee and cocoa plantations. Our destination was the port city of San Pedro, where we were to be happily reunited with the sea, which we had been missing terribly since our departure from Dakar, over 2 months beforehand. Fortunately the military checkpoints were much less common on this stretch of road, perhaps due to the relative lack of foreign workers travelling this route and hence the reduced opportunity to extract bribes. As one approaches the coast, there is a noticeable change in the predominant house-building style in the small villages. Instead of the mud brick walls crowned with a thatch of some variety of grass, wattle and daub walls are used, topped with palm leaves. The numerous unfinished houses in various stages of completion by the road, reveal the construction procedure. First a frame is built, both walls and roof in the shape of the classic house, from thin branches. The gaps in the frame are filled with a mesh of palm leaves which are plastered with mud. Finally the palm-leaf roof is added. This style of housing seems to predominate all along the coast, although bigger and wealthier places use, of course, the ubiquitous concrete and corrugated iron. After 8 hours of jungle with many little hamlets of these huts, we arrived at the coast.

Unfortunately the sea at San Pedro is far too rough for bathing, even dipping one's feet in the sea is potentially life-threatening as violent waves suddenly appear without any warning, crashing over the steep beaches. The town itself is dominated by the port which seems to mainly serve the purpose of exporting the rainforests of the area to feed Europe's furniture shops. Huge lorries, hauling a single section of a tree-trunk of one of the forest giants, are a common sight, as are stockpiles of planks of cut wood, piled high in yards all around the port. We stayed two days, time enough to stroll through the strangely empty port area, among the massive deserted warehouses and along the steep dangerous beaches, occasionally being soaked by a freak wave. There we met a very nice Nigerian man, a Lagosian, who had lived for 8 months on Dublin's North wall, the first African we had met who had been to Ireland.

From this large, modern, industrial port city we traveled Eastwards by minivan along the coast to the small quiet fishing town of Sassandra, surrounded by water on all sides, nestling at the foot of low hills between the sea and the mouth of the Sassandra river. This small town was obviously of some importance in colonial times, monumental colonial-era ruins are numerous, including the shell of the governor's residence, right on the hill at the end of the spit of land projecting into the river-mouth. The ruin of his house today hosts several families who were happy to show us around including the remains of his prison, now derelict. Most of the other remaining colonial houses are inhabited or are used as warehouses, being of a scope and expanse that is completely superfluous in the small scale fishing economy of the modern town. We spent a couple of days relaxing on the beaches, staying in the town's brothel, a collection of grass huts right on the beach in the centre of town, despite the fact that the sea was still too dangerous to really bathe, the mere presence of that vast body of water was immeasurably soothing after having spent so long in the parched fringes of the Sahara.

Indeed it was more than the presence of large bodies of water that made Cote D'Ivoire a relaxing place to visit. In general creature comforts were much more readily available than in the sahelian countries. Hotel rooms were more comfortable and cheaper; for the first time in Africa we were able to afford an air-conditioned room, although alas, for a mere two nights. Up to now

the food we had been eating had been basic. If you asked for chicken and rice, you'd get a lump of chicken and a lump of rice, with a dollop of Maggi sauce out of a jar if you were lucky. Here, in addition to the imported French cuisine, there was a variety of excellent indigenous dishes, like braised fish or chicken in several fine sauces, or antelope and bush-rat soups with pounded yam, prepared in such a way as to make eating a pleasure rather than a mere necessity for survival. These dishes were available in pleasant open-air bar-restaurants known as 'maquis', where \$3 or \$4 could buy a large meal with ample beer.

The other element that made Cote D'Ivoire a relatively pleasant place to travel in was the almost complete absence of hustlers and the small number of hawkers, who did not tend to be overly persistent in any case. I have no idea why this was the case since, if the country is many times richer than its Northern neighbours, it still has its fair share of poverty, misery and unemployment. The lack of tourists, who were extremely scarce while we were there, can hardly explain it because this is a recent development since the coup and by all accounts tourism was formerly very important to the economy. This pleasant surprise was welcome and we thoroughly enjoyed the fact that we could roam at will without attracting crowds of hustlers by virtue of our status as rich tourists. What's more, the coastal regions, due to their milder climate, have long harboured a large number of expatriate Europeans, mostly French, and therefore nobody seems in the least interested to see a white person, quite a liberation after spending months as a 'walking event'. However, even if this had been our impression of the rest of the country, we didn't expect it to be sustained when we left Sassandra for Abidjan, the country's major city and French West Africa's biggest metropolis.

IV ABIDJAN - PAVEMENT CRACKS

Before arriving in Abidjan, we had heard many bad things about it. Ranked as one of the most dangerous cities in West Africa by our guidebook, apparently muggings are very common. Jonathon, a peace-corp volunteer who we had met in Burkina, had told us of his traumatic arrival in the city. He had emerged from his bus into the midst of a raging argument between bunches of local hustlers which had culminated in one of the hustlers taking his penis out, putting it into his hand and charging his opponent with it! He had spent the rest of his stay, the Christmas holidays, confined indoors while the army mutineers ran riot through the streets, shooting into the air and commandeering cars. It was perhaps not surprising that he didn't have much good to say about the place.

In approaching the city, it quickly becomes obvious that it is quite different from the rest of the country. The suburbs sprawl for quite some distance, apartment blocks and endless rows of low, corrugated-iron roofed houses line the wide multi-lane highways for several kilometres before one nears the city centre. Buses from the West arrive in the chaotic Adjame motor park. There are a large number of private bus companies, each having their own depot within the hectic maze of the motor park, which also serves as a major hive of commerce as traders try to get the best bargains on produce arriving fresh from the countryside. The internal roads in the massive motor park complex are unpaved and therefore after any rains, the chaos is aggravated by the large mud pools which develop at the most heavily trafficked intersections. What's more, the roads in the park are narrow and traders' displays often encroach onto the bus lanes, meaning that buses occasionally come to corners which they can't circumvent. Things become really difficult when

two buses, going in opposite directions, meet at a corner on a narrow track with a mud-pool several feet deep at the corner's apex.

Once the tortuous journey into the motor park has been completed and the driver has proved his skill, it is the passengers' turn to run the gauntlet, for the bus is engulfed by 'helpers' who follow it from its entry into the park, trying to make eye-contact with the passengers and innocently asking them whether they have any baggage in the hold. Fortunately we were well prepared and had strapped our backpacks firmly on, so that we couldn't possibly be helped in carrying them. The doors of the bus opened and a mob of youths descended upon the poor old country man who was standing in the doorway, all fighting to try to carry his bags. We seized upon this momentary distraction to make a break for it, jumping off the bus, feinting to go right, then sharply sidestepping to the left and trotting speedily away from the bus. We had come to rest at the edge of the motor park and just beside us, on the road were a fleet of empty taxis waiting to take passengers from the bus. Each taxi had a helper attached, holding the back door open and calling out to us "look I've found a taxi for you", some taxis had even got 2 or 3 helpers hanging on to the door. Yet again we had to rely on sleight of foot to evade the helpers. We headed towards one of the taxis to which a youth was beckoning us, dummied as if to go for the door, shimmied around the taxi and dived head-first into an unattended taxi behind (being the only way to enter a car with a backpack strapped on). We had no time to recover our composure before the car was engulfed with the helpers from the other taxis, joined by the helpers who had been following hot on our heels from the bus. At least six of them started demanding money for having found the taxi, in a rather aggressive manner, and since the taxi driver sympathised much more with their plight than with ours, he was extremely slow in moving off in order to give them as much opportunity as possible to extract a few cents from us. Eventually he did move off, but only after I'd screamed "go driver!!" twice at him, as at that stage things were getting a little tense with the helpers, one of whom was calling me a bastard and when I agreed that I was a bastard, he started making threatening gestures as if he was going to poke my eyes out.

That was the only difficult situation that we had to deal with in Abidjan. The rest of our week-long stay passed without any untoward incidents. Indeed the only problem that we had was the expense of getting around since the city is much too big to walk around and we didn't have long enough to master the public transport system, so we had to use taxis for most journeys. We stayed in a dingy hotel in the Treichville area, the original 'African' area of the city, nowadays the most central of the low-rent neighbourhoods. We spend the week exploring the city and doing all the things that backpackers do when they arrive in a major West African city after spending months 'in the bush': getting visas for the next countries, surfing the internet and sending e-mails, eating hamburgers, browsing in bookshops and reading foreign newspapers. For all of these pursuits Abidjan is extremely well equipped.

Just like Dakar, the European city is situated on a peninsula, projecting out into the sea, which surrounds the city on three sides, guaranteeing a relatively mild climate. Again, just like Dakar, this area is known as the 'plateau', which is no coincidence as the conscientious colonial town planners considered it very important that the Europeans should occupy the highest points of the city to symbolise their dominance over the indigenous masses. This area is today the central business district, littered with prestige high-rise buildings, many of which have striking modernist designs, notably the cathedral, designed so that the steeple represents a man with outstretched arms and the body of the church is his robe flowing out behind him. The cathedral contains massive stained-glass windows depicting three French missionaries arriving on Africa's shores to

teach the heathen about the gospel. The shore contains heathen natives greeting the missionaries with bowls of fruit and beaming smiles, seemingly converted by the mere sight of these holy white men. Come the revolution in Cote D'Ivoire, I believe that this will be the first window to be smashed.

From a distance the city looks impossibly glamorous; shiny skyscrapers set amongst brilliant blue lagoons lined with palm trees. Yet despite the apparent glitz of the city, there are many signs that the cracks are starting to show and not just in the sprawling slum districts around the city. The economy, largely dominated by French capital and once known as the 'African miracle' due to two decades of high growth after independence, is overwhelmingly dependant on two major cash crops, coffee and cocoa. Every issue of every newspaper carries the current market price of these two commodities in prominent position and regularly entire pages are given over to presenting a plethora of facts and figures about the trends of these prices. For some time these prices have been falling, causing cracks to appear in the Ivorian economy, cracks that are mirrored in the buildings of the plateau, which on close inspection look rundown and dilapidated. The pavements too show signs of decline; the trees which were planted along the roadsides have long overgrown their allotted spaces and their roots have spread, destroying the once neat pavements around them, creating undulating hillocks in their place and forcing pedestrians to walk in the mud or on the road as they do in most other African towns.

Pray for Ghana

AXIM

Clap for Jesus

We arrived in Ghana on the Thursday before Easter weekend. After spending a long day on a bus from Abidjan, including a breakdown which lasted for several hours when our bus failed to make it up a small hill, we stopped at Axim, one of the first towns in any size on the Ghanaian coast. The first thing that struck us about the town was the massive, tented enclosure in the town's centre, beneath the old European slaving fort. It was about 9 O' clock in the evening and this enclosure was crammed with a sea of swaying human bodies. Upon approaching closer, we could make out the strains of a hymn, accompanied by a live gospel band. The tented structure was large, accomodating a couple of thousand people on rows of benches. The canopy roof had many flourescent lights attached to it which created a shining glow around the whole area. Loud-speakers were fixed to the poles that supported the roof, carrying the music far into the night. At the front of the enclosure was a low platform. On one side of the platform there was a band with 4 members and in the centre there was a table behind which sat 4 or 5 men in flowing white robes. The audience were standing, arms in the air, swaying to the music and singing with ecstatic expressions on their faces.

We were hungry after a long day on the road and stopped in front of this area at a street food stall. Here we ate a meat pie, a telling introduction to the culinary heritage of British colonialism, a sad contrast to the delicious brochette sandwiches common in the Francophone lands. While we sat there, the singing came to an end and the robed men started shouting into the microphone in the rising and falling rhythm of the charismatic preacher. The crowd contributed regular cries of "Amen", as if with a single voice, which was the only word we understood among all the torrential sermons. We watched this spectacle for about half an hour before retreating for a drink. The rest of the town was quiet, modest and low-key. The few delapidated colonial mansions stood out among a sea of rust-rooved single story modern wooden dwellings. The noise, lights and pomp of the prayer meeting seemed a bizzare anomaly in this setting, particularly since none of the inhabitants that we talked to seemed to think that it was in any way a remarkable event. At about 10:30, on our way home, we encountered the worshippers again, now streaming home all prayed out for the night.

At about 5am the next morning we had our next religious encounter. Sleeping peacefully in our beds, we were woken by the sound of what appeared to be a large group of young women walking by our hotel, clapping and singing hymns in unison at the top of their voices. We were too sleepy, stunned and newly-arrived to react rationally and thus spurned the chance to re-enact the crucifixion, contenting ourselves with a selection of sleepy curses. A few hours later we arose and headed into town for breakfast. There we found the prayer meeting reassembled and in the full flight of their rapturous lord-praising. We left Axim two days later, on Easter Sunday, and during

all this time these people (who we discovered to be some species of pentecostals) never ceased to pray, sing and dance for the big man above, from before dawn until well after dark. And they were far from being the only prayer meeting in town. Walking around this small fishing community we came across numerous halls packed to the rafters with clapping, crooning, amen-ing, sinners. Most of these meeting seemed to be part of smaller, less well known sects of christianity, few of which I had ever heard of before. None of them seemed to possess a purpose-built church; the worshippers were crowded into halls of all descriptions, sometimes spilling out onto the streets. They were all dressed in their Sunday best and answered the preacher fervently as if in a trance.

Although this Easter weekend in Axim was certainly the most concentrated example of religious fervour that we encountered in Ghana, it was by no means altogether exceptional. Christianity is omnipresent, from the gospel music on the radio to the iconic statues and the religious secondary schools, all of which seemed to be run by some variety of priests. At least half of all businesses have a religious name: the 'clap for jesus hardware store', the 'fishers of men snack bar' or the 'he is lord computer school'. Posters advertising church activities are everywhere, declaring "Crusade! Crusade! Crusade!" and announcing drives for mass conversions of animists. Large marquees and tents are dotted around the towns, stuffed with sound equipment, broadcasting the strident tones of various preachers far and wide, at all hours of the day and night. A controversy was raging on the radio phone-in shows as one administrative area of the country had confined all religious activities to their own premises and imposed a maximum decibel level on them in an attempt to reduce noise pollution from over-enthusiastic worshippers, a move fiercely opposed by the evangelicals.

Read for Jesus

For several months myself and Deirdre had been looking forward to arriving in Ghana to replenish our stocks of English language books. In the Francophone countries every large town is sure to have a reasonable bookshop stocking international newspapers and magazines as well as books. The major cities like Abidjan and Dakar have excellent bookshops, yet reading books in French is too much like hard work. At first, when we failed to find any decent bookshops in Ghana, we simply assumed that we just hadn't looked hard enough, but after spending several full days searching in the two big cities, Accra and Kumasi, we finally gave up. The end result of our long quest was one small new bookshop in Accra with a pitiable selection of mainly government publications and trashy romantic novels. Somewhat better was a second hand bookshop stocked with bulk-imports from the US, mostly pulp novels, but there were a few inexpensive classic novels. Other than these two enclaves and the university bookshops, the national book business was entirely dominated by three christian chains: Presbyterian book depot, Methodist book depot and Challenge books.

The Methodist depot made the greatest pretence at being a general bookshop. The religious section took up only about half the stock. They also had a large biography section and an extensive 'general reading' section. However on close inspection there did seem to be a certain slant in title selection. Accounts of the lives of about 6 different members of the Wesley family made up a large part of the biography shelf and I don't think it was any coincidence that all 3 branches which we visited, in Accra, Cape Coast and Kumasi, stocked large numbers of 'God loves communists too', a real-life account of how the author had been a member of a lefty group in England

in the 1970's until God came to her, she saw that she was doing the devil's work and left to join some wierd christian sect where she has found spiritual bliss.

The presbyterian book depot was even worse. 90% of the books were purely religious and the one small shelf labelled 'novels' contained such classics as 'Our police friends' by the PR department of the Ghana police force. Challenge books - "for the best in christian reading" managed to make the other two look like enlightened bastions of rational thought. While the other two were scruffy and musty, this was a slick affair, full of clean-cut young men in suits. The books were glossy, shiny and new. Apart from a few textbooks the entire stock was religious. There were biographies of obscure American faith healers and preachers whom I had never heard of, self-help titles responding to various crises one might have and children's books designed to teach morality to the young. The whole place reeked of American money, come from one of the unspeakably evil born-again sects which dream of spreading their tentacles of ignorance, prejudice and superstition all over the world.

Get better for Jesus

Nationwide, the larger, longer established churches do have a considerable presence - there are plenty of schools, missions and 4 wheel drives sporting the logo of the catholic, methodist, presbyterian and anglican churches - but it is the multitude of smaller, evangelical sects which catch the eye. Some of these are imported. Various baptist denominations, the church of Jesus christ of the latter day saints, the seventh day adventists, the christian scientists and the mormons are among the sects that were previously familiar to me. However the greater number of churches seem to be homegrown and I had never previously encountered many of them. The Divine Life Power Ministries, the Brotherhood of the Cross and Star and many other convoluted titles featuring bibles, crosses, lords and miracles ring out from posters and signboards. Many of these sects are based around a single charismatic leader and incorporate large amounts of 'miraculous' interventions and faith healing. Some of them are extremely weird: in Cape Coast we heard the unmistakable sound of heavy metal drumming coming from an open doorway. Upon investigation, we discovered that the building housed a congregation pacing briskly up and down, eyes fixed on the floor, heads bobbing frantically up and down. All the while they emitted a low demonic guttural murmur and appeared completely oblivious to the world around them.

The success of the charismatic churches surely rests upon their incorporation of many elements of animist and traditional beliefs into the framework of christianity. The various animist systems of belief are generally ill-adapted to the complexities of the modern nation-state, being based on localised, homogenous ethnic groups and emphasising kinship groups and common ancestry. These systems have limited utility in the ethnic mosaic of modern African cities. In contrast christianity and islam both aim towards universality. Yet animist beliefs have the selling point of providing much more immediate access to divinity which resides in trees, charms, crocodiles or catfish, all of which are plainly visible and can be persuaded to intervene on one's behalf if the right invocation is used. Considering the vast magnitude of the social problems facing people all over modern Africa, it is no surprise that the immediate availability of God should be so important as a selling point of a religion. In many places the scale of poverty, insecurity and disease is such that no deliverance is possible, at least in the short term, other than a miracle working divinity. Ghana's economy, like most of its neighbours, is heavily dependant on global commodity prices, in this case cocoa and gold. These have been steadily declining in recent years

and cocoa has lost a quarter of its value in the last year. This has caused serious depreciation of the currency and consequent inflation of living costs - over the 5 weeks that we spent there the currency lost over 10% of its value, a trend which has been going on for some time. In the face of such facts, which are completely beyond the control of ordinary people, it is no wonder that people turn to the false hope of superstition. There are many cynical opportunists who take advantage of this despair. We observed a large billboard advertisement which simply read "there is a cure for aids" with the name of a sect written in small type beneath it.

On one occasion we had the opportunity to closely observe one of the charismatic holymen at work. In fact we had no choice but to watch his show since he delivered it to a busload of captive spectators throughout a 4 hour journey. We had already endured a full hour of preaching in the bus station, courtesy of two young men, by the time the bus actually left. Since the preachers had been left behind we thought that we had escaped without being saved. Then, within seconds of leaving the station, another preacher who had cunningly disguised himself as a passenger stood up, made his way to the front of the bus and turned to address the captive flock.

"Praise the lord", his opening pitch, met with a resounding "Amen" from our fellow travellers. From this opening he went on to expertly work the crowd, extracting Amens at will by producing a stream of canned holy invocations. It appeared that these responses were wholly involuntary on the part of many of the assembled sinners. Having warmed the crowd up, he led them in prayer, getting everybody to bow their heads and repeat his humble words of thanks and praise. Having got the people on his side, he switched from prayer to sales, producing a bottle of some sort of miraculous medicine from his bag and proceeded to extoll the virtues of this curative remedy for the next half hour. This speech was conducted in a local language, but we were able to make out several words such as "diarreoah", "syphilis", "malaria" and "infertility". Five or six of these remedies were purchased at a couple of dollars apiece and then, just as it looked as if the crowd's interest was flagging, the quack reverted to preacher in spectacular fashion, producing a small stringed instrument and drum from his bag. He launched into a set of favourite hymns, belting the words out in his strong voice. This proved very popular with the crowd who joined in, clapping along with his drumming. They even sang along enthusiastically to several of the crowdpleasing numbers. Many songs later, the passengers were sufficiently rejuvenated for him to venture another round of remedy sales, which was even more succesful than the first. By the journey's end, after several cycles of hymns, prayers and sales, he had sold some 30 bottles. 10 kilometres before we arrived, he announced his imminent departure and led the bus on one last singsong before getting the driver to stop the bus. He got out in a remote spot which appeared to be far from any human dwelling and with a last blessing he was gone.

II EUROPEAN RELICS OF THE GOLD COAST

From Axim, we journeyed West to East across Ghana's coast and stopped at several points to visit ancient European forts, relics of the early period of contact between European traders and Africa. The first fort that we saw was in Axim. It was built by the Portuguese in the fifteenth century and taken by the Dutch in 1642. The building is situated on top of a hill projecting into the sea at the centrepont of the town. It is small solid and was clearly built with defendibility as a very important criterion. Arrays of ancient cannons line the walls. A system of drains traps rainwater into a large subterranean reservoir to provide for sieges. As it stands today, it dates

from the period when slaves were the mainstay of commerce and so there are numerous dark dungeons for holding them in wait of a ship. Great pains have been taken to ensure access to the sea. A tunnel runs from the fort, several hundred yards under the sea, to a small island in the bay. This would have allowed slaves to be loaded without leaving, even momentarily, the confines of captivity as well as allowing provisionment if the fort was besieged on land. It is an impressive monument to the European merchants' technical ingenuity and moral decrepitude.

From Axim we proceeded 100km East to the small fishing village of Dixcove, which is again dominated by a European fort, this time English, built in 1691. It is similar in design to most of these forts, with several slave dungeons set around a courtyard where the unfortunate captives were segregated by age and sex. The walls above the dungeons are lined with cannons and above these, towering over the courtyard, are the spacious, airy quarters of the governor. This fort is somewhat larger than that in Axim, but is somewhat less distinguished in terms of self-containment and ingenuity of design. One notable feature is the window in the roof of the female slaves' dungeon, giving onto the officers' area above, which the caretaker informed us was intended to facilitate the choosing of comely slaves to provide the poor lonely Englishmen with some comfort in the absence of their dear wives.

After Dixcove, we travelled another 200 km East to Elmina where the Portuguese had their headquarters for 150 years until they were superseded by the Dutch who made it their headquarters in turn until they were finally ousted by the British in 1872. Constructed in 1482, it is the oldest European monument in sub-saharan Africa. It is much larger and more impressive than the forts which we had already seen. The compound, surrounded by a moat and high wall, is made up of several courtyards, one of which houses a Portuguese catholic church in its centre. The European's living quarters are extensive, particularly the governor's whose 5 room duplex commands spectacular views of the bay. The dungeon complex is large and labyrinthine. The main building is 3 stories high, about 50 feet wide and over 100 feet long. Entrance is gained by means of a lowered drawbridge and the castle is built of dressed stone, imported from Europe. Overall the structure has the atmosphere of the European middle ages, quite disconcerting in the midst of this modest West African fishing town.

15 kilometres further along the coast is Cape Coast, where the fort was the site of the British headquarters in the region until 1876. Curiously located barely a cannon shot distant from their major rivals, the Portuguese and later the Dutch. This castle is of similarly large dimensions to the Elmina fort although its plan is somewhat irregular giving a less pleasant aspect to the whole. A large trapezoidal courtyard is the compound's centrepiece, surrounded by slave dungeons on two sides. One corner of the yard slopes sharply down to a large double gate giving directly onto the sea, conveniently allowing slaves to be loaded onto ships almost directly from their cells, minimising the opportunity for any last act of defiance. The other two sides house the main building incorporating large rooms for the hosting of a large garrison. The governor's quarters again surmount everything, commanding a view over the entirety of the compound as well as much of the surrounding town and the bay. Despite the 50 cannons or so lining the walls, this castle gives the impression of being less fortified than that at Elmina, especially on the landward side, perhaps because the predominant British felt less threatened.

The story of the European forts, 37 of which line Ghana's coast, reveal much about the history of pre-colonial contact between Europe and Africa. The Portuguese buildings are a remnant of the first period of contact, in the 16th and late 15th centuries when European merchants came to this coast looking to obtain the pepper, ivory and gold of trans-saharan trade closer to source. As the

scramble for colonial possessions in the Americas intensified and the genocide of the indigenous peoples created huge shortages of labour, the trade switched to slaves. The 17th, 18th and early 19th centuries saw violent competition among the burgeoning bourgeois merchant classes of the various European nations for control of this lucrative trade. The forts of this period were larger than before to house the bulky human merchandise and stronger to withstand the assaults of European rivals. The Germans, Swedes, Danes and French all built forts on this 500km stretch of coastline but it was the Portuguese, British and Dutch which had the most substantial presence. Many of the forts changed hands many times between the various powers and by the end of the 17th century the British and Dutch had emerged victorious and squeezed their competitors out of the region.

This slave trade proved disastrous for Africa, partly due to the huge drain of manpower which caused whole areas to become depopulated. However, at least as damaging as the loss of manpower, was the arms race which erupted among local powers in the wake of the influx of European firearms. To get guns, slaves were the only currency worth anything, to get slaves, warfare was necessary. Hence this vicious circle led to increasingly bloodthirsty, despotic empires who depended for their survival on endless wars to supply the slaves with which to purchase the guns to enforce their cruel and unpopular rule. More than two centuries of this process left the indigenous civilisations devastated, unable to oppose the European imperial powers in their colonial drive.

The colonial period, beginning in the late 19th century, saw the decline in importance of Ghana's coastal forts. The British empire had no longer any rivals to its hegemony over the Gold coast. The Dutch, long surpassed by the other European powers, had finally ceded the last of their strongholds in 1872 and the Asante kingdom, the most powerful of the indigenous states, was decisively defeated after a series of wars. Nevertheless the forts still contain some memories of this period of imperial conquest. In a punishment intended to symbolise the final humiliation of the Asante, a tiny room in one of the towers of the Elmina fort was used to hold the last independent Asante monarch, Prempeh, en route to his exile in the Seychelles.

III GHANA TODAY

The English legacy

Since, with the minor exception of a week in the Gambia, we had been travelling through ex-French colonies, Ghana was noticeably different to everywhere we had hitherto visited in a number of ways. Firstly and most happily, we discovered that prices were very much lower than elsewhere. We never paid more than \$6 for a room which were generally of very good standard with fans and bathroom ensuite. Food, drink and transport were also similarly inexpensive. Related to the low prices, but much less welcome, was the problem of dealing with a seriously unwieldy currency. All of the ex-French colonies use a common currency, the CFA franc, which is tied to the value of the French franc at a fixed rate. The French government holds 50% of all their foreign exchange and has the power to arbitrarily revalue the CFA franc. In exchange for this total economic and political subjugation, the Francophone African countries at least have a currency that is easy to deal with, comes in sensible denominations and is relatively stable (except when France decides to devalue it by 100%). Ghana has its own currency, the Cedi, and inflation has meant that the biggest note is worth about \$1 and even these are sometimes unavail-

able. When you change say \$400 travellers cheques into Cedis, you can end up with a sackfull of notes worth 40 cents each, not exactly convenient for shopping.

Another major difference between Ghana and the Francophone countries is, naturally, the language. However, unfortunately English is much less widely spoken than French is in the ex-French colonies and the English is heavily flavoured with local peculiarities. Thus we were disappointed to find that we found it harder to communicate with people, despite the best efforts of the school system; everywhere we went small children would sing at us, in a tune obviously taught to toddlers: "hello! how are you? I'm fine. Thank you."

With the change in language came a change in what we were called. For months we had been answering to the title of 'toubab', now we became 'blonni', a welcome change since toubab was starting to grate a bit, especially when followed by "cadeau?" as it so often was. Finally, as I have already mentioned, the food changed dramatically. In contrast to the French lands where French cuisine is available everywhere, restaurants serving international cuisine are rare outside the two big cities and even Ghanaian eateries are sometimes strangely difficult to find, even in fairly large towns. We were therefore constrained to eat almost exclusively from street food stalls. These stalls are ubiquitous in West Africa, selling plates of starch with a splash of sauce. In the sahel regions rice is the most common starch but here along the coast there are a plethora of stodgy staples made of pounded yams, plantain, corn, millet or most commonly cassava. They are normally served in a large sticky mass from which you break off lumps, roll them into cylinders with your hand before dipping them into your sauce and eating them.

The problem with relying on street food is not the taste, for it is frequently delicious, nor is it the hygiene, for we have never got sick from eating it, rather it is the difficulty of figuring out how the hell you order, what to order and how to eat it. These stalls are not focused towards casual or occasional customers. This economy largely depends on the traders cultivating regular customers who are fully familiar with the prices, menus, cutlery conventions, hand washing formalities, suitability of various dishes as accompaniments for each other and a thousand other questions which seem to vary arbitrarily between every stall and can prove utterly confusing to the ignorant. On most occasions you approach a table behind which a formidable woman stands guard, ladle in hand. When you ask what there is, she gestures at the dozen or so pots in front of her, all containing mysterious concoctions. When you ask how much, the response invariably comes back 'how much do you want?' At this stage you simply have to point at a couple of pots and say "10 cents of that, 5 cents of the green stuff and one of those squishy things". It is easy to get the proportions wrong and end up with a huge mound of starch with a single drop of sauce, or a pile of goats intestines, a boiled egg and a small ball of yam. Normally, you do end up with something edible but then chances are that you'll eat it in absolutely the wrong way. Considering that the sight of a foreigner eating street food is often enough to attract a crowd, who'll be thoroughly amused by any breach of social conventions, it can be a trying affair requiring some patience. On many occasions in Ghana, we plodded through towns, dreaming of the cheap restaurants of Francophone lands, hoping forlornly to find something familiar looking before giving up and returning to the dependable street vendors and their trial by pots.

Accra

After seeing our fill of the European monuments of the coast, we caught a bus to the modern capital, Accra. It is a large, spread-out city and possesses an almost total lack of distinguishing

features. Most of the buildings are relatively modern and the city lacks much sense of history. It appears much more like a European city than an African. The main administrative, commercial and business districts are scattered across a large central area, linked together by large, modern, multi-lane roads which pass through a landscape sprinkled with huge sport stadiums, conference centres and luxury hotels. Much of it is almost totally devoid of pedestrians and seems strangely empty. Nevertheless, despite the lack of physical attractions, it is a thoroughly pleasant place to spend some time compared to the other large cities of the region. There are many trees and the physical dispersion means one is rarely troubled by excessive noise and crowds, but most importantly it feels entirely safe to walk around at all hours. The reasons for this surprising lack of urban tension in a very poor city of over 2 million people are doubtless manifold but it must have at least something to do with the fact that Ghana has had a markedly less corrupt and repressive regime than most of its neighbours.

The Flight Lieutenant

Flight Lieutenant Jerry Rawlings has ruled since 1981, mostly as unelected dictator. He was formerly a close ally of Thomas Sankara of Burkina Faso and shares his penchant for anti-imperialist rhetoric, although in fact he has never failed to follow the diktats of the international financial institutions. While he is far from being a great democrat or revolutionary, it seems that control over resources, particularly the national media, is his means of clinging to power rather than an extensive apparatus of repression. Furthermore, the ostentatious display of wealth by a tiny class of ruling elite among oceans of poverty, is far less noticeable in Accra than in Abidjan or Dakar. There seems to have been a genuine attempt to prevent political power translating directly into extravagant riches for those who control it. This has alienated the bourgeois who seem to largely oppose Rawlings.

There will be elections later this year and Rawlings may be forced to relinquish his hold on power. He is constitutionally barred from running and his hand-picked successor (whose appointment he announced to his party while we were in Accra without giving them any say in the matter) lacks his charisma and rhetorical flair. With the opposition of the bourgeois and the devastating effects of IMF 'medicine' on workers and peasants, election victory will be difficult; when we arrived in Ghana our hotel receptionist earned \$28 a month and a primary school teacher \$46, when we left 5 weeks later, their wages were \$24 and \$40 respectively - a powerful argument for change.

Kumasi

From Accra we headed for Kumasi, the pre-colonial capital of the Asante empire, set among low, rolling rainforested hills 250 km north of the coast. In contrast to the modern capital, here the sense of history is strong and the Asante culture seems to far outweigh external influences. The centrepiece of the city's main roundabout is a statue of a stool - an object which has huge symbolic significance to this culture. Kings and traditional rulers derive their authority from the stools on which they sit. Newspapers are full of reports of 'destoolings' when kings are deposed and 'enstoolments' of new monarchs. They also have importance to ordinary people who have their own personal stool which follows them through life. Marriages are sealed by an exchange of stools. The size, strength and development of Asante before their defeat to the British meant that

they were one of the few African cultures which has been able to survive intact, on a large scale. Their city was less fortunate. Although the city has a distinctly 'African' feel, the old buildings all date from the colonial era since the British razed the original city to the ground.

The city, in true African fashion, is centred around a market, but this market is like no other. It is situated in a valley with the city rising up above it on all sides. It is enormous, the largest market in West Africa. It's circumference is about 3 kilometres within which thousands of people throng through dozens of internal alleyways among the countless stalls. Walking through this miniature city is perhaps the closest experience one can have to a medieval town. The streets are narrow, the shops crowded together, the crowds bustling. From time to time the crowd will part and a cart, impossibly heavily laden and hauled by a bunch of burly men, will career through the tiny alley, the momentum of the cart making it impossible for them to stop or slow down. Porters stagger along with huge sacks of grain balanced on their heads. As you pass through the outer lanes of the market, the salesmen's stalls give way to workshops. Whole areas or entire lanes, 100 metres long, are given over to one activity. You pass through a region of sandalmakers where dozens of artisans are engrossed in cutting sandals out of old tyres. Elsewhere you find neighbourhoods entirely devoted to cloth, each lane holding a single type of cloth. The din of toolmakers rises above the whole, hammering metal into spades, picks and hoes. Traders from far abroad come here to buy in bulk and the atmosphere of concerted industry is overwhelming.

Kumasi was the place where we came across the beginnings of the rainy season in earnest. Until now we had experienced several short rainfalls in the previous month after 4 months of unrelenting sunshine. Here, in the rainforest, the rains follow a predictable pattern. The mornings are clear and sunny, by late afternoon the sky has filled with clouds obscuring the sun. By sunfall, at 6:30, the sky is heavy and menacing and about one hour later, a swirling wind suddenly descends on the streets, whipping up dust in miniature whirlwinds and causing the temperature to drop sharply. This is the signal to flee. All the street vendors and stall holders hurriedly gather their wares and sprint for cover. Within 5 minutes of the wind, the rain starts and pours torrentially out of the sky as if it was trying to wear out the ground beneath.

Winneba

After an all too brief stay in Kumasi, we hurried back to the coast to Winneba, 100km West of Accra, where we were hoping to observe the Aboakyer, a traditional deer hunting festival. Winneba, like many of the towns of the coastal Fante people, possesses a traditional militia made up of the town's youth, organised into several rival companies. These militias are known as 'Asafo' and each company has its own shrine, known as 'posuban'. The asafo companies are closely linked to the traditional rulers and kings and are the means by which their authority is enforced. This institution, like many of the surviving elements of the traditional social order, has an ambiguous relationship with the modern state. On the one hand traditional rulers are on the government payroll and are used as intermediaries between the government and the people, in an arrangement instituted by the British. On the other hand, through the asafos, they challenge the state's monopoly over the means of violence, they do not rely on the state for their legitimacy and their succession disputes can often provoke disorder. The enstoolment of a new ruler is a complex affair, involving councils of kingmakers drawn from various tranches of society, who select between several possible successors. This gives plenty of scope for disputes and although

the state courts are supposed to be the ultimate arbitrator of succession matters, in practice their decisions seem to carry little weight with the communities.

