

## INTO THE IVORY

### Cote d'Ivoire Diaries

#### 1. November – December 2016

One early morning in a chilly, dark mid-November, I left a mist-engulfed Basel airport and emerged a few hours later into a golden afternoon wall of West African heat.

I was picked up promptly at the airport and taken to a small studio flat in the north east of the city, arranged for me as a stop-gap by the HR department at the Bank. The flat was a trifle dark, with 70s ochre brown on the walls and furnishings, but very acceptable for blindly chosen accommodation in an as yet unknown African city. The flat has air conditioning in the bedroom, a good wifi network (faster than in either Leymen or Burgess Hill) and cable TV. It's close to the *pharmacie* of the *Septieme Tranche* of the *Deux Plateaux* extension of the commune of *Cocody* in North Abidjan. That previous sentence constitutes the working address, because although the streets have numbers, no one uses them or remembers them, and there is no postal service. Everyone just mentions the most obvious landmark in each street (in this case, the large chemist on the corner).

Mohamed, the driver, met me again later the same evening for a tour of the neighbourhood and for dinner in the street, after I had asked him to choose a place where he might sometimes go to with his family when he ate out. He took me at my word and we went to a "maquis" (restaurant/bar) called *Chez Tante Helene* in the *Vallon* district. We chose, waited for and finally ate *Poisson braisé, atiekke et alloco* - braised tilapia, fermented cassava paste and fried plantain pieces. I had seen sanitiser dispensers with paper serviettes set out on both sides of the street by the restaurant, and had lazily wondered why, since I had also seen a large rat lumbering around the rubbish. Street food is normally eaten by hand (although knives, spoons and forks are available). The rubbish bins were not filled with packaging, empty tins, plastic coverings or containers, but mostly with the paper serviettes supplied with the sanitizers. It is also a universal assumption that anything not eaten from the plate is wrapped up in paper and made ready for you to take home (and eat later).

I was witnessing what seemed an old fashioned sight, similar to old prints of ordinary urban life in past centuries. Even the prevailing sepia colour of the scene seemed authentic for my assumption. It was a picture of poverty, but only in the partial sense that there was a lack of excess, and this is what I noticed first. Everything I actually needed was available, once the unnecessary elements are stripped away. The scene was calm and unhurried, a low hubbub of voices as a background and a distant TV set broadcasting an international match between the Cote d'Ivoire and France, although no one was watching. The lights were no brighter than they needed to be. The ground area was hard but not paved and impossible for cars: a mixture of sand, rubble and earth. Neither was the environment tidy nor particularly clean although it seemed to be clean enough wherever it really counted, around the food preparation and cooking areas. There were almost no flies but I saw a rat as well as its hunter, a small cat. Families sat all together at the tables, which were regularly cleaned with a sanitizer but were flimsy and old, cast-off office furniture or cheap camping tables and plastic chairs. Every table was uneven and had at least one leg that needed supporting with a bunch of serviettes or a chip of wood. Waiters and waitresses were slow in their movements and stopped often for an animated chat with friends, which awoke in me old-world feelings of irritation until I actually received my food. My first evening in Abidjan,

the end of a national holiday, was already a revelation of a way of life lived very differently from mine. But it was one that was consistent with sustenance and adequacy although not with excess. It was without surplus but not deprived, at least not of basics. It was far more sustainable than almost any other alternative in Europe. No wasted food, no wasted materials, no wasted time - assuming you were not in a hurry (and nobody was). I realized afterwards that the area was definitely in the wealthier part of the city, where there was money to spare. After the long wait for the food, and coming off an early start and a full day's journey, that evening I felt my mind becoming slowly unclenched and more relaxed. Of course, I was to find that it clenched up again often as the days wore on, and particularly days at work, but I will always remember the calming experience of my first night in Abidjan, the unhurried service, the waiter wrapping up the rest of the food, my questions to Mohamed about life in Abidjan and his answers. It was all spread out in front of me.

The next morning I arrived in a brand new office in Abidjan, in the skyscraper-specked central district known as the Plateau (not to be taken as a symbol for the state of my career). I was taken straight to the HR department whose task was to process me into the company. I was initially very impressed with the speed with which I was "onboarded", and my colleagues' willingness to explain how my new phone, mobile phone, lap top and ipad worked. In fact, I spent most of my first few days of work almost exclusively getting wired in, hooked up, added to groups, set up, plugged in, noted down, trained up; filling forms, confirming accounts, verifying identities and signing statements. Most signatures here need also to include a contact telephone number, perhaps for good reasons. I provided no less than 14 passport photos for various forms and applications and I had to hand in my passport to the Ivorian authorities to be processed for the purposes of a residents' permit. I was also given a duty free card for use in particular shops and an African Laissez-Passer, an impressive diplomatic document looking exactly like a passport which allows me to travel in most African countries without the need for visas, in theory. I underwent a very comprehensive medical examination at the local clinic, where they gave me an ECG, a blood test, injections, a long questionnaire, knocked my knees with a rubber hammer and performed several other scans and tests (at no point was cancer ever referred to or directly mentioned). While this was all going on, on one occasion, when I was waiting for the doctor and feeling the heat in the hospital, a nurse, who had been sitting at a reception desk, came over and without comment gave me a large bottle of water. I was grateful for this apparently random act of kindness and drank a few mouthfuls, then put the bottle carefully down beside me. After about ten minutes of further waiting I asked Mohamed why we were still waiting, and also why he thought the nurse had given me the water. He replied that I was supposed to drink more of it, as the nurse had assumed that I was waiting to do a urine test. Once that was sorted out, I went in to see the doctor and got the all clear certificate. A nurse at the bank later told me that I should have been taking malaria tablets, as Abidjan is a highly malarial area with its lagoon and many lakes, so I procured the tablets without delay. It's an assumption here that everyone from Europe should take them for at least two months, and even locals long used to the area still suffer from bouts of malaria sometimes, although I have only seen one mosquito in the first month of living here. And it bit me.



Dr. Akinwumi Adesina, President of the African Development Bank, and Lionel Stanbrook, Chief of Communications and Speechwriter, November 2016

The speechwriting tasks began shortly after I met the President, whose welcome when I eventually met him was warm, almost effusive, and a photograph of us shaking hands was duly taken. I did my best to look well-dressed next to him but still managed to look like a tramp off the street. The requirements for speeches, remarks, notes and statements came at a high speed and in a jumble of conflicting urgencies and unforgiving priorities. Essentially I had to jump into a raging current of foaming text preparation in mid-stream and it was very difficult to find the right way to go with the current, when to hold it up, when to hold on and when to hold back. My immediate colleagues in the private office initially seemed to be very busy. No one had been specifically delegated to show me the very particular ropes of the President's Cabinet. Many of the rules intoned to me in my induction course for the rest of the Bank's staff were not applicable or even recognisable for the President's Cabinet, especially the expectation of starting and finishing hours – a factor I recalled from my previous experience in the European Parliament. Many colleagues were not even in the office for my first few days and I spent a lot of time on my own, doing some background reading, trying to understand the new IT equipment, repeatedly calling the IT help desk, arranging for health insurance, medical and visa visits, and re-reading speeches by the President. An early insight I gained is that internal communication is a very different process here than in Europe. Most people do not seem ever to volunteer information, even when it would seem obvious to do so, like the receptionist at the hospital wordlessly waiting for me to perform my unbidden urine test. At the induction session at the end of the month I was disappointed and a bit shocked to learn that I was too old to be allowed into the pension fund. It was also obligatory to retire at 62, a linked double whammy that I had not expected. I had assumed that the retirement age would be 65 as in Europe, which would have left me plenty of time to qualify for the pension, but this news means I have to find another job in three years' time. The revealing truth is that life expectancy is much lower on average in Africa than in Europe, which explains the earlier retirement age.

Gradually (but still rather randomly) I was given more work to do and more speeches and articles to write but it was still slow-slow-quick-quick-slow and I did spend a lot of time waiting for notes to arrive, people to meet, or meetings to begin. Everyone kept saying that I should spend more time with the

President and get to know the way he talks and thinks, and I could not have agreed more, but being able to spend time in this way seemed very difficult indeed. I saw my own boss very rarely – she often seemed to be away or too busy, except at a time of the evening often after I had gone home (which was when I mostly got emails from her). There were two other bosses who seemed also to do a similar job around the President, and they seemed to get in each other's way. It will take me some time to navigate around this rather complicated organigram and also adjust to the President's particular style. He rightly thinks speeches are the most important communications of his Presidency and attends carefully to the precise wording, frequently making corrections to successive drafts at the last minute. He hosted a lunch party for the Cabinet staff as we moved towards Christmas. It seemed a stilted, uneasy affair, for which he and several senior Cabinet members were over an hour late in arriving. There had been some genuine discussion among us punctually arrived about whether even to sit at the table with our Moroccan mint cocktails before the President came in. When he did arrive, everyone showed a great deal of respect. This was fine and proper, but it also meant that every time the President started to talk, everyone else stopped talking and turned to listen to what *bons mots* he would come up with, rendering the occasion overall somewhat disjointed in conversational terms. I imagine it would have been like having a lunch with the Queen. Looking next to his plate at a small piece of paper with everyone's names written in the seating order of the table, he asked everyone in turn about some small personal detail or question relating to them. Since I was a newcomer he had to make up his knowledge about me so he asked me about Brexit to general but gentle mirth. I of course replied with an appropriate measure of respect, expertly analysing the political impact of Britain's disastrous referendum decision. We went on to discuss the US Presidential Election. I wondered out loud whether perhaps the African Union might consider sending in officials to oversee the recounts in the four States of the Union where the result had been opposed. Given that much of the table conversation had been about elections and their outcomes in the Gambia and Ghana, the remark was appreciated.

Since I was not here for sight-seeing, I did not go out much on weekday evenings during the first month, just once or twice in the evenings with my driver where he introduced me to different local restaurants, although all featured the same meals, and a couple of times with work colleagues for rather bland expatriate lunches or dinners. On most evenings after coming back from work I would cook something simple, often boiled vegetables and rice or beans, with different sauces or salad, and while the quality and presentation often left much to be desired, I was not trying to impress anyone. I have even been moderately pleased with my ability to find, buy, and cook food, and have generally managed to enjoy reasonable and tasty meals of my own making, probably at the rate of around five times a week. There are copious fruits available cheaply: bananas, oranges, mangoes, paw-paws, apples and plantains, and I buy a pile of flatbreads every few days, together with beer and wine. On the first Saturday I walked out in the mid-day heat looking for a bar. I didn't need to look for long. In the very same street was the Bar Elena, with tables under cover and even simple grilled "pub food" available as well as cable TV with footie. I couldn't resist and stayed for lunch, eating a brochette of giant snails and rice in the process, which wasn't very vegetarian but was delicious.

It struck me after a week or so that a temporary visitor to an unfamiliar place, especially in a different continent with a much lower standard of living, can easily think that somehow the essentials of normal, ordinary life are different, and that the apparently unusual sights are not themselves authentic; and that because life seems simpler, people and their communities must be simpler. This false impression certainly happens on short touristic visits, but it goes deeper than that. I have got used, in unfamiliar

places, to go out walking and looking around at everything I pass. It is many times better than taking a car or taxi in a city. While walking in a neighbourhood, I can interact with what I see (if only by asking for directions), I can feel the heat, hear the noise and have time to speak to people, stop to take in the views and sights, read the signs on the establishments by the side of the road. I have the time to understand the obvious truth that here too life goes on as it does anywhere else and that the similarities to, for example, Basel or London, are far more numerous than the few differences, despite the vast difference in the standard of living. A first impression of Abidjan, especially from within a taxi from the airport to a European style hotel, might give the impression to a European or an American of a deprived community lacking in basic social services. But after a while and especially with a spirit of curiosity and discovery, the scales start to fall from the eyes, especially during a proper wander (in the style of my lately departed friend John Lock). The lack of excess, not the lack of amenities, was the first thing I noticed. After a while, I started more directly to notice the children's crèches, the clinics, the notaries, the insurance agents, the law offices, the barbers and women's hairdressers, the security and car park attendants, and those eccentric private citizens who volunteer to help with traffic control in the mornings. I saw children in their uniforms going to school and the men in their business suits waiting patiently in long crocodile queues to get onto rickety buses to travel to work from the suburbs each morning. Along the three-lane main dual carriageway to the centre every morning can be seen people on a two-hour daily walk to their work in the city, often past long rows of hopelessly gridlocked cars. Mohamed earned very little money (I paid him the going rate of about €40 a day plus the petrol for his round the clock chauffeur service in his car, which he hired from someone else for \$25 a day), but he got by and declared himself perfectly content with his house, circumstances and not-so-little family of wife and four daughters. He was also a bit of a fixer. I worked out that he did other jobs as well and, with my agreement, he would sometimes make deliveries or pick-ups while he was driving me to and from work. On one occasion he stopped the car by a shop, went in with some sort of form that he had filled in and had a conversation with the shop owner, who signed the paper. I wandered around the shop as he did and decided to buy some jasmine rice and some soap, which I put on the counter and got out some money to pay. The shop keeper said it was complimentary and, after hesitating - not wanting to cause an unnecessary conversation, I thanked him and left to go back into the car. Mohamed emerged a few seconds afterwards carrying a large sack of rice which he hefted into the boot, and explained afterwards that he helps the shopkeeper informally with his administrative bureaucracy, as the man is Mauritanian and needed help with the licences and permissions he needs to run his retail business as a non-Ivorian, giving his payment for Mohamed's services in kind. I have no idea whether this assistance consists of coercion in any way, since it might be mistaken for a small-scale protection racket. But he really doesn't seem the type. He is a very devout Muslim, tolerant, helpful and sensitive. He seems hardly likely to threaten others with menaces. He has been a great help to me while I have been getting used to the city, rather as he must be to the Mauritanian shopkeeper. He is a good driver, and helps me particularly with local knowledge, with haggling in markets, and negotiating for apartments, and we have some excellent conversations about life in Abidjan.

