

Senegal-America Journal

Days 1 and 2: December 26th to the 27th

The rain came down pretty hard in Bridgeport this morning, but I thought to myself, this is probably the last good rainstorm I'll see for at least two weeks. The months of December and January in Senegal are part of the dry season, so I'm guessing temperatures in the 80's, no rain, and best of all- no snow.

I guess my journey to Africa started with a lot of anticipation, packing, repacking, and checking under the bed for those old blue flip-flops that I couldn't seem to find anywhere.

Finally, it was the day after Christmas and I was waiting for my ride. Tony Vacca, from World Rhythms in Massachusetts, and one of our hosts in Senegal, was going to pick up Rich and I at my apartment and take us to JFK airport. They arrived in a large red van just as Rich and I were finishing our Chicken tacos, beans and rice from Mi Rancho, a Mexican place across the street from where I live. We loaded everything in and were on our way. Wow. It's finally here.

The ride started with a lot of introductions. Derrik Jordan, a singer and songwriter from Brattleboro, VT; Burchie and Siomara, Tony's wife and daughter; Jean Butler, head of Arts are Essential, and her daughter, Katie. The ride was pretty uneventful except for the big Subway sandwich Jean bought for Rich and I to split.

We got to the airport early- REALLY early. First ones in line to check in. It was good though because we got to talk to and meet some of the people we would be spending the next 2 weeks with. The rest of the group is pretty impressive- Zan and Bob Lombardo, and Elizabeth Myers, art and computer teachers from Pennsylvania; Debby Kern, our tech guru who is setting us up with the Internet site and all that good stuff. William Daniels works with at risk youth in Florida and helps teach them teamwork through diversity and team building activities. These people all bring a lot of great talents to this experience.

I finally boarded the plane to Casablanca, Morocco. This was going to be a red eye flight to the extreme. Seven hours, leaving at 6:45 PM our time and arriving in Morocco at 6:45AM their time. I needed to try and get some sleep. It was tough. Window seat. Rich sitting next to me, making me laugh. A seat that reclined approximately 15 degrees.

I got about 2 hours of sleep when we finally arrived in Casablanca. Flight was good- a little bit of turbulence. Feature Presentation- the remake of Bewitched and Cinderella Man.

We walked out of the plane directly to the outside- no terminal like in the US. It was kind of cool out. Maybe in the 50's. We took a bus from the plane to the terminal. Then got through customs and waited. Inside the terminal had these two pictures of the leaders in Morocco. This country is a monarchy, so I'm assuming it was the king and his son. While waiting for customs I noticed the room was decorated all with light beige tiles, and a huge working clock designed on the ceiling with a huge cone shaped thing in the center hanging down about 20 feet above our heads. It was pretty cool.

While we waited for the bus that was going to take us to the 1-day only hotel in Casablanca, I watched the people around me. Yes we looked different than the people

around us, but it didn't really bother me. We were mostly white- they mostly Arab or Middle Eastern looking. The men wore mostly Western style clothing. The women were either dressed in traditional clothing, wearing headscarves and skirts, or in blue Jeans and no headscarves. Both Rich and I commented on how the traditional and modern seemed to co-exist rather well.

I also found comfort in the smallest thing. Watching a man going through his daily job at the airport, cleaning windows with a squeegee and bucket. Here's a guy I will probably never see again in my life, but here were the two of us in the middle of Casablanca with totally different perspectives on today. I was puffy eyed, jet lagged, staring into space wondering what to see in this foreign land. He was going about what most consider to be a small task, washing the windows, craftily waving his squeegee, not leaving a single drip, one at a time, trying to make a living, probably feed a family, so that the rest of us tourists could see life clearly through the windows out towards the Moroccan sunrise.

We finally figured out where the bus was and who was driving it. And waited on it about twenty minutes until the driver felt like it was time to go. We drove through the remote countryside of Morocco until we reached the hustle and bustle of the city. It looked dirty to me. And some interesting smells.

