

Bonjour from West Africa (6)

6. Pests and bush taxis in the Casamance I

I think that any foreigner who has lived in or really traveled in West Africa (as opposed to someone who visits in a tour group or comes here on business and leaves with only the five-star experience) will tell you that the long-distance or bush taxi (taxi brousse in French) is the world's worst way of getting around. Designed by no other than Satan him/herself, it is surely the least comfortable, the most unsafe (Amtrak eat your heart out) and probably the least reliable mode of transportation imaginable. It is also about the most interesting.

My previous trip to East Africa a year ago left me with the impression that the famed African bush taxi was a pure myth or at least something that had been consigned by modernity to the historical relic-heap. In Kenya and Tanzania I was able to get around by conventional forms of transportation. The busses weren't always comfortable, but they were always busses. Which is to say they had seats and schedules. Only twice, once in Malawi and another time in Zambia, was I herded onto a private vehicle (a flatbed truck and a Land Rover, respectively) and for the next six hours made to feel like I was heading to a slaughter house. On reflection, I'd say that the transportation system of East Africa is indeed more conventional than what I am now experiencing in the West; the anglophone countries are served better by busses and trains. What makes the situation worst in West Africa is that many of the interesting places to visit are off major transportation arteries - so far off as not to be considered even off the main route. While the major routes - those from the coast to the interior - are served by public conveyances, roads that run perpendicular to them are not. The former are paved; the latter are dirt tracks (pistes) in various states of disrepair. A dotted line on a map can indicate just about any type of trail. The map of West Africa is mostly dotted lines.

For my first two weeks in West Africa (Cote d'Ivoire, Mali and Senegal) I have been able to avoid the bush taxi altogether. Now I am in southern Senegal in an area known as the Basse Casamance, a very rural region surrounding the capital city Ziguinchor (where there is a cathedral that John Paul II and I have visited, in separate trips and slightly different travel styles no doubt). This region of Senegal is inhabited by a people called the Jola; heavily Christian, the area is ethnically different from Dakar and the north. Not many foreign travelers venture to the Casamance any more; the guide books talk about a civil uprising, which in fact happened more than six years ago when the books went to press. Yet even now, French military stationed in Dakar are prohibited from visiting the area. The uprising petered out, leaving only a strong police presence - roadblocks about every 30 kilometers, and few tourists. One of my rules of thumb is to visit places that have emerged from either civil wars or communism (more on that later). In West Africa almost every country fits this description.

On the ferry down from Dakar I am still traveling with the widow Ann-Marie, who had made pals with a French couple on board. We decided to rent bicycles in Ziguinchor to

see the countryside. I hired a bike that was almost an identical twin to the cycle I had owned in China (like most imported durable goods in West Africa, this bike was made in China). We need to transport ourselves and the bikes to where we wanted to bike, about 60 kilometers from town. For that task we need to hire a bush taxi. The French couple have brought with them the name of a local guide named Abdou, a young man who had been recommended to them by previous French travelers. Despite the fact that both the widow and I like to travel with our guidebooks rather than guides in the flesh, we are more than happy to go with a responsible guide. This is why.

Right off the Dakar- Ziguinchor ferry the widow and I are harassed by a gaggle of guides, one of whom latches onto us and will not let us out of his grip. I, for one, am very good at convincing the local touts that I will have nothing to do with them (they usually depart cursing me in numerous languages and dialects), but the widow, bless her soul, is a kind person who never wants to hurt the feelings of others. But even she is getting exasperated at this fellow's pestiness, so instead of heading toward prospective accommodation, we duck into a restaurant for safety. The pest follows, sitting down at our table and inviting himself to join us for lunch, surely at our expense, of course. We finally persuade him to remove himself to another table so we could eat in peace. Nevertheless, he proceeds to talk at us, insisting that he book us a hotel room (he explains he works on commission paid by the hotels so it won't cost us anything; and he needs the work because tourists have abandoned the Casamance because the guidebooks say there is still a civil war but in fact there hasn't been a tourist killed for over six years, and only he, a tout among touts, is capable of showing us what we want to see, because only he knows how to manage our transportation, accommodation and culinary needs, etc.). As we are finishing our meal, the pest affixes himself to our table again. He attacks the bread basket and feasts upon the free mustard that he plops on the free bread, and then orders more bread and spreads on more mustard (again explaining that this is costing us nothing, as he remains unfazed by the waitress who is blasting him in the local dialect).