On the first weekend, my intended leisurely stroll around the neighbourhood had almost turned into a fiasco. Just around the corner is a clean, modern boulangerie, "Paris-Baguette", where bread, *croissants* and *pains au chocolat* can be bought. I had decided to buy a baguette and then walk around the block. What could be easier? So I did just that. After buying the baguette I carried on walking, although I skipped a couple of roads so as to make the walk a little longer and more interesting. This was a mistake, for after scrupulously turning left a couple more times I found that I was in dramatically unfamiliar

territory and I spent at least 45 more minutes wandering round with an unconcerned expression on my face trying to get back to my flat. While quite literally circling back to where I started, I kept seeing chickens crossing the road, and realised that while I still didn't know why they did that, they did at least know exactly where they were and where they were going. The fact that the streets had no names didn't help. I managed to get home in the end with a wilted baguette doubled over in the humidity. Or perhaps it was with transferred embarrassment. After a similar experience a few days later I concluded that I was in an ambulatory Bermuda Triangle and I was lucky to have escaped the vortex just the once.

Each morning I come into work on a different route because Mohamed has a taxi-driver's instinctive knowledge and knows when to avoid an actual or potential traffic jam by heading suddenly down a back street (even one showing as a no through road) and re-emerge on a clear road going in the right direction. Pot holes are more like crevices here and one morning Mohamed took the car up a muddy and bumpy incline across a building site that I would have thought twice about attempting on foot even with stout boots and armed with crampons. Traffic jams are like the mist on a blasted heath in an early American horror film, ever changing, stopping, turning around, lifting, dipping, then disappearing and reappearing randomly, cackling insanely or so it would seem. Driving here looks very hazardous, and we have edged past recent accidents already three times in a month. It seems to develop from the typical Abidjan driver's lack of awareness of the common and mutually earned advantages of occasionally giving way when trying to edge into a stream of traffic. However apocalyptic the traffic looks, it rarely gets to gridlock as there always seems to be a way through the jam, even if it means driving across someone else's yard. The style of driving is pushy, dangerous and risky, and yet no one ever seems to lose their temper. Even hooting is unusual in your average Ivorian automotive jumble.

I listen to the Islamic radio station (Radio Albayen) most mornings which sometimes includes homely advice from the Imam on all sorts of subjects that would never be covered by the average Christian priest. Islam seems to offer not just a moral code for life but a practical set of rules and very detailed instructions for precisely how to live it, with chants and incantations that are supposed to alleviate various problems. Many of these rules involve using the word *Inshallah*, which the Imam said was a particularly sacred word in Islam. One morning the instructions, given both in Arabic and French, were for how to cope with involuntarily passing wind when praying, especially in the initial (getting down on your knees) and final (getting up again) stages, as well as the stages where total prostration, putting pressure on the pelvic and back muscles, is required. The Imam suggested that the cause of flatulence was essentially the devil, causing noxious gases to accumulate in your body as an effect of bad dietary practices. This condition also needed powerful preventive incantations at certain proscribed times and assisted by encouraging good personal health and habits, preventing the evil gases in the body from forming and becoming expelled at the critical times of prayer. There were also considered pieces of advice on all sorts of more general problems. One woman had asked for advice on how to make her non-Muslim husband follow the Prophet and respect Islam, not drink, not eat pork, to like her friends and so on, to which the reply was candid, almost brutal, to the effect of "you made your bed, lie in it". The Imam was very clear that the woman had no right to expect her husband to change religion, even if he wasn't a Muslim, and there was no earthly reason why he should do so. Indeed, he said, you made your choice and you have to put up with it. He also (rather slyly, I thought) added that her marriage was anyway not recognised as legal under Islamic law. The ordinary interest and occasional unintended humour of these broadcasts was tremendously instructive. Islam at the ground level seems very matter of fact, very basic and centered on ordinary concerns for ordinary people, despite the evidence of

differential treatment of men from women. The instructions reach to the most menial of behaviours and imams have a licence to interpret the Koran in many different circumstances. I heard nothing that indicated any hatred or even dislike of non-Islamic people. There was a large degree of respect for other faiths and especially Christianity in the broadcasts, despite expressions of certainty that Christians and other non-Muslims were following the wrong path, or following none at all. These talks were regular morning drive-time radio, with down to earth and practical knowledge, and demonstrating a realistic awareness that there was considerable mixing between the faiths. The broadcasts also revealed a clear differentiation of the expected roles of man and woman, and were clear in several references that women had more family, housekeeping and partner obligations than would be demanded of men. I also heard advice that suggested that the promiscuous sexual habits of men were to be regarded as a regrettable fact of life whereas women as wives had a strict duty of faithfulness to their husbands. The offhand way in which these references were made showed that gender equality has hardly started in mainstream Islam, despite a lot of fanfare and publicity here in the printed media and other radio stations to suggest that it has.

Mohamed invited me to his house on the first weekend and introduced me to his four children and two other cousins who were with them, and to his wife, who made us a meal of braised fish and rice, cooking it, serving it then closing the door and leaving us men alone. Afterwards we went to the busy local market and looked around, almost getting stuck in the crowds. On the next day we went to the beach at *La Grande Bassam* for a short walk along the sands and a beer or two for me (Mohamed takes only soft drinks). *La Grande Bassam* is a seaside resort, not totally unlike Southend, about an hour away from Abidjan. As in Essex, it can sometimes take hours to get there. And unlike Southend the beach has fine sand and a long ram-rod beach with people splashing in the surf. It's a pity that no-one clears the flotsam and jetsam and other rubbish from the beach, but somehow Nature stacks it all in neat piles to make it easily picked up (although it never is, except in front of European-owned beach hotels). We went to a "*cachette*", a discrete drinking area where on Mohamed's recommendation I bought *Banji* and *Kokouro*, both made from the palm fruit. The second of these is an *eau de vie*; the first is a sour milky drink, difficult both to describe and to swallow but I did manage, determinedly, to finish the bottle, ten days later.

On the following weekend, we drove to *Jacqueville*, another beach resort with a straight and sandy beach and only a few people, where I had a walk past the dilapidating beach houses put up over 100 years ago by French colonials. We talked to someone who claimed to own the ruins, and about how easy it would be to restore them and open a stylish beach bar, but he reminded me forlornly that that the sea was coming in, and that the coast was disappearing quickly because of changed weather patterns. He claimed that in ten years the sea will even have consumed the building and the beach road behind it. In his own lifetime it had already advanced some fifty metres inland. I had a beachfront meal of *Marmite de poisson*, and collected some very tasty bananas and local oranges on the way back.

The next weekend, at my insistence, Mohamed brought his family and we all went to Ohaue, a leisure park based around a fish farm and garden centre. It was an excellent afternoon, the children were getting more used to me, and Kadi, his eldest daughter age 12, were more responsive. On the way back I showed them some card tricks. I also bought a cake for Charlotte, Mohamed's wife, as it was her birthday the following day.



Charlotte Dembele and daughter, Ohaue, December 2016

I have been to several city markets, viewed some villas and apartments, including one at *Bassam* owned by a retired diplomat and swathed in scrubby electric fencing, and I have generally been able to explore the city at will, thanks to Mohamed's careful stewardship of my interests. I also went to the Cocody market for a second time and had a look around. I was keen on finding some Christmas presents for the girls, and I was more confident with the traders, especially as Mohamed always drove a hard bargain, generally winning a discount of at least 50% on the trader's first suggestion. He explained later that it irritated him that traders tried to take advantage of tourists, and obviously didn't think much of my argument that when tourists have more money, perhaps it was right that they should pay a bit more, especially as the items were often genuine hand-made articles for which the artisans should receive much better recompense than they do. On my way into the market, one of the stallholders called out to get my attention: "*hé, Monsieur bien-nourri, viens ici!*". I couldn't help laughing, especially as I well knew that the London equivalent might well be the rather less polite "oy, lard-arse!" In the empty car park of the market there were four elaborately made up women in high cheekbones, heels and hips, sashaying along an imaginary catwalk between car parking lines. Their sullen managers, smoking like Bogarts, were assembled jaggedly - crows on a bar. The girls let me take a photo and pouted frighteningly as I did so before I turned back to discuss the prices of some trinkets with a smallholder, for which the assistance of Mahomed was essential. Bargaining is in the African character; it happens all the time and on everything possible, but like the driving, no one ever seems to get angry, and keeping a good sense of humour while haggling is essential. In the last week before coming back to France for Christmas, I visited again and bought a good supply of small bronze and ebony keyrings as small presents.





Models at Cocody Market, December 2016

Finding a more permanent flat has been difficult. I looked at a few places in different areas, deciding after seeing some very big and very empty apartments that I would go for an easy life and another furnished apartment that was closer to the workplace for the time being. One apartment that particularly caught my eye was a two bedroom ground floor flat in a block among three other blocks in a secure walled area. So secure was it that the entrance was a very grim affair and the only way in was through a dark and rather forbidding underground car park. But once in the flat it was very well appointed and even luxurious, with two bedrooms, a huge lounge, two bathrooms and plenty of cupboard space, as well as a garden. I had first liked the look of it because it was good for dogs, who could wander in and out of the flat at will, and the garden was sectioned off so there was little chance of them escaping. Mohamed took charge of negotiations and we beat them down to half the original daily price. We did not reach a final agreement by the time I left for the Christmas break, but I have a good chance of getting the flat when I return in January.

My first official work visit as proposed, to Cameroun, was postponed just before we were due to go. It was disappointing as I had written the President's speech, which was long and quite difficult. I had only just finished it after a full day of research, drafting and revisions just the night before, and half an hour before I got the email from my boss that the trip had been cancelled. The official reason was some Anglophone riots in the west of the country, including at least four deaths during a strike by English teachers in Bamenda in Western Cameroon (the old British Cameroon, which has a lot more in common with Biafra in Eastern Nigeria than with French Cameroun). I read some local news about this on the internet, curious about the history of the problem, irritated that the news had not travelled much beyond the Cameroun borders, and hardly at all outside Africa. Some local journalists seemed to think that the issue was serious enough to destabilise the government, but then most social unrest in Africa tends to get portrayed in this way by local journalists.

The cancellation of the trip left me with a long and blank weekend and I was stuck for things to do, so I stayed in the flat to read, write, and watch television, only emerging occasionally to walk around the block, buy in some food, and try not to get lost again. It was also on the Friday before the weekend that the Islamic authorities had announced that the weekend would be the holiday to celebrate the birth of the Prophet Muhammad, in other words the equivalent of Christmas. It seemed rather short notice to

announce this decision, but apparently everyone knows in advance but pretend they don't and the announcement by the Islamic authorities is somewhat of a foregone conclusion. The calculation of this movable feast is made with the help of the lunar calendar, as the Christians do with Easter – the 9<sup>th</sup> December being the Prophet's official birthday. After Mohamed took me around a couple of markets on Saturday morning, I didn't want to bother him afterwards for Sunday or Monday, as he clearly had a family reunion and religious celebrations to attend, although he phoned me rather worriedly on the Monday morning just to check that I really had said that I would not be needing him on the holiday. I didn't need him but I cannot deny that it was a long weekend in every sense. I watched a couple of films and a full complement of Premier League football on television, struggled through fifty pages of *De rerum natura*, and took several long and careful walks around the neighbourhood, dropping bits of baguette in a trail behind me as I walked. I ate out twice but cooked at home the rest of the time. There was a tremendous thunderstorm on the Monday night, and I realised that throughout a month in which the weather was supposed to be getting dryer, there had been a great deal of rain.