The Aboakyer festival is a competition between the town's two asafo companies. Number 1 supposedly represents modernising progressive youth while number 2 represents those who keep to the traditional fishing lifestyle. The festival lasts one week and includes boat races and other competitions, culminating in a deer hunt on the first Saturday of May. Both companies set out from town into the bush at dawn, the first to return with a live deer is the winner, a victory to be celebrated with days of feasting and drinking. We arrived in Winneba on the eve of the big event to find the town embroiled in the midst of a bitter dispute over the traditional ruler's position. On our arrival the only hint of the festival that we encountered was a procession of angry, headbanded youth, jogging chanting through the streets and, a little further on, a few hundred riot-clad policemen with armoured vehicles and water cannons.

It turned out that the presiding, state-sanctioned ruler was opposed by both companies who were thus boycotting the event. However breakaway factions of the companies, loyal to the ruler, were intent on carrying out the hunt, which would be physically opposed by the main companies. This dispute had been running for four years and in 1999 there were several shootings and one death during clashes between supporters of the rivals to the throne. For fear of any repetition, this year all hunting of deer was banned. The large well-armoured police presence was meant to ensure this.

By the time we awoke the next morning, all the action was over, but plenty of people were happy to fill us in on the outcome. Shortly after dawn, one of the dissident factions had paraded a deer through town, the police had rushed to head them off at the ruler's palace. Once they got there, the commandant ordered his men to intervene to stop the ceremony whereby the ruler steps on the offered deer 3 times to mark god's acceptance of the sacrifice. Intimidated by the spiritual and magical powers of the ruler and the sanctity of the ceremony, all the police had refused to budge which enraged the police commander. He rushed to try to stop the ceremony himself, only to slip and fall on his face, injuring himself. This must have confirmed the troops' opinion of the wisdom of intervening against such powerful spiritual forces and the ceremony was duly carried out. By the time we emerged from our beds at 9 am the only hint of a festival remaining was the occasional carload of drunken youths, careering around town chanting war songs, and truckloads of police moving out of town. I reckon that the organisers have got some way to go in the packaging of the festival for tourism.

IV THE BEACH

Busua

Having quaffed on unrelenting culture for several months, it was time for a hedonistic interlude, lazing on a beach. We originally planned to spend 2 weeks at Busua, a small seaside village on the West coast. However, although the beach was certainly spectacular, set between wooded hilly headlands, it fell some way short of our ideal retreat due to the large, luxury, 'beach-village' resort dominating the bay. This resort played host to numerous 'beach bashes', wild beach parties involving live musicians which drew large crowds from neighbouring towns and from as far afield as the capital. These bashes, held at weekends, somewhat shattered the sense of a remote secluded paradise since they involved thousands of people running rampage on the resort's

beachfront while thousands of others stood forlornly just beyond the resort boundary. From time to time these excluded ones would make mass rushes across the sands towards the resort, pursued by baton-swinging police and security guards.

But it wasn't really the beach bashes which ruined our enjoyment of the beach, it was the presence of dozens of other white Europeans, sunning themselves on the sand which did it. It was just too difficult to retain our carefully cultivated mental image of ourselves as intrepid explorers of wild lands, while lying beside a group of 20 fortnight package tourists from Essex. Elsewhere there was always a foreign presence but this mostly consisted of aid workers and volunteers. Other than these we occasionally came across people who, like ourselves, were spending a considerable length of time travelling through several countries of the region. These encounters were always extremely welcome since they offer a chance to exchange everything from stories and advice to books. It is unfortunate that, in this part of the world, long term overland travellers are few and far between.

While the encounters with overlanders had been hitherto thoroughly enjoyable, here in Busua our happy record scored its first blank, for here we came across two Swiss men who single handedly succeeded in permanently shattering our generally benign view of overlanders. Although we first met them in Busua, we had already had a close brush with them. While waiting for our visas to be delivered to us in the Ghanaian embassy in Cote D'Ivoire, we unwillingly listened to the conversation of two of our fellow supplicants in the adjoining room. One of them was explaining to the other, at great length and in minute technical detail, just how clever he had been in making various adjustments to the engine of his landrover which had allowed him to escape the normal pitfalls associated with cross-desert travel. Since, not wishing to let him see the irritation in my face, I did not look in his direction during this long wait, at first I did not recognise him when he happened to walk into the restaurant where we were sitting one evening in Busua, accompanied by his travelling companion.

Both were in their early forties, moustached and clad in sleeveless safari jackets, covered with zips, pockets and loops - the kind of thing that Prince Charles wears while visiting the Nairobi Hilton. There were no free tables so they shared ours. We engaged them in conversation and quickly recognised one of them as the landrover expert from Cote D'Ivoire, when he decided to treat us to precisely the same account which we had previously overheard. I feel quite sure that neither myself nor Deirdre offered the least encouragement to his litany of mechanical triumph. We sat in stunned, uncomprehending silence, not even offering the merest grunt of congratulation when he reached the climax of his story: the replacement of a broken part of the carburetor with a part from an older, apparently incompatible model! He was totally oblivious to his audience's reaction and, supported by occasional supplementary details interjected by his buddy, gave us the full mechanical chronicles of their trip. They had driven from Switzerland through Libya, Algeria, Mali, Burkina Faso and Cote D'Ivoire, but even the non-mechanical details of their tales were ruined by the fact that the point of every anecdote was that "all those others who do these trips are fools, we on the other hand know better". We told them that two South Africans whom we had met with a landrover had grave security problems. Their car was broken into in Morocco and they lost many of their belongings. They chuckled and shook their heads in sadness that there were such foolish people in the world before explaining to us that all the security measures propounded by the guide books and travel experts were utterly wrong. They appeared amazed that anybody could miss the glaringly obvious and clearly superior security system that they had adopted.

Before they managed to kill us with boredom, we were saved by the arrival of two attractive young Ivorian women whom they had met in Cote D'Ivoire and whom they were now kindly 'giving a lift' to. The next day we encountered them on the beach, in the midst of treating another unfortunate tourist to their tales of glory. We kept our distance.

Ada

After just 4 days at Busua beach we decided to seek another retreat, free of holidaying hordes and Swiss travel experts. Therefore we travelled Eastwards to the small town of Ada Foah, on the mouth of the Volta river. This was much more like it; a sleepy townland spread out along the strip of land between river and sea. There was a tourist industry here but it was all focused on a short stretch of riverbank where a few dozen luxury villas and a hotel provided weekend entertainment for rich Accra businessmen and expatriate workers who fish and jetski on the tranquil river waters. The rest of the town is focused on the seafront and has little to do with the tourist economy. All along the coast groups of people can be seen engaged in the amazing spectacle of collective fishing with huge nets. The nets are hauled in by 20 or 30 people to the rhythm of a common chant. Each net takes over an hour to haul in and men women and children all participate equally in the operation. The initial impression of idealistic communal labour is, however, punctured by the economic reality. The net's owner gets to keep the vast majority of the catch, while the haulers are given a few fish to share among them.

As well as the long lines of fishermen, the coastline is dotted with abandoned, collapsed buildings, many of which have been partially swallowed by the sea. These testify to the fact that the town is essentially built on a sandbar, the coastline is constantly shifting, backwards and forwards into the sea in cycles that can last several decades. The traditional housing, built of palm-fronds and sticks, was well suited to this, since one could pick one's house up and move it backwards or forwards as the shifting coastline demanded. On the other hand, modern concrete buildings, rooted to the ground, have often to be abandoned to the encroaching sea.

We spent a week relaxing in one of the palm-frond huts, rented for \$3 a night, with a sand floor, a mattress stuffed with straw for a bed and the sea 20 feet away. Except for a South African couple who stayed one night, we were the only guests in the 'beach village', a collection of half a dozen huts, 2 hammocks, many palm trees and a bar. The seclusion, beer and beach went a long way towards making it a pleasant stay but what turned it into paradise was the proprietor 'Groove'. A large man with long afro-style hair, I knew that I'd like him from the moment he approached me on the first night and said "do you smoke grass?" before handing me a large joint.

Now this was certainly not the first time that we had come across grass in Africa. It is available everywhere but is often difficult to procure since it is illegal and in some countries, like Cote D'Ivoire, its use is considered a serious offence which forces its consumers to be very secretive. Normally it is of a very low potency compared with the produce of the hydroponic labs of Holland and North America and it is generally sold with small branches and many seeds mixed up with the smokeable parts. The price is uniformly low, 1 joint of pure grass normally costs about twice the price of one cigarette. \$1 buys 10 to 15 grammes and at the site of production prices are as low as \$30 for one kilo.

The grass that Groove introduced me to came ready-divided into single joint-size portions, each portion artfully wrapped in its own cigarette paper, in small croissant shapes exactly the same way that cheese is wrapped inside pasta. This grass was top of the range, 10 cents a joint,

pure, without any seeds, of quite a different quality to that which we had hitherto come across and thus I was quite unprepared for its effects. I sat down with Groove and shared 3 joints and 2 beers with him as the sun set over the sea. Presently Deirdre arrived to collect me for dinner and joined us briefly. Soon we arose, thanked Groove and set out towards the village centre to look for somewhere to eat dinner.

We stepped out of the confines of the beach village and onto the small sandy lane, which stretched through the flat, reedy swamps which separate the village from the coast. The fluorescent sign of Groove's beach village lit up the lane for 20 yards in front of us. As I surveyed this scene, I realised that I had no idea where in the world I was. As I took slow, hesitant steps along the lane, my mind frantically searched for some reference point to locate myself in time or space. The scenery, populated by palms, cactuses and a cacophony of strange insect calls, seemed entirely unfamiliar to me. I found myself completely unable to place myself, the best guess I could make was that I must be on a film set due to the bright lights behind me and the fact that surely no such scenery could possibly exist outside the films. Eventually I had to get Deirdre to explain to me where we were and what we were supposed to be doing. Her bemused answer, that we were in Ada Foah on our way to dinner, lacked any real meaning to me, but I resolved to keep walking and trust Deirdre to lead the way.

After walking for what seemed like hours through the film set, we arrived at the village crossroads. Here we had to make a decision as to which was the best way to go in search of food. Deirdre decided to seek my opinion which was unwise since every direction appeared equally mysterious to me, full of frightening beasts and unknown dangers. As we stood there at the crossroads, weighing up the terrors of the two potential routes, we obviously appeared quite lost and so, naturally, the first passersby approached us to offer their assistance. They were three young men on bicycles, helpful and friendly, but to me their approach was the most traumatic event imaginable. Bravely I managed to return their greetings but that was the end of my participation in the conversation for at that moment I suddenly realised that I no longer had any sense of up and down. It required all of my concentration to stay upright. I felt certain that my body was leaning forward at an unnatural angle and that I must surely fall. However, since I had no idea which was up and which was down and since I didn't seem to have fallen over yet, I decided that the best strategy was to remain rigidly still. As I was battling with this problem, Deirdre heroically concluded the conversation and discovered which direction to go. As she guided me along the road, my senses happily returned.

From then on, I was very careful to exercise caution in indulging in Groove's grass and thus managed to retain my senses throughout the week that we spent with him, drinking and chatting on the beach. He came from Accra, from a well-to-do family and had originally aimed to go to university. On the way into one of his final high school exams, he was suspected of cheating and was searched. Instead of finding any hidden notes, marijuana was found, he was expelled and missed out on going to college. Later he had tried to go on a private course but hadn't been able to afford it. He was still upset that his emigrant cousins in London had refused to finance him. After the end of his education dreams he went into small business, starting off by running a market stall before graduating to running a video house, showing videos to punters for a small fee. He delighted in recounting the plots of many of the films that he had shown, enlivening the accounts with vivid gestures and turns of phrase. Within the last year he had moved onto run one of the two beach villages in town and was delighted to see it mentioned in our guidebook. A

week of his company on the beach refereshed our spirits and readied us for the impending trip along the coast towards the infamous citadel of Lagos.

Togo - Four glorious days

After battling your way through the crowds of money changers, hustlers and helpers on the border between Ghana and Togo, you emerge to find yourself in the city centre of the Togolese capital, Lome, and a bare stone's throw from the presidential palace. The question immediately springs to mind: "why the hell did they build the capital here, right on the border, which limits all expansion to the East?" But this is Africa and you have to remember that the borders are all relatively recent inventions, imposed by the colonial powers in a parcelling out of the lands amongst themselves. In this case the juxtaposition of the capital city and the border is explained by the fact that present day Togo is only part of what was once German Togoland. After the German defeat in WWI, the French and British victors divided up the spoils between themselves. The British got one third which they added to the Gold coast (now Ghana) while the French got the rest. Lome obviously proved a useful point of reference for the division and so the border was traced along the limits of the town as it was then, regardless of the fact that this would obviously prove a great practical nuisance to any growth. After independence nobody thought that this artificial division could possibly last, but the arbitrary carve-up of 1918 remains to this day, due to the fact that no ruler of Ghana or Togo would ever voluntarily reduce their own power. The Togolese rulers want 're-unification', the Ghanaian powers want incorporation of Togo into an expanded Ghana, hence there is a deadlock. Within the framework of nation states the only way that the present borders could change is through conquest of one by the other.

Togo is a thin strip of a country, over 500 km long, but only 50 km wide at the coast and barely reaching 100 km wide elsewhere. Today Lome has little hint of the original German colonial presence. French language and culture are as implanted here as elsewhere in French West Africa. As soon as one crosses the border, the change from anglophone to francophone is immediately evident. The prices increase, the food improves and the gambling stalls show the results of horseraces in Nice rather than football in Bradford. The indigenous culture, on the other hand, is the same on both sides of the border. The people, languages, physical geography, traditional beliefs and climate are exactly the same in Togo as in eastern Ghana. However, in addition to the French influences, one notices a distinct change in the atmosphere. There is a strong sense of underlying tension and anger on the streets of Lome. The market swarms with aggressive hawkers, beggars and souvenir sellers who dog the steps of tourists. Surly policemen man roadblocks on main streets, extorting presents from motorists.

The reason for the atmosphere of discontent is not hard to perceive. Togo's president, general Eyadema, has ruled uninterrupted since his coup in 1967. He has followed remarkably closely in the footsteps of Mobutu who took power in Congo two years before him. Both based their regimes upon vicious repression, paranoid monitoring of all potential opposition, large and corrupt security forces with arbitrary powers, superficial drives for 'authenticity' and african-ness which masked unbridled economic exploitation by foreign capital, elections rigged in laughably obvious frauds and, crucially, Western support in return for staunch political backing during the cold war. However, restrained by a small, relatively resourceless country, Eyadema has never

quite emulated the grandiosity of Mobutu's deranged regime. Not for want of trying though. Alongside his Burkinabe counterpart, Compaore, Eyadema was fingered by recent UN reports as a middleman in the laundering of UNITA's 'conflict diamonds'. In terms of basic development, Togo is significantly worse off than its coastal neighbours; what hasn't been looted, Eyadema has often ploughed into ludicrous self-aggrandising projects. His natal village, Kara, has grown from nothing to be Togo's second city in 20 years, much of industry has been located there. Lome's tallest building is the hotel of February 2nd, a massive, shiny, glass and steel, luxury hotel. What does the date stand for? On February 2nd, 1974 Eyadema made his 'triumphal return' to Lome after surviving a plane crash. This expensive 400 room hotel has remained mostly empty since its construction, perhaps not on the Mobutu scale of follies, like the huge marble palaces deep in the rainforest, but you have to give Eyadema marks for trying.

One place where Eyadema has surpassed Mobutu, is in his survival skills. He rode out the wave of democratic protests which swept across Africa in the early nineties by simply killing hundreds of opponents. In the post cold-war world, Western countries have had less need for loyal dictators of tiny African nations and less willing to take the PR hit of financing them. Therefore Eyadema has had to turn elsewhere for funds. To Libya. While we were in Lome, there was a massive, Libyan funded refurbishment of the city's hotels and conference centres going on, in preparation for the upcoming conference of the Organisation of African Unity. Gaddafi has for some time been using Libya's oil money to bail out broke African rulers in return for their support of his project to create an 'African union'.

Togo's Finest

Despite his success in surviving longer than most of his peers, one gets the sense that Eyadema's days are numbered. Benin and Ghana both house many Togolese dissidents and twice in the 1990's the regime barely survived armed rebellions. From what we saw of Togo's armed forces it is hard to imagine them standing up to any large incursion. The presidential palace, on the Lome seafront, is surrounded by a large wall which has guardhouses built into it at intervals of 20 metres or so. Most of these are normally empty since the soldiers prefer to hang around in a bunch together at one corner of the palace, where they can most effectively extort money from passers-by. On one occasion, Deirdre was walking by the palace alone, on her way to meet me. A lone soldier, standing in one of the guardhouses, hissed to draw her attention. She kept going, not overly eager to help ease his boredom. He then shouted and pointed his rifle at her, which caused her to reconsider and stop, especially since a tourist was shot dead by a soldier at this very place, two years ago. Having got her to stop, he proceeded to berate her for not stopping quickly enough, grinning and brandishing his gun in a naked display of power. Eventually he let her go, after confiscating her passport and telling her to come back 2 hours later. This confiscation was a little worrying since passports are very important for us, having to cross so many borders, and, without one, every roadblock and checkpoint becomes very expensive. Therefore, as soon as she met me, we set out at once to try to procure the passport. We walked back to the palace but the guardhouse where he had been was now empty. We continued to the next one, again empty. The third guardhouse also appeared empty except for a semi-automatic rifle resting on the counter. Quelling the urge to grab the weapon and invade the palace, we approached the counter and called out "hello!". We heard a stirring from the ground and, soon after, the soldier appeared. He

stood up, yawned, slipped on his wrap-around shades, leaned forward on the counter, grinned at us and burped, releasing a waft of beery odour. Completely ignoring Deirdre, he proceeded to explain himself to me. He had seen her walking by the presidential palace and, concerned lest she should do anything forbidden in such a sensitive area, he had decided to apprehend her. Now, since he had explained this to a man who could look after her, of course we could have the passport back, only would't we think of bying him a beer? Since we were rather busy that day, we decided to short-circuit the process and reluctantly agreed to it. After a small bit of haggling over how much a beer would cost, we secured the passport for 75 cents and continued on our way. This brush with the 'elite presidential guard' led us to think that Eyadema's paranoia about armed rebellions is probably well founded. While they are certainly very brave when confronting unarmed tourists, it is hard to imagine their discipline standing up to much of a threat!

Benin - sightseeing

After just 4 days in Lome, we continued along the coast into Benin. The trip from Lome to Benin's commercial capital, Cotonou, is very straightforward since both lie directly on the major coastal highway which runs all the way from Abidjan to Lagos in Nigeria. As one passes Eastwards across Togo and into Benin, the gravitational pull of Lagos can be felt ever stronger. English becomes much more widely spoken and the roads are full of merchants taking wares to and from the undisputed commercial capital of West Africa. Entering Cotonou, the traffic thickens and huge traffic jams cut across the city along the main East-West axis. Massive articulated lorries roll ceaselessly out of Cotonou's port, straight towards the Nigerian border. It is said that Benin's economy largely depends on the smuggling of goods into its massive neighbour.

We based ourselves in Cotonou and made several excursions from there. We were running far behind our original schedule and had thus resolved to hurry through Benin, briefly visiting the main tourist sites. Naturally, our initial plans for a whirlwind tour of 3 days proved to be woefully optimistic, but we didn't regret the week we spend in and around Cotonou. Aesthetically the city is a catastrophe. The whole place looks like a building site which has been abandoned half way through. The skyline is irregular, large ugly stacks are scattered around among the predominant low, concrete buildings. Many buildings are unpainted and the bare concrete has become discoloured and ugly through exposure to the extremes of this tropical climate. Huge piles of sand and gravel obstruct pavements on the main boulevards. Few of the roads are paved and huge pools permanently occupy certain crossroads where the road has long been washed away. Countless small motorbikes and massive trucks throng the streets, spewing clouds of dust and smoke into the air. Nevertheless it is a pleasant and friendly city. Good cheap food is easy to find, the pavement cafes are pleasant places to drink beer and both police roadblocks and aggressive hustlers are mercifully rare.

Stilt living

The whole coastal area of Benin is riddled with lagoons which contain a number of stilt villages. These villages are home to fishing people and are situated on land which is seasonally flooded and is completely submerged for several months of the year. The inhabitants choose to live in these places because they allow them to live much closer to their fishing grounds and because they formerly provided protection against the slave-raiding armies from the Dahomey empire to the North who were forbidden to launch attacks over water. We visited the stilt village of Aguegue, 12 km across the lagoon from Benin's political capital Port Novo. To get there, we rented a canoe and two oarsmen in Port Novo for \$10. One of the rowers stood at the back, polling us along the bottom, while the other sat at the front with a short oar topped by a single heart-shaped blade, alternatively used on either side of the boat. The 12 km trip took about 2 hours, during which we passed through an amazing waterborne society. A large area of the lagoon was divided into large rectangular plots by straight rows of bushes planted tightly together, their tops emerging a couple

of feet above the waterline. Beneath the water, their roots and branches grow so close together that fish can't pass through them. Our rowers informed us that these enclosed plots are used for raising captive fish which are harvested every year or so. These watery fields are interspersed with a system of watery highways through which a large number of small boats constantly travel. People are everywhere, some working in the fields, mending holes in the bushes, collecting fish into their boats or bathing themselves in the water. Others are travelling with fish to the town, or with other supplies towards the villages. Still others sleep, lying in their boats which float gently on the tranquil waters. Here and there wooden huts have been built on stilts above the lagoon and these provide a focus for local people who gather their boats about them and use them to rest and cook food in while out on the water.

The village itself was mostly on dry land when we saw it, although the main transport arteries were channels of water, and pirogues were the only way of getting between the different parts of the village. There were several hundred buildings, most made of thin wooden sticks, although there were also 3 or 4 concrete buildings. All of them were built on stilts, their floors raised about 3 feet off the ground. The inhabitants sat on their porches, lay under their houses in shelter from the sun or rowed about in pirogues. Outside the small concrete church, a funeral was underway with the customary drummers, dancers and fine, colourful outfits. We stopped at the police-station, a tiny concrete hut, for the oarsman to deliver a letter. The policeman, a native of Cotonou, seemed very unhappy with his current posting. Within one minute of our meeting, he had poured out his tales of woe to us. He had previously been posted to Cotonou port, the most cosmopolitan place imaginable and, presumably, a pretty good place to get 'presents'. Now he found himself in this isolated backwater among these uncultured savages whom he considered to be thoroughly useless and lazy on account of the fact that they grew no food, merely fished, and spent much time sleeping in their boats. His isolation meant that he found it difficult to get food, the 2 hour trip to Port Novo was exhausting and, worst of all, nobody came to visit him.

Snakes 'n slaves

Next we visited Ouidah, once a major slave port for the Dahomey empire, today mainly renowned for its voodoo shrines. The city's central square counterposes the two major religious forces. On one side, the catholic basilica towers over the town, on the other stands the much smaller, but vastly more popular with tourists, python temple. This temple houses several shrines for offerings to the 'snake-god' Dagbe, but, most entertainingly, it has a small circular building full of pythons. The temple's custodians are well versed in the arcane art of extracting cash from tourists. \$1.50 has to be paid to gain entry, and if one wants to take photos with the snakes, an extra, negotiable fee must be paid. The custodian's strategy in negotiating this fee was genius. As soon as he learned that we had a camera, he went to the python room, took a large snake out and, ignoring Deirdre's protests, strung it around her neck. Instantly her whole body went completely rigid, her neck sought refuge in her shoulders, her eyes opened wide and took on a glazed appearance, her mouth fell wide open but no sound came out save for a strangled gasp which meant "take it off!". Leaving her in this state, the custodian turned to me and began the negotiations. He wanted \$10 for a photo but I refused to budge over 50 cents. This standoff was obviously not to Deirdre's liking and, had I not appreciated her toughness, I would have been tempted to give in and take the photo, releasing her from her frozen terror which was not helped

by the snake starting to move, squirming across her bare shoulders. Eventually the custodian realised that I was a bastard and gave in, so we managed to capture a pose of Deirdre trying to smile with the snake. The deranged grin did rather a poor job of masking her terror.

Dahomey - skulls

Our final excursion in Benin took us to Abomey, the pre-colonial capital of the powerful Dahomey empire, some 100 km north of the coast. The town, today a calm and pleasant backwater, housed the palaces of the Dahomey kings. Each of the 12 kings built his own palace adjoining that of his predecessors. The complex covers a large area since each palace had several buildings and courtyards. However, the French destroyed all but 2 of the palaces so most of the area has today reverted to wild bush, from which a few sections of mud-brick wall protrude. The 2 remaining palaces are currently being refurbished and are regaining their former splendour. The buildings are mostly long, low and rectangular with sloping roofs. They are made in mudbrick, decorated with brightly painted bas-relief sculptures of many of the kings' symbols. The only concrete building in the complex is a small whitewashed building built as an administrative office by the French after their defeat of Dahomey in 1892. It is situated slap-bang in the middle of the last king's palace, a humiliating symbol of French conquest.

Several of the buildings today serve as museums, housing many historical relics of the Dahomey kings. The kings' authority was derived from various sacred objects: banners, umbrellas, stools, thrones and staffs. Each king had their own particular symbols which were used to decorate their sacred objects. Bees, birds and other symbols from nature predominate on the tapestries and carvings from the early monarchs. As the kingdom became larger and more powerful it also became more despotic and relied increasingly upon trading slaves for guns. This change is reflected in the king's choices of symbols. Decapitated heads became favourite decorative motifs in the tapestries of the early 19th century monarch, Ghezzo. His tyrannical rule was based on a well armed, professional army and large scale sacrifices of slaves to appease the gods. His throne which rests on 4 human skulls, gives one an idea of the type of impression that he wanted to create. However, despite their undoubted military ability, the Dahomey kingdom did not have a social organisation permitting them to wage war on the large scale that the Europeans could and they were unable to resist the large French expeditionary force of the 1890's

Lagos the great

I IN AT THE DEEP END

It wouldn't be true to say that we had heard glowing reports of Lagos before going there. Most of the tourists we met in West Africa thought we were mad for considering it. Nigeria's immigration, customs and security personnel enjoy a special place in the horror stories of African travellers' lore, and Lagos holds pride of place. Long before arriving in Africa, we had heard stories of heavily armed gangs rampaging with impunity through the Lagos streets. In the guidebook descriptions, the word 'hellhole' is alarmingly common. Yet there were compelling reasons to visit it. It is sub-Saharan Africa's most populous city - nobody knows the population but estimates range from 6 to 13 million - dwarfing the other West African cities, and, as the region's undisputed economic capital, we were resolved to visit it, at least briefly, to give us a more rounded picture of the region. Furthermore, after one too many brushes with stamp happy immigration officials, I found my passport full and the only Irish embassies in the region are in Lagos and Freetown, Sierra Leone. Since the war had just flared up again just outside Freetown, Lagos surely had to be a better bet for a replacement passport. Finally and reassuringly, none of the African traders we met seemed to think it especially ill-advised to go there, limiting their warnings to saying that it was a 'fast' place.

For months we had been mentally steeling ourselves for the challenges of this fabled city. Every time we arrived after dark in a town, allowed ourselves to be distracted by shady characters or excessively laden down with unwieldy baggage, we had said to ourselves: "we can make these mistakes now, but not in Lagos". We reckoned that our arrival in the city was the most perilous part of our stay since we'd be new to the country, ignorant of the customs and layout, as well as being conspicuously burdened with juicy backpacks. Therefore we spent a few days in Cotonou, Benin preparing ourselves, before braving the 120 km trip along the coastal highway. We cut our baggage to an absolute minimum by posting all but the absolute neccessary home, taking particular care to eliminate all politically questionable literature which might excite the suspicion of customs officers. We concealed our valuables in various secret pouches and pockets on our bodies. We filled our wallets with American single-dollar bills in preparation for corrupt border officials. Our camera and binoculars, evidence of the crime of 'journalism', were hidden deep inside our bags. The only part of our preparations which was incomplete was our accomodation since, despite many attempts, we had failed to achieve a telephone connection to any of the hotels listed in our guidebook. Nonetheless we set out from Cotonou bright and early to ensure we'd have plenty of time to find a hotel room before dark.

By 11 am we were at the Nigerian border. Our taxi dropped us off a kilometre short of the frontier and we walked the remaining distance through a multitude of traders' stalls, towards the border post, an imposing concrete gateway spanning the road. Our sense of apprehension was heightened by the fact that we seemed to be a most unusual sight to the denizens of this frontier land. They stared in wonder, pointed at us and called out "tourists!" to their friends, as if

we were some semi-mythical beast, unknown outside of ancient folklores. We were expecting a gruelling series of interrogations and were prepared to follow the guidebook's advice and simply dole out the bribes to whoever asked without quibbling. Thus we were amazed when we got through the entire formalities in 5 minutes with almost no expense. We handed our passports to the immigration man, gave him \$2 upon request, answered a few questions about ourselves, specified that we wanted to stay for a month and promptly got our passports back. We moved from immigration to customs. The officer asked for a 'dash' but, as I was fishing for it in my pocket, another officer came over and told his colleague to leave us alone as we were tourists. Reluctantly he concurred and waved us through without the merest peek in our bags. We emerged in Nigeria to find, to our immense surprise, an almost total lack of touts, hustlers and hawkers. It actually took us some time to find a moneychanger, but eventually we tracked one down, changed \$10, enough to get us to Lagos, and found a taxi which was leaving at once with a mere 3 passengers and acres of space, a shocking phenomenon in West Africa where empty space in vehicles seems to be considered an offence against nature itself.

Our car tore along the multi-lane highway, giving us little chance to examine the 80 km of countryside which separate Lagos from the border. The onset of the city is gradual, indicated by thickening traffic which slows to a crawl at least 10 km before the city centre. The city was originally based on islands in the coastal lagoons but nowadays the vast majority of the population live in sprawling suburbs on the mainland. Our taxi inched its way through this sprawl, along a 3 lane highway where the cars, immobilised by the perennial 'go slow', are thronged by itinerant salesmen hawking a vast array of produce. The highway snakes through a bleak, unrelenting, urban landscape, populated by countless rust-roofed appartement buildings and ramshackle commercial stalls, interrupted by massive, creaking factories, desolate warehouses and increasingly rare patches of wasteland, part rubbish dump, part tropical jungle. After about one hour of slow progress, our taxi ejected us at the major suburban intersection known as 'mile 2', where acres of buses, taxis and indeterminate motorised vehicles flank the road. Here we learned to our dismay that the taxi trip to the centre would cost as much as the 90 km from the border. This was especially dissappointing since we had only \$4 left and it required an agonising series of negotiations before we found a taxi driver willing to take us to the hotel that we had picked from our guidebook for this small sum.

The hotel's address was on Lagos island, the commercial centre of the city. The trip there took us along an impressively modern system of highways, linked by stilted, twisting access roads, across bridges, over lagoons and swamps, elevated above the rusting hulks of the city's power-stations and major industry. The skyscrapers of Lagos island loomed behind this scene of desolate pollution like a fairytale city in the clouds. We zoomed unimpeded through this industrial zone and finally emerged onto the final bridge to Lagos island, with the city towering, unobscured before us. Here we learnt why the taxi drivers had been so unwilling to take us. Half way across the bridge, market stalls started appearing towards the side of the road, by the bridge's end, only the centre lane of the 3 lane road was available for cars as the stalls advanced further into the road. A few feet further on, the street disappeared altogether, devoured by the market's insatiable lust for commerce. We crossed the bridge at approximately 2pm, by 2:20 we had advanced about 20 feet when the road suddenly turned into an illegal motor park. The narrow passage that existed between the market stalls was filled with parked minivans, each trying to attract passengers from the market. Thus all traffic had to wait for a van to fill to advance the length of one minivan. We were stuck in the back of the taxi, the driver was getting increasingly annoyed at

us for making him come this way, the sun was beating on our backs amplified by the windscreen glass and worst of all, we were peniless and thus unable to buy any of the frozen yoghurts that vendors were pushing in the windows. For the next 2 hours we advanced one minivan length every 20 minutes or so. The monotony was only relieved by the approach of a policeman who waved completely ineffectually at the traffic for a minute or so before demanding and receiving 50 cents from our driver in appreciation of his help.

It was 4:20 pm when we finally emerged from the market and turned down the road where the hotel was supposed to be situated, a narrow street thronged with pedestrians. When our hotel proved not to be at the address claimed in our book, the driver was in no mood to continue the search and unceremoniously dumped us and our bags out onto the street. We strapped our backpacks on and set out to search the locality for the hotel, knowing that our guidebook frequently gives slightly inaccurate locations. We backtracked along the busy street to roughly the area where it should have been and to our relief saw a small wooden sign pointing down a narrow sidestreet. We jostled our way down this street along the thin passageway between traders' stalls, ignoring the astonished stares and shouted questions from bystanders, in a dismal attempt to appear as if we knew where we were going. 6 metres further on, another sign for the hotel appeared, pointing down a dark, narrow alleyway, maybe 5 feet wide, between two tall buildings. It seemed like a poor location for a hotel, somewhat risky for evening strolls, but we had little alternative but to press on. 10 metres or so down the alley an even smaller alley branched off to the right. A few metres down this alley we could just about see, through the gloom, the name plaque of the hotel pointing towards the doorway of an apparently derelict building with broken windows and boarded up doors. A young woman emerged from a dark entrance opposite and pointed us towards a grimy staircase which rose into unfathomable darkness. We turned and fled, back through the alleys, enduring the bemused looks of the stallholders, back onto the street whence we had come.

So we found ourselves in the middle of one of Lagos's poor neighbourhoods, with no local currency, nowhere to stay, no idea where we were or where we could go and little over an hour of daylight left. We panicked. We rushed randomly through the streets, several times finding ourselves at places where the crowds thinned and thus we turned back, believing ourselves safer among the masses. Pushing through the throng with our homes strapped to our backs, we felt as vulnerable and trapped as a tortoise among a pack of leopards. Never have I felt so conspicuous. Shoppers stopped and stared, idlers pointed and shouted; we seemed to be an entirely novel sight. Our headlong progress brought us into the commercial district, banks housed in towering skyscrapers rose all around and still no hotels. What's more, unlike all the other commercial capitals of West Africa, we had not yet seen a single white person. On several occasions we decided to enter a bank to try to change some money but couldn't figure out how to get past their heavy defences around the doors and so kept going, deciding it was a bad idea to ask help and reveal the full extent of our muggability. We decided to attempt to pay a taximan in dollars but the few taxis that we saw all had passengers. Our guidebook had a rough schematic map of the city on which another hotel was marked. We tried walking there, but soon came to a point where all the streets looked empty and dangerous. We turned back in despair and then, mercifully, saw a parked taxi with the driver leaning against the door. He knew of the hotel and agreed to take us there for 3 US dollars. 5 minutes later we heard the happy words, "yes we have rooms", our white skin persuaded them to forgo the 'payment-in-advance' rule, and our ordeal was over. We

deposited our bags and celebrated our survival with Guinness and Harp in the bar, comforting memories of home.

II THINGS FALL APART

Although we had originally planned for only a few days in Lagos, events contrived to keep us there for more than two weeks which did at least give us a chance to balance our initial terror with more sober assessment. In daylight hours we wandered around much of the central commercial area on foot, as well as through various suburban areas and while we were always very conscious of our security and avoided unpopulated streets, we never felt threatened. The hustle and bustle of the market areas is certainly overwhelming, the sheer volume of people can intimidate, but tourists, being extremely rare, have no place in the economy and are treated as unusual curiosities rather than potential customers or criminal targets. After dark was a different matter and we generally stayed close to home, seeing little of Lagos by night.

The city is very much conceived and laid out on a European model. There is little physical evidence that one is in Africa among the skyscrapers, flyovers, apartment blocks and slums. Glaring poverty sits cheek to cheek with flamboyant wealth. Makeshift plastic and scrap metal homes crowd the patches of scrub beneath the soaring motorways. Recently arrived rural immigrants line the streets, selling all manner of goods, swarming through the traffic, among the numerous shiny mercedes. In the shadow of the gleaming skyscrapers many of the buildings are decayed and falling down. In heavy traffic small beggar children cling to the rear doors of cars and run alongside, for as long as possible, trying to squeeze out a few cents for their persistence. While much of this is common to all the big cities of the third world, Lagos does have a few distorted reflections of the surrounding African society; the lagoons are fringed with stilt-shanty towns, constructed from scrap over the water since no land is available. However, the area where Lagos is most unique, most outstanding, surely unparalleled in all of human history, in its dysfunctionality which reaches epic, mind-boggling proportions. Lagos simply doesn't work.