Back on the street, while he insists on leading us toward the hotel of his choice, we scurry (well scurry is not exactly what we do, I laden with a backpack and daypack and the widow's backpack being wheeled on a made-in-China trolley) into a place mentioned in our guidebooks, a campment, which is the most basic and cheapest accommodation in Africa (together we pay \$6 for room with shower). The campment manager shoos away the pest, who insists on getting a commission from both us and the manager (he gets nothing from anyone).

So we are happy to latch onto Abdou, the guide, to save us from pesty touts. Abdou's first job is to find us a bush taxi so we can go cycling.

Next: Pests and bush taxis in the Casamance II

Bonjour from West Africa (7)

7. Pests and bush taxis in the Casamance II

Abdou is not really a professional guide. He is an unemployed lycee graduate, someone who has finished his education and is looking, more or less, for a job. It seems that serving as a guide, getting clients by word-of-mouth, is his means of livelihood. He will arrange everything for the French couple we met on the ferry, and so the widow and I let him do the same for us. There has been no discussion about fees. The arrangements are so informal, in fact, that I am starting to believe that Abdou is doing this all as a favor to the French couple. In any case, it is great to have someone to run interference for us, keeping the touts at bay.

As we head off to a restaurant a tout slithers along side us. He is about six and a half feet long, with big ears which have allowed him to overhear Abdou discussing with the French couple how we will go about finding a bush taxi. By the time we get to the restaurant the serpent (who just happens to have a taxi ready to take us tomorrow morning) has persuaded Abdou to employ him; he sits down for a meal with us, but we tell him he is not invited. So he waits ready to strike at the exit of the restaurant while we share a meal with Abdou. The restaurant which we have chosen is named Le Mansah and is the backpackers' premier choice in Ziguichor because it serves French food at African prices. Frequented by affluent locals and foreign tourists, La Mansah is so good that we will eat here for the next four nights which, come to think of it, is probably the first time in my life I have eaten in a particular restaurant four nights in a row. Actually, the restaurant is almost empty each night we visit, save one. That night, a French delegation of some sort has reserved the entire restaurant. We order quickly before they arrive, lest we have to endure a less appetizing place. In Paris or New York our three-course meal with drinks would set you back US \$100 a person, but here it's under \$10. By African standards this is, of course, considered a prohibitively expensive meal.

We have made arrangements that the French couple and Abdou will show up at our campment at 9 a.m. They arrive at 10 a.m. It took the serpent longer to arrange for the taxi than he had promised Abdou. The taxi is not the serpent's. He is merely the facilitator, the agent who has found the taxi at the taxi depot. We have apparently hired him along with the taxi and its driver. We head off to pick up the cycles and then load them atop the taxi, a Peugeot 404. What constitutes a bush taxi is anyone's guess. In Senegal they have to be licensed, but this has nothing to do with minimum safety features or a standard fee structure. In francophone countries like Senegal taxis are controlled by a union (syndicate) which oversees the operation of the gare routiere or long-distance taxi depot. In some countries there are posted fees, and tickets are issued by the syndicate. In other cases arrangements are negotiated with the taxi driver. In our case everything is negotiation.

Bush taxis come in many shapes and sizes, including flatbed trucks, goods vans, mini-vans, utility vehicles, pick-ups, station wagons and sedans. About the only common denominator seems to be that the riders are charged for the trip. Taxis sometimes have a common paint scheme, but this usually applies to urban taxis, not their long-distance

counterparts. Africans who are interested in setting up their own taxi service buy their vehicles off expats who must sell their cars before they return home. Except in the capital cities in West Africa there are no automobile showrooms or used car lots. All transactions are private sales. If you see a car you like, you go up to the driver and ask how much. A major source of taxis are the automobiles driven into Africa by European travelers, you might call them backpackers with wheels. Many of these vehicles tend to be Peugeots, cars which backpackers have beaten into submission on journeys down from Paris and then sold to locals. I have talked with several Europeans who are doing this. Usually an old Peugeot can be bought in France for about US \$1,000, driven through the Sahara and then sold in West Africa for US \$6,000 or more.