The hotel was cool. Hotel Ajiad. We took an elevator to see the room. Maybe wash up. Hmm...a bathroom but no electricity. We got a food ticket for brunch and lunch. Brunch consisted of a variety of croissants. Some with chocolate on top. I picked that one. They speak Arabic and French here in Casablanca and very little English. We got what I thought was orange juice - but it was really Tang - to drink, and some coffee that was really tasty.

We decided it was time to go see the city- Rich and I, Jean, and Irma, a storyteller in the US. We got to the bank to exchange money, but while in line, Rich said, "I can't keep my eyes open. I need to go to bed." So instead of seeing Casablanca, We napped. We napped right until it was time to get the bus back to the airport to fly to Dakar, Senegal.

I know it seems kind of lame, but the rest was a good choice. We still had a long day ahead of us and both had gotten about 2 hours sleep. We slept until 3:00 PM and went downstairs for lunch. It was a delicious Moroccan chicken dish with tasty yellow-green gravy and peas. Delicious. Even though lunch was included, we left a 4 dollar tip, and I think the waiter enjoyed it. He brought us extra Moroccan bread to take with us for the rest of the day's journey.

We got to the airport and got ready to board for Senegal. We ran onto a little problem with the airport officials. They tried swindling 200 bucks from Tony and Jean for having bags that were too heavy. Tony knew what was up, told the guy he was crazy and to call JFK in America. He figured the official was planning to just keep the extra money himself. They guy pretended to call on his cell phone, and then said OK you guys can go ahead. Looks like Tony was right.

The plane ride to Dakar was about 3 hours. Zan, teacher from PA, taught me how to play cribbage. I won the first game because she was being nice. And then got totally creamed the second time around.

Arrival in Dakar, Senegal. Holy Cow. Words can't express the scene here. We stepped off the plane, directly outdoors again, and this time it was really warm and

muggy. It was about 11 PM. I was worried about mosquitoes. Don't want to get Malaria. I know I'm taking Larium but I started the medicine late, and had no insect repellent on.

The scene once we took the bus to the terminal was interesting. One line for foreigners, one line for Senegalese citizens. Both lines were painfully slow- but we got in without a hitch. Then on to the baggage claim area - this place was a zoo. Bags stacked everywhere. Luckily I saw my bright red bag on the conveyor belt and ran to grab it. We tried getting people's bags on carts, but then the carts had busted wheels. We got sandwiched in a line waiting to re-scan our bags again. I helped a Senegalese girl who was on our plane with her luggage. Her name was Majji. She now lives in California, and was coming home to see her family. She spoke great English.

We got our bags through this chaos and then waited for everyone. My bag had been opened and so was Derrick Jordan's, the musician. I didn't care since it was all toiletries. But Derrick had a lot of music equipment in his. No sign yet if anything was stolen. I wonder if they opened them in Morocco.

Now we walked out into the street of Dakar and the scene got even crazier. Massamba, our host and Tama drummer for Baaba Maal, and a group of friends and at least 30 other people were on the curb. It wouldn't have been crazy I think except that a guy was filming with a bright light as we all came out. We all felt like celebrities. They filmed each one of us as we greeted Massamba and his friends. I think the crowd wondered who we were. A bunch of these guys helped us with our bags, and we tried to tip them nicely. And they were not shy about asking for one.

It turns out that the guy filming was Robbie Leppzer, a filmmaker who is professionally making a documentary about this experience. He has won some awards and his films have been on CNN, PBS, and other stations. I can't wait to see what he makes of this.

We loaded our baggage onto this rickety old van. And when I say loaded it onto the van that is exactly what I mean. ALL OF OUR BAGS went on the roof, and we crowded inside. It was pretty funny.

It was now 1:30 AM and the drive to the hotel in Dakar surprised me. The streets were really rough. It was pitch black out, but I could still see the poor and dirty streets, and people, (mostly all men) still hanging outside at this time on a Tuesday night. We got to the hotel. I'm tired now. And need to get some sleep.