Living in the *Septième Tranche* has not been anywhere near as tough as I thought it might be. I have got on well with all the local security men who stand outside many of the houses in hot sun and pouring rain, and who always give me a cheerful wave back when I wave to them in passing. The staff at the Residence have been very accommodating and eager to please and I left tips for everyone when I left for the airport on the final Saturday although I was irritated by the owner's sudden demand for another day's rent "to clean up". I have also probably spoken more French more often in the past month than at any time in my life, although not always accurately. After the hot water failed at one stage in my flat I thanked the Manager for personally making sure it was sorted out. He gave me a funny look as I left and I wondered why. Ten minutes later I worked it out. In thanking him I had also cheerfully told him that I had managed to wash my horses in the shower for the first time in a week. I am sleeping well, and thankfully have not yet overslept or got into work too late or kept Mohamed waiting too long very often. The mornings are quite special in their way. The day dawns at around 6am (it does not change much near the equator) and so far I have been waking to the sound of someone sweeping around the courtyard, intermittent chirruping of the *kolokoti* bird, and an occasional rooster clarion, doubtless causing the chickens to cross the road. The evenings are often thunderous, when the nights flash and flicker as in southern Europe, but the rain is, well, tropical. Opinions seem to differ on what to expect in the New Year, but it will be the season of the *Harmattan*, the dry sand- and dust-laden wind that blows over West Africa, keeping temperatures lower, humidity high and creating morning smogs.

But first I was due back home for a much needed fortnight of Christmas, friends and family company and cold weather. Maybe even some snow?

## **INTO THE IVORY**

### **Cote d'Ivoire Diaries**

#### **2. January – March 2017**

Having failed to sleep on a route from Basel that doubled the journey by going via Addis Ababa, I was very tired when I finally got to Abidjan. In comparison to Europe, it was boiling hot when I stepped off

the plane. I learnt later that the snow had finally arrived thick and fast in the Alsace just after I had left. I went into central Abidjan first so that I could get some money out (a medium sized wad - one that disfigures a normal wallet). The largest denomination note is about 15 euros. I also had to remove the clothes that I had stored in the cupboard of my office. I was so tired that I felt my brain sputtering and failing, like a car running out of petrol. I was mixing everything up, and clumsily attempting a sequence of interconnected things at the wrong time and in the wrong order. I forgot that before my departure that I had secreted the keys to the cupboard in my office at work somewhere special, but of course after two spellbinding weeks at home over Christmas in Leymen, it was too special for me to remember where this was. It took me over two days to get someone to come and open the cupboard with a skeleton key, and I therefore had to wear my light tan "African suit" with black shoes twice in a row. This was undeniably a sartorial mistake, but just about permissible for that sketchy first week in January when most people are still sleeping off their celebrations, especially in the Cote d'Ivoire. I also forgot my code for the cash machine, having previously forgotten to bring my password book with me. I had a ghastly insight that day into what it might be like to suffer even from a mild form of Alzheimer's Disease.

After a restorative lunch in the street I got to the ground floor flat in the *Indenie* Building that Mohamed had reserved for me after I had seen and liked it before Christmas. It was dark and musty but cheap for a two bedroom flat in the *Plateau*. It had access to an enclosed garden (perfect for dogs) and I could see possibilities meanwhile in offering the second bedroom out as a flat share. I brought in and stored all my possessions and started planning how to live in it. But it did not take me long to realise that I was wrong on all counts and that the flat was completely unsuitable. The musty pre-Christmas smell had become worse, indicating that no cleaning had been done, also evident from the filthy state of the curtains and windows. In the kitchen small ants scurried around on the food preparation surfaces and there was rubbish (including chicken bones) in a dirty bin with a broken lid; the fridge did not work properly; there was no wi-fi network in the flat and only one small bath towel in the bathroom. There were mosquitos everywhere and many of the electrical points had simply been jammed into holes in the wall, with many not working at all. The air conditioning in the principal bedroom was ineffective and needed at least a thorough service. Once I had unpacked in the late afternoon I took a quick nap, then a tepid shower and was strolling around dressed only in my underpants inspecting the fixtures and fittings when I found the agent and a workman in the living room replacing a lock on the door from the room into the hall. Thank God I had worn something. They spent an incredible three hours changing the lock while I worried about leaving while they were there, and wondered why they thought that a lock on an internal door was even necessary.

Overnight I slept only fitfully, thinking also about my choice of flat, and where I seemed to have ended up after a series of linked and random events that I should have managed better. By the morning it was all too much – I knew I could not live in the flat even another night. Alli certainly couldn't if she was to come here. For the proprietor's manager to achieve what would be needed to make the place presentable seemed a wholly unlikely proposition. I had to leave as soon as possible. I told my driver Mohamed when he arrived, and he calmly took me at my word. He had arranged for the signing session on the contract to take place later that day, with the providential result that I had given no money and signed no contract. He drove me to work, then told a very unhappy agent that I had changed my mind. By lunchtime he had packed up and taken all my possessions from the flat and put three large suitcases and boxes full of clothes into his car. We then went flat hunting again at lunchtime, first to a place nearby that I had seen before Christmas but where the available flats had not appealed to me. Another,

near the golf course in a country club environment, was too expensive and felt too remote. Mohamed said he had recently seen a flat close to the *Plateau* in *Cocody Danga* that might be right for me. It felt like a straw clutched, a loose end. We went to see it and although I could probably have lived there for a while, it was not acceptable. The bedding was dirty; everything was old and while most appliances worked, they didn't look as if they were going to for very long, and all were past their due date, including the air conditioning, the fridge and the oven. I could accurately describe the place as dirt cheap. A man with an atrocious accent said that there was a better flat in the same building (which I was prepared to believe), and he tried to phone its proprietor. We spent 45 minutes doing what I am now recognise as a very African activity of hanging around doing nothing while and because other people make various unsuccessful attempts to do something, in this case to reach the proprietor via her sons, daughters, brothers, uncles, aunts, boss, etc. But I was still tired, my lunch break was ticking away, and all my worldly goods in Africa were stuffed into a Peugeot 406 parked outside. I was in a dirty flat; I had just escaped from another dirty flat, and it looked like I was going to have to book into a dodgy hotel with four suitcases and 7 shopping bags as if I was a petty criminal on the run from Inspector Cockroach.

Then someone sprinkled some fairy dust over us all. It wasn't just that I actually started understanding the agent and his atrocious accent. I was anyway quickly warming to the idea of living away from the Plateau district but close enough to get to work easily and quickly, and I liked the feel of the road with its shading banana, cacao, papaya and coconut trees, its relaxed atmosphere and the friendly, leisurely street sellers of fruit and vegetables, the impromptu Muslim prayer sessions on mats lined up by the side of the road. The road had an aura. It had the Italian Embassy. It even had a street name - *Rue Cannebière*. The agent with the atrocious accent said he knew other agents for other residences in the same road. We walked a few metres down to the next apartment block, the Residence Neuilly, and met someone there who showed us into a modern, clean, tidy but tiny studio apartment on the second floor with a balcony and a view, a working TV, a small kitchen, adequate shelf space, working air conditioning, a strong shower and plenty of hot water - all for a price that was so cheap it made me catch my breath. This was then needlessly but hilariously haggled down further by Mohamed and within thirty minutes I was the tenant of an apartment that while very small seemed just right for me and my short-term needs. Another twenty minutes and all my stuff was stored in the apartment. I had paid a commission and the apartment was mine for three months. It was almost incredible, a miracle unimaginable just an hour previously. I had snatched victory from the jaws of defeat. Mohamed was as relieved as I was, having taken to heart my severe negative reaction to the previous flat, which he wrongly saw as his fault. We were both thunderstruck. I saw my chance to use the most fitting Arabic phrase that I knew: *All hamdu lillahi*, (All thanks to God). Mahomed, a very devout Moslem, roared with laughter. Ten minutes later he dropped me off at work before going to arrange the flat's wi-fi. In the evening I celebrated with a drink, going to the *Port Royal*, a *maquis* on the edge of the Lagoon where with dozens of others I sat gazing across the night water at the winking lights of Abidjan. The cloudy sky had darkened to the crimson haze of the sand-laden *Harmattan*, crowned by a crescent moon and a single star.

On my third night I returned from work to find the water cut off and one of the taps removed from my kitchen sink. The two discoveries at least made sense of each other, although I had not noticed or mentioned a problem with the taps. I mentally shrugged. This was going to happen; it was par for the course. I went to bed that night having not been able to wash up the dishes in the sink, and having used bottled water to brush my teeth. I was just falling asleep at around 11 o'clock when the doorbell rang. I was surprised to see Adamou, the cheerful younger brother of the apartment manager and an equally

cheerful plumber, holding up my detached kitchen tap and a large spanner as identification. Both wore big smiles. "Sorry it's late but we've come to fix your tap!" They worked for twenty minutes then the plumber left as jauntily as he had come. Adamou stayed another ten minutes washing up my dishes in the sink with great care and application, which seemed unnecessary. I told him so. But he just continued until he was finished, wiping down the draining board and carefully folding the tea towel. Then he too left with a cheerful "Bon nuit". I shut and locked the door feeling like a character in an US comedy soap opera, dressed as I was in wide flowery African leggings and a Syngenta tee shirt. The studio audience behind the French window was helpless with canned laughter.

One Friday evening in early January when I got into the car after work, Mohamed asked if I had heard the news. No I hadn't. Some Army ex-rebels who had supported the country's previous President (now languishing in a Dutch jail on ICC charges of torture and intimidation) had seized control of *Bouake*, the country's second city, firing guns in the streets in a protest over broken Government promises on pay and conditions. Mutinies had also occurred in two other towns and the trouble was spreading to Abidjan. As we drove back to my flat, the streets were eerily deserted. Mohamed was only too pleased to be on his way home after dropping me off. The next morning I scanned the view under a foggy sand-blown sun across to the *Plateau* district and the barracks visible from my balcony. There was a road block near the barracks and while local media revealed nothing about the events, I gradually got some reports and updates from each of the pan-African news organisations, including BBC Africa, Africa 24 and Al Jazeera (all broadcasting from outside the Cote d'Ivoire). Twitter and Facebook added some local videos and personal accounts without context. One of these showed people running and soldiers firing in the air in *Adjame*, in the next district. I was also getting security updates from the Bank to its employees, warning me not to make any unnecessary excursions or road trips. I had been aiming to go on my first Hash House Harriers run for decades but got an email to say that it was cancelled for security reasons. In the early afternoon I heard shots from the general direction of the barracks, like popguns at a children's party. When Mohamed arrived (dressed to run) I suggested that instead we go to the duty free shop in the 4th Zone where I stocked up on some duty free goods and then to an Indian restaurant nearby, the *Delhi Darbar*, recommended to me by an Indian colleague, where we had a light vegan lunch, my fitness intentions spoiled by two bottles of cold Kingfisher lager. I spent the rest of the weekend doing some work on forthcoming articles and speeches, watching House of Cards on Netflix, sport on BBC iPlayer as well as catching large parts of a James Bond season of 70s films on local TV. How badly these have dated! I also went into the office in a deserted city centre on Sunday afternoon to finish an urgent job to help my new colleague Sy. Later in the day, the country's President announced on live TV that the soldiers' pay and conditions would be improved. This was after the soldiers had temporarily kidnapped the Defence Minister who had come to discuss matters with them in *Bouake*. Apparently, he was held on a sofa for a couple of hours and forced to listen to Johnny Clegg.

Bit by bit I was sorting out the flat and finding places to put things that maximised the small space available. Sailors say that the smaller the space, the tidier it must be. I took this to heart as I methodically sorted out the clothing, shoes, books, papers, food, dishes and cutlery, making sure that everything was stowed as efficiently as possible. It took a few iterations before I was satisfied, and afterwards I still tinkered with it from time to time. I was never going to use the desktop computer that, oddly, had come with the apartment, but I kept the computer desk. I put my own lap top on it, making it easier to work or check emails than when sitting in one of the two easy chairs. At work, my obligations continued to range from the very stressful and urgent to the unhurried and relaxed, and I found time, as

I had hoped, to read the background to many of the subjects on which I had to write speeches and articles. Over the week I read political and economic journals on Africa and its nations, and I subscribed to reports and newsletters which all started to fill in what was a bad gap in my knowledge about the continent.



Watching the AfCON Cup in Sococe, Abidjan

The African Football Confederation Cup (AfCON) kicked off in mid-January, and took over many of the channels I have on my cable television. I went to watch the first Cote d'Ivoire game on a big screen in the open air of *Cocody Centrale* district. The presenter from the main sponsor, the local energy company, made a little speech at the end of the match and gave a few energy tips which included dusting light bulbs regularly as a way of saving energy. Good, solid, helpful PR, I thought. Shortly afterwards, I was suddenly approached and interviewed live for Ivoirian television on the result (0-0) and Cote d'Ivoire's prospects (good). The interview was broadcast on television at the weekend round up. I tend to watch more television than I really want to, but this reflects my scarce social life. There are no nearby bars or cafes to go to, and restaurants are divided between those with an international menu and those with local dishes, which are very predictable. Meat or fish is served with boiled rice or *attieke* (mashed cassava) and an unchanging but liberal variety of sauces to pour over everything. I tend not to go to the expatriate restaurants and pizzerias as most offer poor value for money and lack character and quality. The standard fare of the typical Ivoirian *maquis* is a lot healthier, but it does get a bit samey.