So we all pile into the taxi, cycles on its roof. Alas, it doesn't start. Non-functioning electrical systems characterize bush taxis. These cars are 20 years old; the electrical assemblage is one of their first systems to fail, given the harsh African heat, between the few months of steady downpours. So it is not unusual to see a driver connect various loose wires when he starts his vehicle. Some of the bush taxis I have taken, in fact, have neither starter nor wires to connect. They must be pushed and started with a popping of the clutch. The most skillful owners can start their vehicles pushing their cabs, one foot on the clutch, one hand on the wheel while they hop along outside. As we sit and wait for the driver and serpent to cogitate the problem, the French couple tell the widow and I that we should bring our passports. We both have photocopies with us, but my copy is not certified and may not be accepted by the police at the various roadblocks we are likely to encounter. So we return by foot to the encampment, retrieve the passports. When we return, the Peugeot is just firing up and the five bikes are being rearranged atop. It is now 11 o'clock.

We head to the gare routiere, where the driver buys a travel document from the police. We are headed about 60 kilometers from Ziguichor through an area of heavy police presence. We need permission to travel there, and we must be out of the area by 7:00 p.m. This is the site of some skirmishes between the army and the separatist forces a few years ago, and sure enough there's a roadblock not 5 kilometers from the city limits. There's a French-made tank, circa the Algerian war perhaps, at the side of the road, and the police carry various arms, revolvers, machine guns, rifles, which seem to have been manufactured about the same time the Peugeot was born. Our travel documents are all in order, as they will be for the next five roadblocks we pass. About 10 kilometers from Ziguichor the macadam turns to dirt, and in a few more miles the dirt turns to ruts and sand. As the track worsens, the cycles show their disapproval and more and more noises are generated from atop the car. Then one of the clamps loosens and the entire assembly of cycles attempts to fall off, held on only by a bungee cord. We stop to secure the five cycles that are piled one on top of another. For the remainder of the trip the driver and the serpent steady the assemblage, each with an arm out the window.

Eventually, we reach our destination. During the formal discussions that took place sometime earlier (perhaps on the walk to the restaurant last night), it was decided that the four of us would pay what amounts to about US \$20 to hire the taxi, driver and serpent

for the day. After we cycle, we are to meet the driver and serpent at the same spot at 5 p.m. Of course, no money will change hands until they return to meet us. It is now noon, which gives us about 3 hours less to bike than we had originally anticipated.

We spend the rest of the day cycling through the Casamance. The trip is enriched by the political thoughts of Abdou, who doesn't hold African politicians in high regard and considers democracy African style to be a window-dressed sham for Western observers. The Casamance is itself a fascinating area, and we bike in and out of villages, along dirt tracks and rice paddies (some sort of joint venture with China, actually with Taiwan Province), not really sure where we are going. We pass a number of campments, now all but empty because of the drop in tourism. We visit a traditional estate, called a case a impluvium, complete with fetish shrines. The animist belief is a way of life here, mixing comfortably with Christianity, the dominant religion in the region. The trip is topped off with Abdou's performing a traditional Senegalese tea ceremony. It is already 5 p.m., but Abdou says the taxi can wait since it was an hour late in picking us up and then it delayed us another hour with engine trouble. Senegalese tea making is a complicated process. First, Abdou builds a fire. Then he washes the glasses. Then boils tea in water. Then he adds a lot of sugar and some milk. The next step is what distinguishes Senegalese tea from its peers. The tea is poured from glass to glass, letting the liquid fall through the air for as great a distance as possible. Poured over and over again. Anything under a meter is considered bush league. This is done for each glass and then all the tea is poured back into the pot, heated up and the process repeated. It is 5:45 p.m., the taxi has been waiting presumably for three-quarters of an hour, and Abdou insists we each have a second cup. We finish at about 6:15 and head back to the car. The driver and serpent are irate and refuse to take us back at the agreed-upon price.