Day 3: Wednesday, December 28, 2005

My phone is ringing, but I know it can't possibly be a phone call in Senegal at this time in the morning. Once I shake the slumber out of my head, I realize that it is my cell phone/alarm clock alerting me to the fact that it is 8:00AM and I am extremely tired.

I'm not sure I was prepared for the scene outside our hotel window. It was the middle of the night when we arrived, little to no street lighting, so I basically had no idea what our surroundings were. Now, at 8AM, I pulled back the curtains to see the most foreign place that I have ever encountered in my lifetime. I was shocked by the beauty, sadness, and strangeness of the landscape in front of me. Our hotel was right on the Atlantic Ocean, and I looked at it today very differently than from my uncle's beach house in Narragansett, RI. I had now seen the Atlantic Ocean from both sides.

The beach scene was lively. Numerous men were fishing, running, exercising, doing push-ups etc., but not like what you would see on a California boulevard. This beach was best described by Rich as a scene from Normandy in 1944. Old concrete bricks in half destroyed bunkers, make shift shacks, garbage and wild dogs scattered the landscape as men of all ages got on with their daily workouts.

Rich took the first shower, cold, no hot water, and I couldn't pull myself from the window and balcony. The ocean was beautiful, but the beach... I thought to myself, why don't these people take better care of this beautiful beach? Where are we? Then I remembered Massamba coming into my room late last night and I asked half jokingly, do you own this building? He said, "Come to the window, look. Out there is the beach less than 2 minutes walk. This is your beach."

And I learned my first lesson in Senegal. This is my beach. I have only been here one night - and this is my beach. We are all responsible for it.

The day started with a group breakfast. We ate croissants again, no chocolate on top this time. They were warm though, and buttery. We also had baguettes, a long, crusty French bread, with butter. To drink we had bottled water, and instant coffee-basically, coffee from Nescafe in a powdered form that you add hot water to.

We waited for quite awhile for Massamba to come and pick us up with the bus. It gave us the opportunity to walk down to the ocean and see what was going on. We passed a man in a makeshift shack, homeless and living here. We got to the water and saw two young Senegalese boys maybe 12 or 13 years old playing soccer or football, the national sport. Rich chased down one of their off-the-mark kicks and decided to join in the game. They were more than happy to let him join in.

We walked back to the hotel. Still no bus. So it gave us an opportunity to chat with Ali, the hotel manager. I enjoyed this a lot, since he spoke English pretty well, and seemed interested to talk to us. We asked him about the building, a beautiful hotel in a poverty stricken street on the beach. How much did it cost? He estimated that the land probably would cost about 100,000 U.S. dollars. Then much more to build the hotel.

Seemed like a lot considering the surroundings. He told us that he actually was from The Gambia, a country that is inside Senegal. He asked us where we were from in the U.S. and the best answer to give is about one hour from New York City. "What about President W. Bush?" he asked? We tried explaining that America is an almost equally divided nation between those that voted for Bush in the last election, and those that wanted Kerry. His only response was that there were many people around the world that did not like Americans because they re-elected Bush, but he said, "I am not one of them." Well, even if he was, he was definitely not the type to say anything about it to us to make us feel uncomfortable. We asked him how he felt about the President of Senegal. He thought he was a good man. However, a few seconds later, he called out to a homeless man that walked by. He took out some coins and handed them over to him. Ali introduced us, we shook hands, and the man was on his way. Ali later told us, that this man was a "neighbor" who lived and roamed on the beach. "The government here in Senegal is not good. Countries send us aid, but it goes into the pockets of the politicians. Then the people here suffer. There are no jobs. People who eat sometimes only once a day. This is not fair. Saddam is not the problem. They say there are democracies in

Africa, there are many dictators also in Africa.” I asked him what he thought that Senegal needed to develop better. “A good government.” Simple enough.