Living and working in Abidjan, and gradually discovering how to do it efficiently and productively, is like peeling layers off an onion. Matters that at first seem simple and easy become less so once one digs deeper and finds out more of what lies behind. Thus it is that while the issues of corruption and of good governance are sternly and seriously debated at high political levels, these problems and their effects can be seen very clearly and felt at all levels of the community. In many ways they are most obvious at the lowest levels, where people who are hard put to scrape together a living are treated extremely badly because they have no money and therefore no choice. They have to borrow money expensively or ask other favours or join some sort of syndicate (or gang) where the money trickles down a bit faster than it does in the free market. Money changes hands very quickly in small quantities in Abidjan, from coins

received for unnecessarily waving a car into a parking space in the street and for the man who bags up your shopping and takes it to your car, to the commission you pay to rent a flat or the wad to persuade the traffic police not to confiscate your licence.

The happy-go-lucky image of the West African often masks a hopeless personal situation for those left at the bottom of the pecking order. Each hierarchical level behaves very badly to the next level (who expect it), while the clink of coins and the rustle of notes is the background noise that keeps most of the parts moving. Much of Ivorian society operates on the basis of myriad economic mini-structures which make deals and arrangements through connection to privilege, power or wealth, however remote. These groupings can be political or economic, or both, but they certainly impede efforts to rationalise or modernize behaviours. All politicians appear to head up large but discrete groups of people dependent upon their patronage, either politically or financially (although in each, family relations are dominant). Their boats start to come in as soon as the politician starts moving up the greasy pole and they strike gold if he becomes Prime Minister or President because it is then time for him (and just occasionally, her) to reward them substantively for their support. When such economic or political interests are successfully challenged, the way is clearer for efficient and productive structures to emerge, and for more money to trickle down from those groups of clenched fists. Some of the foregoing comments of course apply just as well to several European countries and even to the USA, with changes of emphasis or perspective, but a largely integrated economy with better distributed wealth nevertheless seems to prevail in Europe and North America, even if there are economic and social chasms within societies and a rising number of disenfranchised people living outside the main social system.

In Cote d'Ivoire there are several different economies co-existing but largely segregated. The economy at street level is entirely cash-driven. If you have cash, you are powerful and you can bargain down the price as everyone needs cash flow. When purchasing anything or taking a taxi ride, change of any sort is difficult to get, even in a shop, and low denomination notes and coins – unaccountably - are difficult to come by. Almost every transaction I make that has involved the need to receive change (for example, a taxi ride) has resulted in a lack of available coins to provide the right change to balance the transaction. Frustrated by the lack of small change (which I have never previously been concerned about anywhere else) I went to my local bank on the Plateau and, brandishing a note of 10,000 FCFA, asked the cashier for 20 notes of 500 FCFA (the lowest note available, worth about 75 cents/pence) in exchange. She excused herself and said that she couldn't do it. When I persisted, asking instead for half my original demand, she shrugged and unwillingly extracted ten of the precious notes from a drawer and carefully counted them out no less than three times, handling them as if they were each thousand dollar bills with gold thread filigree. There are, at the same time, abundant and large freshly minted 10 FCFA coins, with a monetary equivalent of 1.5 cents each and completely useless for anything except Shove Ha'penny. Some expatriates behave as if none of this exists. They eat in Western style restaurants and cafes, buy imported drinks in hotel bars and live in large and expensive apartments completely separate from economic life outside the house, moving from house to car to office continuously in an air conditioned ecosystem. They have drivers, security guards, gardeners, cooks, "nounous", and "boys" whom they pay each month in notes of high denomination. They often leave tips that make up the total to the nearest note because they only deal in notes and don't bother about the small coins which can represent as much as a day's income to those at the bottom of the pyramid.



Forêt de Teck, Hash House Harriers of Abidjan

I had been cautiously keen to rejoin the Hash House Harriers after a gap of more than thirty years (and as many kilos) in an effort to keep fit, and so after the disappointment of the cancellation of the first run of the year, and after deciphering a very confusing web site, I arrived in Bassam for a hash that was introduced as “difficult”. It certainly was. On the plus side, it was a benefit hash for the Bassam orphanage for girls, with everyone asked to bring donations of clothes, food, and other essentials. But not being au fait with Hash lore, I wrongly chose the running group at the outset, imagining that that most people would be running, and I was confused to be informed that the walkers had a shorter and different circuit than the runners. In short, I should have chosen the walking group. It was a ferociously hot and heavy day - muggy doesn't even start to describe it - and most of the running course had been planned along the beach. This made the markings impossible to notice. There were about 60 people and many were much older even than me. Virtually all were French speakers, which oddly I had not expected. Nevertheless I was quickly a straggler and after having to retrace my steps three times after missing checkpoints and turns I jogged slowly and haltingly for about half the 11k course then gave up, making my way alone back to where the hash had started along an extended stretch of beach that made even walking difficult.

A hash a couple of weeks later was a lot more successful and enjoyable (if that is the right word for a two and a half hour trek through an African teak forest). I knew a handful of people from the Bank and this made it slightly less challenging. It was a stunning trail, plotted through a protected forest reservation which incorporated several villages and plantations of teak and other hardwood trees, as well as large lily-covered lakes, mango swamps, papaya and pineapple fields. I walked briskly most of the time but was very tired by the end of a 9km trail. The Abidjan Hash is unquestionably an unusual one, however, if only because it seems to lack Anglo-Saxon humour, encouragement, welcome or camaraderie. The proportion of beers in the coolers after the race is also disappointingly low for a club whose global tagline is “The drinking club with a running problem”, and there is a distinct lack of friendly and hospitable people looking out for and encouraging new arrivals, stragglers and other misfits, for whom the brisk walk/jog around a forest for two hours a week could be the only exercise they get. I



hope to keep coming when I can and that my initial impressions are premature if not wrong. However I missed all the hashes after that, finding other things to do with my precious Saturday afternoons.

One club I joined and have already left is the Abidjan Oenophiles Club. I attended an excruciating evening during which a speaker described bio-dynamic wine production in great detail at an expensive restaurant in central Abidjan, rambling on for over 90 minutes before we ate or drank anything. The speaker then introduced each of six wines in the tasting at great length with at least 25 minutes of further rambling each time. I would say that this extraordinary event could only happen in France but I forgot ex-French colonies where the supply of crusty old colonials makes this event even more likely than in the Mother Country. The crowd of some 50 people all knew each other and were lapping it up (the talk, not the wine - which was scarce) and again I found it very difficult to break into any of the conversations. I even left early and missed the last two gastronomic courses, so bored did I become.

Conversely, it was a very different experience a few days later when I went with a group for a tour of the Cecile Fakhoury Museum Gallery, which sponsored and exhibited paintings by native Africans. The gallery's owner, Cecile Fakhoury, was our guide and she led us through the gallery with the expertise of one who had lived and breathed it from the first brick laid. I later learnt that she was a multimillionaire arts patron, related by marriage to the architect who designed the Cathedral in Yamassoukro, a stunning piece of monumental architecture three hours north of Abidjan at the nation's capital.

My driver Mahomed was delighted at my suggestion to pay him in advance for his driving services in exchange for accepting a different tariff of charges. This frees me from employing him exclusively, and him from working for me around the clock. Indeed it helped him to buy his car from the taxi company and become independent. He invited me to lunch at his house with his entire family: mother, grandmother, brothers, their wives and children. I knew that this was quite a privilege as Sunday lunch *en famille* was a sacrosanct family fixture. We ate braised crab and fish with "*foutou banani*" (pounded yam and plantain with a peanut sauce). I came back home afterwards with much of the leftover food and drink, which kept me going for days, especially the "*Dege*", a mixture of millet, curds, yogurt and honey, "*Gnamakoudji*", a very spicy ginger juice, and "*Bissap*" a dark red juice made from hibiscus, vanilla and sorrel. Another juice that I tasted later ("*Tamara*") is made from tamarind seeds and has a delicious and unusual taste. The quality of the natural pressed fruit juices in West Africa provides an unfortunate and unmistakable contrast to the popularity of mass produced sodas with high sugar and colouring, including Coca-Cola, Fanta and other similar drinks, which I am told all taste much sweeter here than in Europe. These are of course the children's favourites, heavily advertised, and a lot more expensive to buy. Guinness, also highly sugared and coloured, has a completely different taste than in the UK or Ireland and is advertised with the slogan "*Nous sommes Made of Black*" intoned in a menacing female voice, which I thought exploitative but probably quite effective.

I started to make some preparations for Alli's Abidjan visit, which we had fixed for the last week of March, to coincide with our 28<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. Keen to make the week as enjoyable as possible, I sought and obtained holiday leave and started to scout out some hotels and restaurants that we could visit, as well as interesting things to do in Abidjan. To this end I went to Assinie, the jet-set resort of Abidjan, and looked at some hotels on the lagoon and the beach. I revisited Bassam for the same purpose. I also toured Abidjan's very well-appointed and scenic golf course (and wondered idly if I would ever take up golf). It might perhaps be a longer term challenge to make Abidjan seem an attractive location, but it is a different experience and can certainly be an exciting and rewarding place to live in, as

long as there is good company and plenty to do. This last pair of objectives is my challenge but I do see that many longer term expatriates clearly enjoy being here and do not want to leave.

One morning upon driving out from my Residence, I saw a woman in a business suit waiting to flag down a taxi and I asked her if she would like a lift to the Plateau. She accepted and we got talking in the car. She lived around the corner in a villa basse (bungalow) with her husband and was interested to hear about my continuing search for the right accommodation in Abidjan and the imminence of Alli's visit to look around. She also came to Abidjan to join her husband from France four years ago. She invited me to come round for a drink after work the same evening. It was a revelation. I was invited into a modern, clean and tidy house, not really a bungalow in any sense than that it was on one level, but it was superbly kept, with a fruit garden, vegetable plants and a lawn. I sat with the couple and drank home brewed brown ale and we talked about living in Abidjan. It was clear that they had an excellent time in Abidjan (they both had freelance occupations) and were enjoying themselves enormously. They also gave me some excellent tips for great places to go for holidays and weekends. I left Aurore and Virgil three hours later thoroughly encouraged and wondrously revived, delighted to have spent practically a whole evening talking and discussing interesting things in sociable company.

Similar experiences in different environments started to occur, and in proportion I started to enjoy Abidjan life more. Work continued like a runaway train and keeping up with the flow was as much as my energy allowed. My boss, the Chief of Staff, changed job suddenly and a senior communications colleague abruptly left, even as everyone was involved in a wholesale reorganization of functions from which I shall have to assume that I am relatively secure, having arrived at the end of the reorganization phase. I continue to lack a job description, which may be a blessing in disguise, but equally, may not.

One big personal change that came after the departure of my manager was that I got put on the lists for missions and "state visits" abroad in the Presidential delegation. My first mission was to Khartoum in Sudan, which evoked sepia childhood memories of stories by crusty colonial historians about the Siege of Khartoum and the death of General Gordon. Mentioning this did not win me many Brownie points from my hosts but they were interested enough to take me on a quick tour of the city, pointing out how British are its historical places, with even the streets in one quarter laid out in the form of a Union Jack. Sudan is one of the poorest countries in Africa, despite sitting on a huge subterranean lake of oil into which precious few drills have been sunk to date. It is one of Africa's biggest countries by area, but most of it is completely uninhabitable. The Nile (blue and white) ensures, often dramatically, that large amounts of irrigation, investment and intelligence can be used productively together to change the picture. The country has been subject to over 20 years of US sanctions, copied by Europe, as punishment for its overt involvement in international terrorism several regimes ago. This is one of many examples of a population being punished twice, once by their rulers, then again by an international community unable to separate a country's people from their own oppressors. It is also one of the dreaded countries on the Trump no-come immigration list. Despite the sanctions (which also ended any meaningful investment aid), domestic terrorism aimed at the oil and gas infrastructure, and the secession of south Sudan (where most of the oil production is located) the country has miraculously not only survived but even kept the books relatively balanced, despite a historic and catastrophic debt overhang of \$45 billion (mostly interest arrears and penalties). I accompanied the President in his meetings with Ministers and diplomats, central bankers, investors and entrepreneurs. We had a boat trip on the Nile, a dinner on the lawn of the Central Bank, and genuinely fascinating visits to a cement factory and a sugar factory. Through the week I listened to long lists of investment needs, ate dozens of dates and figs, and took

careful notes of all the meetings. Staying in an expensive but rather dull hotel, I spent most evenings revising the meeting notes, drafting the speeches and programme for the following day, becoming progressively more tired as the week went on. I came back exhausted via a long dusty stopover in Accra. There was time during a recuperative weekend to attend a Muslim ritual house-warming ceremony which included ten singing imams, and to spend a breathless evening in the company of Brazilian dancers at a swanky villa behind Abidjan's US Embassy.