The argument continues for half an hour. Arguments in African bush taxis, in fact arguments just about anywhere in West Africa, are not unusual. Ann Marie and the French couple denounce the serpent and driver and vice-versa. Neither my marginal fluency in French nor my temperament permit me to get involved in the rumpus. One of the advantages of not speaking the language very well is that I can ignore it totally when I so choose. Eventually, a businesswoman from the local village, who wants to ride back to Ziguichor with us, agrees to pay a fare and we cram her and her wares into the Peugeot. So I figure we are all happy. The driver and serpent get more money, but we don't have to pay any more. But the argument continues all the way back to Ziguichor. We arrive at the roadblock with about five seconds to spare. If we had been late, we would have had to negotiate a fine with the police, and then we would have had another argument with the driver and serpent on who would have to pay the fine. I have never been anywhere in the world where people argue as much as in West Africa. I am surprised the continent as a whole is as peaceful as it is, at present with fewer than ten civil wars.

Next: Charity in the Casamance

Bonjour from West Africa (8)

8. Charity in the Casamance

Our guide Abdou has arranged for us to take a trip to Karabane Island and to return by way of the Casamance mangroves. This time, instead of hiring an entire bush taxi for ourselves, we find one heading to the port town of Elinkine. Here's the way long-distance transportation in West Africa works. Bush taxis with various destinations wait at the gare routiere. There are usually several hundred taxis in a space about the size of a football (soccer that is) field. Once a taxi is filled, it takes off and another in the queue (Question: where is a queue not a line? Answer: at the gare routiere. Everyone seems to know the next vehicle in order, although it might be a hundred meters away, headed in the opposite direction, with no driver in sight) starts accepting passengers. How long you wait depends, of course, on how many other people want to go to your destination. Today we are lucky. We have to wait only a few minutes. We cover some of the same road, and same roadblocks with the same policemen, as yesterday. On the way to Elinkine, we pick up a middle-aged white woman who needs to go a few kilometers. She is a volunteer for a small Catholic charity and she explains the operation to the three French people I am traveling with. It sounds like two nuns against the world. That's how much of the aid operation in Africa works.

Abdou hires us a pirogue (canoe) and its two-man crew for the day. They take us to Karabane Island, which is a village cum resort hotel and tourist stalls. The pirogue and crew will wait for us for three hours and then take us for a trip through the mangrove bolongs and back to Elinkine where we will find another taxi for the return trip to Ziguinchor. As we walk around the island we first hear and then see what we are told is a traditional dance. Villagers are moving and shaking in a dance line, with various native instruments and chanting in the local dialect. It is what I would call modernized traditional. For example, instead of wearing gourds around the ankles for producing sounds, the villagers have tied coke cans filled with sea shells. We learn that this is not some sort of ad hoc presentation, though. It is put on once or twice each year to honor a visiting delegation from a particular village in Southern France, the sister village to the island. (I though the visitors looked familiar; they were the party which had reserved our favorite restaurant a few nights before. Each year a dozen or so people from this French village visit the island to be entertained and, indeed, to be honored for their contributions to Karabane.) The French sister village funds the island's school and clinic and helps in various other ways. In turn, they get a rather pleasant vacation, treated as visiting royalty. Their contributions significantly affect the lives of Karabanians, although I would argue they create an unhealthy type of dependency which, in my view, characterizes almost all foreign aid in Africa. In any case, both sides seem content with the situation, and in the short-run at least no one gets hurt. But my concerns are with the long-run (a time in which, of course, we are all dead, so we needn't be so concerned with it; but the bottom line seems to me that Africa's long-run is being cut short by its short-run) and the big picture, and I'd rather see Karabane revert back to a simple self-sufficient fishing village, maybe with a school and a clinic, but without the tourist culture. Oh yes, the French couple give several Bics to local children after they sing songs in French. I am sure West Africa has more Bic pens per capita than anywhere in the world.

