

Zan's journal, December 30, 2005

Why in the world would it take so long to post journal entries and to add new things to this website? Considering that we are Americans with writing, teaching and storytelling skills, plenty of laptops, digital cameras, cables, and even a portable satellite dish and were doing what people back home viewed as "tourism" or "a vacation," could it be so complicated? Located just down the coast from the capital city, how remote could Toubab Diallow be? Even if it were remote, wouldn't that just give everyone more opportunities to spend time on the computers sending things home to the schools in America who eagerly awaited daily messages? The amazing answers to these fair questions give ample insight to our cultural experiences in Senegal.

We came prepared. It's true. Prepared according to American standards, that is. However, nothing could have prepared us for technology Senegal-style. We'd been told that we could use the office Internet connection at Sobobade at 10:00 p.m. after the hotel staff went to bed. What they didn't tell us was that the office doubled as the owner's bedroom. Since the owner, Gerard, was jetlagged from his return flight from Haiti, he could not sleep if we worked late into the night. So after dark on the second night at Sobobade, a group of us broke away from a wonderful drumming performance in the amphitheater to find the Internet café in Toubab Diallow. We walked down the sandy paths between unmarked buildings with no streetlights and no street signs to guide us. Twenty minutes later we still had not located anything that looked remotely like an Internet café. We finally found a local citizen who was kind enough to lead us to Idy's Internet café.

It was an unremarkable cinder block room containing a table covered with a rainbow flag to keep the dust out. Underneath the flag were four computers, outdated by American standards and all in French, only one of which had a dial-up connection that proved reliable. We worked for a couple of hours that first night and when we were finished, we tried to pay Idy. However, he'd had very little business and he couldn't make change for us; so working there proved an expensive proposition. The third option was our portable satellite dish. Jean and Bob tried to get the satellite dish set up as high as they could and aimed it east knowing there was a satellite over the Indian Ocean. They attempted several balconies and even climbed a ladder

to the roof of the tallest building, but to no avail. If you've ever gone to Google Map and looked up West Africa, you'll find that Toubab Diallow, which is a two to three hour drive south of the capital city of Dakar, isn't even available to see via satellite. It was so remote that there was no satellite imaging available for that area. Strike three.

Opportunities to do computer work dwindled with each passing day. During the first several days, we'd all had time on our hands during the long waits at airports, aboard airplanes, and in hotels, but we didn't know each other well yet and our adventures had not fully blossomed. Once we were settled at Sobobade, however, life at the artist's colony began in earnest. Every day there was drumming, music, and dancing lessons hour after hour at the amphitheater. Sometimes we watched with amazement as flexible and talented young performers danced.

Sometimes we were the dancers ourselves. Led by Aissata Cisse, we awakened muscles we didn't know we had and burned the soles of our feet on the sun-drenched tiles. Every day brought another type of instrument and a new master teacher. First it was Ousmane N'Diaye with soulful djembe drums. Every day Pape Sakho enchanted us with his kora and songs. Moise Niassy taught us traditional tunes and entertained us with improvisational dance and singing whenever he heard music that was new to him. Then came tall Sabar drums and delightful N'dongo Diop whose eyes and smiles flashed as he made the rhythms fly. We even had a musical story-telling session with Barou Sall, hodou player, followed by lessons on the talking tama drum with our friend and host, Massamba Diop. When our lessons were over, the master drummers of Sobobade then took the stage and let their polyrhythms rip. When they played, the Sobobade dancers came out of the woodwork and immediately took over the amphitheater floor, dancing and rehearsing for the New Year's Eve show. All of it was so new and exciting; it was difficult to tear us away to do something as mundane as writing in our journals. We did not want to miss a thing!