On the night before my 60th birthday I was sitting rather morosely in my small studio flat, finishing the 23rd edition in the 3rd series of House of Cards on Netflix when I got an email from my daughters and wife to open a video file entitled Happy Birthday Dad.wmv. After some predictable complications in getting started I managed to play the file. Over the next hour I was quite overcome. The girls had written, edited, filmed and produced a narrative of old and recent photos, films and videos of bits of my life from 1957 (yes, and baby photos as well as shots of my christening party in Pembroke College, Oxford) to the present day, interspersed with comments from actual friends and relatives young and old, near and far (most are far at the moment) who had taken the trouble and time to record on video their own messages to me quite recently and, incredibly, to send these messages back to my Ella to be incorporated in the whole. The comments were too nice for it all to have been a coincidence (which was my first thought), and too many for them to have been paid for (which was my next).

I hardly knew what to say even to myself, the whole concept, the idea, the message, the intent, the emotion, the sheer creativity and imagination. I had this feeling of being in the centre of a big warm collection of friends of family, all together in a semicircle around me, rather as if Eamonn Andrews himself had jumped into my small flat from behind the curtain and told me that This Was My Life with a cheeky grin and a gold embossed photograph album, with Barbara Windsor in the wings claiming to have known me intimately (wink, wink). It was the best present I have ever received in my life, beating even the red pedal car I was given when I was three. It all came together in a late night hour of wonder and amazement from me about at how friendly, cooperative and encouraging people can be when put under pressure by one of my daughters. I am lucky to have such friends, from old and wrinkled to new and smooth, and Alli and I are lucky to have such thoughtful and imaginative daughters. It all makes for a wonderful life.

The next morning it was back to business – I was to go to London, and I flew the first leg of the flight on the evening of my birthday to Accra, Ghana, which was also celebrating its 60<sup>th</sup> birthday as a nation that very day. It was a stopover for the overnight flight to London for an investment event in London Bridge. A dour affair, it comprised many of the foreign investment community, dozens of journalists, cameras and hundreds of break-out sessions (why is it that break-out sessions feel so incarcerating?) and the almost obligatory bomb warning and “lock-down” in the late afternoon, and plenty of focused and earnest talk about African development. We had arrived on the red-eye from Accra and were whisked to a swanky hotel in Pall Mall before our rooms were even ready. As a result of the enforced wait, and after casually flooding the bijou white towelled keep fit suite by taking a shower with the door open, I took the opportunity of some breathless running around St James's, where I bought some of my favourite Taylor's Shaving Cream and a cream linen jacket from a tailor in Jermyn Street.



Alli & Lionel, London, March 2017

I also took time to see my brother Clive, who was staying on the Marylebone Road, and managed to have a reviving fraternal chat with him also mostly about African development as he recovered from medical treatment, before having to leg it back to the hotel in time for the stately procession to London Bridge. The last part of the evening was spent in celebratory drinks with Ella and her partner Sam in the bar of the previously mentioned swanky hotel. This had been carefully arranged some days before. What had not been arranged was that Alli also showed up as a surprise. We had time to celebrate my birthday and even for Alli to spend the night with me at the Pall Mall Sofitel, smuggled in to the official delegation like an illicit romance. We hardly saw each other the next morning as I had to fly back to Abidjan but Alli told me the breakfast was delicious and that she felt guilty eating it in my name before heading back to Basel.

Another visit was to Dakar in Senegal, where we stayed for two nights in a dark, grand and damp seaside hotel named after King Fahd. The mission on the day in between was to assist in a complicated ceremony featuring the combined educational establishment of Senegal and several helpings of official but unsynchronised and spontaneous protocol. As had been the case in Khartoum, the Presidential motorcade was hilarious – but here in Dakar the lead outrider had obviously previously worked in the circus as some kind of trapeze artist, for his hand signals to force the oncoming traffic to swerve and halt as our Importances swept through were a sight to behold. Holding, twirling and pirouetting with both his arms aloft while riding a mean police Harley at around 80km/hr through the city centre was a virtuoso performance. It was a cross between a drunken airport ground staff signaller and a ballerina going through the dying swan's throes in the arms of Nureyev. I held my breath partly in awe of his flagrant display of monomania but also because I thought that there was an extremely realistic chance of a gruesome death caused by a head on crash with someone else doing the same thing for, perhaps, the motorcade of the President of the Republic, or just a drunk driver following the centre line very carefully. On the event itself, there were many speeches and even more missed cues, and we finally made it back to Abidjan after a series of events more related to the Keystone Cops than to the A team.

The foreign visits took up time and effort, and made office work very difficult, but I managed to keep up. I had to because the last week of the month featured my first ever days of holiday leave to usher Alli around the not very many places of interest I had visited while in Abidjan.



Just off the plane to Abidjan, Alli with Lionel, March 2017

She arrived and emerged quite perky from the flight, and we drove to a small villa that I had rented in midtown Abidjan. My studio flat, I considered, was not appropriate due to its extremely small size. We visited in quick order the best and second best restaurants in Abidjan, a roiling food market featuring every vegetable, pulse, meat, and fish known to the African landscape, where Alli chose to be photographed with an African snail (about six times the size of its European counterpart), and an artisan market largely for tourists. On the first night we went for old fashioned fish and chips in the old English style (pre HSE), wrapped in newsprint and beautifully cooked with the right batter (but the wrong vinegar, for which we marked it down, despite the fact that neither of us had had traditional English fish and chips for years). We also spent a couple of hours at La Grande Bassam (Abidjan's Southend) and marched around the sand with about five thousand Africans in full throttle in and out of the waves, before decamping to a beach bar and sinking a few beers while meeting a friend of mine from the Bank. On the Monday we went to Assinie, playground of the rich and famous of the Ivory Coast, and we probably saw several of them. I suffered somewhat from food poisoning during our stay but the very conducive prospect of a beach house with a view both of a calm lagoon and the aquamarine sea that patiently laps the West African shores was an acceptable curative. Returning to the villa in Abidjan we found the water cut off by the municipality and thus had a micro-view into the next global challenge, that of water availability. We hardly suffered (wi-fi being Alli's principal concern) but the discomfiture of having no water at all for more than 24 hours with little other recourse was a third world reminder to the first world that it takes far too much for granted. On our way into town that morning, unshowered and unshaved (that's me of course) it was significant and instructive (for reasons of gender politics) to see large groups of patient women with large jerry cans at stand pipes. I didn't know if there would have been that much patience in England, Switzerland or France.

Alli and I also spent a very agreeable day lounging around, having lunch and swimming in the pool and sea at the *Coconut Grove* on the Ile Boulay, a large island off Abidjan. For the final two days we returned to Grande Bassam, which on a Friday was emptier and calmer than on our first visit, and while it filled up

through the weekend, we were in a perfect location for the last days of Alli's brief holiday, designed to give her a glimpse of the delicious possibilities (and some of the grim realities) of life in the Cote d'Ivoire. We managed to get out of the hotel to have a fascinating tour of the National Costume Museum and a last evening as the only visitors to the best-rated restaurant in Bassam before an overnight tropical downpour washed the beach clean. There was time before the airport for an fly-blown authentic African meal at a maquis in the Angre district, an unwinding afternoon back at the villa, and early dinner more locally in the ever comfortable Jardyland.

I finished the month preparing for more foreign visits, to Morocco and to Washington in April, and to Ahmedabad in India in May. Working life continues to be complex, exhilarating and often irritating, but I am certainly finding my feet and starting to understand how the land lies. Until the next attempted coup, that is..

## **INTO THE IVORY**

### **Cote d'Ivoire Diaries**

#### **3. April – June 2017**

The beginning of the month of April, after Alli's week-long visit, seemed bleak and bereft. I retook (as the French say) a monastic life, as the work for the Bank accounted little for personal space or time, with demands on both that did not respect evenings, holidays or weekends. I read accounts from home about how the spring had exploded in the Alsace and looked at photographs of our garden and of the cherry, apple and other blossoms across the region (followed apparently a couple of weeks later by some blossom-killer snow), when in Abidjan the only indication of a new beginning was from the jagged clouds, the grumbling sky, and the occasional downpour to herald the rainy season. And all at over 30 degrees' centigrade. My feelings of isolation were partly mitigated but in other ways reinforced by a new travel schedule, caused by the President's direction that I should attend all his business trips, as a kind of ambulant court versifier. This took me away often and for long periods to other countries, and twice in this quarter to Washington DC.

I also attended the wealthy humanitarian benefactor Mo Ibrahim's annual conference on governance and leadership in Africa, located this year in Marrakesh, one of the few African cities that I had already visited before I took this job. The main routes into the city are preternaturally clean and tidy, with clipped hedges, swept sidewalks and colourful flowers planted along the new main roads. The airport itself was spanking new. I got nowhere near the interesting parts such as the main market centre Jemaa el-Fnaa. A taxi took me instead to the foliage-rich Palmeraie Palace Hotel complex, a millionaire's paradise studded by shiny SUVs and hissing lawns, sparkling fountains, a well-appointed golf course, and swimming pools galore.

The conference featured Kofi Annan, several African Presidents, celebrity journalists, and other well-bronzed international benefactors in dark glasses, including the ubiquitous Bono, who led a few hundred shiny grey suits in a faltering rendition of Happy Birthday to Kofi Annan on the

second day. Bono also called everyone “dude” which was cute and old-time. There were some excellent speeches, one from Paul Polman, the Chief Executive of Unilever, known for his energetically positive approach to corporate responsibility, and another from the Emir of Kano. The hotel was far more show than substance, as the cluttered rooms were stuffed with useless tasselled cushions and other gewgaws. Mosquitos were a continual problem, and room service vanished altogether for three entire days and nights. The main lobby at floor level was tiring even to look at, complicated by its own intricate Islamic architecture. Service from the concierge was at best patchy, and the plethora of VIPs processing around the Palmeraie Palace was a *cauchemar protocolaire* - anxious trails of delegations and retainers intertwining and snagging with each other as they snaked around the carpeted labyrinths.

I used the time afterwards to get ahead of my work, finishing several texts early in order to make more time and space for what I knew would be frantic travels to come. The weekend before my first US visit I joined some friends at Assouinde, staying in a rough and ready hotel on the beach, strewn with old painted wooden fishing longboats next to a ghostly and abandoned Club Med complex, then came back on Easter Sunday, getting dropped off at the Notre-Dame de l’Afrique in Bietry, where I wandered for a while around an open air religious space which incorporated a cathedral, a meeting house, schools, accommodation, a couple of chapels, stations of the cross, a pilgrimage centre and a grotto. There was ethereal singing and a real sense of religious faith in the air.

The next day I had to fly to Washington and I had everything ready and packed until I looked for my passport, less than four hours from the departure time. I could not find it or the wallet in which I knew it to be. There followed two hours of barely controlled panic as I looked everywhere again several times, turning jackets and trousers inside out, upending drawers of man-stuff, and stripping the bed, while I tried to think logically about where the wallet could be. When my driver arrived I took us back to the Cathedral, which was on the way to the airport, to see if it had been handed in, only to be told that there was no lost property office as handing in wallets and other items wasn’t a popular habit. Despairing, I decided to search the car in which I had been given a lift before being dropped at the Cathedral. The car belonged to a friend who told me that it had been cleaned out earlier in the day. As we went to the parking space, I thought of all the unpleasant ramifications of having to miss the flight, given that several colleagues had fallen ill and I had already been given extra responsibilities on the mission. After searching methodically in quiet desperation in all the obvious places of the car I started feeling with my hands around the nether regions on the dark side of the seat and suddenly touched soft leather. The wallet’s snug contents reassuringly still contained the passport, various ID cards, the bank and credit cards and cash. It had been wedged unobtrusively in a crevice between the bottom of the seat’s sliding machinery and the inside wall of the car. I grasped it with a warm relief that is still tangible even as I write this now. I could proceed to the airport with confidence. And I would not have to admit to being a blithering idiot to my work colleagues. Hurrah on both counts! Later that evening and comfortably airborne I sipped a ludicrously contented gin and tonic and briefly reflected as from afar on the cataclysmic social, administrative and emotional dislocation of what might have been. Maybe wandering around the Notre Dame de l’Afrique the previous day, enjoying the devotional music, and offering a small but heartfelt material appreciation of the experience

might have helped to create this personal miracle. However it came about, in such things I continue to be the most fortunate person I know.

