

INTO AFRICA



story & photography by
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It's mid-afternoon. Sweat oozes from every pore of my 60-year-old body. Using the bottom of my T-shirt, I wipe my face, only to smear a day's worth of sand and grit across my brow. I look at Carmen, my sister. We exchange weak smiles that imply, "We're almost there." There, meaning the Banaba Café, a campement on Lac Rose in Senegal, West Africa.

Campements usually consist of small cement huts with thatched roofs. They have beds with foam mattresses and mosquito nets. The doors may or may not lock, and the plumbing may or may not work. It matters not. We've been on the road for nine hours and are looking forward to landing in this particular spot, as it's owned by a British couple. We'll be able to communicate in English, pick up some survival tips and, mercy of mercies, have a refreshing swim in Lac Rose—our first swim since landing in Senegal 10 days ago.

As we near our destination, our driver stops in the centre of a small village to ask directions. In less time than it takes to sip some tepid bottled water, we are swarmed by villagers. They bang on the windshield and badger us to buy beads, brightly coloured pants and plastic pots. They insist that it's impossible to get to our destination by road; we will have to hire someone with a pirogue (canoe-like boat made of heavy planks) and cross the lake to the Banaba Café.



We have paid for the driver, Pape Loum, to deliver us. And we're not about to budge. Seeing a road to our right, we plead in unison, "A droit!" Pape would prefer to drop us here, but he's an honourable man. He swallows his thoughts and puts the car in gear. Onward!

Alas, because of a two-year drought, Lac Rose has shrunk. The shores are parched and cracked. It's also a salt lake, not the kind you plunge in for a refreshing dip. As well, ownership of the campement has changed. Things are not as we expected.



A man approaches us. He insists on taking us for a pirogue ride to see the sights. We're too dispirited to argue. We cast off in a seven-foot punt that's used to collect salt from the bottom of the lake. There are no seats, so we sit precariously on sticky salt-crusted edges as our guide poles across the water. Our self-appointed guide then proceeds to proposition us. Surely we need a young man in our lives? Imagine how well we would sleep after a massage! We are *not* amused. (Later, we learn that many women from France come to Senegal for sex.)

But the day isn't a total disaster. The evening meal is poulet yassa, a superb Senegalese concoction made with chicken and an amazing mustard and onion sauce. And—surprise, surprise—although there is no electricity, our hut has an outdoor washroom replete with a cold water shower spout that actually works.

We each take a shower by the light of the moon. I feel like howling but fear that our "guide" will interpret this as a mating call. Before I crawl into bed, I place a paring knife under my pillow. Then I start to giggle. In fact, I get somewhat hysterical. Here we are, my sister and I, backpacking in West Africa. Surely we've lost our senses.

People have since asked "Why Senegal?" Well, at 56, my sister graduated from Dalhousie University School of Nursing. To celebrate this milestone, we decided to take the trip of a lifetime. It took a couple

of years to settle on a destination, but after reading something on the Internet about drumming lessons, pirogue rides, and bird sanctuaries in Senegal, West Africa, we put the wheels in motion. But no amount of research prepared us to deal with hundreds of *Talibes* (children who beg for their religious leaders) in the city of Dakar or how to avoid being swarmed. Nor were we good at the art of haggling for a bush taxi or prepared for the hairy drives—often in ditches and better by times than the roads—in vehicles that defy description.

But we eventually discovered that the further away we were from Dakar and other large centres, the more we could relax and appreciate Senegal and her people. They are resourceful, spirited and kind. They are superb hosts, and we were often touched by their grace. For example, our journey south of Dakar brought us to Campement de Palmarin, a cooperative venture between four villages on the west coast. We were the first guests to visit in months. The manager, Robert Diouf, had to scurry to gather ingredients for our meal, yet he cooked an incredible dinner over a grate of coals, which included fresh mullet (fish), French fries and that amazing onion-mustard sauce.

The next morning, I heard swish-swishing sounds. A handful of men, bent over homemade whisks, were painstakingly sweeping the grounds—a daily ritual. In spite of not having visitors for months, they were preparing for guests. Every movement was like an unspoken prayer. It was poetic and powerful.

Knowing that we were anxious to find a trustworthy soul to take us on a 50-mile river ride inland to Foundiougne, Robert wrote a letter of introduction to a friend further down the coast who owned a pirogue. What a lifesaver! At one point, skimming along between the mangroves, Carmen stood up in the boat, threw her head back and grinned with glee. The journey was exquisite.

A friend asked me recently what I brought home from my trip. I brought home three shells. I brought home an altered vision of West Africa. I have also changed. Not that I am a better person. But, somehow, I am different. I feel it in my bones.

It's been four years since Sandra and Carmen took this trip. In spite of being a writer, Sandra still struggles to find the right words to describe the journey. The next time she'll ask her sister to write the story.