POWER

The most immediately obvious aspect of this dysfunctionality is in the provision of basic utilities. Lagos has, to all intents and purposes, no electricity supply and only occasional running water. For the first two days of our stay in the city I recorded the coming and going of power:

Day 1: arrive 5pm - No power. 7pm - power on. 9pm - power goes and remains off until next morning except for a brief spell sometime between midnight and dawn which I noticed as the lights came on and I had to get up to turn them on.

Day 2: No power until 4pm 6pm - power off 8pm - power on 8:30pm - power off. 11:30 pm - power on, remains on until morning allowing us to use our air conditioning and sleep without sweating profusely!

After this we moved to a hotel with a generator and ceased to notice the power outages except on the 3 or 4 occasions when the generator broke down. In our first hotel there was no running water at all, we were given 2 buckets full every morning. In the second the water worked most

of the time but was liable to go for hours on end. The extent of the problems that this situation causes in such a massive city is hard to fully appreciate. Anybody who relies upon any electrically powered item must be able to generate their own power. This is feasible, if inconvenient, for large businesses. The commercial areas of Lagos hum with the almost constant sound of thousands of diesel generators. Some large companies go further: Cadburys Nigeria have their own power stations and private distribution network. The situation is much worse for small businesses and artisans. Welders, providers of photocopying or word processing services and many others who could never afford generators are completely immobilised by the situation. As an example of how the unreliable power supply has a wide reach, I wasn't able to get my haircut while in Nigeria for fear that the razor would lose power midway through and leave me with an even sillier haircut than the one that had sprouted on my head since my last haircut in Dakar. Only the richest individuals can afford generators for their homes and thus the city's millions are constrained to endure the intense humidity and heat without as much as a fan to cool them.

PHONES

The telecommunications infrastructure is also barely operational. I wanted to contact the Awareness League, Nigeria's anarcho-syndicalist organisation, while in Lagos. I had been given three telephone numbers for them and, as soon as we arrived, set out to try to phone them. The first problem was finding a phone. All over West Africa there are small telecentres where one can call and the charge is registered on a meter. Not in Lagos. Here there are only a small number of phoneboxes, sparsely scattered about the town. Having located a phonebox, you discover that a prepaid phoncard is needed which is again not easy to find. We spent a large part of a day searching for somewhere to buy one before finally succeeding at the headquarters of the phone company. The cards only come in large denominations and the smallest one, 100 units, is in short supply so we were obliged to buy 200 units for \$15, although we only wanted to make one 10 cent call. Having expended considerable effort to track down the card and phonebox, we were disappointed to learn that none of our numbers appeared to be valid: sometimes the phone started beeping before the number was fully dialled and at others a long silence terminated by a continuous beep followed dialling. After trying all 3 numbers several times each, we came to the conclusion that we must have made a mistake in copying the numbers, so we set out to verify this. The numbers had been sent to me in an email, thus we needed an internet cafe to check them. Whereas little Cotonou, a couple of hours drive away, has several cybercafes, reasonably priced, easy to locate, with modern computers and fast connections, Lagos is different. It took us a full day to find any cybercafe, the price was high, the connection was very slow and the computers were barely operational - it took about 10 seconds for the screen to draw. Nonetheless we did eventually manage to retrieve the telephone numbers only to find that they were identical to those which we had tried. Having nothing else to go on, we decided to try the numbers again in a different phonebox, both with and without the area codes. This time, to our surprise one of the numbers yielded a ringing tone but when it was answered, the person seemed unable to hear us and hung up after a while. Encouraged by this, we tried again, but several more attempts yielded nothing but various sequences of beeps. Finally, on about the 10th call, we got through and were able to leave a message for our contact. Unfortunately it took two more calls to arrange a meeting, again with a connection rate of about 1 in 10. Initially I assumed that this poor strike rate must be caused by something I was doing wrong. It took some time for me to accept that this

was simply the way the phone system worked, an eye-opening realisation which contradicted many of my assumptions about the way the world works. Although communication was rendered extraordinarily difficult by the fact that one had no guarantee of achieving a connection at any given time, we did finally succeed in meeting the Awareness League members.

A TO B

Electricity, water and communications in Lagos may pose problems but what really takes the biscuit, particularly to the newly arrived, is transport, the problem of getting from point A to point B in the city. If the places are close together, one can walk but even this is no simple matter. There are no footpaths. The driving surface often extends right to the edge of the roadside sewers, forcing pedestrians to walk among the traffic, dodging in and out of the narrow channels which temporarily open among the myriad flows of traffic. Where there is a raised verge between the driving surface and the roadside buildings, this gives no safety to pedestrians since, unless the terrain is so rough as to make it physically impossible, cars will swarm all over this area. It is not unusual to see a car, driving along the road's edge, tilted over at a steep angle, with two wheels high up on the verge and two wheels on the road. Driving on these unconventional spaces, reserved for pedestrians in most cities, has no effect on the drivers' speed, except that it is perhaps easier for them to go fast since there are fewer cars to get in their way - pedestrians are no reason to slow down. This all means that walking around Lagos, pushing through the crowds, dodging cars which can appear suddenly from any direction at great speeds, while rebuffing hawkers and beggars, feels like participating in a huge, deranged, futuristic game where the only aim is to survive.

Even if one wanted to, it would be impracticable to rely exclusively on one's feet to get around the city since it spreads over a large area and the different parts are connected only by elevated highways, particularly dangerous to walk along. Therefore it is often necessary to take some form of motorised transport to get around. Taxis are one possibility. However, they are expensive, often difficult to find and, due to the appalling traffic, they can be painfully slow. Even at the best of times, one can find oneself stuck in agonisingly slow jams, especially around major intersections. During the morning and evening 'go-slows' this becomes almost certain. After heavy rains the situation is still worse. The city is built on low, swampy coastal land which floods easily. Heavy rains cause large pools to form on many roads, too deep to drive through, which cause traffic to be completely immobilised for hours. On a couple of occasions we saw huge ponds, 2 or 3 feet deep, blocking traffic in the heart of Lagos island. The traffic blockages, whether caused by flooding or otherwise, are not helped by the behaviour of some of the motorists. In Lagos, although traffic police seem fairly numerous, there is effectively no enforcement of regulations, since they are all busy seeking opportunities for extortion. Therefore, whenever there is a blockage of traffic, although most of the drivers wait patiently in line for the cars to start moving again, invariably a few people decide to try their luck and pull out to recklessly drive down the wrong side of the road or up on the verge. This generally has the consequence of aggravating the situation since, with rogue drivers on either side of the blockage, total deadlock ensues, made ever worse as more and more drivers lose patience in the motionless queue.

To get around the problem of the go-slows, motorbike taxis, known as 'ochadas' are the favoured means of transport. These motorbikes have the advantage of cheapness, about one fifth

the price of a taxi ride, and availability, since they are never hard to find. On the negative side, they are extraordinarily dangerous and, consequently, terrifying. Unfortunately, due to budget restraints, this was our normal form of transport around the city. We had come across these motorbike taxis before, in Togo and Benin, but there, although a little nerve-wracking, they had been an exhilaratingly novel way to travel. Here they somewhat lost their charm. The bikes are normally 80 cc Yamahas, 100 cc Suzukis or 125 cc Hondas, all with long padded seats. Helmets are unknown and, in Lagos, the bikes routinely carry 3 people. The driver sits on the fuel tank while the two passengers squeeze onto the seat, the foremost one using the footrests while the other holds their legs suspended in the air. We generally chose to travel 3 to a bike for security as well as to weigh down the bike and thus limit the speed. Nevertheless the drivers often still manage to coax terrifying speeds out of their small, heavily laden machines, weaving in and out of traffic, up and down onto the verges, switching back and forth between the two sides of the road, leaning into corners at acute angles like racing drivers, ploughing into dense crowds with their hand on the horn. They make any roller coaster look laughably tame. Any projecting limbs are liable to collide with cars and people; on one trip with a particularly reckless driver, I hit my knee against 3 different cars and our bike collided with two pedestrians. The stretches on the highways between the islands are the worst since the bikes have limitless room to accelerate and swerve across lanes. I will not miss this form of transport.

CASH

As well as the problems with the basic services, there are a number of other factors which detract from one's stay in Lagos. Being such a large city, one expects a good range of facilities, at least on a par with Abidjan or Dakar. After the disappointment of Ghana we were desperate for English books and after months of seeing only films dubbed into French, we hoped to watch a few mindless Hollywood blockbuster films in their original language. Thankfully there were some non-religious bookshops here but they were all small and poorly stocked with ancient, yellowing paperbacks. The best among them would come some way short of a typical small, suburban, second-hand bookshop in the West. Cinemas, shockingly don't exist in Lagos. Apart from occasional showings at foreign cultural centres, there is no public cinema. Supermarkets and restaurants do exist but are generally located far out in the affluent suburbs and require a car for a visit. However, by far the most inconvenient aspect for the tourist is the matter of dealing with the local currency.

We carry our money mostly in travellers' cheques and had hitherto no real problems in exchanging them, although we had to carefully plan ahead since banks are limited to major towns. In Lagos we spent an entire day looking for a bank that would exchange such a thing. We travelled up and down several skyscrapers, through heavily guarded vaults where machines counted hundred dollar bills, throughout the strip of shiny bank headquarters, only to be constantly redirected elsewhere, passed around like a hotcake until we finally gave up. The private bureaux de change and street moneychangers would change them for us, but only at about 60% of the cash rate. For our first few days we subsisted on the small stash of cash dollars which we had brought, but, after trying practically every change business in town, we came to realise that we weren't just being taken for mugs, but travellers' cheques were worth far less than cash here. After 3 days

searching we managed to get 80% of their value and had to content ourselves with this although it did make our stay excessively expensive.

Nigeria works on a cash economy. Cheques, credit cards or any sort of cash substitute are almost unknown. The widespread occurrence of financial fraud - known as 'four one nine' after the legal decree which deals with it - ensures that even the biggest, most expensive businesses balk at accepting anything other than cash. Therefore it is unfortunate that cash is so unwieldy. The Nigerian Naira, in 1980 worth over a dollar, is today worth less than one cent. During our stay in Nigeria, the 100 Naira note was just being introduced, although it was yet to enter general circulation. Therefore the biggest note was worth less than 50 cents and even these were hard to find, 20 cent notes being most common. When you take a relatively expensive city, an economy based entirely on cash, a largest denomination of 50 cents and a renowned crime rate together, it is not surprising that there are some problems. One finds oneself walking around with huge wads of cash to pay for the smallest things. Each evening we'd spend quite some time counting the rent on our hotel room. First we'd count it, then they'd count it, if there was any discrepancy we'd have to start again. The whole thing could easily take 10 minutes. The act of money counting starts to take up sizeable chunks of one's day, never mind the time spent concealing huge wads of cash on your person in such a way as not to attract a mugger's attention.

III EXPATONIA

Soon after arrival we contacted the Irish embassy by telephone and explained our need for a new passport. They seemed shocked that we were here, tourists, in Lagos and were very concerned for our safety, counselling us to change hotels to one of the exclusive suburbs. The embassy was located in Victoria Island, the most upmarket neighbourhood in the city, populated by embassies and luxury residences, all defended by massive walls, kilometres of razor wire, armed guards and high-tech security systems. Here, for the first time in Lagos, we came across members of the expatriate community. On the streets they were visible in fleeting glimpses, as they sat in the back of their chauffeur-driven cars or walked between car and house. Within the confines of the four star hotels, embassies and western-style supermarkets stuffed with imported delicacies, they could be seen in greater numbers in less brief installments. We had only a very small exposure to this community, however, even in this short time, we were able to observe a few striking features. In general they live in a self-contained world which has almost nothing in common with the city in which everyone else lives. This separation is reinforced by an exaggerated fear of the dangers of the surrounding society. People were horrified that we were travelling by public transport, expressing the opinion that this was very dangerous for whites since 'they' would hassle us and generally torment us on account of our skin colour. On the contrary we found that people were inclined to take a protective attitude to us on public transport and went out of their way to explain how things worked. Horror stories of banditry and roads strewn with corpses also circulated within the expat community, with reference to the great wilderness beyond the city.

This attitude of exaggerated fear seems to be created as a means of justifying the separateness of the expats, to assuage their consciences, troubled by living on an island of opulence among a sea of misery. It allows them to avoid, and thus ignore, the realities of the city where they live and for many of them, employed in the oil industry and in other jobs basically involving the extraction

of wealth from the country, this requirement for security allows them to avoid confronting the uncomfortable fact of their exploitative role in this society. Nonetheless, despite being slightly rattled by our contravention of the carefully constructed system of separation, the ambassador and embassy staff proved very helpful, preparing me a fresh passport on the spot and supplying us with letters of introduction to assist our applications for visas.

IV ALAGBON: DANGEROUS LIKE A LIONS DEN

There was now only one thing left to deal with in Lagos. When we arrived in the city we had inspected our passports and were surprised to learn that, despite having a visa valid for one month, the immigration man at the border had only granted us a stay of one week. Therefore we would have to get an extension before travelling across the country. We assumed that this had been merely a mistake by the official and that, as in most countries, it would be a simple formality to achieve an extension of our permitted sejour until the end of the month. To this end we undertook enquiries about the means of securing such an extension and were directed to the immigration department of the Federal Secretariat at Alagbon Close, Ikoyi Island. At the time this address did not have any special significance to us and so we went there with light hearts, untainted by any dark apprehensions. Little did we know that the phrase 'Alagbon Close' sends a chill through the soul of Nigerians for it is the Lagos headquarters of the federal government, the lion's den.

Now to understand the mode of functioning of the Nigerian federal government, it is necessary to appreciate certain things about the society. The culture of this modern nation is extremely hierarchical in nature, even militaristic. Differences in standing are finely graded so that it is almost always possible to work out a relative hierarchy among any group of people, even when drawn from different areas. This culture appears to be partly inherited from the militaristic colonial state and partly from some elements of the various indigenous social orders: the Hausa-Fulani emirates of the North are rigidly hierarchical while the South Western Yoruba kingdoms emphasise demonstrations of submission such as full prostration before dignitaries. However, in the modern Nigerian state, it has surely reached its zenith. One of the military dictators in the 1980's (I think Babangida) even attempted to introduce a national ranking, setting out for once and for all who had exactly what positions of relative importance and answering such thorny questions as 'should a university vice chancellor defer to a major of the army?' Among the elite, questions of status and class seem extremely important. The massive Nigerian 'who's who' is an important publication, updated every year, which faithfully records the schooling, and significant positions held by thousands of members of the ruling class. The hierarchical organisation goes hand in hand with a tyrannical use of power. Person number 4,000,001 in the hierarchy must defer, in a servile manner, to number 4,000,000 and can tyrannically terrorise number 4,000,002. This power relationship is manifested in thousands of miniature displays in everyday life. During the 2 weeks we spent in Lagos I was saluted - by doormen and other workers of lowly status - more times than in all the previous years of my life. Anybody who works in the service industry must submit to arbitrary abuse from their customers without the merest complaint or argument, even though they are frequently not at fault, the abuse being merely a way for the customer to flex his or her muscles. The Nigerian federal government is the place where, naturally, this hierarchical tyranny is most perfectly expressed.

We arrived early in the morning at Alagbon Close, a narrow road leading off one of the major highways of Ikoyi. It didn't take us long to find what we were looking for: 30 metres down the road a sign declared 'immigration section' outside an anonymous concrete office block surrounded by a high wall. We addressed ourselves to the uniformed officer at the gate and asked him where we should go to apply for a visa extension. He asked us whether we had a letter. Not knowing to what he was referring, we replied that no, we didn't have a letter. He then said that we needed a letter but perhaps he could help. For a small sum he'd be able to have a letter typed for us. Still ignorant of the meaning of this letter and without any idea how to proceed otherwise, we agreed. He asked us who was our sponsor, the company which was responsible for our immigration. We replied that, as tourists, we had none. He then explained that we would need some local address which would be written into our passports and if we didn't have one then he'd just make one up. A little worried at the prospect of this proposed fraud, we produced a business card given to us by the Irish ambassador and told him that if he needed to use an address then the Irish embassy was as good as any. He shepherded us into the gatehouse and bade us wait while he sent somebody out to type the letter.

For the next 20 minutes we sat there and observed the comings and goings of the immigration department. 2 uniformed officers were employed in the gatehouse. One of them, the less important, was responsible for opening and closing the gate when the other one told him to. The other one, whom we had been dealing with, stood beside the gate and saluted the officers as they came and went, often adding an obsequious "good morning sir". The response of the officers seemed to mostly depend on their status. Those who appeared most prosperous and powerful, condescended to reply with a faint smile, a nod of the head, or even, in an extraordinary display of consideration for this lowly gateman, they'd give a spoken response: "good morning", even adding "how are you?". However the greater number of officers, apparently from the lower grades of the service, either completely ignored him, scowled at him reprovingly, or even admonished him for some supposed oversight, thus hammering home the difference in status between them, lest anybody forget. The gateman in turn frequently berated the gate-opener, some years his senior, for his sloppiness in carrying out his duties. Eventually another officer entered the gatehouse, carrying the letter, which he presented to me, gave me a pen and asked me to sign. The letter, on a thin sheet of plain, unheaded paper, was typed on an antique typewriter. In several places mistakes had been made, typexed out and typed over. The lines of text were completely uneven, swerving up and down, presumably due to the paper being removed several times. The content, in poor, ungrammatical English, amounted to a written pledge, by the Irish ambassador, to take full responsibility, both legal and financial, for the immigration of myself and Deirdre into the country and thus requesting the extension of our visas. Unfortunately, I scrawled my signature at the bottom, underneath the ambassador's name, before the full meaning of the contents had dawned on me. Immediately the letter was taken back from me, we were led out of the gatehouse, across the road, across a courtyard, through a door into a low building. The officer handed our letter, a forgery of appallingly low quality, to another uniformed officer behind a counter, and turned and left us, still somewhat shocked by the turn which events had taken.

We now had a chance to take in our surroundings. We found ourselves in a large, long, open-plan office building. The room was divided into two parts by a counter which ran the length of the room. Behind the counter were some 20 uniformed officers, half of whom were sitting at the counter while the others had desks of different sizes positioned variously around the room. There seemed to be a large amount of activity among the officers, talking on telephones, examining

sheets of paper and passing them among themselves. We were on the other, public side of the counter; a thin corridor between counter and wall furnished only by a long wooden bench. Two of the officers at the counter gestured for us to sit down and started examining our letter. A moment later they looked up, with an expression on their faces that said "I can see that this is going to be very expensive". One held up the letter and said to us "so who is this Ambassador Lynch?" We explained that this letter had been made by one of the gatemen and that we hadn't known that we needed a letter but could now go and get one if necessary. They seemed uninterested in this offer, instead one of them shouted a question to a colleague about the cost of a visa extension for Irish people, "gratis" came back the answer. He turned to us and said: "okay, we can give it to you, but it'll be \$50". We protested that it should be free but he pointed to the forged letter and gave us a knowing smile. Thus, unable to extricate ourselves from the situation, we entered into the haggling over the price. Half an hour later we had succeeded in having the price reduced to \$10, agreed by all parties.

Having settled on a price, the officer took the letter and walked out of the room. Some 20 minutes later he returned and beckoned for us to follow him. He led us out of the room, into a dark alley between two buildings. There we found two uniformed officers inspecting the letter in the gloom. Upon our arrival they looked up from their conspiratorial huddle, nodded and handed the letter to our consort. We were led back to the room and again left to our own devices. Some time later the officer again returned and gestured for me to follow him but for Deirdre to stay. This time he led me in the opposite direction, out of the room, into another adjoining building, through a small anteroom manned by a secretary and into a small office filled by a large desk behind which sat another, this time very well-fed and important looking, uniformed officer, holding our letter between his hands. He gestured for me to sit down. With a bow and a salute my consort backed out of the room, leaving me alone with the big man.

The interrogation started on the subject of the letter but when I explained to him how it had come into existence, he seemed satisfied. For the next hour or so he quizzed me about my 'mission' in the country, my motivation for seeking an extension and my marital status with Deirdre.

- "So you're a journalist?"

-No I'm a tourist.

-But why would a tourist want to stay for a month?

-I want to travel across the country.

-I see, and maybe write a few articles, eh?

-No, I want to visit sites of historic interest.

-But you could do that in a day or two, unless of course you were a journalist?

-But I want to visit Osogbo, Benin city, Jos, Calabar and Kano, they're far apart. ...

-And if she's your wife why does she have a different name to you?

-In my country women often keep their maiden names.

-I tell you they wouldn't want to try that here, here the women take the man's name. It's respect, I mean it just wouldn't do...

-Women in my country are very independant.

-Unless of course, you were two journalists just pretending to be married?"

This interrogation was interrupted by the entry of another man into the room who rushed past the desk, dropped to one knee, clutched the officer's leg and, with bowed head, proceeded to release a string of pleas in a barely discernible low murmur. The officer completely ignored this simpering supplicant but switched tack in the interrogation, concentrating now on the ammount I was willing to pay. Helped by the fact that it was all I had, I refused to budge from \$10, despite quite some pressure from the big man. He seemed rather irritated by my obstinance and I was starting to doubt my success when we were once again interrupted.

This time the caller was no supplicant. His loose fitting African clothes gave no clue as to his status but the reaction to his entry made it clear that he was a very big man indeed. My interrigator sprang to his feet, the supplicant still clinging to his shin, and tried to make himself look small by drawing his neck into his shoulders and bowing his head. With a large smile on his face, the new arrival shook the proffered hand of the officer and said, in a jesting tone: "I'm going to report you, you know". The other laughed in an exaggeratedly ingratiating manner, drew his neck further into his shoulders and said "please sir, no!" Again the new arrival smiled, chuckled and still using the same jesting tone said: "I'm serious, you know", shaking his head in mock exasperation. Throughout this scene of ritual submission, I remained completely ignored. The newcomer proceeded to considerately ask the other about his health, family and mood, interspersing his enquiries with joking reminders that he was going to report the officer, each of which faithfully produced a string of simpering pleas. All the while the supplicant still simpered away on his knees. Finally, having adequately exhibited just who was the big man on the block, the newcomer left and the officer again turned his attention to me. After suffering this humiliation, he now took the oppurtunity to demonstrate his authority to me: "I am giving you two weeks, you can spend one day in each place". He went on to explain exactly how I could manage the transport connections and visit all my intended destinations in just two weeks. I thanked him humbly for his munificence, he scrawled a few figures on my letter, called for an assistant, handed him the letter and I was led back into the large room where Deirdre was waiting.

The letter, complete with the officer's scrawl, was now handed to another officer behind a desk. Here things went wrong. The officer called us over and asked us to explain the letter. He seemed unconcerned by the fact that it was forged by simply refused to accept any letter that was not on headed paper. Thus after several hours trying, we found ourselves back at square one, with only a few hours left to get an extension before our visas expired and put us in the very expesive situation of illegal overstayers. We resolved to procure a genuine letter from the embassy immediately. We travelled directly there by taxi and were obliged by the ambassador who gave us an immaculately word-processed letter introducing us to the immigration service, signed by himself on the crucial, headed notepaper. We returned at once to Alagbon, went straight to the larg office and produced the letter. This time the reaction of teh officers was quite different. Faced with such a letter, not only on headed paper but also with a watermark and two different stamps, they had no choice but to treat us as very important personages. We were led out, across the yard, into an office where we hadn't been before, asked a few polite questions and 20 minutes later

departed with a 5 week extension in our passports. It transpired that the comptroller general, who had just seen us, was the only person with any authority to issue extensions. The entire department simply act as a series of filters between the applicant and authority, filtering cash and the flattery of submission as a condition of being able to pass to the next filter. In our first attempt we had simply presented ourselves, nobodies, and thus were obliged to pass through the full, excruciating set of filters, from gateman to comptroller. The access to power implied by the ambassador's letter short-circuited this system allowing us to bypass most of the filters, since it takes an important officer to risk offending people who have access to a big man like an ambassador. Thus after a long lesson in the ways of power, we left, bruised but victorious with a new found respect for the words 'Alagbon Close'.

V THE GENERAL STRIKE

The day after we arrived in Nigeria, Thursday the 1st of June, the government had announced large increases in the prices of petrol, diesel and kerosene, the principal cooking fuel. The prices of all three were increased by 10 Naira per litre (10 cents) which amounts to a 50% price rise on petrol, now 30 Naira per litre, and almost 60% on kerosene. It did not take us long to learn of the increase. Driving along Kingsway road in Ikoyi, Lagos in a taxi, in typically heavy traffic, another taxi pulled up alongside us and the driver shouted something angrily at our driver in Yoruba. From the tone, we assumed that this was some sort of dispute but no, our driver turned around to us, shook his head and said despairingly: "they've put up the price of fuel". Later that evening, the radio stations phone-in shows rang out with angry callers. Fury was widespread since the price rises had immediately caused large knock-on rises in public transport fares and food prices were expected to follow as extra transport costs kicked in.

Although 30 cents per litre is relatively cheap compared to other countries, petrol occupies a particular place in Nigerian society. Nigeria is the world's sixth largest producer of crude oil. Oil is overwhelmingly its most important resource amounting to as much as 90% of exports. However, most Nigerians feel that they have seen little returns for the billions of dollars earned in oil sales over the years, much of which has lined the pockets of successive spectacularly corrupt leaders, both civilian and military. The only tangible benefit that the oil under their soil brings is the relatively cheap pump prices of petroleum products. The government argues that by selling petrol at the old 'subsidised' rate of 20 Naira per litre, the country is losing billions of dollars, since the price of oil has increased so much on the world market in the last year. It would be much better to save this petrol subsidy and spend it on increased services, education, health and infrastructure. However, Nigerians have learned the hard way that little oil money manages to filter down to the population since there are so many sticky fingers at the top.

The unexpected increase is set against a perennially difficult economic situation, where survival is a daily struggle for many people. President Obasanjo recently announced an increase of the national minimum wage to 7,500 Naira (\$75) for federal employees and 5,500 (\$55) for state employees. Many people interpret these increases as a 'sweetener' for the surprise rise in fuel prices, yet these wages affect as little as 4% of the workforce and have not come into effect yet, while many of the state administrations are refusing to pay them. The unwaged sector is extremely large and unemployment is rampant, many of these people eke out meager existences in the overcrowded slums around the big cities like Lagos. When you are struggling to survive,

somehow defying logic to get by on a miniscule income, you tell yourself that this grim struggle is only going to last until your luck changes, which is bound to happen soon. When the opposite happens and your burden suddenly becomes heavier, it comes as a devastating psychological blow. To resist or to admit defeat are the only options. Slogans such as "why not just kill me", sum up the importance of the issue.

The resistance to the price increases was rapid, widespread and angry. On Monday, June 5th, there were protests all over the Southwest region. Students took to the streets, erecting barricades of burning tyres on many major roads in Lagos, Ibadan, Abeokuta, Ilorin, Oshogbo and other towns. The protestors commandeered buses and prevented the circulation of commercial vehicles, causing huge economic disruption. The resistance gathered momentum when Comrade Adams Oshiomhole, the president of the NLC (Nigerian Labour Congress, the umbrella group of trade unions), called for a boycott of all filling stations that charge the new price and announced a general strike to begin on Thursday June 8th, unless the government reverted to the old price of 20 Naira. Over the next two days, the protests spread from the Southwest to the rest of the country, including Abuja, the federal capital. Protestors blocked roads, seized public transport vehicles, forced filling stations to close and engaged in several confrontations with the police, during which several students were shot, although it seems that the majority of protests remained peaceful. The number of groups supporting the strike call continued to increase and included such diverse groups as the Manufacturers Association of Nigeria, the Association of Road Transport Owners and the Academic Staff Union of Universities. The independent media unanimously condemned the price hike and several state governors also backed the strike call.

THE STRIKE BEGINS.

I got up at 9 am on Thursday morning, the 8th of June, opened my window and heard a bird singing in the distance. You'd probably have to come to Lagos to realise how strange this is. My room was on a busy road on Lagos Island, which normally ensures enough noise to drown out a large explosion nearby, never mind a distant bird. The road, normally jammed with slow-moving, horn-tooting traffic, was deserted except for an occasional pedestrian and an eerie silence hung over the whole city. I went out and walked into the heart of Lagos Island, the commercial centre of Lagos, Nigeria's largest city. These streets, famed for their appalling traffic jams, were all practically deserted, every couple of minutes a lone motorbike or car, carrying a branch of green leaves on its front to show solidarity with the strikers, would hurtle by and a small number of pedestrians made their way tentatively along the edges of the streets. I passed by Tafawa Balewa square, normally thronged with yellow minivans and crowds of bustling commuters. A single bus stood at the loading point beside a small bunch of prospective customers, one of whom walked away complaining bitterly about the inflated prices that were being charged. The busiest areas of the island, around Broad Street and Tinubu Square were empty, barely recognisable and the many bank headquarters appeared closed and empty.

The trade unions led a procession around Abuja, leading government workers out. All across the country banks, hospitals, transport including all domestic flights, and all branches of government were at a standstill. Students and workers barricaded major access roads all over the country including the major Northern cities of Kano and Kaduna, enforcing the unions' stay at home directive to workers and effectively preventing any circulation of public transport or commercial vehicles. The unions were aided in this task by gangs of unemployed youths, 'area boys',

who took it upon themselves to extract tolls and inflict damages on the cars of anybody who defied the union directive. Unfortunately this had the consequence that doctors, journalists and others were prevented from carrying out their essential jobs. Riot police clashed with protestors on several occasions, shooting several of them in the process of clearing the barricades, but the scale of the protests and the massive observance of the strike meant that there was no transport to ferry non-unionised private-sector workers to their places of employment. They either had to trek long distances to work or else return home. The few vehicles that did brave the protestors' wrath faced the problem of securing fuel. Most filling stations were closed, the only open station that I saw was thronged with cars and people carrying jerry-cans. It only stayed open for half the day.

The government backtracked during the first day, returning kerosene to its original price and reducing the increase on petrol and oil to 5 Naira (25%). The unions refused to budge, refusing to accept any price rise whatsoever for a number of reasons. Firstly, on the last 3 occasions that government raised fuel prices in Nigeria, the original increases were somewhat reduced after public outcry. Therefore, many people reason that the government had always intended to introduce a smaller increase than that originally announced, and that anything other than a return to the former price would amount to a defeat to the workers. Furthermore, the unions, having been repressed during many years of military rule, see this struggle as an opportunity to assert their strength especially since many workers have been disappointed with the lack of concrete improvement under the year-old democratic regime. Finally, the fuel price increases are seen as being inspired by the IMF, through the influence of president Obasanjo's economic adviser Philips Asiodu, especially since fuel price increases were central to the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) initiated by the dictator Babangida in the early nineties. In a country where, after several doses of IMF medicine, the average income is somewhere between one quarter and one tenth of what it was in 1980, SAP is practically a swear word.

THE STRIKE CONTINUES

On the second day of the strike, Friday June 9th, I again walked through the commercial heart of Lagos. Again, the streets were virtually deserted. Here and there, forlorn pedestrians were walking about carrying empty jerry-cans, searching for open filling stations. On two occasions, groups of men stopped me to ask me my destination and warn me to return home for my safety. I believe that I might have been mistaken for somebody going to work in defiance of the general strike. In the heart of the commercial district, I came across a group of some 6 youths, picking a man up and holding him suspended upside-down. At this stage I retreated to my room and over the weekend I limited my excursions to the close environs as I had no means of transport and walking around the deserted streets did not appear to be entirely safe. In any case, the main action, protests and rallies were situated far away, in the working class suburbs on the Lagos mainland.

Over the weekend the strike stayed firm and even spread to some hitherto non-striking sectors such as the non-unionised Senior Staff Association, comprising senior workers in banks, civil service, pilots and other senior workers. The extent of the strike is illustrated by the fact that in the entire Lagos metropolis only one filling station remained open on Sunday the 11th, hardly enough to service a city of at least 6 million people! On Friday and Saturday there were several more clashes with police during which many protestors were arrested and a few students

were shot. However the strike still retained its largely peaceful flavour and did not descend into serious widespread violence. For us the weekend passed excessively slowly. For two days we sat in our tiny, grimy hotel room, only leaving briefly to feed ourselves on rice and beans from the street-vendors below. On Sunday, even these dependables didn't appear and an omelette was all we could find to eat. While this situation was certainly difficult for us, our troubles were small compared to those of others. Many people employed in the informal economy exist on a hand-to-mouth basis. They use whatever money they earn to stay alive and have no savings or other means to fall back upon when their income is stopped. A large number of people must have passed a hungry weekend.

Thus when I, driven by cabin fever, went out to walk around the city on Monday morning, I was not surprised to find that many more casual traders, food sellers, taxi drivers and general hawkers had also braved the trip into the city. However, the strike remained total among government workers and civil servants and there was only a bare skeleton of city transport services. Despite the greater number of traders, the city still felt largely deserted and it was clear that the economy remained immobilised. Late that night, the radio news announced the end of the strike. The government had come to a compromise agreement with the NLC which saw petrol priced at 22 Naira, a 10 % increase on the pre-strike level, and kerosene and diesel revert to their original prices. By the afternoon of the next day, Tuesday June 13th, Lagos was largely back to normal, shops, businesses and government offices were mostly open and the streets were thronged with crowds. On Wednesday morning some of the filling stations were open and we were finally able to leave town. Although we weren't sad to say goodbye to it, especially our cell-like room, we were touched to be waved off by many of the food sellers on our street whom we had come to know during the strike.

Overall, although Oshiomhole and the union bureaucracy presented the outcome as a clear victory for labour, the strike's end left an ambiguous impression. On the one hand the IMF inspired pressure to remove subsidies was resisted and many observers claimed that this amounted to a humiliating defeat for Obasanjo, the small rise being scarcely enough for him to save face. On the other hand, a massive and powerful mobilisation on the part of ordinary people ended with things actually worse than they had been initially. Despite the fact that the strike was a resounding success, petrol was now more expensive, prices higher, life more difficult. Moreover, it emerged that the compromise was elaborated in somewhat questionable circumstances. The NLC had held a meeting in Abuja, the federal capital, on the eve of the strike's end. Rumours of backroom deals between politicians and top union officials involving large sums of money were widespread. The agreement was announced by the NLC without consulting the other groups which had been instrumental in the opposition to the price hike, particularly the National Association of Nigerian Students who vehemently opposed the NLC deal. Yet they were powerless to carry on the strike once labour had withdrawn. Finally many of the filling stations refused to reduce their prices to the compromise rate, either selling at the higher price or remaining closed and profiteering by selling their fuel on the black market.

Nigeria, bubblin'

1 CRISES WITHOUT END

All Nigeria is divided into 3 parts. The division is marked by two great rivers, the Niger and the Benue, which come together in a 'Y' shape, creating 3 natural regions. The North is dominated by the Hausa people, their society is characterised by a highly conservative strain of islam, under the rigid hierarchies of Fulani emirs who conquered the region in the 19th century and have managed to maintain their social system ever since by coming to terms with the British colonial power and its sucessor, the Nigerian government. The Yoruba are by far the most numerous group in the South West, while across the Niger in the South East, the Igbo predominate, both of whom are mostly christian but their social orders are absolutely different. The Yoruba were ruled by powerful, although not absolute, kings, or 'obas', and had a class of nobles whose status was inherited. The Igbo, on the other hand, enjoyed a remarkably egalitarian social order, tied together in loose federations with power residing in the villages. These three great blocks, of course, mask an intricate myriad of distinct peoples, some small, some large, generally based around one particular town or area. The Niger delta region is particularly rich in ethnic groups: there are at least 50 peoples who see themselves as being ethnically distinct from the others. However the major groups, Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba are exceedingly numerous and tend to overshadow the others. The fact that these powerful groups are divided by religion and starkly opposed traditional social orders, has provided plenty of oppurtunities for power-hungry politicians to play off the groups against one another. The temptation to garner support by favouritism in official appointments has proved difficult to resist, as has the urge to profit from xenophobia by creating exaggerated fears of domination by the others.