The week in Washington was my first experience of the “Spring meetings” of the World Bank. The centre of Washington was clogged with large black tank-like chauffeur-driven cars. I was staying at the over-elaborate Intercontinental Willard, which I disliked for its facades, ruches, chandeliers, poor service and unnecessarily limited spaces. The place is summed up by its absurd “High Tea” served with hot water and tea bags on reproduction garden furniture thrust along the mirrored length of a carpeted corridor, a meaningless ritual transcribed to the indifferent plucking of a harp. My booking had not been registered so I was bundled into a room far from the delegation, which made synchronised movement difficult. A complaint about the service brought no satisfaction, only the promise of a discount, which wasn’t my point. I spent the week taking notes, editing texts and giving advice, and while this did not present a difficulty, it was far from exciting. I did meet Gordon Brown (ex-UK Prime Minister) and I did discover a truly excellent bistro opposite the back end of the hotel, the Hamilton, which I visited thrice with great pleasure, as I ate very little during the bilaterals, conferences, replenishments and assemblies. I also managed to slip out to buy a much-needed new suit, a jacket and trousers, as well as a year’s supply of pain-killers.

I have not yet mastered the African handshake. I was brought up on one type of handshake, a manly one with a firm grip and a brisk shake, and with confident but not intrusive eye-contact. At some time in the 1970s this started to include the thumb-guided “handstand” grip, but only (in my little world) with West Indians and at rock concerts. I had just about kept up with this and with some of its subsequent variations but now in Africa there are all sorts of handshakes with multiple stages of greeting, even up to quintuple-stack handshakes, starting with the handstand thumb grip, morphing into a knuckle clench, followed by a palm-touch then a fist-to-fist and finally a High 5. These have to be rehearsed exhaustively to look spontaneous, but I have not seen a hand go awry yet (except mine). Any combination is possible with anyone at any time, but I always miss and end up ham-fisted, with either my fist not connecting, my knuckle not clenching, my palm not touching, or my five not getting high. How does everyone else know what to do as someone advances with outstretched hand? I am without compass. It is destroying my confidence and turning me into a social wallflower. And don’t get me started on the male hug or the forehead kiss..

In Abidjan, new supermarkets and speciality food shops are springing up all around the place. Many are French companies. One can live well here at a price by buying food from the hypermarkets, which are for rich people: Auchan, Top Budget, Casino, or Leader Price. There are also mid-range Lebanese, Tunisian and Moroccan supermarkets. Then there are the markets and the stalls in the streets for the majority of the population. But pickings of fresh vegetables are thinner than in Europe, except for carrots, potatoes and cabbage. Also, greens and salads are not popular because of their short shelf life, quality problems and high prices. Fresh fruit is cheap, plentiful and available everywhere from supermarkets to stalls on the side of the road, comprising, in order of abundance, bananas, mangos, pawpaws, apples, (African) oranges, along with coconuts, passion fruit, breadfruit and big fat avocados that seem to go off in 24 hours once bought. The average street diet remains essentially meat (mostly chicken) or



fish and either rice or cassava, a root vegetable high in carbohydrates, known as attiéke. This means that the nutritional quality of the average diet is weighted towards carbohydrates and fruit. Some vegetables and fruit are distinct from their counterparts in Europe and the USA because they appear to be unimproved, older varieties that Europe has either eschewed or never chosen, so they can appear very unusual to the European eye. For example, an African aubergine is a very small vegetable, the size of plug of garlic, and is not aubergine in colour. African oranges are much drier and contain much more pith than their richer and juicier counterparts, also available but very expensive. Local red and green peppers are miniatures of their jowelly European counterparts. The local bananas are smaller and sweeter and go brown faster. A key common factor is that almost none of the food is processed, unless it is bought in one of the supermarkets, where almost everything is imported, largely from France. African food production very obviously shows its lack of technical improvement, resulting in poorer varieties of the fruit and vegetables whose quality we take for granted in Europe. Much of the fruit and vegetables tend to rot quicker, are less tasty, and with harder skins, bigger pips or stones, and smaller in size. There are many exceptions to this but it's an unfortunate effect of the lack of scientific research, quality development, technology and industrial processing in African agricultural production.

While the diet is poor, on the bright side few locals seem to smoke, or even drink, whether regularly or excessively. I'm told that drinking is a problem in some parts of Abidjan but I've never seen much evidence of it, and cigarette-smoking is extremely rare. I probably see someone with a cigarette in hand about once a month. Cigarettes are sometimes given as small change. Even the ever visible-street jetsam has a striking absence of cigarette ends. As a highly processed consumer item, with profit taken in each link of the delivery chain from (often) African fields via everywhere else in the world to African lungs, cigarettes are just too expensive for the majority of the population.

More people, Christian and Muslim, seem to be much more devoted in their religious practices than in Europe. Most Muslims pray five times a day and reject tobacco and alcohol. Radio Albayen broadcasts 24 hours a day and keeps Muslims well informed about all aspects of the faith, as well as offering prayer times by radio, when the faithful cannot make it to a mosque. Ramadan began at the end of May and lasted to the end of June, making a palpable impact on bars, restaurants and even at the Bank, where gatherings to bid adieu to leaving staff were shorn of the normal alcoholic refreshments. My driver suddenly became unavoidably absent at crucial times due to the need for special prayers at special times. One night towards the end of June was the vertiginous Night of Destiny, when prayers offered to Allah were worth 7000 times the impact of prayers offered on any other night of the year. The Ramadan is a most impressive act of abstinence, with no food or drink, even water, between around 4am to around 6.30pm for at least 30 days, and dietary restrictions even apply in the remaining part of the day as well, even when it's dark, the 4am meal is supposed to be just a handful of dates. This beats Lent into a cocked hat. I am very impressed by the strong devotion of Africans, whether Moslems or Christians, but I cannot help thinking that Christians appear to enjoy themselves in groups more, given the fewer restrictions and the more communal and collective nature of the observance of their faith. And the dancing, and the music.

I returned to flat hunting, as while I was comfortable in my tiny studio, it was doing me no good to spend so much time in such a restricted space. I was spending whole weekends in a single room whose walls seemed to press in upon me. Shortly before the visit to India I found a place with the help of the guardian of the block of flats in which I live. The apartment was in the next door building on the first floor, reasonably priced, large and airy, with a balcony, and secure. I needed to find some basic furniture for it to be able to stretch my legs, although I am loath to buy any really good furniture while I am here. However, by a strange twist, second hand prices for furniture in Abidjan are very high, as I found out when I started looking for some. If the furniture is still more or less serviceable then it attracts prices of more than half their price as new, which is unimaginable in Europe or the United States, where ordinary furniture loses its value quickly when it is no longer needed unless it becomes some sort of modern antique or is genuinely unique, for example because it is hand made. Here people use furniture, hand-made or manufactured, quite specifically until it falls apart. There is evidence of this everywhere. Every object has a value if it can be utilised in any way. This is a genuinely poor and needy society. It is therefore not a throw-away society. I did commission a carpenter to make a big bookshelf, a desk, a cupboard and some simple tables for the kitchen, and these were duly done over a period of a few weeks. They came well made, in a local hard wood which the carpenter said was “flambereau”, etched with an (unasked for) intricate design, based on the coat of arms of the King of Bassam. I have my first (I think) piece of genuinely hand-made furniture. Unfortunately one piece has since cracked and the craftsman blamed the air conditioning for this. I now have a more sober view of the craftsman’s technical attributes

The rainy season started in May and continues. This means that it rains a lot, almost every day for a while and sometimes all day, and while the temperature is a little lower than usual, it’s nevertheless between 25 and 30 degrees most of the time. Constant rain through the day featured when I decided to go to Grand Bassam to get away from work for a while and spend the weekend with a novel (I have been re-reading *One Hundred Years of Solitude*) next to a pool and / or the beach. The rain meant that I spent most of it under cover although it did not diminish the restorative impact of watching the waves crash repeatedly on the beach, while eating grilled fresh fish, drinking wine, and trying to distinguish the line of the horizon between the grey sea and grey sky. I also had a local dog for company for my sea side walks.



Lionel on the beach at Bassam, Cote d'Ivoire

However the rainy season had several disadvantages. My new flat, already a little musty, turned very damp indeed, nearly ruining my suits while I was away in India. I had missed this point when signing for the flat after being assured that a damp spot in the corner was nothing to worry about. Maybe it won't be damp outside the rainy season but the realisation also that the flat agents were being less than efficient about the *etat de lieu* sent me into a spree of self-righteous letter writing demanding that the agency check the wiring, repaint the interior, fix the locks, bolts and door jambs, and mitigate the rising damp. There is some movement in all three tasks and just about enough for me to buy some curtains and carpets and try to make the place a little more welcoming to come back to after a difficult day at work, even if, sadly, it is not also bustling with the company and conversation of wife, children, and friends.

On the last weekend of May, disaffected soldiers again started a mutiny at several barracks around the country, including the biggest one, situated about one kilometre from where I live. The mutiny was organised and promoted by those who had supported and acted as the private army of the current President in the country's very violent civil war of six years ago. After his victory (he had, after all, won the election previous to the civil war) he had promised to reward them for their efforts and asked them meanwhile to join the regular army, where they form about one third of the total soldiery. Their grumbles have been getting louder as the years passed, and January's small semi-mutiny was a first sign that they wanted the promise to be made good. Apparently some money to be paid in tranches and more promises were the result, but when the time came for the second tranche to be paid, none was forthcoming. Hence the

new mutiny, bigger than the last, and affecting several barracks around the country. In central Abidjan, I heard gunfire and machine gunfire all day, with some of the shots sounding uncomfortably close. There are rumours of a third and more determined coup over further unmet demands, and while these are just rumours, the locals are very jittery, and the media now report every gunshot heard in the city as if it's the beginning of another coup d'état.

I joined many of my Bank colleagues to fly to Ahmedabad in Gujarat, India, for the Bank's Annual General Meeting. Described by everyone to me beforehand as a time of huge stress for staff but especially for those in the President's Cabinet, I had an inkling of what to expect. I have never been to, let alone helped to organise, anything like it. Spread over six days, it was a cross between an old fashioned African wedding and a 1970s Labour Party Conference. Afterwards, the Presidential delegation travelled directly from Ahmedabad to Rome, and then to Catania in Sicily for the G7 Heads of State and Government meeting in Taormina, where I, almost predictably, lost my baggage on the flight from Rome. After that, we had a lightning stop in Paris to visit the new French President at the Elysee Palace. In Berlin the G20 special conference on partnership with Africa was held in the eccentric location of the dome of a giant industrial gasometer, which was subject to global warming. The collected speeches of a parade of African and European leaders uncoiled slowly along the day in front of hundreds of sweating dignitaries and flunkies, many in full military dress. I was told by a local that the location choice was "sehr Berlin". But the city and its people never fail to impress, and I managed to get out before the Conference for an hour to stroll around Potsdamer Platz and have my first white asparagus of the season. Due to tight deadlines, our delegation had to leave Berlin by the force majeure of a late night Ryanair flight to London Stansted. The experience was memorable. The flight crew rolled up in a van 90 minutes late – at midnight. We in business class had all been waiting for an hour in an old bus parked forlornly in a far corner of Schönefeld airport opposite a dark and silent plane which looked as if it was from the knackers' yard. We had been wondering if we were waiting for the wrong plane since several Ryanair planes packed with passengers had cheerfully zoomed into the night while we were there. Suddenly, a crew turned up in a minivan to unlock the cabin door of the plane, climb in, switch on the lights and start the engine. We listened, incredulous, to the plane rasp, cough and start after some initial cranky whinnying. Twenty minutes later we were on a full plane, airborne, and staggering to Stansted. We touched down (with the cabin door open) in deepest Essex at around 2am, from where we took taxis to Heathrow to spend three hours in a bleak hotel before boarding the 7am flight to Washington. And we nearly didn't make it. Bleary-eyed, we got to the desk after the gate closed. This resulted in an undignified plea for special treatment followed by a mad dash to a gate at the other end of the airport.

In my second Washington visit this year, I avoided the Willard Intercontinental in favour of the Hilton Garden, which was less ridiculous but equally error-strewn and fading. The award ceremony (a Lifetime Achievement Award to the President for his work on nutrition) was a warm and friendly affair, followed by media interviews, a business speech, and meetings in the US Treasury. It was also followed a fortnight later by the announcement that the President was the chosen Laureate this year for the World Food Prize. Following a last evening of bilateral meetings in the hotel, I had the glorious sensation of being free for the next few days, during which I was going to stay with a long-held but rarely-seen American friend. I spent the rest of

Thursday wandering around art galleries, indulging myself with the luxury of plenteous time and high culture. The next day I headed south west by hired car through America's history, past towns with names redolent of the savage civil war that tore the country apart for four years in the 1860s: Manassas, Culpeper, Stonewall, Charlottesville, Fredericksburg. I arrived just after mid-day in Esmont to meet Sarah and her sister Felicity who happened to be visiting – a providential bonus as I had not seen her for over 30 years. We had lunch together then I spent the afternoon in Scottsville walking around the levy by the James River, browsing in the shops as well as sampling the local brewery, before getting a haircut at a local barbershop during a cloudburst. Sarah had made dinner when I got back and we sat on the back porch afterwards, chatting as if we had last met each other only a few months ago. I also played with the indefatigable dog, Talulah, whom I exhausted by throwing the tennis ball repeatedly into the undergrowth of the woods.



