

*Emails from West Africa  
October, 2009*

October 6, 2009

Hi: Am on my way to West Africa tomorrow and am hoping you will send me good thoughts -- I'll really need them on this trip! The main trip (24 days) is with Adventures Abroad - a Canadian company and I've traveled with them before. This is an amazing itinerary which goes mostly overland from Senegal thru Mali, Burkina Faso, Togo, Benin and Ghana. I've been talking to them about this trip for about 3 years!

Before the group tour, I'll spend 12 days with a car/driver and guide in Senegal visiting areas not on the group itinerary as well as The Gambia. After the tour ends, I'll have 6 days in Ghana with a car/driver and a guide. Though my emphasis is cultural and UNESCO sites, I hope to take some drumming and dancing lessons in Dakar and in Ghana.

I plan to send notes of what I'm doing and seeing throughout. Am guessing there will be 4 or 5 as internet is not widely available in these countries. Please let me know if you prefer not to receive them-- I understand the world of full in-boxes!

Thank you and all the best to you in your own travels!

Esther

October 11, 2009

Bonjour from West Africa! If you want to practice your high school French, come

On My Own in Senegal and Gambia  
to Senegal and neighboring countries!! Any questions asked in English bring back a puzzled look. You definitely need a guide, a helper, a fixer -- and he must be a good one.



*They love Obama in West Africa. His name is on earrings (above), woven into Kente cloth and on billboards throughout the entire area.*

Piotr missed the boat on my airport transfer and arrived 4 hours late. It was my fault -- a typo in an email, but I think the company could have checked. I had to do the thing I fear most -- haggle with taxi drivers at 4 in the morning, while sleepy and

trying to hang on to my luggage as self-appointed porters try to wrestle it from me.

Thank goodness I got a good one. No side trips, no long "short cuts" and by 5am I was comfortably settled in the Novotel Hotel in downtown Dakar.

Piotr showed up at 9:30 and we had errands to run -- find a watch battery, buy heavy-duty insect repellent to use later in the trip, buy water and look for a cell phone. I was surprised as he was totally mystified about where to change money. You would think an experienced guide would know the right place at the bank -- but we were shuffled from bank to bank and desk to desk until getting to the right one. I got a little worried when he went into an appliance store (refrigerators, washer/dryers,etc) to buy a cell phone as I already was aware there was a cell phone market in Dakar. This man is clearly not street-smart.

I asked to be taken to the hotel for "lunch" and immediately called Miss Bernadette, my contact at Africa Travel Group and fired him.

At 4pm Samba Sy showed up. We talked. This man knows his stuff and we accomplished all tasks in record time, even changing USD and euro at the "white market" for a better than bank rate. I liked him.



*Who would have thought there would be good shopping at Pink Lake! Lovely women, in flowing robes and big smiles approached me with baskets full of beautiful beaded jewelry. I did not resist!*





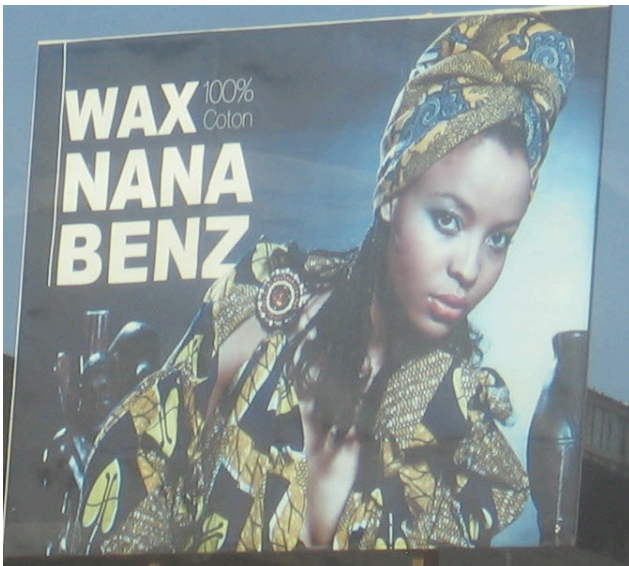
Our true adventures started Friday morning. We visited the Pink Lake, not so pink today as it was overcast. After he explained the work of the salt farmers, I turned to return to the car and gift shop had opened on blankets right next to it. How great is that!!!!

Our ride to Kaolack was a long conversation about Senegalese marriages, customs, schools, women's roles and the various ethnic groups. Samba is Fulani; and my driver Check is Wolof. We listened to Senegali music and I even got a drumming lesson in.

The villages are neat, clean, beautiful and dusty. 90% of women dress in flowing bous-bous (like caftans) with matching head-dresses and look very elegant. They are tall and in New York, any one of them could model.