The country is immense. The population is enormous, exactly how many, nobody knows. The last census, in 1963, was manipulated to show the North having a greater population than the rest of the country combined and was one of the catalysts which led to the civil war. Since then nobody has dared to undertake the extraordinarily delicate task of counting the population. Estimates range from 100 million to 125 million and it is generally agreed that the North is most populous. Whichever estimate one takes, it is clear that Nigeria is by far Africa's most populous state, with as many people as the other 15 West African countries combined and almost one fifth of the entire continent's population. Viewing this immense country from Lagos, a city somewhat set apart from the rest of the land, it appeared to be far from at peace. A multitude of fierce conflicts and struggles were raging, sometimes simmering, then suddenly bursting into torrents of violence and carnage. Although it appeared to us that the situation must be approaching breaking point, Nigerians are well used to living in a state of permanent crisis. Life goes on, the people have to 'make manage' as best as possible, despair is a luxury they can't afford.

Labour.

Although the general strike had just come to an end, there was by no means peace on the labour front. The civil servants of many states remained on strike in a dispute over implementation of the new minimum wage. Nigeria is a federation of 36 states, carved out by successive administrations in a bid to mollify local, regional and ethnic elites and incorporate them into the government lest they get any successionist ideas or other ambitions. The state governments have their own staff, budget and limited form of autonomy, the exact extent of which is a matter of constant argument. Many of them are very artificial, uneconomic constructions which rely for all their funding on federal money. Several states claimed inability to pay the newly decreed \$55 monthly minimum wage prompting strikes. Elsewhere, in richer and more expensive states, workers took action to achieve parity with the \$75 federal minimum wage. These wage increases were rendered particularly expensive for the state governments since wages had to increase for all grades of the civil service, not just for those on the minimum. In fact the negotiated increases were largest for the upper echelons, whose wages rose by more than 100%, while the lowest grades got an extra 60%. Since the higher grades are often stuffed with traditional rulers and religious chiefs, given salaries as patronage by the governors, several states were going to have trouble paying the bills.

Government

The government itself, created in 1999 on a wave of democratic enthusiasm after 16 years of military rule, was already bogged down in the problems which characterised previous 'democratic' governments. The new democratic political system appears to be modelled on the United States; a president, senate and house of representatives make up the federal government. The political parties are artificial concoctions, created to meet difficult eligibility conditions which were imposed on political parties in a vain attempt to avoid regional or tribalist parties. They are alliances of diverse interests united merely by legal requirement. Although the president and the majority of representatives belong to the same party, disputes have constantly raged between the two branches of government, often over patently venal matters. President Obasanjo's purchase of a jet from one of the gulf royals for some \$75 million provoked a prolonged crisis when the National assembly blocked the funds. More recently the representatives have spent much time fighting for increased benefits; housing allowances, travel allowances, furniture allowances...

On several occasions fistfights have broken out in parliament between the president's faction and that of other powerful figures such as senate president Okadigbo. By the time we were in Nigeria, only a year after its introduction, democracy had descended to a thinly masked farce between squabbling, greedy barons. The president declared the anniversary of the election, May 29th, to be a national holiday, 'democracy day'. The National Assembly claimed this was illegal, advised the public to ignore it and announced their own democracy day: June 15th, anniversary of the annulled election of chief Abiola in 1993. Then the senate voted themselves a three month holiday, seemingly in a strategic move to block funds from the president. The minority senate faction which supports the president declared this illegal and tried to hold a session of their own, however the senate mace was missing from its normal place and, without this important symbol, it was impossible for the senate to sit. Thus, in the early hours of the morning, some 50 heavily armed soldiers invaded the senate president's house to search for the mace. Other representatives who saw the raid assumed it was a coup and sought refuge in the US embassy.

American television apparently came very close to announcing another Nigerian coup to the world.

Although Nigerian politics is often farcical, the politicians certainly can't be accused of not taking themselves seriously. The prestige and dignity of the rulers is seen as being of utmost importance. The accumulation of wealth and privileges from one's position is easily justified by this: "Nigeria is a great nation. Our elite must be worthy of this great nation, comparable with that of the Western countries, none of these shoddy, cut-price African regimes. Therefore I deserve all the wealth which I am looting, the dignity of the state is in question". When Obasanjo was prevented from purchasing a luxury presidential jet, he flew to the G77 meeting in Jamaica on an ordinary commercial flight. His supporters in the media went to great lengths to emphasise what a humiliation this was for such a great nation. Just imagine the president travelling as if he was just anyone, the shame! The senate speaker was recently questioned by an inquiry on corruption and graft. He admitted receiving \$330,000 as a furniture allowance. Vehemently denying that this was corrupt, he said: "I got the best stuff. I needed it to furnish my home in a manner worthy of such an important person in such a great nation. Anyone can come and check the stuff. You'll see I got good value for money."

Violence

While the politicians squabbled among themselves and feathered their nests, the crises were multiplying in society. Several ethnic militias have recently emerged. OPC, IPC, APC, the 'dreaded' Bakassi boys and a host of other groups, profited from the poor security situation to gain support by mounting vigilante actions in addition to their attacks on 'ethnic-immigrant' traders. During the year of democracy these and other groups were involved in many ethnic conflicts, often causing large numbers of deaths. Several land disputes caused large scale communal fighting, about village, town and state boundaries. The twin towns of Ife and Modakeke are in a virtual state of war, several recent battles have caused dozens of deaths. The police, corrupt, inefficient and ill-equipped, demoralised by a long military rule when they were seen as potential rivals and starved of resources, face great problems against some of the well-armed militias. The oil producing delta region is racked with conflicts and disasters. About 3,000 people died in late 1999 in ethnic clashes involving Urhobo and Itsekiri youths and the security services. Kidnappings of oil-workers were common and a thousand disputes raged, many threatening to break into violence at any time, all across the region. In March, youths in Odi town killed 12 policemen who had come to free kidnapped oil workers. The government responded by sending in the army which shot their way into town, razed every building to the ground and raped or killed all those who had not escaped. This was plainly intended to send a message to anybody else who might think of coming between the politicians in Abuja and the black gold of the Niger delta.

Sharia

But surely the worst of the problems facing Nigeria was the matter of sharia and the prospects for generalised violence or civil war. Kaduna state, home to a significant number of non-muslims, declared islamic law on February 22nd, 2000. The ensuing fighting caused at least 1000 deaths and renewed fighting in May saw another 300 dead. Sharia was spreading all over the North. Many governors saw it as a populist measure, allowing them to identify the loss of religious purity as

the root of the social problems, rather than the corruption and greed of the rulers. While we were in the country Kano, capital city of the North, announced the introduction of sharia. The sharia laws are generally enforced by bands of Hausa youth and this easily turns into harassment and terrorisation of outsiders and dissidents. Thus the introduction of sharia was inevitably followed by a flood of refugees returning to the South. However sharia was widely interpreted in Nigeria as being a political rather than a religious matter. Many analysts believed that the whole issue was the work of a group of muslim army officers from the administration of the late dictator Sani Abacha, based in Kaduna and known as the 'Kaduna clique'. These officers were apparently bent on creating instability so they could step in and save the people from the unrest of civilian rule. Already their work was beginning to bear fruit. In June the respected weekly Nigerian current affairs magazine, Newswatch, asked: "does democracy engender social conflict?", and, in their opinion: "for many Nigerians the answer is: 'to a large extent'".

II OSHOGBO - HOLY SMOKE

We intended to travel directly across the South of the country, West to East, and not to visit the North. This was more to avoid the need to buy new sharia-compliant wardrobes than for any real security concern. Our first destination was Oshogbo, one of the important Yoruba religious towns, 200 km North East of Lagos. Most of this route was along a multi-lane hard-surfaced motorway, the first we'd seen in Africa. We covered the journey in impressive time. Too impressive. Although the driver of our taxi didn't go excessively fast, he did manage to maintain a near constant pace, despite the many hazards the road had to offer. If the road in front of him was blocked, he'd simply switch to the wrong side and continue at the same pace - with his hand on the horn. He seemed to think that the fact of having his hand on the horn was like a charm against all danger. A still more powerful charm was the hazard lights. On the couple of occasions when it appeared that we were surely hurtling towards a crash unless we slowed down, he flicked on his hazard lights and kept his foot firmly on the accelerator. There are many similar drivers in Nigeria, so people must be very conscious of other cars, or else we would surely have come to grief on this road which was frequently cratered or partially closed due to accidents or repairs. The only hazards which did manage to slow us down were the police roadblocks, although it would really be more accurate to refer to these as 'armed cash collection points'. A dozen policemen with machine guns stand in the middle of the road. Each driver slows down, rolls down their windows, hands a 20 Naira note to the policeman and continues on their way. We careered through the outskirts of Ibadan, the capital of Yorubaland, acres of low, rust-roofed concrete sprawling over low, jungled hills, itself home to upwards of 5 million people, and kept going North.

Oshogbo is one of the old Yoruba towns, along with nearby Ife and Oyo, a spiritual centre for the Yoruba religion. It is where the invading Fulani armies from the North were finally repulsed in 1840. Today the town is a pleasant, friendly backwater of some 300,000 souls, quite small by Nigerian standards. The dominant 2 storey concrete houses with rusted rooves are surprisingly pretty with their balconies of patterned concrete blocks. We stayed in a cheap hotel with fans, air conditioning, satellite television, although their generator was broken so all these appliances just sat there. We visited the shrine of the river god, Osun, just outside the town. This shrine is at the centre of the sacred groves, a small forest full of elaborate carvings and statues. The groves have been renovated since the 1950's by a group of artists based around an Austrian

artist, Suzanne Wenger, in an attempt to rejuvenate the traditional religion. I don't know if this was successful in its effects on the locals, but it did at least create an ideal tourist attraction. The combination of forest, river, loads of surreal sculptures, and some real traditional meaning, is irresistible for tourists, in this country where much traditional culture is poorly packaged for tourist consumption.

After visiting the groves, we strolled the 3 kilometres back into town. As we arrived into the town centre, alongside the royal palace, at one end of the main thoroughfare, we heard a commotion behind us. We turned around and saw a procession of vehicles; cars, buses and trucks, carrying an enormous number of young men, crammed into every space, sitting on bonnets, balancing on rooves, hanging precariously onto windows. These men were chanting and singing, some were waving sticks in the air and many wore headbands. As soon as this procession appeared, all the casual traders who were lining this busy shopping street began to frantically gather their affairs and flee, spilling their wares behind them in their haste to escape. Very quickly the road emptied but on this occasion our normal rule of thumb, to join in any mass flights, was impossible to carry out. There were no sidestreets to turn into, all the nearby buildings were shut up and we had only recently arrived so were totally unfamiliar with the terrain. Thus we had no choice but to wait for the procession to pass. This was one of those occasions when you really start to wish you weren't so conspicuous. As it was, almost every single member of the mob shouted 'oyibo' (Yoruba for whitey) at us as they drove by, although happily it was meant in a friendly rather than threatening way. Many of the mob waved at us, gave us thumbs up signs, or clenched fists, all of which we returned enthusiastically, hoping that we weren't thereby signalling our support for some religious sect on their way to stone adulterers or some such nutters.

The mob drove by and the street slowly returned to normal, traders crept from their hideouts and set their stands up again. We continued on our way, strolling along the main street, casually browsing for replacements for some of our worn-out clothes. An hour later we had bought nothing useful, only a traditional Yoruba cap, embroidered with gold thread, and had almost completed our journey through town. I noticed a small group gathered about 20 metres ahead, all staring down a street that descended into a market on the left. Something about the posture of this group caused me to suspect trouble and I called out to Deirdre: "let's get out of here". However disaster had struck. At the same instant as I had spotted the people, Deirdre had spotted the perfect pair of sandals hanging from a stall just behind them and was now headed determinedly in that direction. I called after her: "but I think there's a riot", to no avail, she is quite accustomed to ignoring my objections to shopping and now brushed me off and kept going. The stall owner detached himself from the growing crowd and hurried back to deal with us. Deirdre indicated the pair, tried them on and started the price negotiations. Before the haggling had really got going, the crowd behind us suddenly turned and fled, panicked, tearing down the street in a desperate attempt to escape from something. The stall owner bundled us quickly into his stall and drew the shutters. Outside we heard several loud explosions, unmistakably caused by some type of firearm. I peered through a slit in the shutters and saw a bunch of policemen outside, armed with various large guns. They were standing in the middle of the intersection and one of them was continually launching tear-gas cannisters indiscriminately into the surrounding area. I saw many cannisters land on people's rooves, one land inside a shop and others land on the streets, far away from the area where the police were standing.

Throughout all of this Deirdre remained determinedly focused on the sandals. The owner, nervous at the prospect of looters, was clutching a large hammer behind his back. Clouds of tear

gas were drifting into the stall, causing our eyes to water and out throats to burn. Still Deirdre refused to budge from \$3, offering the poor distracted man many arguments to support her case. He realised he had met his match and gracefully gave in. Now all we had to do was get home. We edged our way to the stall's front, ready to seize our chance and make a break away from this area with its clouds of noxious gas. This was not made easy by the fact that the police had now got control of the area and were now sauntering around in the middle of the road. From time to time members of the public would peek outside their houses to see how the situation had developed. Whenever the police caught sight of one of these curious bystanders they'd fire a tear gas cannister at them, aimed into the ground to bounce up at them. Eventually we got tired of waiting and breathing gas and made a break for it. We sprinted out, intending to dash across the street and down a side alley. Unfortunately our escape proved less inconspicuous than we had hoped. One of the policemen instantly saw us and alerted his colleagues who all turned around, waved in a merry manner and called out 'oyibo, oyibo' to us, completely forgetting their teargassing duties. Our dash was further hampered by Deirdre's new sandals which caused her to slip earning hearty laughter from the policemen and all the onlookers. She picked herself up with as much dignity as she could muster and we trotted away to safety with the laughter ringing in our ears. Within no time we found a share-taxi going towards home. Our fellow passenger, a local market woman, filled us in on all the details of what had happened.

The mob which we had earlier seen were students from the nearby university. A local businessman with four wives had acquired a new, young girlfriend, but he learned that she had a thing on the side with a student. The businessman disposed of this rival by denouncing him to the police for some infraction. The police promptly took him in for questioning and, in the process, shot him in the knees. This mob of students had gone to the market where the businessman had his operation and demonstrated their disapproval through pillage. The teargassing was the aftermath of the pillage of the market. The local woman seemed to put all the blame on the businessman and was particularly incensed by the fact that he already had four wives when he started this trouble.

III BENIN

From Oshogbo we headed South East, through Yoruba land, to Benin city, the capital of a formidable ancient kingdom and home to the Edo people. We missed the direct bus and thus had to spend most of the day sitting in motionless minibuses, waiting for passengers to arrive. Then we had to take a considerable detour as the driver wished to avoid the warring town of Ife. Therefore, despite an early start, we didn't arrive at Benin until darkness was falling. Our minibus ejected us in the outer suburbs. For the next hour we stood by the side of the large highway what we found ourselves on, trying vainly to find a taxi or bus to take us into town. This is one of the problems of travelling by public transport in Nigeria. All of the principal towns are enormous. Elsewhere in West Africa, it is generally only the capital city which is big enough to present problems for orientation. Here in Nigeria the population of a small town like Benin is numbered in the hundreds of thousands. All of the towns have different transport systems, some have shared taxis which can go anywhere, some have shared taxis which only run certain fixed routes, some have individually hired taxis, while others, like Benin, have no taxis, only motorbikes and buses. Thus we seemed to continually find ourselves stranded in far flung corners of huge cities, without

a clue how to get out of there. On this occasion we were saved by one of the nearby stallholders, who came out to look after us and eventually found us a rentable car.

The city of Benin is today far from picturesque. It is, in every way, a modern Nigerian city, untidy, dusty, smoky, smelly, noisy, crowded with an unbelievable quantity of horn-tooting vehicles, yet resounding with the frenetic activity of countless small scale industries, to an extent unimaginable in other West African countries. Walking along the garbage strewn streets, one catches brief glimpses, in the ubiquitous low concrete houses, of rooms crowded with artisans concentrating intently on their labour. Particularly noticeable are the gate makers. Elaborately decorated iron gates are very popular in Nigeria. Strips of metal are beaten with hammers into delicate twists and curls to form great fans and floral motifs set into a heavy iron framework. Completed examples are laid out by the roadside as advertisements of the gatemaker's skill. Needless to say, the gates are all 10 feet high and topped with elegant, razor-sharp spikes.

Although there is little evidence of it apparent today, Benin is a city with a long history. For centuries before 1400 a civilization flourished here which constructed an immense system of walls around the city, said to be the second largest man made structure ever built, after the great wall of China. The Benin wall was in no way a standard city wall, encircling the town, rather it consisted of many circles linked together with straight sections, radiating outwards from the city centre. The walls, some 6 metres high, built of earth, are backed by trenches and are thought to have primarily for demarcating the territory of different clan groups rather than providing defence against external invaders. The remains of the walls are scattered around the city, mounds of earth sprouting thick masses of vegetation and are even used as plots by guerrilla-farmers to grow corn. We were fortunate to be shown a substantial section of the wall which we climbed and walked along the top. The mother of one of the present kings of the city saw us as she was driving past and was so flattered to see foreigners interested in Benin's history that she got her driver to turn around and come back to invite us to visit her.

After the era of the walls' construction, in around the 15th century, the Benin civilisation saw a change to a more centralised, despotic monarchy. These kings, known as obas, considered bronze sculptures to be important symbols of their rule and commissioned a large number of bronze statues, plaques and busts to decorate their palaces. The Benin museum houses a large number of these bronzes, many of which are exceptionally well produced, sensitive naturalistic depictions of people, animals and great deeds, including many depictions of Portuguese soldiers who sometimes fought for the oba after 1500. In fact these bronzes were so well produced that, after Benin's bloody defeat by the British in 1897, the victorious imperialists refused to believe that these could have been produced from this Africa, a place of 'savage chaos'. The conquering imperialists were intent on creating a popular impression of a barbaric, savage Africa. They needed to justify their civilising mission, the white man's burden, which was crucial to winning popular support at home for these conquests. European imperialist historians came up with a bizarre series of theories to explain how this enormous quantity of outstanding artwork happened to turn up in the palace of a savage. Ancient Egypt, Atlantis and some unknown solitary European of long ago were variously given credit for these works. Nevertheless, even after these theories were substantially rubbished, the imperialists proved keen to hold onto these bronzes despite the savagery of their creators. Today Benin has only the third largest collection of Benin bronzes in the world, trailing behind London and Berlin, the spoils of war.

After visiting the limited sights of Benin, we decided to remain there for the weekend since we couldn't face arriving in yet another huge strange city without some rest. Fortunately our

hotel possessed a reliable generator, so we were able to enjoy, for the first time, the electrical appliances which seem to inhabit every Nigerian hotel room, however modest. We remained in our room for much of the weekend, luxuriating in the fanned, air-conditioned coolness, washing ourselves from actually functioning taps and, most of all, enjoying the delights of television. Nigerian television is unlike any other in West Africa. Elsewhere the state or semi-state broadcasting company invariably dominates completely, competitors are rare and, when they exist, they are limited to the capital city or only available on satellite. In Nigeria, not only is television completely privatised, but there are no national channels, each city or state gives its own licences to local television companies. Oshogbo has their station, Lagos has about 5 stations, little Benin city has two stations all of its own, indeed it seems any place of any size possesses at least one. This atomisation of broadcasting certainly avoids the problem of monolithic, stuffy, politically controlled stations, but it presents another problem; the stations all seem to have ludicrously small budgets. One of the Benin channels would regularly go off air due to powercuts, they didn't even possess a generator. The programs which they produce themselves normally feature one person sitting nervously on a chair, staring into the camera and speaking in a monotone while the background and lighting do their utmost to make the presenter look like Frankenstein's monster. Anything even slightly more elaborate seems to require wholesale commercial sponsorship which utterly dominates the show. The Saturday morning children's show was called 'Mirinda fun hour', sponsored by Mirinda orange drink. The content seemed to consist of a cameraman wandering aimlessly around in a school hall while groups of children gave singing and dancing displays in the far distance. The only props were one cardboard Mirinda advertisement leaning against one wall and paper Mirinda hats which all the kids wore. There were frequent breaks for, you guessed it, Mirinda ads.

In addition to the self-produced content, a few purchased, American produced shows were aired. These fitted into two categories. The first kind was the cheapest of the cheap sitcom or soap opera, often of the African-American variety, full of canned laughter and jarringly predictable jokes. These shows create a strange impression when seen through African eyes. Everybody appears ridiculously wealthy, even depictions of squalor and poverty look like the good life. Many of the jokes are completely incongruous in their African setting. The difficulties of interior decorating or the unenviable status of video store clerks don't cross the cultural barrier too well, as many people here live in bare mud huts and could never dream of getting a good job in a proper shop. The second type of show is far worse; glossy productions by insane American evangelists, which are presumably given free to the television stations. We were treated to the Saturday night special of "does the bible predict the end of the world?". The answer was, emphatically, "yes, and soon". The evidence was largely drawn from the book of revelations: (presenters voice) - "As revelations says, 'an age of abominations shall come' and today we see homosexuals rampant" (cut to footage of two men walking along holding hands) - "Again revelations says: 'an evil empire shall rise and the sky will fill with fire'" (footage of Saddam Hussein addressing animated crowd) - "Was this referring to Saddam Hussein?" (cut to portrait of Saddam, then presenter steps out from behind it wearing a black polo neck, stares fixedly at camera and says) - "Is that a chance that YOU want to take? Will you reject the lord?"

In fact religion also features heavily in indigenous shows as we discovered on Sunday. The two Benin channels provided live, back to back coverage of the, very lengthy, services of the local anglican, catholic and baptist churches. This finally drove us out of our luxurious room, but we weren't able to escape the big man above that easily. The restaurant where we went for lunch

had a television in the corner and the waiter followed each service, kneeling standing and sitting as instructed by the priest and joining in with the hymns and refrains. This had something of a negative impact on the quality of service. When we returned to our room in time for the evening news we were disappointed to find that the three main news items consisted of recounting the highlights of the three sermons that afternoon. I kid you not. The newsreader sat there with a serious expression on her face and said "today bishop X said that society must be cleansed, love is the answer and the church must be the focus of this cleansing love..." I was stunned by this invasion of religion into what I had thought was going to be a secular medium, only to have this trumped by an item in the Sunday newspaper. Predictably it was a politician who managed to scale this peak of sacred insanity. The article reported a speech by the minister for information, Jerry Gana, promoting an upcoming event in the Lagos Anglican church. It was to be a 12, yes 12, hour long service, entitled "operation quench the matter". The theme was to be "let us pray" and its stated aim was to "launch intercontinental ballistic missiles into the kingdom of darkness". The program would include "aggressive prayers for the stability of Nigeria" and "for the well being of the president and commander in chief of the armed forces".

IV PORT HARCOURT OILFIELDS/BATTLEGROUND

Before our car set out from Benin, all the passengers had to write their names on a form. According to the small print this was the government's new road safety measure, designed to help with the identification of bodies after accidents. Hardly reassuring. We swept Southwards through dense and swampy coastal forest, around the Igbo lands to the North, into the delta region, oil country. This region is home to a myriad of different peoples, most of them with relatively small populations. Most of these peoples have long felt completely marginalised in this state with its rivalries between the 3 main groups. This area produces all of Nigeria's oil and thus most of its wealth, yet the local people have seen little or nothing of this oil revenue. The land and fishing grounds which they depend on have been heavily polluted as a consequence of large-scale extraction of oil, effectively unfettered by environmental regulations. Over the last decade these forgotten ethnic groups have steadily become more vocal in demanding their rights, inspired by examples like that of the Ogoni people's MOSOP movement, catapulted to worldwide attention by the military government's assassination of Ken Saro Wiwa. This vocal opposition has recently turned into violent confrontation and, in many areas, virtual war. All across the region bands of well armed, unemployed youths were fighting battles against police, oil companies and often even their own traditional rulers. The Odi massacres had not been effective. Kidnappings of oil workers, especially expatriates, were still commonplace. Sabotage of oil pipelines was an everyday occurrence and on several occasions hundreds of lives were lost when oil was ignited while it was being siphoned off by locals.

We drove through the outskirts of Warri, capital of the oil industry, where the brightly coloured logos of Shell, Chevron, Mobil and Exxon are emblazoned shamelessly on many of the buildings and vehicles. The road now veered South Eastwards, parallel with the coast, through thick jungle interspersed with lagoons, creeks and the thousands of little rivulets which the mighty Niger river separates into as it approaches the sea. We passed over the river's main channel, almost without noticing it, now a bare fraction of the width several thousand kilometers to the North where we had last seen it. The city of Port Harcourt, our next destination, sprawled back along

the highway to meet us. The road swooped and swerved through this modern city of concrete, cars and, most of all, oil. The flames of gas flares are visible in the coastal swamps behind the city. Happily our bush-taxi happened to drive by our intended hotel and spared us the ordeal of orienting ourselves in another huge, unknown city.

We passed only one night in this city, time enough to visit the local supermarket which caused us a severe case of 'product shock'. The sight of all those aisles of shiny Western goods, imported for the expatriate oil workers, was overwhelming. We didn't buy anything, just walked around ogling all the products that we hadn't seen in months. We spent that evening in an open air bar watching European championship football, alongside a huge crowd of enthusiastic Nigerians. Italy were playing Sweden. I supported Italy. The Nigerians, to the last man, supported Sweden. I would say the scenes of joy when the Swedes equalised were unparalleled in Sweden itself. Happily Italy soon scored again and so I was able to celebrate in the face of the whole crowd who naturally took their defeat gracefully.

V CALABAR

From Port Harcourt we continued Eastwards into the territory of the Ibibio people, nowadays in Akwa Ibom state. Our destination was Calabar, in Cross river state, which is separated from Akwa Ibom by a large creek, spanned by a wide bridge. As our taxi approached this bridge, a large man wearing unidentifiable khaki clothes, carrying an enormous machine gun, stepped into the middle of the road. He waved his gun wildly in the air gesturing for us to stop. Bandit or soldier? we asked ourselves (in as much as there is a difference). Our driver kept going at tremendous speed. When we were a mere 20 metres away, the armed man stopped waving his gun, cradled it in his arms and took aim at the car. We skidded smartly to a stop, terrified at the prospect of being shot or robbed, but it turned out to be merely a joke on the part of our driver. He rolled down his window and called jestingly to the man, a soldier, "you wouldn't really have shot me would you?" Our papers were checked and we crossed the bridge to find a scene of vast destruction. For several kilometres beyond the bridge, every village, house and structure of any size was in ashes, razed to the ground. Here and there wretched groups of people were gathered together in settlements of makeshift tents. Ten days previously a boundary dispute between Akwa Ibom and Cross River state had flared up. The bridge had been the site of a massive battle between residents of the two states. The Akwa Ibomites, at least 1000 strong, armed with rifles, machetes and petrol bombs had driven their opponents back into Cross River state and proceeded to lay the country waste before them. It is a measure of Nigeria's volatility that nobody seemed to think that such battles, where the combatants are well armed and number in the thousands, are particularly out of the ordinary.

We sped onwards, among swamps and jungles, through many small villages where vendors thronged the car selling bowls of fat cucumbers, and finally arrived at Calabar. The city, mainly inhabited by the Efik people, was one of the principal trading ports on the Nigerian coast in pre-colonial days, as long ago as the 15th century. The city came to be controlled by a small number of trading families, such as the Henshaws and the Hawkins who adopted European names as a sign of status, having been made rich by their contact with Europeans and the slave trade. They would equip huge war canoes with as many as 90 men and launch slaving expeditions into the maze of creeks and rivers behind the coast, raiding villages and ambushing any solitary people they

found to carry them off for sale to the European hulks which were permanently moored off Calabar. The city flourished on this trade and attracted many newcomers from surrounding regions. For many Africans the city presented a unique opportunity for them to attain high status, since even men of low birth could rise to importance here merely by mounting a few successful raids. In the 19th century the great trading families switched from slaves to palm-oil and continued to prosper until the new demands of colonialism dictated policies to undermine native-owned industry in favour of metropolitan companies.

Today, Calabar, although large, is a very pleasant town by Nigerian standards. The old town rises up two hills from the harbour, dominated by pleasantly scruffy old colonial buildings. We wandered around this quiet and calm area filled with the ever-present hordes of children. On several occasions in Nigeria, we had witnessed what seems to be a cultural memory of the slave trade. Parents, upon seeing us, would sometimes jestingly pretend to hand their small children to us, whereupon the kids would scream in genuine terror, apparently still regularly scared by bedtime tales of white people who would take them away to eat them. Walking through the streets of Calabar we came across two young girls fighting with each other. They were so engrossed in their battle that they didn't notice us approach until we were only a foot or two away. Suddenly they perceived us, they stopped dead still, mid-wrestle, their eyes opened with terror and they both burst into tears and fled in opposite directions as fast as they could run.

The Calabari people are famed in Nigeria for their cuisine, which is unusual in that dog is a favourite dish. Restaurants have cages of live hounds outside and are decorated with wall paintings of cute dogs with their tongues hanging out, standing beside bowls of rice. We had the pleasure of sampling some of this exotic dish and found the meat to be extremely succulent, somewhat similar to lamb, served in an intensely hot chili sauce. Our host was a certain Mr Magick, an amiable fellow who used to make a living by catering for the overland trucks full of tourists who used to pass through Calabar on their way to South Africa from London. Since the mid 1990's, it has been generally impossible to go through the Congo, thus any traffic which wishes to go overland from West Africa to Eastern or Southern Africa has to travel through Chad and Sudan, the only open route, which avoids Southern Nigeria. This development proved fatal for the tiny number of Nigerians who depended on this trade for their living, like Mr Magick. He remains hopeful that it will return and, despite having lost his restaurant, brought us to his house for a meal. Regardless of his good intentions, it is hard to see him making a living from entertaining people such as us. We asked him whether many tourists came through Calabar, he replied that yes, many tourists come here, only a fortnight ago his wife had seen one in the market.

While eating at his house, a torrential downpour started, as it does on many evenings in the rainy season. After waiting a couple of hours for it to relent, we gave up waiting and decided to brave the trip home, regardless of the wet. Mr Magick kindly offered to give us a lift home on his motorbike. I sat at the back, Deirdre in the middle, with him driving. The rain was so heavy that we were utterly sodden by the time we'd climbed on. Mr Magick's brother was also standing out in the rain, holding a torch for us. I thought that this courtesy was somewhat uncalled for since he was getting drenched for his trouble and we could have mounted the bike without light. Mr Magick started the bike after many attempts then, to my utter surprise, his brother draped himself across the handlebars at the front, still holding the torch. It turned out that he was to be our headlight! Because the bike was so crowded, I wasn't able to move my head from pointing towards the side and thus I couldn't see what was happening in front of me. I was very thankful for this since my sideways view was terrifying enough. The roads were utterly flooded to such an

extent that my feet sometimes trailed through the puddles, yet, even with four people on board, in the midst of a torrential downpour, we managed to travel at lightning speed. My view gave me a good opportunity to study the stunned expressions of the other motorcyclists whom we were overtaking, splashing them with large waves as we zoomed by. We even managed to overtake the only two cars that I saw who had dared the weather, swerving around them in reckless manoeuvres. Despite our protests Mr Magick, a gentleman to the end, insisted on dropping us all the way to our door.

VI THE TROUBLE WITH NIGERIA

Of all the places we had visited in Nigeria, Calabar had easily the most dysfunctional electricity supply. We spent four days there and I believe the electricity functioned for less than four hours in total. On the couple of occasions when the current starts to flow, it seems that every electrical appliance in Africa is concentrated in this small city. Flourescent lights shine on every porch, stereos beam from open windows, thousands of fans whirr, air-conditioners hum, televisions are wheeled out for crowds to gather around. Then, inevitably, darkness suddenly falls, a sigh runs across the city and life returns to normal. The locals explained that their supply was so bad as the power station was far away in the North and they were at the end of the line. A fault requiring a repair anywhere between them and the power plant would cause them to lose power. The people of Calabar consider places like Lagos to have good power supply. Yet despite the very rare power, Calabar seems to possess a wealth of electrical appliances, far more than one would expect in other West African towns of comparable size.

Indeed all across the country the same could be observed. Not only electrical appliances, but also hard-surfaced roads, hospitals, universities, manufacturing plants, publishing houses, cars, bridges, concrete buildings, and all the other signs of developed society are much more common throughout Nigeria than anywhere else in West Africa. Yet it all seems to be falling apart at the seams. The hotel rooms have telephones and air-conditioners which have obviously not worked in the last decade. The highways are littered with potholes and fringed with the rusting hulks of vehicles abandoned after accidents. The universities are so starved of funds that many lecturers earn their living by selling handouts to their students, sales of examination papers are common and those who oppose the corruption can face assassination. Manufacturing suffers from gross under-utilisation of production capacity, 32 percent in 1999. Houses crumble and rust. The sense of decay is everywhere.

The most commonly advanced reason for Nigeria's decay is corruption. The money for improving infrastructure, repairing roads and powerlines, and constructing new facilities is frittered away by an administration which is profoundly corrupt at many levels. Certainly there is something to this idea. The recent regime of Sani Abacha is reputed to have been the most corrupt ever. He is believed to have stashed billions of dollars in Swiss bank accounts and is said to have surrounded himself with a bunch of fast living military cronies who filled the presidential halls with prostitutes and sumptuous feasts. He is remembered with a sense of shame and the memory of the celebrations which followed his death is very much alive. However Abacha did not invent corruption. As long ago as 1975, the crusading military ruler Murtala Muhammed felt it necessary to sack over 10,000 civil servants for corruption in 'operation deadwoods'. The corrupt practices of embezzlement, bribing, overcharging on public contracts and shoddy, uncompleted

projects at vast expense have a long history in Nigeria, yet there has not always been such decay. At one stage all of the infrastructures, hotels and facilities which are now decaying were shiny and new, corruption is not the only answer.

Another factor which undoubtedly has contributed to the decay so evident in Nigeria today is the changed in the price of oil. In the early 1970's vast reserves of crude oil were discovered in the Niger delta region and a series of partnership deals were signed with multinational companies to exploit these reserves. This pumped a huge amount of money into the economy and financed the building of many of the modern infrastructure, on a wave of optimism that Nigeria was going to fulfill its destiny and become a great nation. By 1978 president Obasanjo, then military dictator, felt confident enough to declare that 'Nigeria will be one of the 10 greatest powers on earth by 2000'. McDonalds, Kentucky Fried chicken and other companies, symbols of the opulent West, began opening branches in Nigeria. The oil boom had peaked by 1980, global oil prices started a steep and steady decline which they still have not recovered from, despite the recent large increases. The partnership agreements turned out to be excessively favourable to the foreign oil companies who controlled the extraction and were able to manipulate it to limit the payments to the government. Debt repayments started eating huge chunks from the budget and IMF loans came at a very heavy cost. Today, after 20 years of this process, the average income may be as little as a tenth of what it was in 1980. The country simply doesn't have the capacity to supply electricity to all those who were connected, nor does it have the money to build new power stations or replace aging machinery. At least some of the blame for Nigeria's decay must be found here, in the functioning of the global capitalist system, beyond the control of Nigeria's rulers, however corrupt they may be.

Yet there is more to Nigeria than violence, decay and corruption. While it may be volatile, it is also vigorous. People are generally very quick to object in they feel they are not receiving the treatment they deserve. Massive demonstrations and protest movements can spring up quickly in the face of injustice. Concepts of direct action and resistance are very much alive. Education appears to have had a much wider reach here than elsewhere in Africa. Nigeria probably has a much more substantial output of literature and drama than any other African country. There are an enormous number of newspapers and current affairs magazines with large readerships. Many of these are of very high quality, representing a broad range of views and opinions which would put the output of most Western countries to shame. Many of the traditional cultures retain great strength, even in the large urban centres where Western culture has proved irresistible elsewhere. Many of the manufactured goods sold in the markets are made in Nigeria and the country generally appears far less economically and politically subservient to the former colonial masters than any other country in the region. Women have been far more successful in attaining education, jobs and status than in most of West Africa. Many of the positive aspects of pre-colonial societies still exist, such as the Igbo principle whereby everyone should have a say in decisions, a legacy which undoubtedly contributed to the proud fact that Nigeria, almost alone among African countries, has produced a movement belonging to the anti-authoritarian branch of socialism. A modern anarchism which draws heavily on indigenous practice as well as 19th century European theorists. The fact that this could emerge in a country, racked with problems which make organising extremely difficult, under the yoke of a repressive dictatorship, bodes well for a brighter future.