Sarah Sargent, Thomas Jefferson, Lionel, Monticello, June 2017

The next day we visited Monticello, the ancestral home of Thomas Jefferson. It was a hot day and there were many visitors but it was a fascinating, well organised place, with its inevitable Visitor Centre and café. The guides and the commentaries now state more openly the stories and experiences of hundreds of slaves who worked there and made it what it became. We also walked around the campus of the University of Virginia, founded by Jefferson in Charlottesville, whose most distinguished alumni are Edgar Allan Poe and Woodrow Wilson. Sarah's partner John arrived home later that day and we all had dinner together and moaned about Trump.

I left Esmont the next morning and visited Charlottesville again, keen to buy a good history of the Civil War, and to wander around the town centre in which the Paramount Theatre still had its smaller back entrance, originally intended for blacks only, and kept for historical record. I then drove to a B&B near Fredericksburg and on the next day walked around the small city, which has strong associations with George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. I learnt about the horrific battle of Fredericksburg with the help of a video in the Visitor Centre and a guide leaflet while I walked around the battleground site. The impeccable lawns and gardens in the south of the town near the Sunken Road and Marye's Heights made the dreadful scenes of carnage and slaughter on some of the bloodiest days of the whole civil war difficult to imagine without the accompanying black and white photos. Feeling sombre, I then drove west across the Blue Ridge Mountains to explore the ridge the next day. I took the Skyline trail through the Shenandoah National Park, stopping several times on each side of the Blue Ridge to take in the view as well as hiking to the Stony Man Summit.

I came back to Abidjan on the Night of Destiny, Laylat al-Qadr, one of the most sacred nights of the Muslim year, marking the night that the Prophet Muhammad received the first revelations of the Quran. Prayer on this night is apparently especially powerful, and "better than a thousand months". It comes near the end of Ramadan at the feast of *Eid Al-Fitr*, the breaking of the fast, which took place at the final weekend of the month. Because the timing of the end of Ramadan is based on the Imams' sighting of the moon, it can be difficult to predict when the festival will happen in any given country. In Abidjan, following the moon sighting on the Saturday night, Sunday became *Eid Al-Fitr* and Monday was a compensatory public holiday. This way of announcing public holidays is not, of course, very conducive to holiday planning, and most people stay at home with their families. The major work, as usual, is for the women who spontaneously have to prepare all the food for such feasts. I suppose the men just keep out of the kitchen and go down the Mosque. I'm just looking forward to the end of the rainy season.

## **INTO THE IVORY**

### **Cote d'Ivoire Diaries**

#### **4. July – September 2017**

The weather at the beginning of July seemed calmer than in the frenetic, cloud-bursting month of June. But I had little idea that I had already started into a four month period of lower temperatures, sudden tempestuous storms, weekends with clouds, light rain and zero ideas about what to do to get out of the flat. In fact I had no idea what was going to happen from day to day with the weather, and not for the first time here I realized that there was no consensus about the annual timing of the rainy season, although plants seem determined to grow lustily at all times of the year. I never discovered any consistent response to my question about when the rains started or finished. I learned from someone else that in a typical year there were in fact two rainy seasons, one shorter mini-season after the other major one separated only by a couple of hot and dry weeks. I must have missed that completely, and it might explain why the rainy season is so unpredictable in its extent and duration. I never noticed a

particularly dry period although I suppose I did notice a short summery interregnum between two fairly intense and dense periods of heavy storms and torrential rain. In fact, the quarter ended almost exactly as it had begun, in a 48 hour thunderous storm with torrential and remorseless downpours that made hundreds of people temporarily homeless in the shanty towns around the city.

However, the extreme temperatures of early in the year were much reduced. I spent large amounts of time in my apartment with the windows open and the air conditioning off, partially satisfying my addiction to detective films and ancient history on Netflix and streamed BBC and ITV on the computer. I was determined to survive, nonetheless, without cable television, the price of which I found far too expensive for the frequency with which I would use it, although sometimes I yearned to just curl up and stupidly watch Match of the Day (although I concede that I can do without Gary Lineker).



Still life in Lionel's apartment, August 2017

I took a trip to Rwanda where I spent some days in Kigali and was impressed by how clean and orderly much of the city seemed to be, and my Ivorian friend on security detail (an ex-soldier in the Cote d'Ivoire army) drew my attention to the fact that 100% of Rwandan motorcyclists were wearing helmets – a unique mark of genuine personal discipline in Africa. The city was founded in 1907 by a psychiatrist from Bayreuth, Richard Kandt, as part of German East Africa. It's now Rwanda's capital where, 23 years ago, between half a million and a million people were massacred in less than 100 days while everyone outside the country just wrung their hands in horror and passed resolutions against it. There can have been but few moments in world history quite like that, and all Rwanda's history, understandably, is divided between life before and after the genocide. I attended a youth conference where hundreds of enthusiastic young people waved balloons and made pledges about starting businesses. At the conference, young Africans from Rwanda and many other nations wanted to shake my hand and thank me for coming to the conference. No one asked which tribe I came from. On the evening of the conference I got talking with some of them. They all wanted the political and economic union of Africa. I feel very proud now to be helping in my minuscule way with the establishment of an African Union, which every African wants except the dictators who have lost their moral compasses and their

apologists, supporters and financiers, and too many Europeans and Americans, who clearly want Africa just to stay poor, divided and starving forever.

I am fascinated by the small differences between the Cote d'Ivoire and France. These include the scarcity of sink plugs, difficult to find even in new apartments or in shiny supermarkets specialising in bathroom DIY. I am mystified that I cannot find plugs to fit my sinks, and get blank looks from those who should, but don't, sell them. I try to explain that it is a requirement for shaving (in the old fashioned way, with a sink of hot water) and for washing the dishes properly. There are even good environmental reasons to have them. I did manage to buy two of them for a fortune from someone who didn't even know what they were, but neither of them fit the holes for which they were intended.

Then there's the issue of small change. The smallest denominations are in some ways the most valuable, since the basic street economy deals in hundreds of West African francs whereas the expatriate community deals in tens of thousands. If I want to take a taxi, buy something from a street stall or in the market, or offer a tip, the amount to pay requires the smallest denomination notes and coins available and they are as scarce as hen's teeth. When I see a 500 FCFA note, it's like finding a first edition Charizard and I feel the need to hang onto it. It is a note so thoroughly used that it often looks like a used tea bag. But nobody at street level who drives a taxi, offers a cheap meal, or sells from a stall, ever has any small change. Even banks don't offer it. I therefore have to stock up, because otherwise I must wave away change that should be forthcoming but isn't. The shadowy money changers who haunt the entrances to Banks are not offering foreign currency in exchange but small denomination notes in exchange for large denomination ones, and a 5% - 10% charge is applied.

On the last weekend I tried to be inspired culturally and went to the Fondation Charles Donwahi, where the exhibition of Ivoirian sculptor Jems Koko Bi, "Terre d'Origine", was in its last couple of days. Koko Bi only works on the trunks of dead trees, carving them with a chain saw into rough and immense sculptures which seem foreboding but grimly impressive, set like huge menhirs in a large walled garden at the rear of the gallery. I think his talent would be quickly recognized in Europe, but Mohamed sagely told me that Ivoirians are not that interested in modern artists. We went on to visit the more popular National Museum of Ivory Coast Civilisations, free to enter during the Francophone Games which are taking place in the Cote d'Ivoire. From it, I shall probably only remember a comprehensive guided tour of an Environmental Consciousness Tent by a wonderfully confident and determined local 10 year old girl in the grounds of the museum holding forth about ecological balance.

I visited the Royaume Congo, a famous nightclub close to where I first lived in Abidjan. After warming my hands by a fire of cartons, pallets and other street rubbish outside on the corner, I listened to some energetic Congolese Rumba with some Ghanaian friends. I enjoyed the music although the place was a bit small for any actual movement. We were also told after an hour that we had been in an area reserved for others and that we had to move, presumably for more important people. This annoyed my Ghanaian friends and we left in high dudgeon for a final drink in the bar opposite, where the music wasn't live but Osibisa videos on the TV were a good alternative, especially as we had earlier been talking about the prowess of Ghanaian musicians Teddy Osei and Sol Amarfio.





Pink Cross, Presqu'île du Christ

The following weekend I went with a friend to Jacquelineville, where I visited an unusual beach and accommodation area called the Presqu'île du Christ. Established by a pastor, the self-styled manoir is used for weddings, ceremonies and getaways. It's a picturesque haven of calm, surrounded almost entirely by the sleepy lagoon, attached to the mainland only by a narrow peninsula path. It looks just right for a completely relaxing weekend sojourn with a book or a stack of blank paper. For some reason the attendant village has several large wooden crosses at road junctions and clearings. Nothing particularly unusual in that, except that all are carefully painted in a very pretty, almost luminous bright pink gloss. I have not yet dared to ask why this should be.

I went with the President's delegation for an official visit to neighboring Ghana. A highlight was the meeting with the new President whose full moniker is President Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo. Nana has a cut-glass BBC English accent and speaks with rolling Churchillian cadence. He had twice before been a close runner-up for the Ghanaian Presidency, and helped to preserve the peace of the country by his immediate acceptance of defeat on both occasions. We also visited a chocolate factory (actually a cocoa processing factory, but bars of chocolate were handed out) at Tema Harbour in Accra. The harbour, which now handles 80% of all Ghana's external trade, featured in one of my very first picture books as a child. It was a sepia photo of the port under construction, placed next to a photo of the Kariba Dam in Kenya, both built by the British in the 1950s.

In Abidjan, the pace of work slowed through August as staff thinned to take advantage of the holiday period. At weekends I took to walking for hours around the immediate locale of Danga, finding that the lower seasonal temperature (generally under 30 degrees) made this just about possible. It is endlessly fascinating to walk through Abidjan's local neighborhoods, especially the hilly south part of Cocody, a mixture of old poverty, new money, half-built houses, chickens, and potholes. Walking randomly, even with maps, is complicated as the higgledy-piggledy town planning means that there are frequent and surprising culs de sac, even within a stone's throw of the big clogged highways to which access is not possible. If it was, the mini-neighbourhoods caused by the culs de sac might have more income from passing trade. As it is, suicidal vendors stand in the middle of the three line highways improbably offering anything from monthly historical journals to umbrellas, windscreen wipers, plug spanners and

banana chips. But the city's inhabitants, although plagued by poverty and want, are always friendly, and enjoy spontaneous conversation with passers-by such as me, often telling the history of this or that building that I have stopped to inspect. Since first arriving here, I have never experienced one second of concern for my personal safety. People are either completely uninterested, benignly curious, or bubbly-welcoming as I trudge past to my next bagbottom.

After an eventful summer holiday in France and Croatia with All and some friends, I returned rather gloomily to the Cote d'Ivoire on a three-stage sixteen-hour journey. While I had been away, Mohamed, who helps me with local advice and assistance, some driving and other tasks, had been masterminding the welcome back of his aunt from Mecca, where she had gone on the Hajj. This is the pinnacle of the Muslim experience: essentially to visit Mecca and walk around the Ka'ba, as well as to tour and view the nearby holy places of Islam. The month-long expenses paid tour is offered by the government to some 300 family heads each year, and is considered a great honour for the family and the community where they live. In this case it is *Abobo*, a vast shanty suburb, the poorest and most ignored part of Abidjan, with one brutal swathe of an arterial road running through it but practically no stable infrastructure. There are thousands of cribbed and confined houses of wood, corrugated metal, plasterboard, plastic and bamboo. There is no running water except the occasional standpipe; most of the lighting is by kerosene and power is by battery or generator.