After the conversation with Ali, I watched a little boy maybe 7 or 8 years old sitting alone on the front sidewalk. He was pretty dirty and sitting with an empty can. I had no idea what the can was for, but I walked up to him and asked him if he would like a lifesaver that I had in my pocket. I’m sure he couldn’t understand, but when I showed it to him, he reached out and accepted gladly. There were lots of kids around, and no adults. Three little ones about 4 or 5 years old walked hand in hand together out of one of the abandoned buildings to the beach. They pulled down their pants and went to the bathroom. No indoor plumbing. As they walked back I wasn’t sure what to do. Should I say hello? Would their mother or father be upset if I, a stranger, started talking to them? I decided at the last second before they disappeared into the half-standing building just to wave. All three of them, looking at me as curiously as I did at them, smiled and waved back. They disappeared into the building, but only for a second. They came right back out to wave again. I smiled and waved a second time. This was followed by three huge laughs, and then my own. They peeked back into the building and then came out to wave again. We played this game for a little while until they grew tired of it and waved for the last time. I wanted them to come back out. Wasn’t there more I could do? I wonder if they would like some candy? Can’t we play the game a little longer?

And so I learned my second lesson in Senegal. Sometimes all a stranger needs to do is wave. We are worlds apart, different in so many ways. I will never know what the future holds for them. But a simple gesture - a smile, a wave, and a laugh - connected us in a way I know I will never forget. The bus finally arrived, an hour and a half late. I had experienced more in that one-hour and half waiting, than I had the entire trip so far trying to get places.

We boarded the bus and I was excited for the next stop. We would be moving to Massamba Diop’s house for lunch. As Massamba is the tama drummer for Baaba Maal, he is well known as the best in the country. People looked as we walked with him. I felt honored to be his guest.

Massamba’s house was in a poor neighborhood. This surprised me. However, the inside of his house was beautiful. Probably a middle class home in the U.S, but obviously a wealthy person’s home here in Dakar. There were 4 or 5 bedrooms, a balcony, a bathroom with two toilet stalls, and many pictures of Massamba, his wife, and children up on the walls. Not any pictures together, interestingly enough, except for their wedding photo. Separate portraits - occasionally side by side.

We sat all together in a room, 15 members of Senegal-America project, and Massamba. Although there was some initial awkwardness, Tony broke the silence. He shared with us how when he was here in 1998, Massamba was planning on building the house, and now he saw the finished product. Massamba let us know that this was Tony’s second home. Massamba asked us to come take the tour of his home. My favorite part was the roof of the house, which was flat, open to the air, and housed the kitchen and two goats for the Tabasky holiday. Three women, Massamba’s wife, daughter, and a family guest were busy preparing our lunch.

After the tour, Massamba's daughter spread out floor mats so we could sit on the tile floor in the hallway. We all followed the cue, and took off our shoes like the other family members. Earl, a high school senior from Philadelphia, picked up a djembe drum and started playing. I was surprised by this move and even more surprised by the fact that he was really good at it. We politely clapped along, not knowing if it was OK for Earl to be slamming away at the djembe in the middle of Massamba's hallway.

Soon the men guests clapped along and the girls told us all to get up and dance. Although some of us felt weird doing this, mostly all of us did it anyway. Massamba's friend asked Earl if he could take over for a bit. Earl was more than happy to pass it on, and this guy, Ousmane, absolutely tore it up on the drum. The dancing and clapping continued, and as we were starting to feel good, we were hit with the sound of two tama drums coming from the back of the room. Tony and Massamba had got their tama drums out and were ready to duel. What followed was the most intense spontaneous drumming session I have ever seen.

Ultimately things finally settled down, and it was time to eat. Soft cloths were added on top of the floor mats in the living room, and so were cloth napkins. It appeared as though we were going to eat on the floor. And that was exactly what we did. We sat cross-legged with napkins but no utensils. The food came out on these 3 large round silver platters, about the size of a super large pizza pie. And it looked like nothing I had eaten before. The smell wasn't very appealing, and at one point I even felt a little nauseous. It looked good though. The dish, Tony told me, was basically the national dish of Senegal- Chebu Jem – or Fish and Rice. Two pieces of grilled fish were in the middle of the platter, still whole, tails, eyes, and all. The rice underneath was brown with a sauce poured over it, made from a variety of spices and onions. Many vegetables surrounded the fish- manioc, carrots, something that looked like a mini green pumpkin, and cabbage.