VII OUT OF NIGERIA

The last day of our epic journey across Nigeria should have been the shortest. Calabar is only 25 km from the Cameroon border at the little town of Iking. Since there are no roads in that part of Cameroon, we would have to take a boat from Iking through the coastal mangrove swamps to Mundemba, our destination, the first town in Cameroon. Thus we set out bright and early on Saturday morning, hired a car to get us to Iking and arrived there in no time. There was a military checkpoint at the entrance to the town manned by four soldiers, one of whom waved for us to stop. He approached our driver and asked him our business. For some reason our driver took it upon himself to declare that we were journalists, almost giving me a heart attack, but we quickly corrected the mistake. The soldier instructed us to wait.

20 minutes later we were still waiting, assuming this was a build up to some scam, wishing that they'd hurry up and ask for money so the haggling could begin. We sent our driver to see what they wanted and he returned with the news that they were fetching an officer. Sure enough, 10 minutes later, an officer walked into view along the road. He was young and clearly well educated with a neat uniform and well-groomed appearance. He bent down to peer in the back window of the car to inspect us. We explained the purpose of our trip here and he responded with a very worried look on his face: "do you know that this is disputed territory, the Bakassi peninsula disputed between Cameroon and Nigeria?" We did actually know of the dispute over Bakassi but hadn't realised that Iking was on the peninsula. He continued: "there are several more checkpoints to pass. Whatever you do make sure that you ask for the officer", he glanced around at his men, "they won't understand about tourism. It's very dangerous, just ask for the officer". We thanked him for his advice and, before continuing, asked him if he knew how easy it would be to find a boat to Cameroon. "I don't know," he replied, "they won't want to take you since if the Cameroon army see white people in the boat they'll open fire at once. It's what we'd do if they were coming from there. Some of the boatmen have been killed like this so they won't want to take you." We turned around and drove straight back to Calabar.

Having failed in the direct route, we had two options. The first was to take a ferry across the Calabar river to Oron from where we could take a smuggler's barge to Cameroon. This would also involve passing Bakassi but we'd be far enough out at sea to avoid the customs and therefore also the soldiers. We tried this option, but there was no boat for Oron until the evening. The final option was to take a bush-taxi 200 kilometres north to Ikom from where we could find transport Eastwards to meet the only road in that part of Cameroon. This was a serious detour, but we had little choice. By mid-afternoon we were in Ikon, at the taxi park, an awful place full of con-artists and hustlers waiting to take advantage of naive arrivals from the backwoods of Cameroon. Eventually, after being misinformed and misdirected by various spiteful young men, we found a car heading towards the border at Mfum. The horrible atmosphere of the taxi-park seemed to infect everything and it took us at least half an hour to leave the park since our driver got into a raging dispute with the official manning the gate of the park over how much he had to pay. The driver, having lost this argument, proceeded to take it out on a petrol pump attendant, whom he abused horrible for some miniscule mistake.

We finally put the horrors of Ikom behind us and sped through the forest towards the border 30 km away. Naturally there were many checkpoints on this stretch of road. We passed the first two without any problem. At the third we had to get out and bring our passports to a bunch of soldiers lounging in the shade of a low, sloping wooden shelter. We handed our passports to the

soldier in charge and he slowly flicked through them with a disinterested expression on his face, not looking for anything in particular, just showing us that he was the powerful one here and that we'd have to wait as long as he wanted us to.

Suddenly a jeep roared up from the direction of Cameroon and screeched to a halt in front of the barrier. 3 large men climbed out, wearing civilian clothes, sleeveless t-shirts, jeans and dark sunglasses, clutching large, automatic weapons. The soldier with our passports and all his colleagues immediately grabbed their guns, raced over to the barrier and started shouting at these 3 men: 'you're so damn stupid!'. The two groups screamed, jostled and pushed each other, waving their guns around for effect. The soldier still had our passports in his hand and thus we had to wait, cowering around the car, for this standoff to end. Our driver, still enraged over the dispute in the taxi park, was impatient to go and tried to persuade me to go and retrieve the passports, which I totally refused to do since it would have meant interrupting a dispute between a large bunch of heavily armed, apparently insane men. In any case the situation was somehow defused, we got our passports back, and were soon deposited at the small village of Mfum, one kilometre before the border.

We walked to the Nigerian border post and were miraculously waved through by customs which was fortunate since we had a ten kilogramme bronze replica of a Benin statue in our bags and Nigerian customs are famed for invoking the clause which prevents export of works of art. We entered the immigration shed where 7 or 8 of the most bored people I have ever seen were seated at desks, some sleeping, others playing board games with each other. Each one of them interrogated us in turn, filling in different forms with our details, yet, despite the lengthiness of the proceedings, none of them raised any problems. Finally we emerged, having received our exit stamps, and walked across a beautiful suspension bridge over a fast-flowing river, which one of the Nigerian officials had told us was 5 kilometres deep, into Cameroon and out of the Nigerian cauldron. We breathed a long, contented sigh of relief.

Cameroun - Cameroon - Kamerun

Walking across the narrow, metal suspension bridge which spans the Cross river, from Nigeria to Cameroon, feels like passing through a magic portal into another time and a far off place. behind is the modern, paved road which speeds one into the tempest and tumult of modern Nigeria; in front a narrow dirt track winds gently up a small hill, through lush tropical vegetation decorated with bright flowers and swarms of enormous, brilliantly patterned butterflies. Walking up this hill, no sound of human provenance intrudes on the sense of tropical wilderness. Behind there is the distant gurgling of the river, quickly drowned out by the cacophony of countless birds and insects hidden in the forest. At the crest of the hill we came upon a small clearing inhabited by Ekok, a sleepy little village of some 20 buildings, all constructed of irregularly shaped slats of wood and roofed with corrugated iron. A bunch of men was gathered outside the first, and largest, building. Two of them beckoned us inside, questioned us briefly and stamped our passports, another two negotiated the exchange of our remaining Nigerian Naira into Central African Francs while the rest fought among themselves over who would get to drive us to Mamfe, the first town in Cameroon, about 70 kilometres from the border. Eventually we simply jumped into the nearest car, both squeezing onto the front passenger seat, short-circuiting the arguments about who had seen us first. We used our scarcity value to insist that we leave at once.

The road between Ekok and Mamfe is no more than a long, thin mound of red laterite mud. The top is fairly flat and about 5 feet wide. The sides slope steeply down into the forest which surrounds the road. Laterite becomes extremely slippery when wet and this was the middle of the rainy season. Whereas it was now only drizzling lightly, there had been recent heavy downpours and the surface was sodden. The narrow, treacherous road wound its way slowly upwards into the foothills of the Bamenda highlands. Our driver managed to coax amazing speeds out of his ancient Fiat, seemingly unperturbed by the prospect of meeting any traffic coming in the opposite direction. This road is one of the two principal crossings on the 2500 kilometre frontier between Nigeria and Cameroon, the main highway between West and Central Africa, yet in the 3 hours that we spent between Nigeria and Mamfe, we encountered less than 5 vehicles. This was lucky really, since when two vehicles pass, both must drive on the steep, slippery sides of the road, a nail-biting experience especially when your driver so obviously has a death wish. The reason that this short trip in a fast car took 3 hours was the presence of police and military roadblocks, 4 of which managed to convincingly cancel out our driver's efforts. The roadblocks, complete with gates across the road and wooden booths, had a sense of permanence and age in contrast to the highly mobile banditry of the Nigerian police. The Cameroonian officials also lacked the efficiency of their Nigerian counterparts. They'd strut around the car imperiously and question us passengers at length in an arrogant, sullen manner before taking the driver aside for some private 'business' which could take up to 10 minutes to conclude. Happily their attempts to extract cash from us were very half hearted and easily rebuffed. The driver's absences did at least give us an opportunity to survey the rich forest around us, which crowded in on the dirt road, as if it resented the space stolen from it and was just waiting for the chance to gobble it back up.

Our journey came to a premature end, just after sundown, when our car was forbidden permission to pass a checkpoint just outside Mamfe for some unknown reason - presumably connected to the driver's lack of generosity in his contributions to the upkeep of the security services. Nevertheless we soon found a municipal share-taxi to complete the trip and were safely deposited at a hotel on the edge of town. This modest guesthouse appeared to us like a miraculous apparition of extravagant luxury and obsessive orderliness. The building was modern, well painted and surrounded by a carefully tended garden. The bar and dining hall were clean and ordered, brightly lit by the light of dozens of functioning electric lightbulbs and ventilated by two well oiled ceiling fans. Our room was spotless; fan, lights, telephone, shower, sink and even the European style flush toilet worked perfectly. After a month in Nigeria we were overwhelmed by these gadgets and were unable to restrain ourselves from gathering around the toilet to laugh and clap at the wonderful sight of flushing. Several flushes later we dragged ourselves away to a meal of steak and chips - the first European food in some time - and a choice of 10 different types of ice cold beer.

II South West Province

Cameroon was initially a German colony, 'Kamerun', until their defeat in the first world war, whereafter it was shared out among the victorious British and French. To balance the British acquisition of Tanganyika, here, as in Togo, the French got the lion's share. After independence president Ahidjo, the Francophone leader handpicked by Paris, managed to manipulate the popular desire for unity. He took advantage of the ambition of some Anglophone politicians to 're-unite' the two Cameroons in a federation dominated by himself. The federation was soon replaced by a unitary republic and Ahidjo thereafter proved very skillful at using patronage, repression and military and political backing from France to copperfasten his hold on power. He abdicated in 1982 and his chosen successor, Paul Biya, has taken the same approach and brooks no opposition to his command of the country. This domineering central power is based upon support among the francophone people, causing the population of the old British Cameroon to feel neglected and sidelined. The manifestation of this division did not take long to show itself to us. The first person we met on our first morning in Mamfe showed us around town, carefully pointing out the many examples of the 'Frenchman's' ill-will: the cracked and exposed water pipes running along a muddy track, the lack of a hospital and the appalling roads leading away from the town in all directions.

Indeed there does seem to be something to his point. The main road out of Mamfe, South towards the coast and the major population centres, is perhaps even worse than the one to the border. 200 kilometres of narrow, slippery laterite track, interspersed with quagmires of soft, deep mud where some heavy vehicle has churned the surface. We took a minibus along this road to Kumba and the buses owner explained to us that the 'Frenchman' didn't want to allow access to cheap goods from Nigeria's factories to compete with imports from France, thus this main route into Nigeria was left undeveloped and indeed could be impassible for weeks on end. On this half-day journey, we encountered perhaps 4 other vehicles, a stark contrast to Nigeria. Whatsoever one of the cars was comically overcrowded. Three people protruded from the boot of the midsize saloon car, one sat on the bonnet, while two clung onto the sides with their lower legs in the windows. They smiled and waved as they passed us out. For 5 hours we travelled through

deep, untouched rainforest. The few small hamlets of rough wooden huts and the occasional guardhouse with a pole across the road appeared frail, fleeting and insignificant in the shadow of the huge dark forest.

Kumba

We arrived in Kumba as the sun was setting, a sizeable provincial town on the edge of the forest region. Naturally wood is the predominant building material and the wide dusty streets are flanked with simple houses with elevated verandahs constructed entirely of wood. The whole town has the look and feel of the wild west. The battered old share-taxis lumber around town negotiating the unimaginably bad roads, bucking over huge potholes, at a pace barely faster than walking. We stayed in the 'Tavern', the towns most popular drinking spot, with rooms upstairs, like an old West saloon. We deposited our bags, washed ourselves and were just settling in for the semi-finals of the European championships on television, when we encountered 5 peace corp volunteers, on a drinking binge. We needed little persuasion to join them on this - since parting company with another Irishman 4 months before we had been sorely lacking drinking partners. They were working as science teachers in a local school, but seemed to find their work somewhat unrewarding. They thought the school system was a shambles, the schools were totally lacking resources and their teaching colleagues were demoralised and showed no enthusiasm for learning new techniques and approaches from the volunteers. Hardly surprising since the government had halved the wages for all civil servants two years before. Still, despite their teaching frustrations, they proved very good instructors in the pleasure possibilities of Kumba, managing to eke out drinking spots into the small hours of the morning.

The next morning we awoke with royal hangovers to the sound of a thousand birds in full song immediately outside our window. A colony of masked weaver birds were building nests in a tree below. These birds are brightly coloured, yellow or red, with black faces and congregate in great numbers to build nests, all in one tree. They dangle upside down to weave strands of grass into hollow, spherical nests which hang from the branches. Despite their prettiness, when hungover it is a great misfortune to find oneself so close to a colony since their din is tremendous. After this shock to the senses, we deemed ourselves unfit to travel and postponed our departure for a day. We walked unsteadily to a nearby crater lake which proved overwhelmingly peaceful among the forest of massive, ancient tropical giants, yet it failed to calm our raging headaches and turbulent tummies. We visited some of the peace corp volunteers on our way back. They lived in a very pleasant bungalow near the local potentate's mansion. They entertained us for the evening which proved a very welcome change after spending so many evenings in hotels. We stuffed ourselves with home cooking, took care not to drink and the following morning we had recovered sufficiently to embark towards Mundemba, 200km Westwards, back towards the Nigerian border.

The road was again a narrow, precarious laterite track, interrupted by patches of deep swamp where all the passengers had to disembark to allow the car to career wildly through the mud with wheels spinning. Apart from the brief walking interludes, the only variety on this journey through unabating forest and palm plantations was a policeman arresting a fellow passenger from Niger, for failure to possess some document. We arrived in town just before sundown. We had been within 20km of here four days before, when scared off by the Nigerian army. To reach Mundemba, the first town in Cameroon, from Calabar, the last town in Nigeria, about 50

km apart, took us 3 long days of uncomfortable travel, over 900 km of dangerous tracks, as well as one even longer day of suffering from a painful hangover.

Mundemba

Mundemba is a small, spread out town surrounded by palm-oil plantations and rainforest. The town is filled with swarms of bright butterflies and tiny birds which fly in swarms and perch on blades of grass. We had come all the way here to visit Korup national Park, a large area of protected primary rainforest along the Nigeria-Cameroon border. We hired a guide and a porter at the park office, provisioned ourselves with sacks of rice, cans of tomatoes, tins of sardines, corned beef and oil, and set out into the forest. The first stage was accomplished in a WWF landrover, through an enormous palm-oil plantation owned by Unilever where the workers are housed in makeshift company towns, remote and isolated amongst the fields, utterly dominated by the all-powerful company to the extent that these little towns are known simply by the name of the company. The plantations end at the swift and turbulent Korup river which we crossed in a small dinghy and entered into the almost untouched wilderness of Korup forest.

The park houses many species of primates, forest elephants and all manner of animals such as the fantastic pangolin with its armoured scaly skin and long tail. However all of this wildlife is difficult to see as the thick foliage limits visibility to a few metres and the wildlife has learned the valuable lesson that humans are best avoided. All over West Africa we had seen only fleeting glimpses of wild monkeys, duikers, snakes and hippos, many of them were promptly killed as soon as they were spotted, either for food or because they were considered a threat. In general wildlife is either limited to very remote areas, or is extremely good at hiding. Nevertheless despite the disappointing scarcity of animals, the experience of walking through the forest was interesting enough in itself. The forest floor is comparatively dark, shaded by the multiple levels of growth overhead; from towering forest giants, thousands of years old, to small skinny saplings, all competing for light in this most fertile environment. The variety of trees and plants is staggering. Dozens of different, brightly coloured, exotic fruits and flowers hang from trees; patches of brilliant colour which appear suddenly among the dark trees. The smell of fermenting fruit is all pervasive. Bush mangoes and countless other forest fruits lay rotting on the ground, creating a pungent odour in the moist heat. In the canopy above, the sounds of dozens of forest birds ring out, each of which was identified, including its latin name, by our guide. Most impressive was the unlikely looking hornbills whose sound as they flew overhead brought to mind images of pre-historic teradactyls. From time to time we'd come across a clearing where a large tree had fallen and allowed the sunlight to reach the forest floor. Here flowers, swarms of butterflies and thick green bushes abounded. We walked 15km into the park to a manmade clearing with some wooden huts screened against insects. The only animals we encountered were a group of monkeys maniacally leaping from the giant trees into the canopy far beneath, and the nest of a fowl, *Pitticarthus*, which our guide informed us was the world's rarest bird.

The next day, after an uncomfortable nights sleep on the hard wooden floors of the huts, we set out to walk back out of the forest. 3 hours into the journey we came upon a big group of Drill monkeys, large brown primates with huge fangs, which mostly stay on the ground. They are most notable for their unmistakable sexual characteristics. The dominant male's bottom and genitals are bright shades of blue and red, while the fertile female's bottom swells up like a large balloon. These drills are thought to number only a few thousand and they exist only here and in two

other isolated spots in the world, victims of the shrinking of their habitats through deforestation and hunting by local populations. We also got an introduction to that more common feature of the rainforest: the rain. For 2 hours we walked through a torrential downpour which instantly seemed to flood all the paths and turn all the small streams into raging torrents.

As we left the forest depths behind us and approached the banks of the Korup river we started encountering evidence of more wildlife. Here and there, in thickets away from the river banks, there were piles of goods, wrapped in plastic and covered in tarpaulins. Our guide identified them as the unmistakable signs of the common Nigerian smuggler, who pile small boats full of petrol and manufactured goods and then carefully pick their way through the maze of coastal lagoons and rivers which lie all along the border. The smugglers proved to be the tamest wildlife in the forest, a group of them, busy unloading a boat, barely noticed our arrival at the river. We were pleasantly surprised to find the WWF Landcruiser waiting punctually to ferry us back to Mundemba. The cold beer, beds and showers of this tiny village made our 2 days in the forest look like the heroic escapade of an old time explorer in comparison.

Limbe

After the rigours of the rainforest we made for Limbe, a resort town on the coast, to recuperate and give our collection of exotic insect bites time to heal. We retraced our steps along the sticky tracks to Kumba, then encountered a tarred road for the first time in Cameroon, which sped us the short distance to the coast. Limbe, formerly known as Victoria, was the original capital of German Cameroon. The town is dominated by the great mass of Mount Cameroon, West Africa's highest mountain which rises sheer from the sea to a height of 4095 metres. The mountain is an active volcano and while we were in town, lava was still flowing from an eruption which had occurred a few months before. The sides of the mountain are thickly coated in jungle except for several swathes of bare black rock formed by the cooling of recent lavaflows. A series of fine beaches lines the mountain's foot. The sand is a deep chocolate brown colour from the igneous rock. The lower reaches of the mountain are a lush tropical wilderness which extends right to the edge of the beach. Gangs of cheeky monkeys gather in the nearest trees to steal food off unwary sunbathers.

The town today has little of its former importance. Most of its economic activity seems to be based around the weekend holidaymakers, especially expatriates from the nearby city of Douala. Along the seafront and in the adjoining streets, many of the buildings date from the colonial period, even from the period of German rule, before 1916. They today house administrative buildings, shops, hotels and restaurants. A well maintained botanical garden laid out by the Germans, leads away from the old seafront. This old colonial area is well planned, tidy and practically lifeless, almost deserted. The vast majority of the town's population live in straggling, scruffy suburbs in valleys hidden from the resort by the clefts and spurs of the mountain, far away from the shore. Our stay coincided with the rainy season and, thus a lack of holidaymakers. Saturday night was the only time that the resort saw any life as the many night-bars boomed music into the night and filled with groups of festive locals, dressed up, gaily dancing and drinking with increasing enthusiasm as the night wore on. Sunday night saw the European cup final between France and Italy, which we watched with a small crowd of locals, in a pleasant seafront bar set in the middle of the picturesque bay. The bay is dotted with strange projecting rocks and ships of all sizes. On one side is the massive volcano of Mount Cameroon. On the other side, in the

distance, can be seen another huge volcano rising clean from the sea; Bioko island, home to the capital of Equatorial Guinea, an island which consists entirely of a volcano protruding 3000 metre sheer out of the sea. Still the impressive setting couldn't compete with the football. The Cameroonians were divided in support between the two teams, with a slight majority favouring Italy. Curiously all of the 5 or 6 expatriates present were Germans who had businesses in Limbe, a sign of the lasting influence of the brief German occupation. It seems that the links have mainly been maintained by the German presbyterian church which is very powerful in Cameroon and, for example, owns Limbe's principal bookshop.

III Two French cities

After rejuvenating ourselves in Limbe's soothing waters for a weekend we continued on our way to Cameroon's big cities: Douala and Yaounde. We eventually spent a fortnight in each. This brought us out of the anglophone region of Cameroon and into the much larger francophone area of the country. Although the terms 'anglophone' and 'francophone' are generally used in the country, they are hardly accurate since Cameroon, as much as any modern African country, is made up of a vast patchwork of native languages, generally mutually incomprehensible and often completely linguistically unrelated. Furthermore the English spoken is a local pidgin which is incomprehensible to an English speaker at first. However it is certainly true that the dual colonial mandate has left a lasting impression on the country. In Limbe, Buea and Kumba, French is scarcely heard on the streets and is only really used for communicating with officials and government workers who always seem to be posted far from home. Pidgin English is the language of the market and taxi-park. 50 kilometres away in Douala, French totally dominates and English is not heard at all. The linguistic identity seems much more marked on the anglophone side than the francophone. While some anglophones did express some nostalgia for the British, this seemed merely to be a means of bashing the French: "The English, at least they taught us to respect people. These Frenchmen, tut tut, they have no respect at all." Nevertheless their dislike was always directed at the French rather than francophone Cameroonians and there didn't seem to be overt hostility between the two groups.

Douala and Yaounde are both large, modern cities. Douala is primarily a port town, hot, sultry and lush on the coastal lowland. The city is laid out like a French Mediterranean town and some of the wealthier boulevards and places are not totally unlike French versions, but the illusion is paper thin as poverty and dilapidation are never far away. Yaounde is the centre of government and of the exploitation of the vast rainforests which cover the south of the country. It sprawls over several hills and is riddled with pockets of wasteland. The government area of town is dominated by bold modernistic blocks, in all sorts of geometric shapes, built over the last couple of decades and already starting to peel and crack in the harsh climate of meagre resources for maintenance. Both cities are a world away from the rest of Cameroon that we had hitherto seen. Paved roads, shiny international restaurants, electricity, running water, modern comfortable cinemas, European style shops, five star hotels, large numbers of private vehicles, streets lined with high rise concrete blocks, neighbourhoods filled with acres of luxury villages; all contrasted starkly with the muddy wooden hamlets that we had been used to. It was quite obvious where the accumulated wealth of Cameroon had ended up.

France's Civilizing Mission

One striking point about Cameroon's large cities is the overwhelming presence of all things French in the world of business media and culture. Even in comparison to the countries of French West Africa, themselves barely independant, the pervasiveness of French influence comes as a shock. This influence is maintained through both direct interventions by France's government and military and through the power of French transnational corporations, like Elf-Total.

Amongst the various Cameroonian people I asked, it was universally held that president Paul Biya's regime is a puppet of France, and to a lesser extent the United States and other Western powers. In 1992 President Biya blatantly rigged an election, declared a state of emergency and viciously repressed protests with widespread use of illegal detentions and torture. Facing economic sanctions, international condemnation and an upsurge in domestic opposition, Biya was saved only by a \$115 million unilateral loan from France which allowed him to weather the storm. In the most recent elections which were obviously going to be rigged, the opposition chose to boycott the poll. France criticised this boycott as 'undemocratic'. Of course, France's influence in Cameroon does not rest on economic and political power alone. The French army has permanent bases in neighbouring Gabon and Chad, ready to 'protect French lives and property' at any time, although as France's 35 post-independance military interventions in Africa have shown, this sometimes requires defeating a rebellion or replacing a government.

The overt foreign influences in Cameroon are visible on the streets of Douala and Yaounde, in the shape of a large number of expatriate workers, mostly French and German, working for large foreign companies as consultants, engineers and senior management. Even the civil service has a few French nationals in key positions. These expatriates form the majority of the clientele of many of the fine restaurants, boulangeries and recreational facilities. In Douala we stayed for a few nights in the German Seaman's mission, a favourite haunt of expatriates, who flock there in the evenings to sit around the pool, gulping draught beer and tucking into numerous grilled German sausages with salads of cabbage and vinegar. Most of the other restaurants that we saw had more black faces present, although many of these faces were on top of skinny, long-legged, short-skirted, tight-topped, female bodies, for wherever there were expats, prostitutes were never far behind.

We inadvertently stumbled upon two of the prime spots for observing the mating behaviour and habits of these expats and their playthings; The Mediterraneo restaurant on Douala's foremost boulevard, and La Terrasse restaurant next door to our hotel near Yaounde's town hall. These were similar places; big, largely open-air, with a moderately priced European menu and overpriced beer, frequented by mostly middle-aged European men, most of whom had grown fat and idle from a pampered life with servants always to hand. From time to time young black women, mostly very beautiful, unusually skinny and scantily clad by african standards, would walk into the restaurant, either alone or in small groups of 3 or 4 women. They'd walk through the tables, greeting the men whom they already knew, sometimes one or more would be invited to join the table of some group of men. If not they'd take a table and wait for more guests to arrive and then approach the newcomers to innocently greet them, hoping to get an invitation to stay. The clients were certainly not shy about the business being transacted. We observed a table of two Frenchmen with four African women, one on each of the men's knee. The men were openly fondling the women, planting slobbering kisses on them and slapping the bottoms of passing, unattached women. As the night went on the demonstrativeness became ever more

lewd and unrestrained. In Africa, at least in everywhere that we had been, it is always taboo to display physical affection in public. Even married couples holding hands is prohibited. On one occasion we had the misfortune to observe a very drunk Frenchman going through an elaborate and lengthy flirtation pantomime with a paid woman, chasing her around the bar to try to kiss her as she pretended to flee from him.

The expats seem to exist in a world without a moral code. Many of them are contemptuous of the native culture and its social restrictions. Their contempt is given strength by their economic might in relation to the vast majority of africans. The expatriate employees of multinational corporations and expatriate entrepreneurs are often in the country primarily to make money. They resent the inconveniences to their lifestyles of living in a poor country. Despite their relative wealth, their numbers are not enough to maintain a fraction of the number of fine restaurants, hotels, nightclubs and myriad diversions of a European city. The only consolation is the potential for exercising power over people to an extent that would be possible in Europe only for the richest and most powerful bosses.

Any expatriate worker can afford to employ a large staff of domestic workers. Many have cooks, maids, childminders, gardeners, butlers, drivers and it seems to be common practice to employ a man to sit outside the house by the gate and open it when cars come, although this may only happen twice a day or not at all! These domestic workers are almost universally servile in tone and normally address their employer and his associates as 'sir', 'master' or 'boss' ('patron' in french). In addition to their domestic power, many expats command the labour of large staffs of Africans at work, and others use their money to exploit the native culture in a whole host of ways.

This exploitation inevitably creates resentment among Africans and indeed in Cameroon, we perceived, for the first time in Africa, a real sense of hostility to white-skinned people. Ordinary people in Douala and Yaounde sometimes appeared instantly hostile, a reaction which we had barely seen in West Africa where the only time racism had been an issue was when an occasional hustler had tried to use guilt about 'white privilege' to extract cash from tourists. One Friday evening we travelled to the Yaounde suburb where the African music halls are concentrated, hoping to see a local band. We were accompanied by Pedro, a Swiss guy who was half way through cycling from Morocco to South Africa and who we'd previously come across in Burkina Faso. We were sitting in a crowded beer hall fending off two ladies who were determinedly trying to pick us up or get invitations to Europe, when a man approached us and asked, smiling, how we were enjoying our stay in his beautiful country? We were reciting our standard polite responses when he suddenly stuck his middle finger up at us and shouted: "fuck you, go back to where you're from, fuck off". Pedro shouted back: "shut you're fucking gob". Happily 2 or 3 bystanders interceded to calm the situation by putting their bodies in front of our enemy. He complained to them: "but if I was in their country, they wouldn't let me just go to a bar for a drink like that", but he was soon diverted away to drink more beer.

The following evening we went to see an American film, 'Hurricane', at the cinema. The audience of about 200 people, was boisterous, groups of excited teenagers swigging whiskey on a Saturday night out. The film traced the career of a black American boxer persecuted by racist police. For the first half of the film, all the white people were deep South racists. African audiences are always demonstrative and vocal. Normally it is part of the fun of visiting the cinema, but on this occasion it lost its charm as the group of drunken youths behind us started shouting racial abuse, obviously aimed at us, the only whites in the cinema. "Yea that's what all whites are like, they're pigs", "fucking whites". We were most relieved when the inevitable Hollywood

affirmation of America and its justice kicked in. In the second half of the film, some good whites emerged and helped to free the imprisoned hero. The audience's mood changed miraculously as the hero realised that all whites aren't racist. In the final scene of the film, the white US supreme court judge delivers an eloquent speech freeing the hero. Several people leapt into the air with joy. The tension had disappeared completely and we escaped before risking the crowd's reaction to the second film of the double header. We deemed their reaction too unpredictable after an aging, latin-incanting, catholic priest had attempted to assassinate the devil with a high powered rifle, only to be thwarted by an elite US commando - in the first scene.

Otherwise we managed not to come across overt racial hostility. Newspapers carried an occasional scandalous story about unnamed Europeans paying Cameroonian women to have sex with dogs, or some such outrage. However much of the latent hostility probably had nothing to do with racism, it was probably simply a consequence of the harsh atmosphere of these big cities where poverty and repression lay heavily upon the people. Guns are widely available and violent crime is common. I was fortunate to escape when a group of 5 men surrounded me, grabbed me and tried to empty my pockets in front of Yaounde's central market at midday. The criminals must be truly desperate for justice is rough. The police are alleged to have killed hundreds of suspected criminals under their 'commandement operationnelle' to clean up Douala and Yaounde. There is a constant state of warfare between police and desperate illegal hawkers who flock into the cities' commercial areas. It is not unusual to see dozens of hawkers fleeing as large teams of armoured police arrive en masse to confiscate their wares. The government and security services have a well earned reputation for gross corruption. Transparency International ranked Cameroon the world's most corrupt country, it is also Africa's leading importer of Champagne. In our experience Cameroonian police were the most corrupt, arrogant and acted with the most impunity of any country that we'd seen. Torture in custody seems common - in Limbe, a human rights group had shown us photographs of the bruised body of a suspect who had died recently during interrogations.

The Post Office

In addition to widespread corruption at senior levels, Cameroon's public sector services are affected by extreme demoralisation among workers as a consequence of 5 rounds of belt-tightening on IMF structural adjustment programmes. Not only did workers see their pay universally halved 2 years ago, but they have to work with a serious lack of resources due to meagre and shrinking budgets. We unfortunately needed to use the Cameroonian postal service to dispatch a parcel of surplus goods which were weighing us down - especially the 10 kg bronze soldier from Benin. It took us several days of enquiries to learn the whereabouts of the only post office in Douala which accepted parcels - in the port, a long walk through an eerie and deserted corridor of heaped shipping containers. The post office, dark and quiet, is beside the port's customs office. A decent sized crowd seemed to be always standing around outside, waiting for some dealing with that office. I entered the post office to find a woman half asleep behind a counter. I asked her how much it would cost to send a package weighing 20kg to Ireland. She told me that the person who knew how to work out such matters was out, could I come back the next day? The next day, she informed me that he was out, this time to lunch, but that the package wouldn't cost more than \$50 and that if we came back in 2 hours, he'd definitely be back. We hired a taxi to carry our package and arrived back 2 hours later with it. The woman was still there lightly snoozing. We

awoke her. There was no sign of the expected man but she assured us he'd be back soon. She invited us into the office, a semi-derelict room with an adjoining storeroom littered with parcels that had an abandoned air about them. In one corner a uniformed official slept on his desk. We waited for two hours in the sweltering heat until the woman at the desk finally realised that we weren't going to go away and called somebody on the telephone. Some 20 minutes later a besuited man entered the room, he claimed to know the secret of pricing parcels. We quickly lost faith in the reason behind his method however, when his first question to us was: "so how many kilometres is it from here to Dublin?" Several minutes later, after substituting this distance into a complicated equation that he had constructed, he calculated that it would cost about \$500 to send the package. We stormed out full of impotent rage.

A week later we tried again, this time in Yaounde. This time the price was reasonable but it took us several days to complete the transaction. We had to apply to officials in two different government ministries for permission to export the goods, each of which took several days to process. Once the export certificates were obtained and, of course, the fees paid, we brought our package to the post office. First the porter brought us to the desk for clearing agricultural exports and fooled us into purchasing a certificate. Before we left the post office, we had to pay police, customs and post office officials for various 'certifications' and had to fill out a sickening quantity of forms. Happily, despite our misgivings, the parcel did actually arrive safely.

IV Into the Central African rainforest

Initially we had envisaged that Yaounde would be the end of our overland trip in Western Africa. We planned to fly to Kenya and continue overland to South Africa along the East coast. Beyond Yaounde, to the East, South and West, lies the great rainforest of the Congo basin. This region of Africa from Southern Cameroon, running Southwards through Gabon and the two Congos to Angola; Eastwards through Central Africa to the Western parts of Rwanda, Uganda and Burundi, is covered by the vast Central African rainforest. This belt also comprises the most ravaged countries of modern Africa. As long ago as the early 16th century, only a few decades after the first contact with Europeans, King Alfonso of the Congo was complaining to the Portuguese about depopulation of his lands due to excessive slaving. In colonial times they remained almost totally undeveloped. The harsh climate and impenetrable forests of the region caused it to be neglected in favour of lands where wealth was easier to extract. Today the countries of the region are extreme examples of exploited and impoverished third world countries. Their economies are dominated by a small number of foreign companies who extract oil and minerals from the abundant sources of diamonds, gold, copper, aluminium, crude and timber and other riches from the central african soil. Roads, where they exist at all, run from the mining centre to the port, airport or river, from where the goods are shipped straight to Europe. There are no paved roads linking any of the capital cities of any of the central African countries to each other. They are completely focused on exporting raw materials to Europe and America.

The small amount of wealth remaining in the country, after the multinationals have taken their profits, accumulates in the hands of those who control political power. Outside the capital city and the few centres of extraction, there is virtually no development whatsoever. No roads, no large towns, just subsistence villagers, abandoned by the state except for its constant attempts to extort money from them through police, army and taxman. The capital cities swell with hungry

peasants while the elite squander the country's meagre resources consuming expensive imported European luxuries. The swollen cities woefully lack services and breed desperation and crime. Because wealth resides in small cliques and is dependant primarily on physical control of a small number of strategic sites, wars, coups and invasions of mercenary adventurers are common. Angola has been at war for 40 years for control of its diamonds and offshore oil. Congo-Zaire has seen 5 years of bloody war for control of its vast mineral wealth. The robber-barons who rule these unfortunate states are famed for their brutality and greed: Idi Amin, Mobutu, Bokassa in the past, today Omar Bongo in Gabon, Denis Sassou-Nguesso in Congo-Brazzaville and Laurent Kabila in Kinshasa. Yet these brutal rulers have generally relied on the support of the multinational companies and the governments that sponsor them. To give a few examples: Elf-Aquitane largely financed the 1997 coup in Congo-Brazzaville. Mobutu's kleptocracy in Zaire was consistently assisted by France and the US, including French military interventions to quell rebellions. France backed the regime that was responsible for the Rwandan genocide to the last. There have been at least 6 major French military interventions in Central Africa since 1990.

Crossing Central Africa?

Due to the anticipated problems with transport and security in this troubled region, we had initially thought that it would be impossible and foolhardy to cross overland to East or Southern Africa. However as we travelled through West Africa, we had learned that many things are both possible and safe which are not supposed to be. We also met people who had done it in the past. Whatmore we were very curious to experience this region at first hand, inhabited by elephants, chimpanzees and gorillas and home to many isolated tribes living very traditional lifestyles, as well as the less interesting soldiers and strong men. Therefore we resolved to attempt to traverse Central Africa, overland from Yaounde.