On the taxi ride back, we convince the driver to wait a half hour in a town called Mlomp while we visit the small Catholic charity we had passed and heard about in the morning. It is called Social Center for the Promotion of Women and is run by the Sisters of St. Joseph (Soeur de St. Joseph, CCP Dakar 03505B, Senegal). Or more accurately, it is run by two nuns of this order and a handful of French women volunteers. Theirs is a comprehensive undertaking. They are concerned with the plight of girls and women because in Africa females are definitely second class citizens. Given scarce resources, families send only sons to school, if indeed anyone goes to school. Thus, the Center offers kindergarten and primary education for girls. This includes a meal in the middle of the day for about 75 people, including boy infants who need to be taken care of while their mothers are at the Center. Also, women are taught various crafts and produce some tourist items. They also learn how to grow vegetables because the local diet which almost exclusively includes fish and rice is not very well-rounded. They receive instructions on child spacing (as versus birth control). Strangely enough, one room in the center resembles a modern kitchen. There's a full stove, a refrigerator and washing machine. This is for educating the rural women on how to use domestic appliances like the type they will be exposed to in Dakar when they go to the big city to become domestic workers. The nuns see migration to Dakar as inevitable. Due to the civil war, tourism in the Casamance has dried up and there are few jobs in the region. Many of the men have fled to Dakar, leaving behind the women and children. The irony is that Dakar is about as similar to the Casamance as Albania is to Alabama, which is to say different language, different religion and different culture. Which is why a lot of people in the Casamance still believe it should separate from Senegal (read Dakar) and never should have been part of Senegal in the first place. A resumption of the civil war is just a matter of time.

I am not sure how long this Center will continue to function. It has no steady source of funding, and the sisters keep it open on a day-to-day basis. It seems to me that charity that goes to the grassroots level, such as to this Center or to the Karabane project that is the magnanimity of the French villages, makes more sense than the costly urban infrastructure projects funded by international aid. I don't know what portion of aid to Africa goes to urban areas, but I imagine it is in inverse proportion to relative populations. Why should we in the rich world continue to improve the quality of life in urban West Africa? It seems to me that the last thing Africa needs is larger cities, breeding grounds for crime and violence and human misery. Make the villages the places that are more livable, with better education and health. Try to reverse the rural-to-urban flight. The villages are not run along democratic lines, but who cares? (In Senegal's elections an entire village usually votes the way of the chief, and the US praises this country for its democratic institutions!) Traditional tribal culture is not built upon our Greek origins of democracy (real democracy which in fact ancient Greece lacked in that neither women nor slaves could vote), so must we mold Africans to our own concocted heritage? I don't think foreign aid today plays a positive role in any long-run solution in Africa, but I have to resign myself to the reality that at present we better worry about the short-run, given the horror of today's Africa. At least we should give our money where it might do some good.

We have our last supper at our favorite restaurant, and we each chip in about \$5 as a cadeau for Abdou. This type of cadeau (something earned, priced by the buyer not seller) I have no problem with. Abdou's services would be a bargain at thrice the price.

Next: A visit to an unnecessary nation-state
Bonjour from West Africa (9)

9. A visit to an unnecessary nation-state

Is this too bold a statement: the nation-state is the most detrimental thing that humanity has ever invented? Each time aliens visit the Earth I am positive that many things convince them that there is no intelligent life on this planet. Remembering our Darwin, we know that it is not unusual for members of one species to kill those of another or even to kill among their own kind. In the case of inter-species conflict, killing relates to gathering food. Apparently since the human species has stomped the earth, we have destroyed more species that even exist today, and what we kill off or merely endanger has almost nothing to do with our sustenance needs. It has to do with self-aggrandizement (industrialization, city-building, excessive commercial cropping and animal farming) and petty rivalries (by the way, the exact two features that characterize life in a university faculty). Conflict within a species concerns matters of territory and the setting of hierarchy to ensure reproduction of the fittest. But human history has been characterized by a different type of conflict, especially that involving race or religion or self-aggrandizement (a concept described by words such as hegemony or imperialism or being a world leader). I wonder if an alien of even moderate intelligence, a rational being, in stumbling upon the Earth could even conceive of such an orb where one people try to annihilate another, indeed enjoy the very process of annihilation, because of genetic differences or a disagreement over belief systems. Things that by their very nature cannot be proved superior one way or the other. It is like imagining lions trying to wipe out tigers or cheetahs or leopards, or the latter ganging up to take out the former, just because they look dissimilar or behave differently. I am sure that an alien of even marginal intelligence would recognize cats, and most any animal with four legs, to have a higher level of intelligence than two-legged humans.