They are proud of their beaches here and the Relais Hotel in Kaolack is right on the seashore. Our big event this afternoon is the Kaolack Market - the second largest in Senegal. It is the crossroads for Senegali, Gambian, Guinean, Mauritanian and Malian merchants. I'm sure I saw only a small percent of it -- as it stretched as far as the eye could see. I am the only tourist in sight.

### Bad day in Banjul



*The Gambia is known for its textiles and many women have become so rich in the trade, they are known as "Nana Benz" as the first thing they do with their money is buy a Mercedes.*

It is hot, it is steamy, and there is no shade. There are no bridges on the Gambia River -- just ferries. You jostle between other cars, people, cattle, pushcarts, etc. and hope you can get on. We didn't on our first try and had a 3 hour wait. With the border formalities, the ferry crossing, the incredibly bad roads, it took 8 hours to travel 70 miles.

But it is worth it. I am at the Karaiba Hotel - The Gambia's 5-star beach resort with lavish buffets, a suite with a wrap-around balcony, a private mile-wide beach and good (though expensive) internet. They don't take dollars here, and no credit cards. The euro is king.

Most of the other guests are Europeans and stay from one to three weeks and I can't blame them one bit. This afternoon we head toward the mangroves and a more basic forest lodge. The adventure continues

Send good thoughts my way -- I need them!

Esther

(apologies for typos -- they use a different keyboard here)



*I loved my week with Samba Sy, my guide. I stayed in some lovely places, but the best one was in Senegal's Saloum (Delta). I had my own bungalow at the Hotel Delta Niominka and Samba's was next door. The pool was lovely, the food was all fresh and excellent and prepared by a French-trained chef.. We did day trips in the mangroves, went bird-watching, dophin spotting and took walks around the private island.*

## West Africa with Adventures Abroad

November 15, 2009

Hi: the past weeks are almost indescribable. Its been a difficult overland itinerary (almost 3000 miles) but our guide Claude smoothed a lot of the rough spots for us. Our Adventures Abroad tour started in easy-to-take Senegal which proved a great place for the 19 of us to gather with its good hotels, continental services and even a comfortable bus for us.



*We all loved Claude Morency, a Canadian who designed and has guided this trip for years. He knows how West Africa works, knows who to tip and who to bribe, which was helpful when crossing borders.*

*Here he takes our lunch orders on the bus, calls it in to the restaurant. In spite of this good planning, we often wait 45 min. or more for food to be prepared. In West Africa, patience is a virtue.*



We flew from Dakar to Bamako, Mali then continued our journey in a caravan of six big Toyota Landcruisers, adding a Mali guide and a mechanic (who proved to be worth his weight in gold several times). The first big event for many of us was Timbuktu and having good interactions with the Tuaregs. I could see our group's luggage getting heavier and heavier as we had some dedicated shoppers (not me!) on board.

*Oops! We had our share of mishaps in central Mali.*





*The best way to get to Timbuctu is to fly on Air Mali. Its not a long flight, and it beats having to do a dangerous and hot desert crossing.*

*The "Blue Men of the Sahara" like to stand around looking particularly picturesque. They also like to have their pictures taken! And if you ask, they are happy to show you their magnificent jewelry.*



*A travel friend has asked me to deliver a newspaper article to his former guide. Trying to track him down was no problem. I just showed the article with his picture and soon he appeared on his motorbike.*





Our second highlight was time in the Dogon country visiting their cliff dwellings and learning about their animistic culture. Our itinerary even included a performance by Dogon dancers, complete with costumes and masks. The whole village came out to enjoy it. There was some hiking in order to see the houses, granaries, altars and sanctuaries so many of us hired "helpers." I should have hired two, one to pull and another to push me up the rocky cliffs.



*Dogon Villages are set in the valley below the cliffs. The storehouses are nestled high into the cliffs and re reminiscent of Anasazi dwellings of Colorado, New Mexico and Arizona.*







*I was in Car #5 throughout Mali and Burkina Faso and the driver gave me his "Tuareg Passport" - which I am wearing on my blouse. It is the particular design of this village and if I ever travel in central Mali again, it will give me entree to his and other villages. If I ever get lost, I just show it and will be guided to his village. I keep it on my purse now. You just never know.*



*Even Claude takes photos of this magnificent woman with her solid gold earrings.*



Our SUV caravan continued to Burkina Faso which a lot of people loved but I found just so-so. We did have the best wood-fire cooked pizza ever though. At the Burkina Faso/Ghana border, we moved from the Landcruisers back to a bus (yippee!) as well as from adventure-type touring to more of a sightseeing trip, with later morning departures and more comfortable hotels.

In the Ashanti area, we happened to be visiting the Royal Palace when a ceremony began honoring the Ashanti King and the president of Ghana. We were invited to take seats in the huge garden and enjoy the festivities. All the Ashanti Chiefs were in attendance in their ceremonial attire -- fabulous. We did a canopy walk at a National Park, visited museums, crocodile ponds (considered sacred here), then spent some days in the Gold Coast visiting historic slave sites. The group tour ended with time in Togo and Benin where we were introduced to the Voodoo culture.