There were two possible routes. We could either go South through Gabon and Brazzaville to Kinshasa, the capital of Congo-Zaire. From there we'd have to traverse the country to the South Eastern border with Zambia, and the safety of Southern Africa. The other option would be to go East into the Central African Republic (CAR) and from there across the North Eastern corner of Congo-Zaire into Uganda and the safety of tourist-trodden East Africa. After a week of deliberating and trying unsuccessfully to obtain any information whatsoever about the viability of either route, we finally opted to try the Eastern one since the ceasefire in the CAR was almost 3 years old while in Congo-Brazzaville it had barely attained 6 months. Furthermore this would minimise the distance to cover through Congo-Zaire and keep us further from the frontlines of the war there, in territory controlled by Uganda and Rwanda, whose soldiers we were less afraid of than the notoriously drunken, ill-disciplined troops of Kabila's government. Therefore we resolved to travel East to Bangui, the capital of the CAR, as the first leg of our journey.

To this end we dawdled in Yaounde, steeling ourselves for the rigours ahead. We replaced worn out shoes, clothes and used-up toiletries. We purchased cooking equipment and medical supplies, emergency rations in tins, plates and cutlery. We did everything to lighten our loads to increase our mobility with our backpacks on. We sent home or discarded all but the most essential items. 2 small paperbacks were our only reading material. Finally we filled ourselves with all the good things that Yaounde had to offer, especially the delicious grilled fish, cooked over charcoal fires along the roadside and eaten with strange, super-dense, translucent sticks of cassava, wrapped in corn leaves.

Illness

Our stay in Yaounde was further prolonged when I became sick. I was suffering from mild heart palpitations, chest pains and headaches and feared that I may have picked up some tropical disease. I called the British embassy to ask them to recommend a doctor. They sent me to an expensive clinic in the suburbs where my blood was tested for various parasites, 3 x-rays were taken, my blood pressure, throat, chest and eyes were examined and I was charged \$120 before I'd even got to see the doctor. When I was eventually ushered into the doctor's office, he briefly examined the x-rays, asked me a few questions, mostly about what I was doing in Africa, before delivering a vague diagnosis of something to do with my lung as evidenced by some imperceptible mark on the x-ray. He proceeded to write a long list of prescriptions. At this stage I asked him about the result of the blood tests. This took him by surprise, he hadn't known they existed. He bid his assistant to bring him the results. Five minutes later his assistant returned with a card. The doctor took this, read it and said: "ah, it appears that you have picked up a little malaria on your travels, you really should have taken some prevention. But you also have that thing I told you about before". I protested that I was taking mefloquine but he just smiled, shook his head, and added an anti-malarial drug to the long list of prescriptions, before ushering me out.

Even though I was very sceptical about the doctor's original diagnosis, I resolved to follow the prescriptions exactly. I had to go to a pharmacy and purchase over \$100 worth of drugs: anti-inflammatories, antibiotic pills, an antibiotic nasal spray, anti-malarial pills, and some mucus producing pills. I was feeling relieved to have at least something to take, hopefully at least one of the drugs would kill the bug and cure me. Then, when I got back to my hotel room, I read the instructions on the anti-inflammatories. The simple instruction : "administer anally" was enough to take any pleasure out of the cure. Nevertheless after a few days stuffed with drugs, I did indeed feel sufficiently better to push on into the rainforest.

V INTO THE FOREST

In order to break up our journey and because we still hoped to see gorillas, chimpanzees and forest elephants, we decided to visit one of the remote rainforest reserves in the South Eastern corner of Cameroon, a minor diversion from the road to Bangui, according to our map. We visited the WWF offices in Yaounde and they informed us that everything could be organised from their regional office in Yokadouma, the largest town in the South Eastern rainforest zone. Therefore we duly made our way to the bus station at 6am one morning to attempt to find a bus to Yokadouma. No direct buses existed so we crammed into a packed, old Mercedes 20-seat minibus with metal benches and no windows, to Bertoua - an administrative town some 450km East, roughly halfway to Yokadouma. The first hour or so was on a reasonable paved road. Thereafter we made tortuous progress over the earth tracks, corrugated in parts and starting to become slippery and churned up by the rains. The scenery was unrelenting forest, although it appeared to be secondary growth after logging, rather than pristine rainforest. Most of the infrequent traffic consisted of enormous logging trucks carrying enormous loads of wood. Some of the wood is cut into planks and stacked high in giant bales. Other lorries carry just 2 or 3 enormous logs, sections of the forest giants. This is the main road for the extraction of timber from the rainforests of the CAR and Congo-Brazzaville as well as from Eastern Cameroon. All the timber goes to the port in Douala. Cameroon insists that wood be sawed in the country in an attempt to create jobs and add

value to the wood rather than to simply export it raw, elsewhere there is not even this meagre effort. The road passes through several small towns, many obviously supported by the jobs of the logging industry. The buildings are simple wooded concoctions made in three different styles. The most basic houses use irregular planks roughly overlaid in horizontal rows. Another version is made of planks cut in the mill and regularly overlaid. The third style has long thin strips, about 10cm wide, laid vertically side by side to form the walls. All are roofed in corrugated iron or palm-thatch. While stopped at one such town for lunch, a local dressed in rags approached me. -"So what have you come here for, what are you going to take from the ground?" -"I'm only passing through, I'm on my way to Yokadouma to try to see animals in the forest" -"A few weeks ago a German was in town. He said that he was going to Lome (a nearby logging town) to look at gorillas, but I knew he was lying, he was going to look for diamonds and things in the ground like all the whites do." -"But you see there are no gorillas where I'm from so some people come here to see them" -"What, no gorillas?" he looked incredulously at me. -"we don't even have any monkeys". He walked away clearly not believing me.

We arrived in Bertoua after 11 hours travelling, slept and arose to catch an onward bus at 4 am to Yokadouma. The road and bus on this second stretch were much as before. The scenery briefly cleared out into pleasant tropical woodlands, before the road plunged back Southwards into the forest. The settlements on this stretch were much smaller than before; tiny hamlets of simple huts along the roadside with the forest pressing in all around them. Some of the huts were entirely constructed out of palm frond thatch, wrapped around a wooden frame. One would have barely noticed the villages if it wasn't for the ubiquitous strutting policeman barring the road with a pole. They became every more surly and numerous as we went deeper into the forest.

Yokadouma

Yokadouma is a straggling settlement around a crossroads at the centre of town. The buildings are almost all wooden, some of two stories. The streets are normally lined with timber lorries. Prospectors and dealers in diamonds and gold abound, all looking for credulous buyers. The shiny white Landcruisers of the WWF are the only small vehicles on the roads, adding to the curious mix of this boom town, which has grown from almost nothing by attracting immigration from all across the region with the prospect of work for the logging companies or, even better, discovering a fortune in gold or diamonds. The centrepiece of the town is a small statue of a forest elephant, ironically driven ever deeper into the forest by Yokadouma's industry. The monument, on a small pedestal, is surrounded by a horde of fast-talking, motorbike taxi drivers. Nearby are numerous large provision stores which are amazingly well stocked given the town's remoteness. These shops are all owned by merchants with light skin and arabic appearance and the same appears to be true even in the small villages of the region. In the evening the streets fill with women grilling fish to be eaten on a plate of forest leaves. The numerous night bars blast music from huge speakers and advertise beer promotions to attract the truckers, lumberjacks, environmentalists, prospectors and pygmies in from the bush with money to spend.

We arrived in town in the early afternoon and checked into one of the cheap hotels which seem to have been hastily constructed in the last few years, near the centre of town. We left our room to find some lunch. The first person we met tried to sell us diamonds but couldn't assist our search for food. Eventually, after walking aimlessly about for an hour, we found somewhere, ate an overpriced fish head and drowned it with a bottle of guinness before getting an early night.

When we contacted the WWF office in Yokadouma the next day, we discovered that we'd have to wait several days and pay some money for a permit to continue. We had come to expect such situations in Cameroon and accepted it with resignation. Therefore we spent 2 days sampling the limited charms of this boom town and trying to avoid being conned by one of the many sharks in town. Finally our permission arrived and we set out at 5am to catch a bus to the reserve. Contrary to the advice of everyone we'd asked, the bus didn't eventually depart until 7, which gave the local lunatic ample time to try to find out why we were REALLY here. We had been assured that we'd arrive by 10am but this turned out to be pure fantasy. We made tortuous progress over the 100km or so of wet and slippery logging roads. The weight and size of the logging trucks frequently destroys the road surface in the wet. There are many rain gates on the roads which are closed to prevent circulation in the rain and are manned by officials. Many of the bridges become damaged by the heavy vehicles and are repaired in makeshift manners. These required our bus to advance at crawling pace for fear of falling off.

This journey was made even less comfortable than usual by the poor bus, another aging Mercedes, but this time worse, as there were 4 benches set lengthways facing each other, all crammed with people. We passed through a series of tiny settlements of 20 or 30 buildings by the side of the road. Here and there pygmies had settled in small, semi-permanent camps. Their buildings were mostly built in their traditional way, in a domed hut, shaped like an igloo, with a cane frame and a covering of giant palm leaves from the forest.

Mambele

At about 5pm, our kindly fellow passengers informed us that we were arriving at our destination, a tiny place, not marked on any map, called Mambele. We made ready to descend but were informed that there was no need to rush since we'd be stopping anyway. At the entrance to town there was a pole stretched across the road. Beside it was a small shelter, under which sat 2 uniformed police officers behind a table. A third officer was sleeping on the table.

The sleeping officer awoke, exchanged a few words with the driver and motioned one of the other policemen to open the gate. We drove through the barrier and stopped 10 metres further on. We were gathering our bags together when the officer climbed on to the back of the bus, pointed at us and gestured for us to come with him. We followed him off the bus with our baggage. "Passports" he demanded in an angry tone. We handed them over. "Vaccination certificates", he continued, now even angrier. He took a cursory glance at Deirdre's certificate, waved it in the air, cried "out of date vaccinations, these are from 1999! Take their baggage off the bus!" and stormed off to his shelter with our documents. We followed with the bags.

Unfortunately I was in terrible humour after 12 hours of uncomfortable travel and was in no mood for confronting such a situation. I couldn't help myself from telling the officer that I knew the law perfectly well, he had no authority to enforce vaccination regulations, and that if he could read he'd see that all of our vaccinations lasted for 3 to 10 years. He became enraged. He took a fresh look at the documents and screamed "No TB vaccination!". I irritably replied: "nobody needs a TB vaccination, you're making the laws up, anyway I can show you the scars of my TB injections". He was getting every angrier. He continued questioning us aggressively for some time. When he realised that this place, Mambele, was our destination, he made one last desperate attempt to frighten and annoy us. He shouted out: "your vaccination cards are not in order. You have no TB vaccination. That amounts to fraudulent entry into the country. You are under arrest,

get back onto the bus and you will be taken to the major police station at the Congolese border". We reluctantly climbed back onto the bus, our bags were loaded back on top, and we resigned ourselves to losing another few days to the officials of the Cameroon state. The officer stood a little way away, conferring with a subordinate. Everybody on the bus waited. Finally, after some time, a fellow passenger approached and told me to go talk to the officer. Deirdre suggested that I try to apologise. I followed her advice, approached the officer and expressed my profound apologies for my stupidity in not having a TB vaccination. It worked. He ordered our baggage unloaded and commanded a subordinate to bring us to a nearby hut. This policeman explained to us, as he led us away, the gravity of our offence: offence to the dignity of an officer. We had implicitly told him that he didn't know his job by disagreeing with him, in front of his subordinates and common people, a very serious offence. 20 minutes later we were summoned out of the hut, back to the policemen's shelter. The officer had gathered his subordinates and numerous underlings around. For five minutes he gave us a lecture on the dangers of not having vaccinations: "If you had gone and caught TB, you'd come crying to me wouldn't you..." We bowed our heads and nodded our agreement with his opinion of our foolishness. The price of freedom. After the speech we were duly released and strolled across the road to the local lodge, an extremely simple makeshift wooden affair. We fell asleep on its wooden boards almost at once.

Mambele is a small collection of shacks gathered around a 'T' junction in the logging roads. Truckers often stop here to eat or sleep at the lodge. When it rains trucks may be stuck for weeks here as there is a rain gate on the edge of town. There are two small provisions stores selling basic goods. Around the town, in small scattered settlements, there are pygmies. These people, of the Baka tribe, lived until recently a hunter-gatherer lifestyle. Now many have settled in semi-permanent camps on the fringes of Bantu towns and villages. The Baka families we saw around Mambele were some of the most wretched people we'd seen in Africa. Thin, hungry-looking, dressed in rags which were dyed a uniform dirty orange by the red soil of the forest lands. The Baka, like most of the inhabitants of the region, survive off the produce of the forest. Small mammals, duikers and pangolins, dangle on sticks outside several huts, advertising game for sale. Others weave palm fronds into furniture and implements. Many people eat forest fruits, vegetables and herbs to supplement their diets. The only transport in the area is provided by the WWF Landcruiser which acts as an unofficial public transport, delivering people and goods at it goes about its business.

Lake Lobeke

We had no problem in tracking down the local WWF officer in this small town. He conned us into paying for a weeks supply of fuel for the Landcruiser and then organised 2 guides for us, one Baka, one Bantu, provisions and a lift to the edge of the woods. The route into the forest is heavily overgrown with thick foliage, at least 3 feet deep on top of the 'road'. From time to time we had to stop for one of our guides to hack a fallen branch away from the road. Otherwise we hurtled through this dense bush. Our guides who were riding in the open back of the pickup had to be constantly vigilant to avoid being whipped by dangling branches. After driving for what seemed like a ridiculous distance through the forest, we finally came to a tiny clearing with a flimsy cane shelter. We loaded our gear off the back, fixed a rendezvous with the driver for 2 days later, and bid him farewell. It was already raining heavily. We waited under the shelter for half an hour, dividing up the baggage and hoping that the rain would stop. It didn't. For the next 6 hours we

walked at a brisk pace through the trees, along a faint trail, over fallen trunks and across rivers. It poured rain incessantly for 6 hours. Water, several centimetres deep, sat permanently on the ground everywhere. After 6 hours our guides stopped and pointed to the left; "a gorrilla!", but we were too weary and defeated by the rain to react, and missed the creature.

We stayed for 2 days in a wooden hut on stilts overlooking a large clearing and a small stream, deep in the rainforest. Our guides stayed a kilometre away in a tent in a forest clearing and cooked meals from sardines and cassava flour, made delicious by our hunger and the forest spices that our guides found. While we weren't eating with them, we were supposed to be viewing wildlife from our stilted lookout. However the forest animals proved as elusive as ever and apart from monkeys we only saw a pair of buffalo in the distance. The birds were more numerous: geese, hornbills, ibises, bea-eaters and kingfishers. Most numerous of all were the insects, an incredible variety of biting things, flying, crawling, hopping and squirming, visited us from all over the forest. Deirdre got 170 bites on her legs when she left them uncovered for 1 hour at dusk. By the end of the two days, while we hadn't seen much wildlife, at least we were able to dry all of our things which had been soaked on the way in.

As we were gathering our bags to walk back out of the forest, it started to rain again. 2 hours into the walk, it suddenly began to rain much more heavily, which was seriously demoralising since it was already some of the heaviest rain I had ever seen. It is amazing how good the rainforest is at catching sun and how bad it is at catching water. The water on the path was deeper than our boots and we were utterly sodden and shivering. In these downpours, snakes emerge from their hiding places and climb up trees to escape the waters. Deirdre's boot missed one such snake by a few millimetres. The rest of us had to stop to wait for this small, green serpent to leisurely cross the path and wrap himself around the stem of a small bush. The WWF Landcruiser was an hour late to meet us. We shivered and scratched our bites under the dripping shelter waiting for them, then travelled back, exhausted, wet and covered with mud, and once more collapsed into the simple wooden beds at Mambele lodge.

Back to Yokadouma

The next morning we arose at 6, with all of our belongings still wet and covered in mud, except for one set of clothes which we had thoughtfully left behind in Mambele. Naturally the bus didn't arrive for a few hours after it was supposed to, so we got a chance to sample the comings and goings of this curious crossroads. There were several benches in front of buildings, on which locals sat passively, waiting to see what would happen. From time to time a figure would appear in the distance and walk, very slowly, across the wide road; small children sent to buy bread, the WWF driver organising a lift, a truck driver getting a bottle of beer. 3 Baka children, in their dirty orange rags, came to scoop water into their pots from the muddy puddles in the middle of the road. A screaming fight broke out between two groups of young ladies which eventually precipitated a huge argument. Most of the village's inhabitants came out to watch the shouting and screaming. The bus arrived full. We had to squeeze on, standing in the non-existent space between facing rows of people. After an hour we each got a seat on one of the benches, almost opposite each other. It started to rain, not a downpour but consistent rain, and I was soon soaked by a leaky window behind me.

The roads became very slippery. We passed a bus that had slid off the road into the banks of deep mud at the side. We came to a raingate. It was closed, no logging trucks could proceed but

we, as public transport, were okay. A line of trucks were parked in front of the gates, taking up most of the flat surface of the road. Another bus, coming in the opposite direction, was trying to manoeuvre around these trucks. It went a few centimetres off course and slid off the road. We would have to wait for this obstacle to be cleared before we could attempt to pass.

We all got off the bus and sheltered on the porch of a nearby hut. The passengers' natural pessimism was in full flight. Most seemed already resigned to passing the night here, in the bush, and predictions for our journey time were running from 2 days to 1 week. It took 6 attempts to push the wayward bus back onto the road. The first five ended with the bus careering back down the slope, nearly crushing the passengers who were pushing. The sixth was successful and the passengers re-embarked, covered with mud and soaking wet. Now it was our turn. The leading logging truck tried to move over, but only succeeded in skidding further onto the road. Our driver tried to manoeuvre slowly around it but we started sliding towards the edge. Miraculously we stopped with 2 wheels on the sloping side of the road. The passengers had to disembark and push the bus back onto the road at a tortuous pace. The conductor dug ruts beneath the wheels. We'd push, after a few centimetres the bus would start to slide and we'd have to stop and dig another rut. While leaning over to push the bus, I slipped down the slope into the edge and got covered in mud. I tried to rinse it off with water from puddles, but everything went instantly orange. Finally we made it past the rain gate, after a 3 hour delay, wet and muddy with only a small distance covered.

The next major delay occurred when we encountered a broken bridge. It had been down for some time when we got there. A dozen logging trucks were waiting, and a team of engineers, employed by the logging company, were already fixing the bridge. They bolted some improvised wooden beams to the metal bridge in the place of the warped and broken metal supports. They were a team of 8 workers or so, there was one white man with them who appeared to supervise the operation. 2 hours later we were back on the road, darkness was approaching and several of our fellow passengers warned us to take care of our belongings. All of our valuables were in a small satchel on my lap. I thought that I was safe since the guy on my right was a religious nutter who kept singing hymns and brandishing a bible, and I had my eye on the guy on my left. Later, when we finally got to Yokadouma at 9 pm, I learned the valuable lesson that one should never trust a man with a bible - he had taken advantage of the tight squeeze and the dark to slip his hand in my bag and swipe my camera! We stayed 2 nights in Yokadouma, enough time to wash our clothes and dry all of our belongings and to rest a little before setting off again into the unknown.

Central African Republic: You see how we suffer?

I TRIP TO BERBERATI

We had very little prior information about the Central African Republic, commonly known as the CAR. Our guidebook had only a couple of pages about it, most of which seemed to be very out of date, with almost no concrete information. We had heard the tales of the dictator Bokassa who used to publically feed his enemies to his pet lions and crocodiles, who had ordered massacres of protesting primary school kids and who had been rumoured to indulge in cannibalism, but that was in the 1970's. We had searched for information on the internet, but we found little. There were some newswire articles about dire petrol shortages and crime waves but it appeared that this problem had been solved a few weeks before we were set to travel. There were some human rights reports of systematic summary executions of suspected criminals, but tourists are immune from this. We also found a few traveller's reports from 1998 recounting that all the land borders had been closed to foreigners due to the high incidence of highway banditry, but the woman in the CAR embassy in Yaounde had happily sold us visas, naturally overcharging us, and assured us that the borders were open again. We also met one Central African refugee in Yokadouma who regaled us with tales of horror, mayhem and flight through showers of bullets, but he assured us that the country was quiet now. Thus, there didn't seem to be any overriding reason not to go to the CAR, but just in case, we decided that we'd first go to Berberati, the first town in CAR - just across the border - and test the water. If things looked dodgy we'd be able to flee back to the charted lands of Cameroon. Also, since Berberati was a mere 150 km or so from where we were in Yokadouma, we should be able to get there before dark if we set out early enough.

We were also running short of money as we had been unpleasantly surprised to discover that Yokadouma had no means of cashing travellers cheques. We were down to our last \$25 cash, so we had to try to make it to Berberati as quickly as possible and hope that there was a bank there. Therefore we arose at the unprecedented time of 4 am, to make absolutely certain that no bus could escape before us, and made our way to Yokadouma's small bus terminal. We approached the ticket office, woke the official who was sleeping inside, and asked about buses to Berberati. To our dismay we were told that none were travelling for 2 days. We couldn't afford to wait. The official explained our options. We could try to hitch a lift with one of the sugar lorries which take passengers directly across the border, along unmarked tracks to the village of Yola in the CAR, from where we could hope to find onward transport to Berberati the following day. Otherwise we could take a bus 100km North to the main road and hope to hitch a ride from there across the border. We decided on the second option and duly climbed aboard yet another cramped minibus.

The bus slowly filled and by 6:30 am it pulled out of town towards the North. After passing through a few tiny villages we came to a slightly bigger village with a customs officer and a pole across the road. He asked us, through the window, where we were headed. "Berberati" we replied.

His eyes lit up and he said "but there is a vehicle going to Berberati from here today", pointing into the village, "you see that white one down there". We were slow to believe him, suspecting a ploy to strand us in his jurisdiction but a number of bystanders confirmed his story. It was market day here, in Gari Gombole, and many Central Africans had come across the border to buy goods and do their shopping, therefore transport was plentiful.

Gari Gombole

We dismounted from our original bus and followed the customs officer into his office to complete the formalities. This naturally turned out to be an attempt to charge us \$10 for a fictional customs pass. We escaped by declaring that, given the unexpected fees we'd have to abandon our trip, and return to Yokadouma. We left his office and walked directly down the road to find the white vehicle that was allegedly travelling to Berberati. It was a small Isuzu 3000kg flatbed truck with a railing around the edge. The owner was delighted to offer us passage for \$8, as long as we didn't mind sitting in the back "like the Central Africans do", as he put it, with a large grin. His brother issued us with official tickets and advised us to eat some food while we were waiting. We deemed this prudent and headed into a nearby food shack.

Although it was only 8 am, we opted for a large and heavy meal of the local cassava staple with soup and a lump of meat, accompanied by a bottle of Guinness foreign extra, to steel ourselves for the journey. We watched a dozen young men load a multitude of goods onto the back of the truck: sacks of rice, millet and cassava flour, dried fish, crates of beer piled high, sacks of vegetables, clothes, livestock, clocks and stereos. An aged white man with leathered skin covered in dark blotches emerged from the market throng. He asked us a few questions about our trip and assured us that it was only 90km to Berberati, and that we should be there by noon. We took him for a missionary and thus were sceptical of his estimate since he'd be accustomed to travel in a modern 4 wheel drive.

As we were finishing our meal, 20 people or so came from nowhere, scrambled onto the back of the lorry and started to establish places for themselves among the cargo. We hurried out but were too late to follow the driver's advice and get a seat towards the front; we had to make do with squeezing in the back corner. I sat on the railing and Deirdre sat among the beer crates. Naturally it took the vehicle another hour or so to leave, by which time even more people and goods had joined us in the back. There were at least 30 people on the back as we pulled out of town, in addition to the large cargo. We trundled slowly to the border, only a kilometre away, enough time for me to almost do a back flip off the side as the truck lurched sideways, also causing Dierdre to be partially buried alive by an avalanche of beer crates.

CAR - first blood

The Cameroon border post was a little hut set beside a wooden gate which blocked the road. I leapt off the crowded lorry and entered the hut, accompanied by the driver. The desk inside was manned by a small boy who jumped up and went running off to fetch the official. 5 minutes later the official arrived, stamped our passports and demanded a \$5 fee. I succeeded in halving the price by pleading lack of cash, but couldn't escape having to pay. We were now down to our last banknote 10,000 CFA, worth about \$15. The vehicle continued slowly on its way for about 10 minutes, then it stopped and 6 young men emerged from a hut at the roadside, unloaded

the crates of beer and carried them off into the forest. We kept going and sadly the extra space thus created was soon filled by new passengers who were waiting by the roadside every few hundred metres, standing beside large sacks of bulky cargo. After a short while we came to a small village with a large clearing at its centre. There were 5 or 6 vehicles similar to our one all stopped here, each one piled unbelievably high with goods fresh from Gari Gombole's market. Some uniformed customs officials were examining the cargoes, poking and prodding the bags of goods. A crowd of perhaps a hundred people was standing around the vehicles or sitting on the grass underneath trees, waiting patiently. We all dismounted and our driver pointed out the immigration office where we needed to go to obtain a stamp. The officer inside was extremely friendly in stark contrast to the Cameroonians. He asked me about Irish football and Gerry Adams before explaining the disappointing news that there was a \$10 fee to get a stamp. I explained that I had absolutely no money since I needed to go to Berberati to change a travellers cheque. He appeared to believe me but was dumbfounded by the situation. "You mean you've got no money at all, not even \$2?", he said sounding hurt. He shook his head saying "I can't give you the stamp, you'll have to continue to Berberati and get it there once you have some money". We had no stamp but at least we were free to continue. I hurried out to join the truck, which was once again filled with passengers, all waiting for me, crammed onto the back of the truck, baking in the heat of the rising sun. We started out and before long we stopped at another small huddle of buildings. A fellow passenger advised me that I should go to the commisariat here, but I declined to follow his advice. Nevertheless we were far from inconspicuous on the back of the truck and a prowling policeman soon spotted our white skin and ordered me to their office. There were two officers in the room. They examined our passports and demanded \$10 to stamp them. Again I recounted our tale, again they looked flabbergasted. It seemed to be going according to plan when a very angry senior officer stormed into the room and shouted "\$15 each, stamp duty". He started interrogating me and was driven into a rage by my story. The passengers were still sitting outside in extreme discomfort on the truck and the driver now entered to try to hurry up our dealings. He appeared to be perplexed by my unwillingness to pay, negotiated a new price of \$8 on our behalf and offered to loan me the money - in return he'd hang onto our passports until we paid him back. Since this would leave us with only \$7 left, I was very reluctant to agree but was finally forced to concede defeat when the officer ordered one of his underlings to unload Deirdre and our baggage from the vehicle.

We continued on our way, ever fuller as we picked up more and more people waiting by the side of the road. 4 or 5 young men were employed to load all the extra goods onto the truck. They hung onto the railing at the back while we were travelling and entertained the crowd with their banter. Whenever we were ready to start again after a stop, they'd shout "fasten your seat belts" to the crowd who greeted their jests with loud laughter. In general, the passengers seemed to be in remarkably high spirits considering the excruciating lack of comfort. They were a mixed assortment of people from old men clutching novelty wall clocks, to teenaged women valiantly protecting tiny babies from the dangers of being squashed by careless passengers or avalanches of cargo. Here, like in Cameroon, all the men were dressed in Western clothes. The flowing robes and brilliantly coloured gowns of West Africa were not to be seen. The women, for their part did wear the same wrap skirts as in West Africa, but with second hand t-shirts rather than the bright tailored tops of West Africa. Still there were some similarities between the regional clothing - sure enough a small boy towards the front was resplendently decked out in a complete replica Manchester United football kit. In general the passengers were very friendly and pleasant to-

wards us, interested to know where we were from and why we were here, and above all anxious that we understand the difficulty of their lives. The phrase: "you see how we suffer?" was one that we heard several times and indeed we would have had great difficulty in not seeing it as this most wearying journey wore on. The only exceptions to the warmth of our fellow passengers was one shifty looking youth who persistently tried to sell me diamonds and a middle aged, uniformed passenger who kept advising me to visit the police station for a stamp in every tiny hamlet that we stopped at.

The countryside which we were travelling through opened out into a rolling woodland with patches of long, thick grasses. The occasional villages were small, orderly affairs. The houses all faced onto the road and were laid out in an unusually formal, ordered way, which made the villages seem somehow artificial. This could be a consequence of the forcible population relocations of the mad dictator Bokassa, who ordered the entire population to move their homes to the environs of one of the country's exceedingly few roads. Mostly the buildings were the familiar rectangular mudbrick affairs, roofed with a thick grass thatch, while a minority of buildings were constructed entirely of bundles of dried grass and looked very vulnerable to being blown down by a wolf. Many buildings were decorated with elaborately patterned woven grass mats and we saw several old men at work constructing these weaves and large baskets of a similar style by the roadside. The villages had many seats and benches fashioned out of cane providing places to sit outside the houses.

lunch

At about 1:30 we stopped in a village of about 100 buildings, the largest we'd seen so far. The driver instructed everyone to climb down, as a lot of fresh cargo needed to be loaded. We watched the youths clear a space on the bottom of the truck and fill it with huge bags of grain. The cargo was piled back up on top of these bags, but the people still didn't get back on board. The driver was missing. We stood idly about in the meagre shade waiting for him to return. The local drunkard took this ideal opportunity to express his admiration for France to me. I escaped when the driver appeared from behind a hut, beckoned for me to follow him, turned around and dissappeared again. I followed to find him sitting with his family enjoying a hearty lunch. We had come to this village, which turned out to be a large detour, so he could eat with his parents. At least they did offer to share some food with me. They claimed Portuguese origin and indeed they had unusually light skin. After chatting with them for a few minutes, I looked up and saw that everyone had got back on the bus. I hurriedly thanked my hosts and rushed out fearing that I'd lose my place.

Thankfully Deirdre had heroically defended my spot and I settled back into my crevice between two sacks of cassava. Deirdre sat on a bag of flour with her legs dangling over the side. Over lunch some new passengers had joined us and I counted 48 heads on the back of the truck as we started up again. We retraced our steps to the Berberati road, where some women were waiting with 6 big sacks of vegetables. Inevitably we stopped. I protested to Deirdre that there was no way that we could fit the extra load. Just then, an earthmoving lorry rolled into town and pulled to a halt behind us. Some 15 passengers piled off the back and started unloading their luggage and transferring it to our vehicle. Sure enough they all jumped on the back with their sacks of rice and bags of cassava. My position was becoming extremely uncomfortable, even excruciating. A tall, well-built man was sitting on one of my shoulders and I was in constant danger of being

swallowed by the sacks of grain. A bystander took this chance to call out to me that phrase that seemed to be the slogan of the CAR. "Do you see how we suffer?", he said, "In Paris you all drive around in your own cars don't you. When you go back, tell them how we suffer". I was too busy suffering to bother correcting his misapprehension about my nationality. After the new passengers had climbed aboard, the driver turned his attention back to the group of women whom we had originally stopped for. Catching a look of incredulity on my face, the driver explained to me: "it's the only transport this week. If I don't take them, their goods will rot before they get to market". Still his concern for the women didn't prevent him from fiercely haggling over the price they'd have to pay before being allowed on.

The vehicle continued, ridiculously overburdened. I was in constant pain. We travelled some distance like this until I finally managed to squirm my way to a position alongside Deirdre, dangling my feet over the edge. The cargo now rose well above the railing, so we had to reach down to hold it and it offered minimal protection against falling off. However we deemed this position safest as, if the lorry were to tumble over, which seemed eminently likely as it lurched dangerously from side to side, we'd be thrown to safety. Whenever the lorry did lurch towards our side we were violently swung over the edge, holding onto the rail beneath us like gymnasts on the parallel bars. The road was fringed with thick bushes and trees. Many branches overhung the road. One of the workers hanging onto the back, had the job of warning people when such a branch was coming, but several people received blows to the head anyway. The mood of the passengers stayed miraculously good throughout this grueling ordeal. They laughed loudly at the constant jokes of the workers. They greeted every violent bump, or sudden, dangerous lurch with unrestrained mirth and somebody would invariably catch our eye and, grinning, shake his head - as if to ensure that we hadn't missed the event. Everyone was very concerned that we should understand what it's like for the Central Africans!

The afternoon progressed and the journey wore painfully on. We came to a river which was crossed by means of a hand-pulled ferry. It took half an hour for the ferry owner to haul the bus across the small river with a hand winch. At least this did give us a time to reintroduce blood to our limbs. The crowd's jocularly began to stretch thin at some stages and allow one to see it for what it was, that is a reaction to despair and powerlessness. We stopped at a small village in front of a closed rain gate. Somebody was dispatched to fetch the official in charge of it. It turned out that he was eating dinner and would attend to us afterwards. Half an hour later, waiting crammed onto the truck, he emerged from his house overlooking the road. He walked slowly towards the gate, then suddenly seemed to change his mind. He turned around and began walking back towards the house. As he reached the door, he stopped and grinned at the crowd, it had just been a joke! He came back towards the gate. The people greeted this display of arrogance with a loud burst of raucous laughter. They fell around holding their sides, congratulating the official on his wit, the only response possible short of total despair.

arrival

We finally arrived in Berberati at 7:30pm, 10 hours to cover 90 km. Naturally, it was already dark and there appeared to be few buildings in the town with electric light. The driver, who had befriended us at this stage, kindly stopped outside the town's finest hotel and helped us to get our baggage down. Mercifully our room cost only \$4, so after recuperating our passports, we had \$3 with which to feed ourselves. We asked the receptionist where we could find food.

He directed us to the local bakery, but warned us to hurry back as it wasn't safe to be out late at night. We followed his directions and arrived in the bakery, the local evening spot. It was a curious hybrid of a place. One part of it served French pastries, another part served beer. The decor was dour, reminiscent of soviet-era Eastern Europe, and all the fare was served in archaic style by formal waiters with silver trays and tongs. The clientele was all African, groups of 2 or 3 people huddled quietly over a beer. We learned to our dismay that beer cost twice the price that it did in Cameroon but we were still able to afford a dinner of two breadrolls and a shared Mocaf beer to celebrate our safe arrival in the Central African Republic.

II A DAY IN BERBERATI

We arose early the following morning and set out to take care of the pressing matter of our finances. We enquired from the hotel's gateman and were exceedingly relieved to be informed that there was a functioning bank in town. He directed us to it, a few hundred yards further along the town's main road. We promptly followed his instructions and walked along this undulating, muddy track until we came to the bank. This was supposed to be the centre of town yet the buildings were widely spaced and surrounded by patches of greenery. The bank was shiny and new, with 5 respectably dressed employees sitting attentively behind desks with modern computers. Not only was there none of the long queues normal in African banks, there were absolutely no other customers during the hour we spent there. They were happy to cash our travellers' cheques but had clearly never performed the operation before, as they all gathered around one monitor to figure out how to negotiate correctly through their computerised system. Eventually we successfully got our money, and since it was now 9 am and we had long missed all onward transport from Berberati, we set out to uncover the delights of Central Africa's second town.

Berberati is a small town, with perhaps 10,000 inhabitants. The town is centred on a 'T' junction of two muddy tracks. Near this junction lie the small bus-park and market, the bank and the few large buildings; administrative offices, churches, a school, and some commercial enterprises. The few large shops are big concrete hulks, obviously designed with defensibility in mind. We visited one to buy batteries and soap. It was run by an old Portuguese man, with the tough weatherbeaten face of a frontier capitalist. He asked us the purpose of our presence in this far-flung corner and when we told him, he shook his head in wonder and expressed his admiration. Even more fortified than the shops are the 3 or 4 big diamond buying centres, with razor wire, high walls and gates manned by at least 4 heavily-armed guards. Otherwise there is little evidence of any commerce or industry save for a few small, poorly-stocked, informal shops.

The streets are muddy, uneven and empty of vehicles. In the entire day that we spent there we saw perhaps three cars, sturdy 4-wheel drives, driven by white men with tough faces: merchants, managers of the nearby coffee plantations, or diamond dealers. We wandered through the market but hurried away, intimidated by the stares of the gangs of idle youth standing listlessly around. Except for the curious bar-bakery which we had visited the previous evening, the only eating and drinking establishment of any kind were a couple of crumbling 'nite-bars'. These looked like relics of happier days, for now the walls that were painted with bright pictures of revelry were dull and flaking. Weeds pushed through the concrete and they had a deserted look about them. After making some enquiries, we finally located one, on the outskirts of town, which was still functioning and served food and drink. The bar was equipped with a television and a satellite

dish and there was a group of burly men watching it over a beer. We sat in the empty restaurant and ordered chicken, the one item on the menu. We sipped a beer while we waited. 20 minutes later a small boy on a big bike arrived with a live chicken and a bag of potatoes. It was a long wait.