It seems that the Earth has redefined how a species evolves. The peoples of the Earth, in a master stroke of silliness, have decided that the way to evolve is through the construction of nation-states. This is a silly notion when it works best, but when it works poorly, as in West Africa, it adds new meaning to the word stupid. One of my favorite descriptors in the English language is the term worthless, an adjective for which there seems to be an inordinate supply of appropriate nouns. Nation-state heads my list of such nouns.

Now, there are numerous silly nation-states, such as Andorra, Luxembourg and the like, but these national jokes have no aspirations to ever being more than what they are, incorporated as countries for some higher purpose than nation-statehood, usually

involving tax avoidance, smuggling or selling postage stamps. The nation-states of West Africa really think of themselves as nation-states, valuing themselves as important because they are microcosms of the world's greatest nation-states (so they perceive), like France, Britain or the USA. Among the most silliest and worthless of these West African entities is surely a little place called The Gambia ('The' is part of its name, so I will refer to it as TG.) TG is named for the 250-mile river which is its distinguishing feature because it runs through the center of the 30-mile wide country. To say that TG is a postage-stamp sized country really defames philately. But it's not even the smallest country in Africa; there are six smaller nation-states on the continent (actually off Africa since they are all islands). Ever heard of the Federal Islamic Republic of the Comoros, for example?).

From my perspective TG's sole reasons for existence are (1) to remind us of historical folly and (2) to provide beaches for the British. On average about three flights each day of the year leave London for TG, bringing in pale Brits desperately seeking something that is rarely available on the British Isles: the sun. After a week or two, in various shades of pink they fly back to the UK's miserable climate. Much of TG's economy serves these tourists, with 20% of the country's population clustered around the resort beaches. The rest of the population farm groundnuts (peanuts), TG's leading export.

TG is almost literally a thorn in Senegal's side. On first viewing a map of Senegal, one might be surprised by the missing piece in the lower left, as if a jigsaw piece had been lost. That emptiness is TG, surrounded by Senegal on three sides - it's just north of the Casamance - and the Atlantic Ocean on the fourth. It is overwhelmed by Senegal, which is almost twenty times the size of TG. Senegal and TG have been talking merger almost since their independences, from France in 1960 and from Britain in 1965, respectively. The peoples of TG and the surrounding parts of Senegal are the same in terms of race, religion, language and ethnicity. The official languages of Senegal and TC are French and English, respectively, but they are spoken most often by school children in school, or with tourists, or with Arab shop-owners, of which there seem to be a lot (The Gambians leave a lot of commerce to immigrant Arabs). The peoples themselves speak dialects of a common language. That TG is an independent country is a vestige of colonialism, something that resulted from the Anglo-franco treaty of 1889. It makes no sense outside this historical context. Yet the silliest thing about TG is not its nation-statehood but rather its worthless transportation system.

Next: Getting about in The Gambia

Bonjour from West Africa (10)

10. Getting about in The Gambia

A hundred years of British influence in The Gambia (TG) has taken its toll. Compared with the surrounding countries, people in the service trade are more differential and class-conscious (like in Britain, not France). The food in TG lacks the nuance and sophistication of that in the surrounding francophone countries. In fact, it's difficult to

find a decent meal in The Gambia or Ghana. There are a lot of take-out joints, mostly run by Indians and Arabs. The transportation system in TG is much more chaotic than that in the neighboring countries. In other words, the busses in TG are even less appealing than the bush taxi system of the surrounding francophone countries. I don't have an explanation for this that relates to colonialism, for I have found the transportation systems of neither France or Britain to be especially chaotic. Nevertheless, TG's system so chaotic that one imagines that the Devil is surely behind it.

