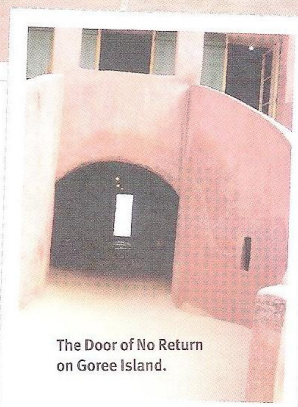


Seductive Senegal

A West African Homecoming



Above: the author making new friends. Top right: The Door of Return, a monument urging African Americans to come "home."



The Door of No Return on Goree Island.

A Trip to the Motherland Feels Like a Family Reunion

words and photographs
by robin m. bennefield

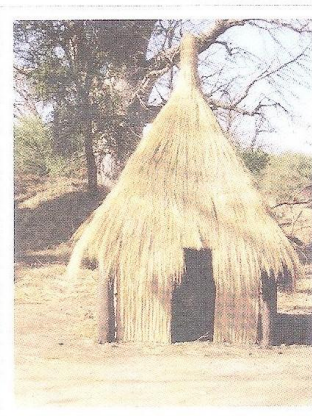
My friend Beverly has been to Senegal eight times. Her initial curiosity about this small West African nation has turned into an annual homecoming. "It's like going down south for a family reunion," she said, convincing me to take the trip.

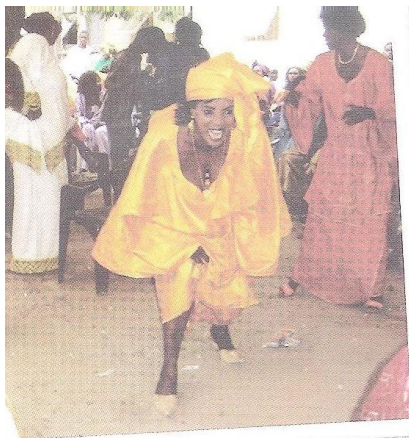
Every reunion has some contemplation of where you come from, accompanied by lots of food, music and dancing. Throw in extreme shopping and you've got a trip to Senegal.

One of our first stops in Dakar, Senegal's capital, was the Door of Re-

turn, an open doorway facing the Atlantic, a monument dedicated to the return of African-Americans to African soil. A lithe golden figure rests atop the doorway trumpeting a joyous welcome. A day later, I stood in the Door of No Return at the Maison des Esclaves on Goree Island, a short ferry ride from Dakar, where slaves were stacked in stone cells before being dispatched to the New World. I was struck by the beauty: pastel pink and yellow walls overlooking deep blue water. It was an incongruous sight: a former slave port on an idyllic island.

But beyond Goree, there is much to see of Senegal's vibrant present.





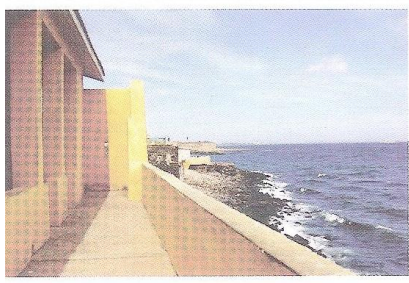
ESCAPES >

Mara, our guide, took us to a naming celebration for a new cousin. After a child's first month, the father reveals its name at a spiritual ceremony and a huge celebration follows. The women held court at this party set up under a tent on a sandy neighborhood street. They wore their best finery, newly tailored boubous (a loose top) with matching lapas (skirts). And then there was the hair—colored, weaved,

Food for Thought

Just as the nightlife in Dakar is not to be missed, neither is the food. At our first meal at Restaurant Louisiane, a quaint establishment with colorful beads hanging at the entrance, we sampled yassa chicken, large quarters of chicken drenched in a lemon, mustard and sautéed onion sauce, and Ceeb bu jen, a meaty sautéed fish with carrots, cabbage and yucca on a

"Dancing was the highlight of this celebration. Some women danced low, winding and bouncing their behinds."



braided and curled—framing faces that looked as if each woman had a MAC makeup artist living in her home. I felt like a ragamuffin next to these sisters in my Texas and T-shirt.

Dancing was the highlight of this celebration. Some women danced low, winding and bouncing their behinds—I now know where our fascination with shaking our booties comes from—while others danced high, punctuating their movements with leaps and jumps.

bed of tomato-infused rice. Everywhere we went the fish was fantastic, most likely plucked from the ocean that day, as fishing is a mainstay for many Senegalese people.

The Senegalese have a knack for entrepreneurship, too, selling everything from arts and crafts to electronics and dinnerware on the street and in open-air markets. Their persistent sales pitch can be overwhelming for the uninitiated, as I came to realize in Soumbédioune, where I was surrounded by several eager salesmen as I contemplated carved stools.

Clothing, carvings and jewelry can be had at a fraction of what you'd pay in the States after a bit of hard bargaining, and each market has its own specialty. Marche Carmelle is the spice market; Marche Mali sells shea butter for \$1 a pound, while at Sandaga, you can get just about anything, from colorful cloth to shoes and CDs.

I came back with my share of Senegal jammed in my luggage, but I also returned with a new name, Gnima Sane, the name of a beautiful Di-allo farm girl, along with the sense that maybe I had found a new home worth visiting again and again. ♦

Robin Bennefield, an executive producer for discoverychannel.com, has traveled to such far-flung places as Nicaragua, China, Australia, Cuba and Belize.

IF YOU GO...

South Africa Air offers direct flights to Dakar from New York City. The best time to travel to Senegal is November through February, when it's cooler.

LODGING

The Sofitel Teranga is a four-star hotel in downtown Dakar with sea views and a large pool. Rooms cost about \$120 per night or \$120,000 CFA.

SIDE TRIP

Pink Lake or Lac Retba lies about an hour north of Dakar along the Cape Vert Peninsula and is known as Senegal's answer to the Dead Sea. The lake is 10 times saltier than the ocean.

WEB SITES

www.au-senegal.com

Click on the English version of this French site for a complete guide to the country.

www.senegal-tourism.com

The site of the Senegal Tourism Office offers a calendar of events and travel tips.

Put on Your Dancin' Shoes

At Kilimanjaro, we enjoyed mbax, Senegalese pop music performed by singer Thione Seck. Decked out in a black suit with yellow pinstripes and matching yellow shirt and tie, he never broke a sweat in front of his frenzied fans or when one of them, called by the drums, joined him onstage.

Viviane N'Dour, sister-in-law of singer Youssou N'Dour, has her own following. We were able to see the range of her singing style and popularity at two clubs in Dakar. At Just 4 U, she performed sultry tunes with a small jazz band. Days later we saw her at Yeungounlene, a large multilevel entertainment complex, where the latest rap and reggae played and a crowd of young Senegalese men jostled for position to get the best view of their favorite pop idol.