After lunch, since the sun was now setting, we hurried home, through the slow centre and back to our hotel before darkness fell, since the streets seemed full of desperate and idle youth. Our hotel was, like all the other buildings in town, built for security. It was surrounded by a high wall and a watchman sat in a booth guarding the gate. We deemed that we'd sampled enough of Berberati's charms in one day and since we had survived unharmed thusfar, we decided to press on into the depths of the country, to the capital Bangui. Thus we told the watchman that we would be leaving the next day and asked him to wake us in time for the Bangui bus. He informed us that we should be at the station by 4:30 am to ensure a seat, but since it'd still be dark at that time, we'd need to bring a security guard with us. We thought that this advice was merely a means of earning a tip for the watchman and that the precaution was unnecessary since Berberati is a small town and thusfar in Africa, we had found small towns to be very safe indeed, since the strong social structures of the community guarantee security. Any delinquency is sure to be observed by a relative, neighbour or acquaintance who will ensure that news of the wrongdoing is effectively known. Besides what criminals are desperate enough to get up at 4 am? Nevertheless we agreed to be accompanied since at least he would be able to show us the correct place to wait and it wouldn't be expensive. Therefore we arranged for him to wake us the next morning in time for the bus.

III BERBERATI - THE BUS PARK

Having slept for a few short hours, we heard the appointed knocking at our door, shortly after 4 am. We dressed quickly and hurried out to find the watchman waiting for us. He accompanied us out of the hotel compound, holding our torch for us, and onto the muddy main street. It was still entirely dark as he led us towards the bus park. As we approached the 'T' junction at the town's centre, we could dimly make out the shapes of a dozen human figures, standing in the middle of the road ahead of us. Their shapes were silhouetted by the strong moonlight but it was a misty night and the gloom gave them an eerie appearance, like zombies. When we got nearer, we could discern them more clearly. They were all young men, standing motionless in the road, apparently waiting for some event. They stared sullenly at us as we passed them, and I was now very glad to have the watchman with us. One called out a question to me, asking where we were headed, "Bangui", I replied and hurried on. The bus had not yet arrived when we got to the bus park. There was a small group of people who also seemed to be waiting for a bus so we thanked the watchman, tipped him, found a bench near the others and settled down to wait. As we waited we were pestered by a young man who appeared to be trying to get a tip from us for helping us to catch the bus. We did our best to ignore him, as he offered to do various services for us.

After 20 minutes or so there were barely more than a handful of other passengers and we began to question the wisdom of arriving so early. Then, in a sudden flurry of activity and commotion, a sound of a heavy diesel engine was heard and became increasingly louder, until a huge vehicle turned into the yard of the bus park. It was not so much a bus as a converted heavy-duty goods

lorry in which the cargo container had been converted to take passengers. Holes had been cut in the sides to serve as windows and benches had been bolted to the base for seating.

Attack - wave 1

As soon as this 'bus' appeared, bedlam broke out around us. Our candidate helper began gesturing frantically towards the bus with one hand while pulling at my backpack with his other. I shook him off, slung the backpack over my shoulder, grabbed our satchel in my other hand and charged towards the bus with the baggage dangling from my limbs. For some reason there appeared to be about 6 passengers on the bus already as it pulled into the station. Their silhouettes could be made out, all standing in the aisle, as the bus circled the yard and came to a halt in front of us. I raced for the door still trying to fend off the helper whose hands I could feel dragging at one of my bags. When I got to the bus, closely followed by the helper, there was a small bunch of men crowding around the door in front of me. For some inexplicable reason this group seemed to mysteriously part as I approached, letting me at the door. I grabbed onto the sides of the door with both hands, to haul myself onto the elevated seating area. A guy was standing in the doorway, blocking my entry and he seemed not to be moving out of my way. I felt something holding me back and looked behind me to see two hands hanging onto my pockets. Suddenly everything made sense. I beat the hands away and forced myself past the guy in the doorway with great difficulty because I was burdened by two heavy bags. I stumbled forward into the aisle and felt a hand unzip my back pocket. I whirled around to deter the culprit but almost immediately I felt the clasp on top of my backpack being popped open behind me. I tried to make a dive for a seat, a defensible space where I could have my back to a wall, but everytime I made for a seat, a large man would suddenly appear and snatch the cushioned base of the seat away, from right under my nose. At first I didn't give much thought to this, accepting it as just another random element of the general lunacy, but when it happened for the third time in succession, it dawned on me that these snarling young men who were snatching the seats were claiming that they had reserved them and were demanding that I pay for the privilege of their use. Yet I was still under assault by the pack of thieves who were persistently trying to drag stuff out of my bag behind me and I was in no state to undertake a fierce negotiation with a seat-bandit. In no time at all, all of the seat bases were stored in the overhead luggage racks and a dozen tough-looking men stood around aggressively guarding their 'reserved' domains. I was at a complete loss, there was a limit to how long I could beat off the pack of thieves and I was out of ideas. Then suddenly I spotted Deirdre at the other end of the bus. She had climbed on the back door during all the commotion. Since, in Africa, it is almost always assumed that the man carries the money, the pack of thieves had totally ignored her and she had even managed to secure a seat at the back of the bus. I made a final Herculean effort and broke away from the thieves, barged past the guys blocking my path, and dived into the seat beside Deirdre. I struggled out of the backpack's straps and swung it around onto the ground in front of me. I clasped the bag firmly between my thighs to protect it and Deirdre similarly protected hers. Next I placed my satchel, locked with a mini-padlock, on my lap with the strap around my neck. I closed all the zips and clasps which the thieves had opened and, having thus made our possessions safe, I assessed the damage of the initial assault.

A sinking feeling came over me as I turned my attention from the bags to my pockets. It felt as if they were far less full than they should have been. In panic I checked my left pocket

and was enormously relieved to find my passport and wallet, with all my money, still there. My right pocket was empty, but surely there had been something in it before? I went through the possibilities and realised that I had put our torch in it before running for the bus. It was gone. Still, it was a very poor quality plastic torch, made in China and bought in Senegal for about a dollar. Despite its sentimental value, having lit our way across West Africa, it would be easily replaced. Nothing else was missing. I breathed a sigh of relief at the smallness of the loss. But we were certainly not out of the woods yet.

Wave 2

As I shifted my attention from my pockets and bags to the surrounding environment, I noticed that one of the young men was standing right beside me, shouting something in an angry tone. I slowly came to the realisation that he had 'reserved' this seat and was now demanding payment for it. He was demanding \$10, a ridiculous amount considering the fare was only \$15, and he reacted with aggressive indignation to our offers of reasonable sums. We refused to be intimidated and despite his rising anger, our offer remained firm at \$1. As this argument went on, I noticed, behind our tormentor, a familiar face. It was one of our fellow passengers from our trip to Berberati, a friendly young student with whom we had briefly chatted during the journey. I thought that this might be our salvation and called out a greeting to him. He greeted me back and I said "hey, it's pretty crazy here, he?", indicating our enemy with a nod of my head. I had been expecting him to come to our aid, but he only nodded sadly and said: "you see how it is for us". Until this point I had assumed that all this banditry was aimed at us, the rich foreigners. Now I looked around the bus and noticed that there were passengers sitting in most of the seats and every passenger was in the same situation as us, attempting to fend off one of these angry seat-bandits. I understood, for the first time, that we were in a terrorised society where security did not exist.

I turned my attention back to our immediate situation and tried to press the dollar into our assailant's hand. He refused to take it, shook his head in disgust, turned away, climbed down from the bus and walked off. We had survived this first battle but we knew that he wouldn't give up so easily and we remained in a heightened state of alert as we sat there.

Wave 3

However, the next onslaught proved to come from a different source. A scruffy young man, no older than 18, dressed in ragged and dirty clothes, tapped me on the shoulder and asked me to move over. This came as quite a surprise as myself and Deirdre were squeezed tightly onto the narrow bench with no room to spare. However, the young man informed me that here, in the CAR, each bench seats three passengers, but still I refused to budge at all. He looked far too poor to be travelling on such an expensive journey and after our earlier experience we were extremely suspicious and feared that he might be another thief, especially since there seemed to be plenty of more spacious spots available elsewhere. Therefore I told him to go elsewhere, but still he persisted and eventually perched his bottom on the edge of the seat without our consent. Ten minutes passed in an undeclared war of attrition between our bottoms as he tried to squeeze further onto the seat and I did my best to hold firm. My suspicions of his motives were heightened further when he adjusted the position of his arms a couple of times in such a way that his hand

brushed against my thigh, as if he was trying to establish where I kept my wallet. He was on my left side, towards the aisle, so I switched my wallet from my left to my right pocket, further away from him, and kept my hand buried in my pocket with a tight grip on the wallet.

Then suddenly, the owner of the seat reappeared. He was still angry and was still demanding a ludicrous sum for the privilege of using his place. Naturally, we still refused to increase our bid, and he became still angrier. He switched his attention to our new neighbour, shouting with equal vehemence at him, but since it was in Sanga, the lingua franca of the CAR, we didn't understand the meaning of the words. Presently he grabbed our neighbour and started trying to drag him from the seat. This effort was unsuccessful and he desisted after a while and turned his attention back to us. Our seat was the last bench on the right hand side of the bus and the back door was directly behind us. I noticed that a tall man, whom I felt certain had been among the pack of thieves, had climbed onto the bus and was standing immediately behind our seat, observing us. The back of our seat was a wooden plank and there was a large gap between this and the seatbase. I realised that he was waiting for me to take my hand from my right pocket so he could put his in and remove my wallet. I buried my hand deeper.

By now the seat owner was in such a fury that he was taking swipes at me, which I was doing my best to fend off with my free hand. He was screaming loudly, obviously for the benefit of the other passengers, "give me my money, give it to me". I had been wondering why this gang hadn't just pulled a knife, a gun, or simply beat me up, to rob all of our valuables, but this public display made me realise that these thieves could not run the risk of appearing publically in a situation where they could be indisputably identified as the perpetrators of a crime. They had to act in a gang and confuse the victim so that the individual thief couldn't be fingered or else their banditry had to operate under the pretence of a legitimate act like reserving a seat. For a victim, or an observer, had the ultimate power to point their finger at an individual and shout "thief!" and from what we had been told thusfar, this would likely lead to a beating from an angry mob, even a lynching or a summary execution if a security officer was present.

This realisation, that there were some limits that the thieves could not overstep, gave me confidence to continue resisting. My assailant now started threatening to take my hat in lieu of payment - my beloved explorer's hat. But I refused to take the bait and kept my hand firmly in my pocket, guessing that this act of open theft was beyond the limits. I was correct for he hesitated before grabbing it, allowing Deirdre to swipe it off my head and stuff it safely in her pocket. I was not enjoying this situation. In front of me the seat's owner was still making lunges which I was fending off with my left hand. To my left there was a youth whom I strongly suspected of being a pickpocket, and just behind me another lingered. The youth on my left now took a large value bill from his pocket and handed it theatrically to the seat-owner, obviously trying to exhibit to us that even the locals had to pay the price he was demanding. He then turned to us and started explaining, in the friendly tones of a helpful fellow passenger, that one just had to pay. This convinced us that the three were acting in league. We told him in no uncertain terms what we thought of his advice.

Final assault

Next they tried one last trick to get me to remove my hand from my pocket. The man behind leaned over our seat, as if to adjust a bag in the overhead luggage rack. As he did so, he dropped the burning hot cone from the top of his cigarette into my lap. This coincided with a renewed

onslaught from the seat owner, but still I refused to release my hand from my pocket. I bounced up and down in the seat to shake the burning cone free, and switched to the offensive, screaming, for all the bus to hear: "what the fuck is this, take your damn money and leave me alone", and thrust the dollar aggressively into our assailant's hand. Miraculously it worked, he took the money and departed with a curse. I looked behind and sure enough our friend had vanished, only the youth on the seat beside us remained. He started trying to get into our favours by denouncing the other two as thieves but we flatly refused to respond. After some fifteen minutes trying in vain to win our confidences, he confirmed all of our worst suspicions; from one of his pockets he produced a bible and, holding it up, asked us if we were interested.

We sat there for what seemed like an eternity, in an extremely heightened state of tension, watching the restless hands of our bible wielding neighbour like a hawk, constantly expecting hordes of thieves to dive in the window or pounce from the luggage rack. But the bus slowly filled, the seat-bandits one by one came to arrangements with the passengers and drifted away, and still ourselves and our belongings remained intact. By 9:30 am the bus was full, 3 bodies were crammed onto each bench and the aisle was filled with dozens more bodies and many large, shapeless sacks of cargo. By 10 am when the joyous sound of the engine starting was heard and the bus finally pulled out of the yard, some 20 more passengers had joined our merry crew, on the roof.

IV THE ROAD TO BANGUI

The distance from Berberati to Bangui is some 650 km and from the speed of our vehicle, which seemed to have a top speed of about 35 kph, it looked like being a long trip. At least the traffic was light, and for the next six hours we passed along muddy tracks through wild and lush woodlands with barely a hint of human presence save for a couple of insignificant hamlets, and saw no more than a couple of other vehicles. However, I had little time to watch the surroundings as I had to remain constantly vigilant regarding the unwanted presence to my left who seemed to never tire of moving his hands to different positions out of my view. Indeed a kind of tension seemed to hang over the whole bus and most of the passengers seemed to keep to themselves, clutching tightly to their luggage, all of which seemed to be padlocked closed. The only exceptions were a group of prosperous looking, middle-aged men who were swigging bottles of guinness and becoming increasingly boisterous as the alcohol took effect. We stopped twice, once at a police roadblock where we all had to dismount and present our identification to a group of officers behind a desk. They seemed surprisingly disciplined, with clean uniforms, bright bearings and upright stances, yet they still demanded \$2 to let us pass. We hadn't the energy to refuse and duly coughed up. The one Cameroonian on the bus fared even worse. He was hit for a \$7.50 fee to be allowed to proceed. The second stop was at a large village where we were thankfully able to buy a soft drink, 2 boiled eggs and a cob of corn, the first food we'd come across all day.

As the afternoon progressed and the journey wore monotonously on, we became increasingly tired and hungry. Our legs were stuffed tightly around our packs with literally no space to adjust their position which became agonising as the blood circulation to our legs was cut off. We had got up at 4 am and the pain allied with the constant effort of remaining vigilant was rapidly sapping my energy. Whatsmore, a boiled egg and a few grains of corn was insufficient food for such a gruelling trip; the food sellers who normally line the roads of African countries were almost

completely absent here. On two occasions we did come across women selling curious looking bunches of small peach-coloured fruits, but their entire stock was quickly snapped up, leaving many frustrated passengers. Thus we felt a tremendous surge of joy when, at around 7:30pm, we pulled into a small village and not only did we come to a rest outside a shop, but our neighbour arose, picked up his bag, waved farewell to us, and disappeared into the village.

Thereafter I found the trip much easier, a packet of biscuits eased our hunger and our new neighbour, a young woman with a small baby, was much less threatening than her predecessor. I was able to relax my vigilance and even allow my eyes to close. We rolled on through the night, along more muddy tracks which were occasionally inundated with enormous puddles, like small lakes, which required us to drive through the bush around them. I succeeded in catching a few brief moments of sleep by resting my head on the back of the seat in front of me while we were stopped at a squalid little village. At some stage during the night we got stuck in the mud and many of the passengers had to dismount to help free us, but I pretended to be asleep. Soon afterwards we arrived at the surfaced road leading to Bangui, one of only a few hundred kilometres of tarmac in the country; a very welcome sight but our pace barely increased.

The sun dawned to find us at one of the series of security roadblocks which line the roads leading towards the capital city. Again we were too tired and morally defeated to protest the demanded \$2 fee, again the Cameroonian had to pay more. By 10am we had arrived at km 50, a larger roadblock and again we had to pay. By 11:30 we were at km 12, the really major roadblock before the city proper begins. There were a dozen low buildings lining the road before the barrier, each housing a large number of uniformed officers sitting behind desks. It was Sunday morning but there was still a large and busy crowd of vendors, urchins, idlers and voyagers milling about on the road. 3 or 4 vehicles were waiting to cross the barrier and their passengers were huddled around various buildings, waiting for their papers to be cleared. Considering the number of uniformed personnel and the confusion of the crowd, it seemed that this checkpoint could prove expensive and traumatic, given our weakened state. Thus we decided to duck down in our seats and remain in the vehicle. To our surprise this simple ploy succeeded without a hitch. The other passengers dismounted, then returned in dribs and drabs until the bus was once again full. We passed through the barrier without anyone noticing us, and drove on into the city of Bangui.

Arrival

The only real task that remained was to get ourselves and our possessions safely from the bus and onto a taxi which could whisk us to the secure confines of a hotel. This had always been the bit that we'd been most afraid of. Bangui, along with virtually every other capital city in the region, has a terrible reputation for violent crime and the most dangerous moments are, as always, when one first arrives and is laden down with luggage. After our experiences in the tiny town of Berberati, we could scarcely imagine what horrors awaited us here. Our strategy was, once we got to the bus station, to remain in the middle of the crowd at all times, only leaving it to make a quick dart for a taxi. However our plans were completely shattered when the bus pulled over in some scruffy suburb and almost all the passengers alighted. We were left on the bus with a mere handful of people, among whom were a group of young men who took a sudden interest in talking to us, again innocently brushing their hands against my thigh as they gesticulated.

Finally the bus came to a halt, not as we had expected in a station, but in a derelict lot just off a quiet street. There were no taxis around, just 5 ragged youth lounging against a wall. We

grabbed our bags and leapt from the bus, judging that anything was better than to stay there like sitting ducks. The loungers hurried over towards us, not as we had feared, to relieve us of our belongings, but to ask us if we needed a taxi. We nodded assent and one of them charged into the middle of the road where he forced a passing taxi to stop by pointing at his skin and mouthing the word "white". There were people already in the car but our helper's actions must have convinced the driver that he had greater priorities and his passengers were quickly evicted before he turned around and drove over to pick us up. We quickly fixed a price, tipped our helper and plunged into the safe haven of that wonderful car.

Central African Republic: Bangui, capital of misery

I BANGUI, a tragedy

In Bangui, the capital city, the full tragedy of the CAR reveals itself. It is a singularly unfortunate country. The loosely organised village communities of the area proved unable to offer sufficient resistance to the raiders who supplied the Atlantic slave trade and many people were carried off over the centuries. When the Atlantic trade came to an end in the 19th century, slavers from the East took their turn at using the area to feed the Arab trade on the Indian ocean. The country was heavily depopulated by slaving and even today, with an area larger than France, it is inhabited by just 3 million people. In the colonial era the CAR was utterly neglected by the French imperial power; it was too far from the sea and the ships which carried raw materials from Africa to Europe; the area was densely forested and development of roads and infrastructure would have required great investments. Therefore, rather than undertake this long-term task, the entire country was simply divided up and leased to a few private companies who were free to use the resources as they wished, including the human population who were often pressed into slavery.

Since independence little has fundamentally changed. The presidents have been picked, supported and then replaced by France. The imperial power has cared only about the safeguarding of their economic and strategic interests and have been happy to prop up rulers, often by military intervention, who guarantee these interests, no matter how brutal they are. The little fame that the CAR has earned in the world is for the reigns of terror which have been used to ensure the status quo is retained. Dacko and Kolingba have gained some little repute for their cruelty and autocracy but the man who really put the CAR on the map was Bokassa, the cannibal, the butcher of schoolkids, who introduced a new standard among insane dictators when he spent \$28 million in 1978, more than the entire government budget, in a ceremony where he was crowned 'emperor' of the newly renamed 'Central African Empire'. France actually bankrolled the whole thing.

Meanwhile the country remains almost totally undeveloped. The communications with the exterior are still so poor that it is not worthwhile to exploit most of the abundant resources of this fertile country. There are a few diamond mines in the West which are economically viable due to the low transport costs of this valuable commodity. In the North there are some game reserves where super rich Frenchmen, including ex president Giscard-d'Estaing come to shoot elephants. There are a few coffee plantations along the Cameroon border and timber, bananas and palms are exploited in the rapidly shrinking forests of the South, but these are on a small scale and relatively unprofitable since the transport costs are high compared to their competitors - all these goods have to be hauled over more than a thousand kilometres of muddy tracks into

Cameroon and onwards to the port at Douala. The total income of the CAR government, around \$800 million a year, is comparable to a room of Wall Street stockbrokers.

The history of the CAR in the last few years has continued on its tragic course. Our taxi-driver, who picked us up when we arrived in the city, filled us in on the events of recent years. The current president, Felix Andre Patasse, was the first person from the North of the country to hold power. He favoured fellow Northerners in employment which prompted the army, still dominated by Southern officers from previous regimes, to revolt. In 1996 and '97 there were three mutinies of large parts of the army against the president. The presence of some 2,000 French troops was crucial to the president's survival. The third mutiny saw heavy fighting on the streets of Bangui which lasted for a week. According to our driver, during this week it was impossible to step onto the streets of the city. Both sides in the conflict distributed arms among the city's idle youth and formed squads of irregular troops which battled each other throughout the suburbs. The conflict was eventually halted by a deal which saw the introduction of a UN peacekeeping force to oversee the demobilisation of the irregular forces. However the end of the conflict created its own problems since many of the demobilized youth, armed and unemployed, took up a career in banditry and for much of 1998 and 1999, travel outside the city was extremely dangerous due to the high number of hijackers.

As well as its security problems, CAR has of late been suffering an acute financial crisis. Our driver told us the hardly believable fact that no wages had been paid to any public sector workers for the past 18 months. Since the city of Bangui has almost no private sector to speak of, this non-payment had a devastating effect on the entire economy of the city. All of the services: restaurants, bars, taxis, shops and other businesses which had depended on the custom of the public sector workers, had seen their revenue disappear. Added to this crisis was the influx of thousands of refugees into the city, fleeing from persecution and wars in other countries of the region. There were substantial numbers of Burundians, Rwandese and refugees from the wars in both Congos in the city, all displaced and desperate. Thus this city, which housed about a million people, had almost no money in circulation, everybody needed money, nobody had any.

This dire predicament had recently become even worse. The country's main trade route for imports and exports used to be the Oubangui river. Goods were shipped by river to Brazzaville and from there by rail to the port at Pointe Noire. However the railway was destroyed during the civil war in Congo-Brazzaville and the war in the other Congo effectively closed the river to commercial shipping since piracy became so common. The closure of this supply route precipitated a severe fuel shortage in Bangui. For several weeks no petrol was available which caused, among other things, a wave of armed bank robberies in Bangui - the police apparently had no fuel to pursue the robbers. The fuel crisis was resolved just a week before we arrived in Bangui by Qaddafi of Libya sending a shipment of petrol as a gift to the CAR. Given all these problems, it is safe to say that the citizens of Bangui were far from content. Things were so bad that our driver could even fondly reminisce about the days when the Southerners had held power. "Back when our lot was in power, sure there may have been problems, but I mean it wasn't like this!", he said gesturing at the streets around him.

Despite our driver's obvious passion for the subject, his descriptions of the tribulations of the people of the CAR were far surpassed by the vivid visual story which we witnessed through the car windows. We drove into the circular Place at the heart of the city. It appeared dusty and decrepit, almost like a ghost town. The shops looked poor and decaying, and many had obviously closed down. The only people on the streets were wretched and destitute-looking. Hungry Tuareg

beggar children lingered on corners ready to cling to any passers by. Crippled and deformed old men slumped against boarded up businesses. Paint flaked from almost every building, and of the only exceptions was a new-looking brightly painted bank in the heart of the Place.

We drove through the Place and out along Avenue Boganda, one of the two principal roads which radiate from the city centre. This road was the front-line in the fighting of 1997 and many of the buildings still bear heavy scars. The tourism ministry sports a line of bullet holes - filled in but not painted over - so one can see how the building was raked with a burst of automatic gunfire. Many of the large concrete hulks which line the avenue also bear the marks of war. A tall government office block looks like it has been burnt out and only survives as a skeleton. In many ways the avenue resembles an urban wasteland more than the principal artery of a capital city.

Almost the only cars on the road are share-taxis, mostly crammed with 6 or 7 people for economy. The main exceptions are the UN vehicles, shiny new white Landcruisers with the letters 'UN' marked a metre high on their sides in black paint. They are part of the prospective peace-keeping forces for the DRC, currently based in Bangui in the absence of a peace to keep across the border. They drive around the city, often in convoys of several vehicles, driven by uniformed soldiers and packed with sophisticated communications equipment, a stark contrast to the destitution of the rest of the city. We drove by their heavily fortified and guarded base, surrounded by high concrete walls topped with razor wire. To our right we could see a large imposing stadium of grey concrete in the shape of an oblong bowl: built for Bokassa's inauguration as 'emperor' and left unused and empty since that day - a fine monument to the insanity of absolutism.

We kept going along Avenue Boganda and arrived at the major intersection known as 'km 5', a congregation of low concrete buildings and haphazard wooden shacks, all roofed with rusting sheets of corrugated iron. Unlike the rest of the city, this area was thronged with crowds of people and traffic. Fierce looking women guarded small piles of vegetables at the many informal stalls which filled all the available space at the road's edges. Crowds of thin and hungry shoppers milled among the vehicles and stalls, their clothes often ragged or covered with the dust that hung over the area. The din of cars, horns and the cries of traders filled the air.

Our taxi muscled its way slowly through the intersection and continued towards the hostel which we had picked from our guidebook. Actually it hadn't been a difficult choice, since according to the book there were only a handful of hotels in the city and only two hostels which were relatively moderately priced. We had chosen the one which was supposedly 'popular with overland travelers' and had facilities like a bar, restaurant and barbecue. However when we got there we found the site was derelict, boarded up, the buildings were falling down and the place was covered with weeds. The driver honked the horn until a caretaker eventually appeared. He explained that many tourists used to come before 1997 but not since then and the place had been forced to close down long ago.

Our taxi turned back towards km 5 and this time turned North at the intersection, away from the city centre, towards the other cheap accommodation option listed in our book: a Presbyterian mission with dormitories for travelers. On the way our driver pointed out one of the city's foremost sights: the large pyramidal church of christianism, a sect which was born in the superstitious despair of Zaire and now spreads across Africa flourishing wherever desperation reigns. It took us some time to locate the mission since its entrance was marked with no sign, but eventually a passerby was able to point it out. We drove in the gate to be once again greeted with a desolate scene. The main building had a gaping hole in the roof and the place looked deserted.

The caretaker knew nothing of dormitories but he did offer to rent us a villa for a few hundred dollars a month.

We had now exhausted the cheap accommodation options. We asked the driver if he knew of anything else. He replied that, yes, there were many boarding houses around the city but these would be far too insecure for people like us who would attract thieves, therefore he said we'd have to try one of the hotels. We reluctantly agreed and he took us to the hotel Iroko, the cheapest hotel in town. It was located off Avenue Boganda, along a network of incredibly uneven dirt tracks. The building was heavily defended with a large metal cage at the front protecting an open air seating area. The place did have a derelict air, the receptionist lay flat out asleep on a table in what must once have been a dining room. Most of the rooms had large gaping holes in the wall where air-conditioner units once hummed. But happily, there was one functioning room, and we accepted it willingly, although the price, \$25 a night, was far greater than anything we had paid before in Africa.

II ACROSS THE RIVER

Bangui lies on the Northern bank of the Oubangui river, the largest tributary of the mighty Congo river, and on of Africa's longest rivers in its own right. It runs over 2000 km from its source on the Western border of Uganda to where it meets the Congo. From the Bangui waterfront a large gently rounded green hill can be clearly seen across the grey sluggish waters of the great river. At the foot of the hill a few white-painted, single-storied buildings can be made out among the lush and verdant plantlife which thrives all along the river. At any one time a handful of dugout canoes can be seen, paddling tranquilly across the few hundred metres of water between Bangui and these buildings. It is a picture of natural harmony, an African idyll of peace, tradition and fertility. However, all is not as it seems.

For the buildings at the foot of the hill are the town of Zongo which lies in the country formerly known as Zaire, as close to hell on earth as one is ever likely to get. Even the name of this country presents a problem, most people in Africa call it Congo-Kinshasa after its capital city Kinshasa, but this is hardly satisfactory since it springs from the colonial tradition of naming a territory after the centre from where it was conquered, pacified and administered, sort of like saying: the native region under the dominion of the fortified European citadel of Kinshasa. Others refer to this country as Congo-Zaire in reflection of its former name 'Zaire', but this is equally unsatisfactory since the name 'Zaire' was invented by the mad dictator Mobutu, during one of his phony drives for 'Africaness and authenticity', but in reality the name is no more authentic than any other. The colonial name 'Congo' is already the property of its neighbour, the other Congo with its capital at Brazzaville, just across the river from Kinshasa. Finally the official name, the Democratic Republic of Congo, or DRC, is patently unsuitable and is a name which I only heard used once in Africa. The reason for the unsuitability is the extreme absurdity of calling this state democratic which has eminently succeeded in quashing any threat, however vague, of democracy by murder, torture and mass repression. Rather than in democracy, it has excelled in the field of dictatorship and brutality and the Kabila regime that was in power at the time, was the proud world record holder for the number of journalists in prison without trial.

We were originally intending on trying to cross this gigantic country from Bangui through the Northwest DRC to Uganda, the route which was once part of the 'Trans African highway'. In the

70's and 80's a steady trickle of adventurous Europeans in Landrovers and trucks traveled this route on their way to complete the famed overland traversal of Africa from the Mediterranean to the Cape. However by the time that we finally got to view this country from the Bangui waterfront, any ideas of going there had been firmly set aside. In Yaounde, we had found on the internet, an account by a group of South Africans who had done this journey in 1998. It had taken them 4 months of grueling travel, constantly harassed and arrested by paranoid and corrupt security personnel. The transport situation was woeful. The Belgians who were the colonial rulers and were far from committed to the development of the country, had left some 88,000 km of motorisable tracks in the country at independence. By the end of Mobutu's rule in 1997 this figure had decreased to 12,000 km, naturally in the vicinity of mines. The voracious forests of the Congo basin have gobbled up the rest, temporary aberrations, and reclaimed what was their own. The South African travelers had been forced to walk for hundreds of miles through this wilderness since many of the roads had disappeared. Where there were roads, there were no motorised vehicles and even large sections of the once-great Trans African highway were now no more than 2 feet wide and passable only on foot or by bicycle.

Based on this report from 1998 we were still intending on attempting to cross the country, but it appeared that things had now become far worse than two years before. In 1998 the Ugandan and Rwandan regimes, and the foreign policy of Britain and the US which underwrites them, had turned against the Kabila regime which they had created, and took up arms against the government. They created two indigenous rebel movements as paper-thin fronts for their invasion; the "Congolesse Rally for Democracy" under Jean Pierre Bamba, as a disguise for Rwanda's interests, and the Movement for the Liberation of Congo for the Ugandans. Even the leaders of these movements themselves admit that they are in fact puppets for their backers who supposedly came to the DRC to assist them. Against the invasion of these two armies, who are the military heavyweights of the region, battle hardened by their wars at home and well armed and trained by their US and British backers, the Kabila regime would have had no chance. His army and administration is famously corrupt and ill-disciplined, not much better than the old guard of Mobutu which turned on the civilian population rather than confront Kabila and the advancing Rwandan and Ugandan armies. So Kabila tried to save his skin and invited several foreign armies to the DRC. The Zimbabweans sent some 10,000 troops, the Namibians a few hundred, the Libyans several thousand, and crucially the highly organised Angolan army, battle-hardened from their 25 year war with UNITA, sent some 10,000 troops. In return for this military support, Kabila handed over several of the rich mineral resources of his country to these foreign armies to be personally managed by the military and civilian hierarchies. Good incentives indeed for them to defend their frontlines.

Since the early days of the war and the foreign interventions, things had largely remained at a stalemate. The country was divided roughly in half, diagonally from Northwest to Southeast, a line corresponding with the main mining axis of the country. Each of the foreign armies seemed principally concerned with extracting and defending their share of the mineral wealth. The United Nations had been busily trying to broker a ceasefire and it succeeded when the Lusaka accord was signed in 1999 by all the warring parties, laying down various terms for an end to hostilities and an eventual introduction of peacekeeping troops to monitor the ceasefire which, at some unspecified time in the future would lead to a withdrawal of foreign troops. According to the media reports that we had been hearing, it seemed that this ceasefire was largely holding. The agreement seemed to allow the various parties to get on with the important business of

enriching themselves, without the inconvenience of having to fight a pesky war. Thus we had hoped to be able to travel through the country given the peace on the ground. However, while traveling across the CAR, and in Bangui itself, we met several people who had recently been in the DRC, or came from there, and from what they told us it appeared that the equilibrium of the DRC did not represent peace at all, but was an equilibrium of bitter war and horror that reached into every part of life.

Although the main protagonists had not been directly confronting one another, except in minor skirmishes here and there, there were a multitude of low-intensity proxy wars going on across the country. The occupying forces on both sides of the war generally seemed to secure their control by choosing one ethnic group as their local enforcers. Militias are formed from the ranks of the numerous unemployed youth of the chosen ethnic group. These militias don't fight any wars or engage in battles, they merely act against the local civilian population, extracting "taxes" from them, 'recruiting' young men to be sent to the front lines, and suppressing any 'rebellion' against the occupying armies, who are naturally extremely unpopular. Their power is based on their ethnic make up, since their victims are drawn from other ethnic groups, thus they attempt to tie the interests of these favoured ethnic groups to that of the invaders. For without the support of the occupying armies, the logic goes, the ethnic groups suppressed by these militias would surely rise up and massacre all of this oppressing tribe. So even if the viciousness of your ethnic militia appalls you, you are bound to support it for fear of horrific retribution. Meanwhile the other side of the war channel funds and arms to violent terror groups among the suppressed people, creating a terrible cycle of violence.

Recent visitors to the DRC reported a civilisation that had all but ceased to exist. Villages and market towns lie uninhabited as the population has abandoned them and reverted to a primitive life in the bush rather than face the impossible levels of exploitation and oppression. Transport and trade had essentially vanished since the roads were controlled by dozens of different local strongmen and militias, all extracting unbearable tolls on travelers. Many of the soldiers were routinely drunk and drugged and we heard stories of soldiers opening fire on vehicles just for fun. Several hundred thousands, or even millions, had died during this brutal, pointless war. The Central Africans considered traveling in ex-Zaire to be incomparably more difficult and dangerous than in their own country, which is no mean feat. They thought of the country as a wild place, to be avoided at all costs.

Whatsmore, just before we arrived in Bangui, serious fighting had flared up again between the regular armies in the DRC. Fittingly, in this most cynical war, the fighting was between two armies who were supposed to be on the same side. The Ugandan UPDF and the Rwandan RPF, the two key US allies in Africa, had already had frequent skirmishes before over the town of Kisangani, the country's third city, and crucially the centre for the country's lucrative diamond trade. This time the conflict erupted into all out war. The city was demolished as the two allies fought it out using heavy artillery within the city streets. Thousands of civilians were killed before the RPF finally drove the Ugandans out of the city and secured their mastery over the diamond profits.

A couple of weeks after the destruction of Kisangani, the Ugandan UPDF started pulling several thousand troops out of their frontline positions in Northern Congo. This was apparently done out of respect for the Lusaka accords but was actually probably due to increasing rebel activity in Uganda itself. Kabila immediately scrapped the peace accord and launched an offensive on his Northern front. Hundreds of thousands of refugees poured across the Oubangui river to find

safety in the rainforests of Congo-Brazzaville, one of the most inhospitable places on earth. While we were in Bangui, heavy fighting continued on this front, scarcely 50 kms South of us. All things considered we thought that maybe we'd visit Congo next time.