The widow and I are experiencing sheer madness as we try to get a minivan to take us out of Banjul, TG's capital, and back to our hostel nearer to the beach. And we don't even have our rucksacks with us. There is no queue (definitely not a line) at the bus-stop, a terminus which is unsigned in any case, and at least a hundred people are waiting for vans (school has just let out and it seems the country doesn't have school busses). Every time a public minivan is seen coming up the street, a crowd intercepts and surges around it, forcing it to let out its passengers away from the bus stop. And, of course, people wanting seats try to rush into the van before the departing passengers can leave. After the bus pulls up, some of its passengers don't even alight, which is a bit strange as this is the terminus. What is also eerie is that all this confusion is not accompanied by much sound, as if someone had turned off the sound while a riot is shown on TV. That no one shouts at each other is very British, very un-African French. Vans continue to be stopped up and down the street, with various mini-mobs trying to trap whichever van it can find. I see no hope of ever leaving Banjul. That IS a nightmare.

I hit upon the clever idea of backtracking the route of the vans and trying to catch them before they reach the final stop. Other people have the same idea, and we end up walking about five streets before we can find a van heading toward the terminus that has empty seats. After we board, the van fills up and doesn't even bother going to the terminus. All in all, this seems to me as very un-British, not the way a post-colonial transportation system should operate.

I stay in TG for several days and then decide to take a bus (full-sized, not a mini-van) across the length of the country, to the town of Basse which is the stepping off point for Guinea, the next country I want to visit. Everyone I ask tells me that busses depart frequently and that I should just show up at the station. So I wake up at 6:00 a.m. The widow and I are staying at a family-run guesthouse a kilometer or so off the beach; she will be heading back to Dakar, up through Morocco, and then to France for a grandchild's baptism. Promising to keep in touch (in Dakar I had opened up an email account for her on hotmail.com, but she is computer illiterate, and in this electronic age I no longer write letters), I depart and walk through various business and residential neighborhoods in the dark (the moon had set almost before it had risen the previous night) and finally arrive at the bus station, and am told I have just missed a bus. It was a 'local' and not worth taking, I am told. The next bus will show up 'sometime after' 9 a.m. but tickets are not for sale in advance (also something very un-British). Sometime after 9 a.m. a big bus arrives. I hope against hope that there might be a queue (this is a big bus and one would think something more formal and orderly than a mini-van). Boy am I wrong. The

stampeding herd becomes vicious, and when the dust clears (literally), I am left without a seat. It turns out that many of the old folks on the bus have paid young men, facilitators, to save them a seat, so there is no way I could have elbowed my way ahead of the numerous 20 year old bucks who do this sort of thing as a profession. I have my luggage with me and realize it will have to be stored on top. I carry a backpack, but whenever traveling in busses or taxis I enclose the rucksack in a nylon bag and lock it with a combination lock. So I drag the bag back off the bus and find an attendant to store it atop the bus (keeping out the inevitable dust is another reason I use a nylon bag), and she gives me a ticket. Then I get back on the bus which was now getting quite crowded, even with the herd of bucks grazing among customers who wait for the next bus. Then I find out I have to buy a bus ticket which an attendant sells from a cage in the middle of the bus, a congested area which everyone is either trying to reach or trying to leave. (Why couldn't they sell tickets at the depot and assign seats as they do in most places in the world?) I finally squeeze through and buy my ticket (I am charged for the bag at this time). I return to my standing spot. The bus resembles a sardine can on its side that smells quite ripe (few locals use deodorant in Africa. It takes a few weeks to acclimate to this natural human odor; I am not yet acclimated.)

So I am left standing for the next three hours, or about 150 kilometers. TG's highway - it is the nation's only highway - is macadam, and pretty smooth as roads in West Africa go, but it is still three hours standing, the first time I have ever stood in a moving vehicle for so long. When the bus pulls over for lunch, I grab the seat of a passenger who's leaving. I know I should give this seat to the elderly women and pregnant women and women with babies bundled on to their backs who remain standing. But the custom in Africa is first come, first served, and I rationalize that giving up my seat would be an affront to local custom. And it would just give fodder to those who argue that white folks' customs are just plain stupid. Fortunately, most of the infirm, baby-ridden and pregnant women find seats, and my guilt abates and I no longer have to pretend to be reading so as to avert my eyes from coming in contact with those of fellow passengers.

From my vantage point, the bush taxi is starting to look pretty good again. And they better because they are what I must endure in order to see what will be my favorite West African country, Guinea.

Next: Post-communism is the place to be