In Senegal, the family meal is served on the floor. People share from the same platter, and they do not use utensils or plates. You must use your right hand only to pick and scoop what you want. Not too difficult with the fish pieces and vegetables, but trying this method to eat greasy brown rice proved to be a challenge. The technique Massamba showed me was to scoop the rice towards you and then squish it in the palm of your hand. A few shakes to let the extra stuff fall, and then open your hand and bring the packed rice to your mouth. After making a mess the first three or four times, I finally started getting the hang of it. Massamba and his family were so nice in providing us with spoons, but most of us, including myself, opted to do it the traditional way. It was also much more fun - you could finally eat with your hand! Right hand only! The left hand is considered unclean since it is the hand used to clean oneself after a visit to the toilets.

The food tasted great! Fish was delicious and very spicy, and the rice had a delicious flavor. I even didn't mind the carrots and the manioc, which is like a thinner yam.

Day 3: December 29th, 2005

There is a reason that alarm clocks have snooze buttons. And it has something to do with the fact that you are allowed to strategically get some extra sleep before the time you REALLY have to get up. When the cell/phone alarm clock went off this morning at 9AM, I felt this morning was a perfect candidate for the snooze button. Unfortunately, I did not get to practice this function on my cell phone prior to the trip. So even though in my half-conscious state I thought I had hit the snooze function, I had really turned the alarm off.

An hour and a half later, at 10:30AM, I awoke with the feeling you get when you just know that you overslept. "Rich." I said sternly. "What?" he replied groggily. "Get up...it's 10:30." Rich shot out of bed and jumped into the shower. Once again, there was no hot water. The water here at Sobobade comes from a well, and well frankly, it just isn't very reliable. Besides never being hot, it didn't even work last night. That meant no toilet flushing, no shower, and no faucets.

After about 3 minutes in the cold shower and noises from Rich I never knew were humanly possible, he got out. I contemplated a shower, and decided against it. I would rather have bed head than purposely immerse myself in freezing water. We got dressed quickly and rushed out since we missed the 8:00 breakfast and were very close to being tardy for the dance lessons.

Lesson number three in Senegal - there is no need to be in a rush. Things unfold naturally, and the clock is basically irrelevant. While the late bus yesterday should have clued me into this lesson, what I experienced this morning solidified it. Breakfast was still being served, and we were not the last team members to arrive to the table. So we finished breakfast at 11:15 or so and had time to sit by the ocean for a little while before our 10:30 dance lesson.

The dancer and drummer showed up around 11:30, the standard one hour late. While waiting for the dancer and drummer, Tony and Earl started an informal jam session with a local dancer who happened to be in the amphitheater at Sobobade. Tony plays an instrument called the balafon. It is basically a West African instrument that he got in the Ivory Coast. It is played like a xylophone, except that the keys are made of wood and are amplified by large gourds underneath.

The dancer and drummers finally arrived. The dancer was a beautiful local Senegalese girl. Her name was Israda, and she was going to teach us a traditional dance. There were a few group members who chose to sit this one out. I decide that when in Rome, you should do things you normally would like a fool for doing back home. Three or four drummers accompanied the dancing, and I learned quickly that the dance dictates the drumming. Israda was in complete control, occasionally correcting the drummers for their missteps. The dancing was lots of fun, and tiring. Midday in the hot sun was not an opportune time for my first exercise in months. But I couldn't help but feel pulled in by the energy of Israda and the drummers. At first I was completely out of rhythm and out of sync. But there came a glorious moment when I finally felt it and tapped into the rhythm. The feeling is quite exhilarating, and at that point your body takes over while your mind takes a water break.