*Here I am with the local witchdoctor. Below are some of the animal bits and pieces he uses to cast spells - good and bad.*



On November 11th, after hugging everyone goodbye in Cotonou, Benin, another passenger and I were transferred back to Accra in a marathon 9 hr drive with just one rest stop. The driver handled the passport paperwork at the 4 borders we had to cross. The best part was we had the whole 30 passenger bus to ourselves! William (the other passenger) and I had bought our air tickets when the tour was advertised as ending in Accra; later the itinerary changed. The others were all on the group flight home from Benin.

I had arranged to have six more days of touring in Ghana with a car/driver. I loved the local guide assigned to us in Ghana and asked the company to hire Yaw to accompany me for these days and it was a good move. I also have a well-experienced driver who knows every back road in the country.

After one night in Accra (and leaving my little mountain of luggage at the Novotel Hotel), Henry (driver), Yaw (guide) and I set out for Lake Volta - one of West Africa's most ambitious hydro-electric projects. Sounds boring and uninteresting?? Not so! It's a beautiful drive making stops at a village where everyone is involved in bead making, and we visited markets and shrines.

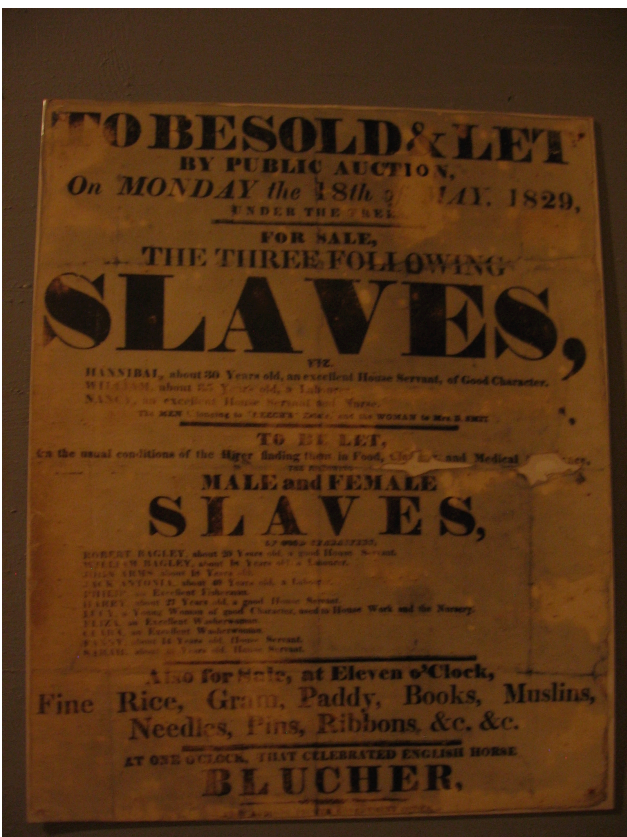


*The Cedi Bead Factory is one of the largest bead manufacturers in Ghana. They make most all their beads by hand. I was the only visitor that afternoon and they opened up the gift shop just for me! It had the largest array of necklaces, bracelets and other beadwork, both new and antique that I've ever seen.*



You must realize that when traveling with a group, someone who pays a single supplement usually gets the smallest, least desirable hotel room. Things changed now! I had the largest part of a suite, 1 1/2 balconies and a straight-on view of the lake and the dam!

*What happened at Elmira Castle is one of the saddest pages in world history. Today it is a museum which honors the 20,000 slaves that left from this fort to the New World.*





Next day we traveled to Cape Coast and a two night stay at the same beach resort I had stayed with the group. It was good to be back as it is a beautiful property. Our main activities were walking tours round Elmina and the fishing village (very colorful), a private performance by the Bamboo Orchestra in one of the nearby villages (fabulous!) and a moving visit to a Slave Route memorial.

On our way back to Accra we stopped at a 3-story shrine where the caretaker (a inherited position that has been in his family for centuries) explicated every detail.



*One of our quirkiest stops was at a fantasy coffin workshop. Don't stand still for too long, or they will measure you! Full size coffins can be anything you want - a boat, plane, fish, bird, etc. The group to the right are urns. This is a thriving industry in Ghana.*



Tonight its packing to return home (flight is at 10pm tomorrow nite) and tomorrow Henry, Yaw and I visit the fantasy coffin makers -- you can be buried in a Mercedes, an airplane, a replica of your house,etc; and the grand finale is an afternoon of drumming and dancing lessons.



*My last meal in Ghana was at Big Milly's on the beach. Fresh fish, a good guide and driver and a coconut. How much better can it get!*



Am happy to say my luggage might be lighter going home than when I came as I've shared my books and files with fellow travelers and guides and I've been able to get rid of some of my clothes. Its a good feeling!