III SIGHTSEEING

After abandoning our plans of traveling through the country formerly known as Zaire, we had only one remaining possibility of completing an uninterrupted overland trip to South Africa; a route that would take us through Sudan. There were problems with this route. Southern Sudan was at war, a civil war between the muslim-dominated government and various minority groups in the South of the country, which had been raging on and off since independence. Therefore, if we wanted to cross Sudan, we'd have to travel several thousand kilometres Northwards to Khartoum to avoid the warzone, cross vast tracts of desert and go through the remotest, wildest parts of CAR where roads don't really exist. However we were attached to the romantic idea of making a complete traversal of subsaharan Africa, thus we decided to attempt to secure a Sudanese visa, reputedly no easy task.

So, on the morning after we arrived in Bangui, we made our way to the Sudanese embassy to lodge our applications. We found the place easily enough and were pleasantly surprised to find the staff to be extremely helpful and friendly. We filled in our applications and handed them over but, unfortunately, when we asked when the visas would be ready, they responded that they didn't know. They'd have to send our applications to Khartoum for approval, it all depended on when Khartoum got back to them. This might take a week, maybe longer. If we called back at the end of the week, they'd tell us if they had heard anything. Although disappointed by this news, we put on a brave face and resolved to use the time to discover some of the hidden delights of Bangui.

Our explorations started on Avenue Boganda, near the city's central Place. There were a couple of general stores, in one of which we managed to replace our stolen torch with a stylish looking metal one, equally as cheap as the lost one and also made in China. We visited the town's only supermarket of luxury imported goods to find basic items like butter and yoghurt being sold at ridiculous prices like \$15 for a half kilo. We stopped for a nescafe in one of the city's two coffee shops, both based on the French model and run by Lebanese families. We moved onto the roundabout at the heart of town but there was little entertainment to be had among the couple of banks and the scruffy market behind. Whatsoever we attracted flocks of small beggar-children who were dressed in rags and wore truly desperate and hungry expressions. They proved incredibly persistent and were immensely difficult to shake off. At this stage we had exhausted the entertainment options of Bangui's principal commercial strip and so we decided to stroll around the edges of town to see if the natural beauty was a substitute for the thinness of the urban attractions. The waterfront was our first destination but the ill-kept wasteland covered with scrub grass and weeds in front of the dirty-grey water, thronged with idle young men, left something to be desired in terms of charm. We retreated to the area beyond the commercial centre, hoping to discover some hidden charms, but after a few hours trudging along desolate, dusty roads, lined with patches of wasteland interspersed with cracking, grey, concrete high rise blocks with bombed-out airs about them, or rows of rusting corrugated iron fences topped with razor wire defending ugly concrete houses, under an unrelenting sun, we thought better of this.

We decided to give up on the hidden charms and instead make do with the standard tourist facilities of museums, hotels, restaurants and cinemas. The museum was our first stop but when we got there it seemed closed and deserted. We wandered around the building and eventually found a watchman lounging about in a shack at the back. He informed us that the museum was currently closed for lunch and that we should come back in a few hours. This seemed odd since it was mid-afternoon, definitely not lunch time. We peered through the grimy windows of the main building. From what we saw, it had either been a very long lunch - long enough for all the displays to have decomposed into dust - or else it was a museum of interrogation chambers, for the building contained nothing but a large room with a single, wooden table and chair in the middle.

After our failure at the museum we checked the cinema. While it did appear to be functioning, the films on offer were two 'straight to video' Hollywood action films, dubbed into French, the very definition of torture on celluloid, not even a year in Bangui would have been enough to make this seem like an attractive option. Next we investigated the hotels. There was one real 'International class' hotel in town, the Sofitel, a concrete high-rise on the waterfront at the edge of the city. We tramped out to it, along the long unshaded waterfront, under the oppressive heat of the afternoon sun. It was a vision from another world, an open air swimming pool overlooking the river with an elegant poolside bar, restaurant and tourist gift shop. A few French NGO workers and businessmen splashed about in the pool and sipped drinks at the bar. But alas this was another world barred to us, for the \$10 charge of a sandwich alone was beyond our means and we had no choice but to turn around and trudge back into town.

Our next, and final recourse was the city's restaurants. Our guidebook listed a dozen or so restaurants, mostly reasonably priced and serving everything from pizza to coq au vin. By the time we got to the fifth restaurant to find it had also closed down, we were starting to lose hope. Eventually we did manage to find one which still existed, although it too had a semi-deserted look about it, and there couldn't have been many recent guests. The prices were high, about \$6 a dish, especially dear when you consider that the menu consisted of just two items, chicken or fish. Nevertheless we were happy to have found some food and ate our meals gratefully before hurrying home as dusk set lest we might have to face the terrors of the Bangui night.

IV ESCAPE FROM BANGUI - ATTEMPT 1

After the rather disappointing results of our investigation into the pleasure possibilities of Bangui, we decided it better to leave the city and wait for our visas in some smaller country-town where our keep would be far less expensive, we'd have far less worries about our security and we'd be able to amuse ourselves by taking walks in the countryside. Therefore we set out on the next day to catch a bus to M'baiki, a small town in the rainforest 80km south of the capital, known for its mahogany carvings and the large population of pygmies in the surrounding countryside. The transport departed from km 5, the downbeat market area, centre of town for most people, but completely avoided by the city's resident expats and with a terrible reputation for crime. Therefore, when our share-taxi deposited us, complete with all our baggage, at the crossroads at the centre of km5, and we were instantly surrounded by a swarm of ragged men with desperate eyes, we followed our taxi-driver's earnest advice and chose one of these men at random to 'guide' us to the bus.

The bus rank turned out to be 200 metres away through the crowds of makeshift stalls and dense throng that perpetually fill this area in daylight hours. We were glad indeed for our guide who merely walked a few steps in front of us, because the sense of menace from the vast number of ragged youth was tangible. The markets of Lagos or the West African cities did not compare to this in terms of visible desperation, despair and danger. We were relieved to arrive unscathed at the bus rank, although the buses were in fact small, uncovered pick-ups with no provision for seating at all. Nonetheless we climbed up and did our best to eke out spaces which would allow us to journey with a minimum of pain. We watched impassively as newcoming passengers were mobbed by gangs of potential porters, fighting among themselves to carry the luggage. Before long we had reached a ridiculous level of overcrowdedness which the vehicle's owners reckoned, using their arcane science which appears to defy all logic, was sufficient to depart.

Inevitably, after passing along a few kilometres of dusty road, by rows of squalid shacks and spindly shelters, we came to a security checkpoint. Our vehicle stopped and the driver went away accompanied by one of his helpers to conclude their business with the group of officials sitting at table some 10 metres back from the road. After a few minutes they returned and it appeared that we were about to proceed when I felt a tug at my shirt. I turned around to see the sad sight of a fat, middle-aged, uniformed gentleman looking indignantly at me. He demanded "why haven't you registered?" in an angry tone and pointed at a small sign by the officials' table, which was much too far away to read, but I later learned that it read: "registration of foreigners". I apologised for my incredible negligence in not having informed myself of this regulation and both myself and Deirdre resignedly climbed off the vehicle, cursing the loss of our places, and presented ourselves with our passports to the desk. Several of our fellow passengers groaned as we departed, obviously not relishing the prospect of this delay.

In contrast to our last series of encounters with the CAR security services, on this occasion we were well rested, both physically and mentally, and were determined not to cough up without putting up a fight. Thus we affected total disinterested boredom when the most senior official examined our passports and turned to us with wide eyes and said:

- "but where's the card that you got on entry to the city?"

We shrugged and said:

- "What card? They didn't give us any".

The official held up a green piece of card and declared:

- "At km 12, when you entered the city, you were supposed to get one of these".

We still acted totally nonplussed and replied casually:

- "oh yeah, well it's your country, naturally you know the laws better than us, still they didn't give us one".

He explained further

- "when you enter the city you should pay \$5 for this card which you then surrender upon leaving the city, again paying \$5 each. Without this I'm going to have to arrest you for clandestine entry, a very serious offence".

- "Oh drat", we replied with an utterly disinterested air.

- "Yes of course", he continued, "I could out of the kindness of my heart, help you out. I could issue you with the card as if you'd entered through this checkpoint, just pay me the fees and say, \$10 each in fines, and we can arrange the whole affair".

It was hard to retain our composure at the extravagance of the sum, \$40, demanded, a good month's wage in the CAR, roughly equal to our intended budget for the week in M'baiki. Still,

we soon got a hold of ourselves and nonchalantly suggested that it would be a better idea if we just forgot about the whole thing. We would pretend that we'd never been in Bangui and we'd pick up one of these cards on our way back in, nobody would be the wiser and it would all be nice and legal. Somehow he seemed unimpressed with our suggestion.

The negotiations didn't seem to be going anywhere, our fellow passengers were becoming impatient with us and we could hear a few cries of "would they ever just pay up" from the distance. The official was staying put at his original demand: "either pay the \$40 - remember I'm doing you a favour here - or else you're under arrest". "I suppose you'd better arrest us then", I replied. He did. We despondently removed our bags from the pickup. While doing so we excused ourselves to the other passengers for the delay by mentioning the outrageous sum demanded. Upon hearing our explanation their impatience turned to sympathy. We took the bags and climbed into the back of the police vehicle. We made one last attempt to salvage our trip by offering to pay \$10, but it was dismissed out of hand.

2 officers climbed into the front of the car and we took off, back towards the city centre. We drove directly into the main Place and continued going towards the waterfront. We came to a halt in front of an enormous chain-link gate, some 10 metres high. A uniformed officer opened the gate and we drove in to a large yard surrounded by low buildings, apparently a compound of the security services. We stopped in front of a long 2 story building with a sign outside which read: "Police for the surveillance of the territory". There were no windows on the ground floor save one, heavily barred, about 2 metres long and 2 metres above the ground. We could see a large number of hands extending out of this window and as we were led past it, we heard many disembodied plaintiff voices pleading for us to buy them a cob of corn - for in Africa prisoners must feed themselves or starve. This sight made me think, for the first time, that maybe we were in the wrong country to be hard-balling cops.

We were led up a staircase, dragging all our luggage with us, and into a dark corridor where we were told to wait. Our apprehensions had an opportunity to flourish in the few moments that we were waiting and when we were ushered into an office our demeanour had utterly changed from our earlier nonchalance. The office was sparsely decorated with a wooden desk and a few chairs, there was not even a fan to stir the oppressive atmosphere. Behind the desk sat the chief of 'surveillance of the territory', a thin, middle-aged man with a military moustache and neat uniform. He gestured for us to sit down, but I, in my nervousness, knocked one of the chairs over as I turned and sent it clattering to the floor. This unfortunate start further convinced me that we were heading for a spell downstairs or a very expensive alternative, but happily the chief laughed it off and proceeded to launch into a long explanation of why we needed an entry card for the city. His speech was littered with self-pitying references about how he was the chief, but he didn't even get an official car. We listened with as great an air of humility, sympathy and submissiveness as we could muster, waiting for his speech to find its way to the 'fine' we were anticipating. However, we were surprised that instead of fining us, the chief wrote out a letter, stamped it with a carefully chosen selection from among his impressive rubber-stamp collection, sealed it in an envelope and ordered us to present it to the officer on duty at the checkpoint at km 12 where we had originally entered the city.

We left, immensely relieved and, on our way from the building, our sharpened sense of empathy for their plight prompted us to buy 10 cobs of corn for the prisoners downstairs which we passed in through the bars. We took a taxi straight to the hotel which we had left that morning on our way to a pleasure trip to the countryside and left our baggage there. Then we continued

directly to km 12 where we handed the letter to one of the officials. Sure enough, after a small amount of haggling, he stapled one of the cards into our passports, we handed over \$10, and we were once again legal foreigners in the CAR.

V TREADING WATER

Thereafter, for the following week that we spent in Bangui, we gave up on the prospect of sightseeing. Survival was our only goal. We remained for long periods of time in our room simply watching the time pass, for we had almost no means of entertainment. Our shortwave radio, heretofore our saviour in such times, chose this time to finally die, after having been soaked during our walk through the rainforests of Cameroon. We had no reading material left and the selection available locally was poor to say the least. Deirdre passed the time by playing several million hands of patience, while I concentrated on sewing patches onto my worn out clothes, taking up hems and fixing tears. To make matters worse, I developed a nasty case of dysentery and had to make frequent runs to the toilet. The fact that the toilet was only separated from our room by a low partition certainly didn't help to create a pleasant or fragrant atmosphere.

The problem of getting food did occasionally drive us from the safety of our room and into the city. Each day we left our room at about noon, walked along the channel of dense weeds that was once a river or canal, onto one of the main boulevards where we flagged down a share-taxi, squeezed in, and traveled to the city centre. We'd make our way, fending off beggars to one of the Lebanese cafes where we'd eat a schwarma sandwich and a guava juice each. Afterwards we'd walk a few hundred metres out of town to the newsstand where we'd buy a local paper if there was a new one out. Then we'd flag down another taxi to travel back home, past the bullet riddled department of tourism, the brightly painted 'bar-dancing', the heavily defended Nigerian embassy and the even more heavily defended UN compound. The whole expedition cost about \$4. To add some diversity to our day, when we were dropped off we'd sometimes walked back along a slightly different route. We'd turn off the avenue of weeds early, down some sandy backstreets which took us by one of the strange wigwam shaped temples of the church of christianism.

After returning to our room we'd spend the afternoon playing patience, sewing and running to the toilet. By 6.30pm it had got dark and we'd be hungry again. Feeding ourselves in the evening presented a much greater problem than it did in the afternoon. There is no street lighting in Bangui and it is a very dangerous to be wandering around in the dark. Therefore since we couldn't afford to rent private taxis and the share taxis were too far away and wouldn't leave us exactly where we wanted to go, we were limited to what food we could find in the immediate neighbourhood of the hotel. In most African cities this would have been no problem, since wherever there are people there is street food, plates of rice with sauce and other simple meals for a few cents. But it appears that Bangui's economy is in such a sorry state that even these meals are beyond the budget of most. The only area where there are such meals available easily is km 5, out of bounds to us after dark. In the environs of our hotel, there was only the simplest snacks available. Deep fried doughballs, charred cobs of corn and boiled eggs formed our evening meals. After a couple of days we ventured a little further along the dark lanes and found a woman selling small grilled sticks of meat, seasoned with garlic and lemon, which tasted to us like the finest food imaginable and made our diets tolerable thereafter.

After dinner was the time when we'd treat ourselves. We'd sit in front of the hotel and drink a small bottle of Cameroonian beer each and talk to the only other guest of the hotel, Martin. Martin was a builder, a site manager from a small village near Kumba in the English speaking part of Cameroon. He was a jolly fellow with a large waist and a big smile. He had been brought to CAR on a contract by the owner of the hotel, which was why he was staying here. He considered the Central African Republic to be a "terrible place", which he'd say with a shake of his head and a merry chuckle. He told us how his boss had received a \$1 million advance from the government for his current project, but had then invested this money in another business and was now unable to pay his workers - even though the building technicians earned less than \$30 a month. Therefore many of the workers didn't turn up for work for long stretches at a time. When they did show up, they were often unable to do anything since there was a chronic shortage of materials in the country. For the last month there had been no cement in the CAR until a shipment had just arrived from Cameroon, albeit at several times the cost price. These delays had kept Martin in Bangui much longer than he had intended or wanted.

Martin put much of the CAR's problems down to the Frenchman, and the fact that he never taught anybody to show respect. Yet he also attributed much of the problem to the frequent changes in the presidency. He thought Cameroon's stability compared to the CAR was due to the fact that there had only been one change of president since independence in Cameroon, while the CAR had gone through 5! Curiously Bokassa was the only one whom he seemed to have any respect for: "in the emperor's day you used to hear about this place, but now it's nothing". Indeed, he considered the country, its language, its standard of development, even its football, as being equally woeful and he whiled away his time lonely in this hotel, with nothing to do, waiting for his contract to end. Still, despite his low opinion of the country, he had genuine sympathy for the plight of the people here. He'd shake his head and chortle softly saying 'terrible, terrible', when talking about the wages of his co-workers or the government's corruption, with a sad look in his eyes.

VI PRESIDENTIAL DECREES

The time that we spent in Bangui happened to coincide with a week of National mourning. The president Felix Andre Patasse's first wife had died and, as our taxi driver informed us upon our arrival, this meant that the whole nation was in mourning. It was hard to escape this fact since the president, with the majestic instinct that seems to come so naturally to African heads of state, issued a few orders that made sure his subjects couldn't help but notice their collective grief. His first and perhaps most impressive command concerned the contents of CAR's only television channel. Each evening, in place of the regular light entertainment schedule, one hour of coverage of the mourning was broadcast. This involved a stationary camera filming a long line of dignitaries shaking hands in turn with the president, one after the other. This uninterrupted hour of hand-shaking was followed by an hour of classical music performed by a Viennese orchestra and choir. Apparently the president deemed this music appropriately dignified and sombre for this period of National mourning. I can't tell what the general opinion of the public was towards it, but the few whom I asked expressed the opinion that European classical music in general, and Viennese choral music in particular, had a rather limited following in the Central African Republic, probably less than ten. Still it did go to demonstrate that the president's grip on power

was firmer than might be supposed, for I can scarcely imagine any Western leader daring such a provocative act. To leave people with the choice of no television or Viennese choirs would be to invite instant revolution and the eternal dismantling of the state.

Yet despite the authoritarian commands of the president, it was almost impossible to find anybody who was willing to openly criticise the imposed period of mourning. On the contrary, most people seemed to enter wholeheartedly into the spirit of grief. Even our first taxi driver who had absolutely no sympathy for the president, had informed us of the situation by saying "we are in mourning". Indeed we encountered various people who expressed pride at the extent to which they had entered into the spirit of things. One man who lived near our hotel boasted to us that he had stayed up all night, standing outside the room that held the coffin, praying fiercely all the time. This devotion to the dead surprised us at first, but our wise friend Martin explained it to us. "In Africa", he said, "everybody secretly rejoices when a rich person dies. Their relatives are obliged to provide sumptuous food and drink to the mourners. It is unthinkable not to properly celebrate the dead in such a way. There are even many cases where the relatives won't spend a small amount of money to buy medicine to save a life and then spend many times the sum on celebrating the death. Thus when a really important person dies, there are many rejoicers, but they wear faces of mourning". However, the president whose television decree was so meekly accepted, was to try the people's patience to a considerably greater extent.

On Thursday morning, before our customary schwarma lunch, we visited the shiny new bank on Bangui's main square in order to cash a travelers cheque. We arrived there at approximately 11:30 am, but found the foreign exchange desk unmanned. We asked the porter and were informed that the official had probably taken an early lunch. We asked what time she'd be back and were disappointed to be told that foreign exchange was a morning only service, could we please come back tomorrow. Thankfully we had enough cash to survive until then and thus, with the quietism that we had laboriously learned in order to avoid the constant psychological trauma of trying to organise things in Africa, we meekly accepted this advice without any fuss. We went and had our lunch as normal and, on our way to catch a taxi home we actually came across the president's cavalcade itself. It was preceded by a large number of police and soldiers with rifles, all gesturing urgently for people to clear the roads, then it zoomed by, accompanied by about 10 military vehicles stuffed with firepower, including one heavy artillery piece which seemed to be overdoing it to say the least. A bystander informed us that he was on his way to pay a final visit to his wife's coffin for her body was due to be moved to the country for the next day for burial.

We thought nothing more of this incident until later that evening when we returned from our dinner of odds and ends. Martin asked us had we heard about the president's announcement. "What announcement?", we replied. "Well", said Martin, "he just announced on television that, out of respect for his first wife tomorrow will be a public holiday, that means everything will be closed". "What!", we exclaimed in shock, "but tomorrow's Friday, we have to go to the bank and the embassy, we have no money to survive the weekend, how can he do that, surely the banks can't close". "I fear they may", he said with a sad chuckle, "whatsoever Monday is also a public holiday for religious reasons, and Tuesday is the CAR's national holiday". We were struck dumb with horror. The president had launched a surprise public holiday immediately before 4 consecutive holiday days. It would be almost a week before we could obtain money. We could only hope against all that we knew that the banks would ignore this holiday and remain open. Surely reason dictated that otherwise many people would find themselves in difficult straits?

Friday

7 am the following, Friday, morning saw us outside an unquestionably closed bank. The security guard approached us, as we stood outside the chained-closed gates and told us to come back on Wednesday. We protested imploringly that we had been told to come back this morning and that we absolutely had to change money. He replied with a smile: "well there's nobody here, the bank won't be open till Wednesday, you're welcome to wait", and left us standing there rattling the gate with impotent rage. We tried the only other bank with foreign exchange, again it was closed and firmly locked up. Things had now reached a serious crisis point. We had no money left and we were intending on leaving the city in the next couple of days, since we hoped our visas for Sudan would be ready today or on Monday at the latest, and the prospect of having to stay an extra week in Bangui, especially in absolute poverty, sent shivers down our spines. We had to come up with some means of getting money. We finally decided to try the Sofitel tourist hotel, maybe they'd be able to cash a cheque for us, but first we had to make our way to it across town.

Our predicament was made considerably more difficult by the nature of this 'public holiday', central African style. Whereas public holidays in Western countries are normally greeted with joy - most people get a paid day off and those in marginal jobs simple work anyway - here it was quite different. A very small proportion of the population is employed in regular jobs with holiday pay and other benefits. The vast majority of workers depend on informal work to survive, like hawking goods on the street, selling food or casual labouring. If these people take a day off, it simply means that they don't eat. So what's that problem, you'd think, surely these people would just go to work anyway? Well, that's not the way president Patasse saw it, for when he calls a public holiday he means it, anybody who dares not observe it is guilty of disrespect and will face the consequences. The streets of central Bangui were crawling with armed military personnel, out to enforce the public holiday, and maybe earn a little money with which to celebrate at the same time.

Myself and Deirdre were obvious targets for these soldiers out to earn some beer money and so we had to steer our way across the city with extreme caution. We had only got a few blocks from the bank when we were arrested for the first time. We followed a footpath which cut diagonally across a block. Halfway across we were stopped by a semi-drunken officer who informed us that the path was a high-security zone and that we were forbidden to use it despite the fact that a steady stream of civilian pedestrians were using it right in front of us. Happily our true tale of pennilessness was strong enough to deflect his fire and he let us go as soon as he became convinced that he'd get no money out of us. We hurried on to the hotel and arrived there, by way of various backstreets, without any further mishaps. The hotel refused to cash the cheques for us since we weren't residents but after some lengthy pleading the kind receptionist finally assented to letting us have 100,000 CFA, about \$150, minus a commission but at least we had money to survive the long holiday.

Having acquired some money, our thoughts turned to the visas. We had to visit the Sudanese embassy to learn the result of our visa applications. Again we had to walk right across town and again we were 'arrested', this time for walking along a high-security stretch of the waterfront. Our excuse about the banks being closed and us being penniless worked again, although this time we were lying. We arrived at the embassy to find it closed, like all the other premises in the city. However we knocked on the door and were admitted by the doorman after he had checked the

surrounding streets to make sure nobody was observing him. We were led into the waiting room but the receptionist informed us that the embassy was closed for the public holiday. We persisted and pleaded with him to tell us if there was any news of our visas. Reluctantly he concurred and went off to see if the visa official had left yet for the weekend. We were most encouraged when the official entered the office a few minutes later, with a broad smile on his face. "I'm afraid Khartoum haven't got back to us", he said still smiling broadly, "since we'll be closed for most of next week, you can come back on Monday week and we'll tell you if we've heard any news then." We left the embassy devastated, our plans in tatters. We had scarcely the courage to face another 11 days waiting in Bangui and even then there was no guarantee that we'd be granted the visas especially since the Khartoum government had just started a bombing campaign against UN bases in the South of the country and Western tourists might not be especially welcome.

VII ESCAPE FROM BANGUI - ATTEMPT 2

Faced with this situation, a long uncertain wait in probably the least pleasant place that either of us had ever been in, our determination to cross Africa overland vanished. We left the Sudanese embassy and, without having to say a word to each other, we knew that our goal had changed - our only aim now was to get out of the CAR as quickly as possible, to get to East Africa by whatever means were available, at whatever the cost. Our friend Martin, whose building site was at the airport had told us of the flight schedule from Bangui which wasn't particularly difficult to remember since there were only about 5 flights a week. Only 3 companies fly to Bangui: Air France, Air Afrique and Air Sudan. Of these Air Sudan was out since it flew only to Khartoum. Since there are no travel agents in the CAR, we'd have to try to go to the other two airline offices themselves and hope that they had somehow defied the public holiday.

Our first stop was Air Afrique, but the office looked closed, the door was locked and the shutters were drawn. Still we approached the door and tried to peer through the glass. We could make out nothing inside. We turned to go despondently. Just then a security guard behind us hissed at us to catch our attention. He gestured for us to follow him and led us around the back of the building, through a door and a series of dark corridors, into the office, where we saw that a woman was manning the desk. They were open for clandestine business! We waited for the two other secret clients to be dealt with before approaching the desk and inquiring about flights to East Africa. To our delight she informed us that there was a flight on Monday to Douala, Cameroon from where we could get a connecting flight the following day to Nairobi. We had no Cameroonian visa and wouldn't be able to get one, but still we eagerly agreed to this course of action - anything rather than being stuck in Bangui. She asked us how we wanted to pay, "credit card", we replied, but alas, despite the VISA stickers plastered all over the window, she refused. "The cashier isn't here today", she said, "it's cash only or else you can come back next Wednesday". "But", we protested, "we simply must fly on Monday". "Well, the office might be open for half an hour tomorrow morning and the cashier might be here", she replied sounding extremely unconvinced.

We left the office dejected, it seemed that our major hope had fallen through. The cost of the tickets was astronomical, some \$650 each one way, about 4 times what we had paid for a return flight from London to the Gambia, and there seemed no chance of getting that amount of cash together with the banks closed. We had a bright idea - maybe there would be a boat leaving

soon to travel down the Oubangui to Brazzaville. We walked to the port and asked some of the men lounging idly about. No joy - the next boat wasn't for two weeks - so that idea was quickly shelved. Our last hope was Air France but this seemed like a slim possibility since we knew that from Bangui they flew only to Chad, completely the wrong direction, but perhaps we might be able to get some connecting transport from there and besides it couldn't be worse than Bangui. So we duly trudged several kilometres out along Avenue de l'Indépendance to the Air France office.

Military games

As we approached the office, it looked firmly closed. The gates to the compound were chained shut and we were on the point of giving up when we saw a security guard open the gate and let a car containing two men and woman out. We hoped that, similarly to Air Afrique, they were clandestinely open for business, and called out a question to the guard. Yet he informed us that, no, they were indeed closed. We were on the point of walking away when the driver of the car called out to us:

- "Are you looking for plane tickets?", he asked,
- "Yes!".
- "Where do you want to go?"
- "East Africa, anywhere, Nairobi, Kigali, or even Douala"
- "Douala? Nairobi? I may be able to help you, come with me" He gestured for us to get into the back of the car which we did, having no other plans. Once into the car he explained to us:
 - "I know some very important people in the ministry of defence, sometimes they can arrange for very cheap tickets on military flights. I'll try to locate my contact and bring him back to talk to you. Where are you lodged?"
 - "Hotel Iroko"
 - "Okay, I'll drop you there now and go and find him" We took off, heading across town. The car was an old battered Peugeot 504 estate. The driver was in his thirties, respectably if quite cheaply dressed, with a sparse moustache. He carried a large mobile phone, prominently - quite a status symbol in Bangui. His male passenger was tall, thin, similarly dressed and kept silent throughout the journey. The female passenger who sat in the back with us was much older, perhaps 50. She recounted to us tales of her life in France, of which she was obviously proud, and showed off her command of French slang. She had lived in Toulouse for 10 years: "a beautiful city but ruined by the influx of arabs, especially the Algerians. They're all thieves and savages".

We turned off the main road some way short of our hotel and started driving through the backstreets of Bangui, unpaved, uneven and lined with shacks of corrugated iron and flimsy wooden boards. We began to feel concerned since we were certain that this wasn't the way home, but our doubts were dispelled when we came to a stop outside a hut and the woman passenger got out. We returned to the main road and continued towards the hotel but, as we were nearing the turn off to our hotel, the driver sounded his horn, long and loud, waved frantically at something and came to a sudden screeching halt. We looked around to see what had caused this behaviour and saw that another car, which had been traveling in the opposite direction, had come to a halt beside us. Evidently our driver had spotted somebody he knew and sure enough he turned around to us and said: "this is your lucky day, the guy driving that car is the minister of defence, if anybody can find you a flight he can". Our driver got out of the car and walked back to greet

the minister who had also got out. The minister was a tall, respectable looking man in his early forties with a benevolent look, dressed in gray slacks and a patterned jumper. He was far from our image of what an African defence minister should look like - no uniform and no dark glasses and what on earth was he doing driving his own car? - but this was the CAR and things were different here. Only the previous evening Martin had informed us that the strange man who came alone to drink a beer occasionally in our hotel was in fact the minister for industry, although Martin had belittled the importance of this minister considering the complete absence of industry in the country. Still, when this minister approached our car and nodded in the back window, smiling paternalistically at us, we responded with as much politeness as we could muster. Our driver suggested that we should go for a drink together so we could discuss the matter at hand. We agreed and so did the minister who climbed back into his car and followed us to a nearby bar. As he followed us I got a chance to observe his car, a brand new white Fiat Uno. It seemed an extremely modest car for a minister for defence, but it did carry the official 'FACA' number-plates of the armed forces, and besides we reasoned that it was impressive enough for the CAR.

We once again turned off the main street and back into the dusty side-streets, this time coming to a halt outside a whitewashed concrete bar. We entered together, passed through a barroom full of holiday drinkers and into the courtyard. We took the table furthest from the bar - our driver said this was necessary since the minister was afraid of spies eavesdropping his conversations. Over a round of beers we exchanged small talk about our impressions of the CAR with the minister and it's probably safe to say that the opinions which we expressed were a little generous. The minister also recounted the tale of his narrow escape when his house had been blown up during the last army mutiny. Eventually the conversation came around to the matter of flights. The minister explained that there were two possibilities: there was a commercial flight to Douala on Monday with Air Centrafrique which would cost about \$200, or else there was a military flight to Nairobi on Sunday, via Douala, which we wouldn't have to pay for, except for an insurance charge of about \$50. The minister finished his large bottle of Guinness, shook hands with us, exchanged a few phrases in Sango with our driver, and departed. Our driver at this stage affected a look of embarrassment and told us that he had forgotten his money, could we pay for the drinks? We had been expecting this and figured that it was a small price to pay for such a cheap escape from Bangui, so we coughed up without complaint.

We got back into the battered Peugeot and continued on our way to our hotel. This time we managed to arrive there without any detours. We were expecting that the driver would leave us here and return later but to our surprise he accompanied us into the hotel and sat himself down on one of the wrought-iron chairs in the caged area at the front. We didn't quite know what to do, so we excused ourselves and went to our room to consult. We were doubtful on a number of points about the deal. Firstly the minister of defence hadn't been quite convincing. Secondly the minister referred to a flight with Air Centrafrique, but Martin had not mentioned the existence of this airline. Thirdly, I remembered reading an anecdote in a travel book about a guy getting sold a fake air ticket in Bangui. Therefore we resolved to proceed with caution, we wouldn't make any definite arrangements today, much less part with any money, but we certainly wouldn't abandon the project altogether - after all it seemed like our only chance of getting out of Bangui in the foreseeable future and it would cost only about a tenth the price of a commercial flight.

After formulating this resolution, we returned from our room to entertain our guest. An awkward silence hung over the group. We didn't know why he was still here and wished he'd go so we could further discuss our plans. He broke the silence by producing his mobile phone from

his pocket and declaring that he'd now call about the flights, but first he'd need our details. He produced two forms which we filled out with our names, ages and passport details. Having got these he dialed a few numbers and began to speak: "yeah, great, okay, oh yeah, will do". He hung up and said

- "okay we can get the military flight".

- "That's great", we responded, "so when does it leave?" He looked a little unsure:

- "like we said earlier"

- "Sunday?"

- "yeah that's it".

- "What time?",

- "the morning, eh, 10".

- "Okay we'll get the money tomorrow".

- "Tomorrow? but you'll have to pay now, to reserve the seat, the soldiers wives will be going shopping, they always book out the plane".

- "But we'll reserve it now and pay tomorrow, even Air France let you do that"

- "but for the insurance, you'll need to pay now" Once again the bank closure came in useful

- "but we've no money, the banks were closed today, we couldn't get any"

- "no money? none at all? not even \$20 now?" This was beginning to look very suspicious. "Could you perhaps borrow money from the hotel?"

- "we already owe them a whole week of rent, we tell you we can't get any money until tomorrow, come back in the morning". He finally gave up, rose and left looking deflated, with a half-hearted pledge to return the next day.

As soon as he left we set about establishing for sure whether the whole story had been a hoax as we now strongly suspected. We caught a taxi to the airport, a crumbling concrete pile with no planes nor passengers to be seen, just large numbers of bored-looking soldiers hanging around in small groups. We approached the information desk which was boarded up and obviously hadn't been used for some years. Our posture betrayed the fact that we needed information and a soldier promptly approached us to ask what we were looking for.

- "What flights leave on Sunday"?

- "There are no flights on Sunday"

- "What about Monday?"

- "Air Afrique fly to Douala"

- "What about Air Centrafrique?"

- "They've been out of business for years, since the mutinies"

We returned to the hotel, now convinced that it was all an elaborate scam. Later we recounted our tale to Martin who was in no doubt about the deal's fakeness: "military flight", he chuckled, "they are so tricky, so tricky". We may have escaped the scam but we were still in Bangui.

The next morning we made our last throw of the dice. We arrived at 7am outside the office of Air Afrique. After about an hour's wait the security guard emerged and once again led us in through the back entrance. To our joy the cashier was present behind her desk and we were able to purchase two tickets in a matter of minutes. We practically danced home, clutching the tickets tightly as if they were made of some precious mineral. For the rest of the weekend we remained closeted in our room, only emerging on a couple of occasions. The would be con-man actually had the audacity to show up looking for money, but we dispatched him quickly with a casual mention of the history of Air Centrafrique.

Other than that we only came out to eat, terrified lest one of Bangui's many malevolent spirits would somehow sabotage our escape plans if we exposed ourselves unduly to the city.

Getaway

On Monday morning we arose at 7:30, three hours before the flight was due to leave. It had rained heavily overnight and all the roads surrounding our hotel were flooded. We were terrified lest this flood might jeopardise our departure and indeed when we left the hotel, the streets were empty of cars. We waded through a few blocks, aiming for the main boulevard which we hoped would be free of water and full of taxis. Before we got there, however, a large minibus pulled over and offered to give us a lift. We negotiated a price and were soon safely deposited at the airport after ploughing our way through several streets which looked more like rivers than roads.

Once inside the airport, the worst was behind us. The only perils left to deal with were the pack of porters who persistently tried to help us through customs and immigration. We decided to take the easy way out and tipped one of them before he had a chance to help us, which meant that all the others stayed away since we were 'taken'. Some other passengers weren't so lucky. We watched one porter 'help' a passenger by voluntarily emptying all his possessions onto the customs desk so he could then plead with the customs official on the passenger's behalf. The final hurdle was the immigration official, but we were confident of passing this since we now had our official Bangui entry card stapled into our passports. Sure enough we passed the formalities without a problem, but his reaction to seeing the card in Deirdre's passport was not what we had been suspecting. A surprised look came over his face and he asked: "where did you get this"? "Km 12, at the checkpoint", she replied brightly. He sighed, shook his head and, looking slightly embarrassed, pulled the card from the passport, tore it into tiny pieces and threw it on the ground. It appeared that the whole elaborate system of registration of foreigners, highly organised and coordinated between the officers at all the checkpoints around the city and involving the chief of the service, was all a scam, totally illegal. Still we didn't worry about it too much; after all we were on a plane. Bangui was behind us, and from this perspective the world looked like a very happy place indeed.

*

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Chekov Feeney
An Irish anarchist in Africa
11 Dec 2000

<http://struggle.ws/africa/accounts/chekov.html>

These pages are part of a travel diary kept by an Irish anarchist who travelled through Africa in 2000. They are useful in terms of giving non-Africans an introduction to the difficulties in organising there and the way capitalism has left the continent impoverished. They were originally written as emails to friends back home rather than as a political essay but we think they are useful in providing a general background.

theanarchistlibrary.org