Israda taught us a few steps at a time, and we repeated them over and over. Since the dance style includes a lot of movement and the temperatures were in the upper 80's today, we lost a few people. Ultimately, after about an hour of practice, there were only 4 of us left standing: Rich, Tony, Jason (a musician from Hartford), and myself. Now for the real show. Israda said she was going to step aside and we had to do the whole dance on our own. Well, needless to say, it was not perfect, but I thought we did a heck of a job. Bob, the former teacher from Pennsylvania, told us no matter how hard we tried we still danced like stiff Americans.

We thanked her graciously for her time and efforts, and I nearly collapsed on the red concrete seat of the amphitheater from exhaustion. Zan, Bob's wife, asked Israda and Ousmane, the drummer, if she could paint one of their eyes on her canvas. They agreed. Zan is creating a portrait of eyes from a variety of the people in our group and those that we encounter along the way. So far there were three on it, and it looked amazing.

While recovering there in my seat, most of the people from our group left to take a swim at the beach. I was glad that Rich and I did not. A Senegalese man, probably in his early 30's, strolled into the amphitheater with a huge stringed instrument. I recognized it immediately from my National Geographic map of Senegal. It was a kora, a twenty-one stringed instrument from West Africa that is an integral part of the griot or storyteller tradition here. The kora looks like a type of guitar, but it plays more like a harp. It is made from a large hollowed out gourd, and the strings come up vertically as opposed to horizontally on a guitar.

The man started to play. The plucking of the strings sounded very delicate and soothing, and he was very talented. He began to sing a song in Wolof, and some of the other locals chanted when it was their turn. The kora is meant to accompany a story that has some sort of meaningful lesson. I wish I knew what he was singing about, but it was beautiful nonetheless.

We left, and since we were still a little early for lunch, decided to walk down to the beach. We picked up three bottles of Coke, and as we descended down the stairs to the ocean where two young men approached us. They were very friendly, but wanted us to look at the wares they had on display for sale. Sobobade, our hotel, is developing as a tourist stop, and the locals have set up shop from the bottom of the stairs and onward. I'm sure this is great for the local economy. We said we would be back some day this week to look at their stuff, and gave them two of our Cokes as compensation. They looked satisfied.

As I walked down the beach, there were lots of little kids playing soccer. Kim, a teacher from our group asked if I would take her picture near the reddish-black basalt rocks protruding into the water. The kids found this to be a perfect opportunity to jump into the photograph - at least 7 of them. I laughed and asked if they wanted to take a picture of me. Of course they agreed. As they climbed all over me, Kim snapped the picture. They knew how the digital camera functioned, from other tourists I'm sure, because they desperately climbed on her asking her to show them what the picture looked like. They laughed and pointed at each other when they saw themselves in the picture.

Time for lunch. We shared a large platter of chembu jem, fish and rice again. We used spoons.

After lunch, it was back to the amphitheater for djembe drum lessons with Ousmane, one of Massamba's friends. It was much harder than I thought. While some people think you just bang on it, there are actually different ways to hit it for a certain sound. We learned the first three sounds that can be played on a djembe today. A flat open hand hitting the center of the drum makes the bass sound. The tone is made with closed fingers hitting the edges, and lastly, the slap is made with open fingers on the edges as well.

End of Day

UPDATE:

Much has happened since, including 2 Baaba Maal concerts and a visit to Baaba Maal's house. He was very gracious and a wonderful person. He thanked Rich and I for the Peace Corps work we have supported in Africa.

I also have made friends in a nearby village that I see almost daily. I have visited their homes and met the director of the school there. He was very thankful for the T-shirts, school materials, and paper. The director of the school walked 15 minutes to our hotel this morning and woke us up, just to say thank you again. We are spending the day in their school tomorrow. I'm sorry for taking so long to reach you all, but getting phone or Internet here is very difficult. I also had to take the pictures out of this journal because the file was WAY too big to send. I haven't had too much time to write lately, so I will update when I can and when we find the Internet again.

Much love from Senegal
Jeri jef (Thank You)

Lenny