In Mohamed's close family set-up, his mother and all her older sisters are all referred to by their children as "mother". So while his mother/aunt was away, Mohamed and his brothers, sisters and cousins had done a complete make-over of her dwelling, as a welcome home surprise. The place was totally refitted and redecorated. Her reaction when she got back home would have looked good on TV, and the family celebration on the following Saturday, to which relatives, religious leaders, and friends (including me) were invited, was a memorable occasion. From Mohamed's small house poured out about thirty women of different ages, shapes and sizes, all dressed in bright and richly-coloured Bazin dresses, bustles and veils of the Sunni Tidjani type, (in which the face is fully exposed). Then the men, dressed mostly in stock Muslim attire of the male Bazin, shuffled along behind. The family sat under a canopy waiting for the procession that could already be heard arriving down one of the pathways through the houses. There were around ten imams, including Mohamed's own spiritual adviser, together with a long train of friends and more distant relatives who had joined them as they approached. They were chanting some verses from the Koran and also about welcoming Mohamed's aunt from the Hajj, and who is now therefore known as Hajja and wears a white lace veil. They arrived and sat in a circle on a mat opposite her under the canopy and started to have sing-song conversations with each other in a rhythmic narrative that referred to the family, the occasion in general and the people to be named, blessed and honoured, including the local Mayor, the President and Prime Minister. I was also one of these, referred to as Lionel, the blessed benefactor, which seemed somewhat exaggerated. I had followed the advice of offering what I could afford as a contribution to the imams' sterling performance and had also earlier given Hajja 20 US dollars as a contribution to the journey. The imams continued the chant-conversation, fingering their chapelets (rosaries), rolling and unrolling absent-mindedly the notes that had been passed to them, and praising people in the name of Allah. After about half an hour, with much laughing and good nature, they suddenly stopped, thrust their chapelets deep into their pockets, stood up, saluted each other, and said a quick grace for lunch, whereupon we all tucked into bowls of steaming rice, plantain fofous and spiced fried chicken. The procession then led away along the same path as it had come. Such celebrations are part of an imam's job and constitute part of their service to the local

community. The majority of imams are not paid for their office, except by voluntary contributions from celebrants and others that they collect in the course of their duties. During this celebration, I had seen several people getting up to make small contributions, often in single coins. According to Islam, the actual money received is of no consequence. All contributions, including the widow's mite, generate the blessings in equal proportion.

In conversation afterwards with the aunt, I learned that she had actually walked around the Ka'ba no less than five times, having many things to ask on behalf of her family while evoking some of the names of Allah. She was also asking pardon for the sins of her husband (long deceased), relatives, and of course for herself. She gave me two little bottles of healing holy water, known as zamzam, with the apparently miraculous property of satisfying both thirst and hunger, from the sacred zamzam well of Mecca, specifically for me and for Alli - perfume for the soul.

According to Arab historians, the Zamzam Well near Mecca, except for a few periods when it became dry or was buried under sand, has been in use for around 4000 years. The well marks the site of a spring that, miraculously, after being scraped by the Angel Gabriel, had issued forth from a barren and desolate wadi where Ismail, the infant son of the Prophet Ibrahim and his wife Hajar, was dying of thirst.

One of the miracles of Zamzam water is its ability to satisfy both thirst and hunger. Some say that the water of Zamzam has healing effects. Many Muslims believe that the water is blessed and accordingly it is considered as one of the best gifts to be offered.



Lionel and local dance troupe, Burkina Faso

September ended with breathless visits to Niger and Burkina Faso, where I was again mostly detained in hotel rooms writing or editing speeches, and where the weather was blisteringly hot. Niger in particular is one of the hottest countries in the world and so is unsurprisingly trying to build its capacity of solar power generation with generators located in the hottest regions. In Burkina Faso during a gala dinner in front of assorted Burkinabe notables, politicians and dignitaries, I was pulled on stage by the singer in a local dance band and invited to get down and dance with the shapely troupe. How could I refuse? My galumphing performance is already finding its place in the cultural and geopolitical situation of Burkinabe and the wider Sahel family of countries, and I am assured a warm welcome when I next come.

## **INTO THE IVORY**

### **Cote d'Ivoire Diaries**

**October 2017 – January 2018**

There is very little to do in the evenings or weekends in Abidjan. This is a completely subjective opinion, changeable according to personal situation or circumstance. I accept that highly resourceful people should be able to make their own social activities in any given environment. I know some of them and they never fail to tire me out. I am not a natural socializer and I tend to wait for opportunities rather than to make them myself. Much depends on the availability of social occasions and places to meet people in the city, and on this unfair basis there is very little to do here compared to other cities (London, Paris, Basel) when duty time switches from on to off.

I have forsworn television as being a waste of time and money. The news is partial and selective, comprising shots of suited politicians good-naturedly greeting each other in meetings or at conferences, speeches and ugly music videos. Access to this level of coverage costs around 20 pounds a month. I would have to pay around 70 pounds a month for the cultural and linguistic variations offered by the BBC, ITV, and other European channels which would presumably include watching my football team get beaten every week in real time and perhaps more professional music videos. I use a VPN which is erratic (and doesn't get BBC) but does help me watch or listen online to some of the preferred TV fare. I am still mostly on a diet of Endeavour, Morse and Lewis, but I have also been watching The Handmaid's Tale, Top of the Lake, Blue Murder, House of Cards and Ken Burns on the American Civil War. As the year ended the BBC and ITV implemented new blocking technology that made it impossible to use the VPN for British TV access generally so I must start again. I use Youtube for music when I am in the flat and regularly listen to fine recordings both classical and modern of great musicians and orchestras.

The weekday evenings are largely pre-ordained. Most of the Abidjani working population like to go straight home after work, and so they crowd into cars rather than bars and inch their way back to Abidjani suburbs in the evenings. The centre of the city features virtually no bars or restaurants open in the evenings and drains quickly of people after 7pm or so, and it can even be difficult to find a taxi if one leaves work later than that. Also, in common with many Islamic countries, a woman's social role is quite severely limited, and it is very rare to see local women out on their own or even in groups (except when preparing meals or queuing to get water). I always return alone after work and spend time either finishing something I brought back from work, or if I am too tired, do little else than read a book, cook a meal, watch a programme on the computer screen, or read last week's FT Weekend. This is starting to change me into an obsessive in some habits. I nearly always sit in the same place in my lounge. I go through a specific procedure of putting on the kettle for tea, changing into light clothes, hanging up my day clothes, turning on the air conditioning when necessary, starting to prepare a meal, pouring a drink, having a shower, although not necessarily always in that same order. About once a week I go out to dinner, either on my own when I take a book or when accompanied by Mohamed, or more rarely with a friend from work. The rest of the time I cook my own meals. In my fridge and larder there are nearly always vegetables, fruit, legumes, beans, and lentils. I am mostly vegan at home (apart from eggs and fish), pescetarian when out and about. I spend a lot of time in the kitchen as it needs to be kept clean,

since any food left exposed, for example on a bread board for a day, invariably gathers tiny ants, just as my stores of rice, spices and oats (when not sealed) can attract weevils from nowhere, apparently. I have become, doubtless to the delight of some, an enthusiastic cleaner and washer-up. Rubbish bags with food refuse have to be taken out daily, and I am careful about wiping the tiled surfaces in the kitchen every evening and morning. Insecticide is my friend. Most recently it has rained far more than is normal for the season, and a constantly humid environment creates its own problems with mould. I have to check my suits regularly as well as items I am not used to checking so carefully: pillows, leather belts, shoes, even notepads and paperback books.

Making and eating a meal is time consuming, certainly the way that I do it, since I often get distracted during the more creative phases and forget many of the stages of the cooking or mix them up with my other evening habits. For example, I generally pour myself a glass of wine once I have cooked my dinner, but sometimes see that I have just moments before made a cup of tea. Or I get diverted by an email and ultimately find that something I have put in the oven to heat for ten minutes has burnt to a cinder or the water has boiled dry. This is worryingly common, and while I am trying hard not to forget items put on the cooker, my natural forgetfulness often means that I am left with the uncertain warning system of the smell of burning before I remember that something is wrong. Listening to music is also dangerous as I get caught up by it and forget that there is water boiling or that I have some emails to send by a certain time. Bit by bit I add to my long awaited work on the Prisoner of the Landskron, but progress on this is glacially slow, and distraction is a sworn enemy of this particular enterprise.

For the weekends I make more of an effort. Taking a walk with no particular objective is difficult, as people just don't go strolling around for the sake of it. Pavements, where they exist, are used for other purposes such as parking cars. Going out in the evening entails thinking about where to go and how to get back. The traffic jams make driving around the city difficult and irritating. Local African restaurants and bars are fine but they all serve very similar fare, and they are not particularly sociable if you go in alone. Expatriate places are often too expensive, even by direct comparison to France, but lacking French quality. Again it is difficult to go alone. But there are some good places to go – they are just very few and far between. Fish and chips actually wrapped in UK newsprint can be had on Friday evenings at the luminously liminal but poorly named Jardyland in the Vallon district. A cheerful local maquis in Cocody St Jean (Du Val) and another in Marcory (Chez Ambroise) are recent discoveries but the bill of fare in both is largely the same, if with better cooking, improved and cheerful service, and the inclusion of a few European alternatives to the standard African menu (such as omelette). Most dishes are meat and there are few options for vegetarians.

At weekends and holidays I am too often at a loss, and while I have the luxury of a car and a driver if needed, interesting and reasonably close places to visit are few and far between. I have recently discovered a new and interesting venue, the Botanical Gardens at Bingerville, where I go for a walk when I get invited by a friend to help walk an energetic dog.



Bingerville Botanical Gardens

The local version of the Hash House Harriers is disappointingly serious and even a trifle unwelcoming, although I have tried a few times, the courses selected are long, complicated and often problematic. The drinks afterwards are, controversially, mostly sodas or just water, and there is very little sense of cooperation on the run, still less that a party has started on completion of the course, which in my experience has been badly marked by the Hares. There also appear to be no Hashers with responsibility to make sure everyone knows where they are going, or indeed where they are. This is a health and safety issue as I am filled with a vague sense of unease about getting lost while running in a West African forest fifty kilometers outside the city. Nevertheless it attracts nearly 100-200 people each Saturday afternoon and is starting to become a little more anglophone so I have recently started to go again, although the total confusion that reigns over the location and timings of these events continues to irritate me. Most recently I trusted to the map given on the web site and managed to start at the end point, marked on the map as A, and made for the start point 14 kilometers away, indicated as B. Long before I got anywhere near the real start point, I had tired of jogging on my own on the side of a busy motorway in 30 degrees, but just then a police car stopped beside me and I was asked what I was doing. I explained the predicament, and got one of those stares from the two policeman indicating that they thought I was raving mad. They had seen me from the control tower, and must have thought I was some sort of drugged vagrant in my plastered shirt, floppy hat, running shorts and tennis shoes. They offered to give me a lift, so I gave up on the Hash, and arrived home in the back of an Ivorian police car. The guardians of the building, with whom I often share light banter as I come and go, stared at me in total

amazement, and my popularity with them has risen to new levels. For them I am indeed a man of influence, high standing and good connections.

Once a month, I try to attend a Book discussion meeting, which is better and more stimulating company even if it is less healthy physically. I nearly always read and join the discussion of the monthly book, and by this means I have managed to read a lot of modern African fiction, which has been interesting and impressive. My turn to introduce a book will soon come, and I have chosen the African classic "Things Fall Apart" by Chinua Achebe. I have not yet made my pilgrimage to Yammasoukro, the nation's official capital, which boasts a grotesque-sounding larger copy of Rome's St Peter's, built, reportedly, with development aid money by the devout first President of the country, but doubtless I shall get there one day (it is 4 hours' drive away). The stock response of many Abidjanis and expatriates to the question of what to do at the weekends is to go to the beach resorts of Bassam, Assinie and Jacqueville, where the sea crashes perpetually on a straight sandy beach and beach houses built a hundred years ago gradually disintegrate. The ruination and abandonment of the historic seaside buildings gives a forlorn air to the sea breezes, but such visits nevertheless tend to lift my spirits. There is something very inspiring about the sea on the West African coast, and especially in Cote d'Ivoire, where the coast is long, and the beach sandy and often straight for hundreds of kilometers. There are signs of the country's French and even British colonial history in these places, but the sea has been eating away at the coast for many decades, and most of the oldest houses have already been overwhelmed. Bassam somehow reminds me of Southend, with a more worn out air, and a mix of culture and decay. Unlike Southend, it has a king, who still has considerable power, although his rule is of the traditional type. He is a patron of celebrations and feasts, a recipient of large tributes and small taxes, an owner of ruined property and a patriarch with wives and children galore. The Abissa ceremony each November is a colourful popular celebration which attracts visitors from all over the country, and is a reminder that the Carnival itself was originally an African invention.

Occasionally I go out with friends, and I find myself all too often sitting in hotel bars hearing well-heeled complaints in French or English about the simply ghastly problems of living in Abidjan, which are larger scale model conversations of the eternal expatriate grouse that the country is not like one's own. Despite my own litany I am not a fan of this type of conversation. I am resigned to living alone, enjoying what I can, enduring what I cannot, and essentially just getting on with it. The environment is difficult but not impossible, and expatriate complaints are difficult to take seriously. I plead guilty, however, to some very low moments, when I try to think how my predicament differs from being in prison (admittedly the open variety) and whether I can actually survive any more days in a row without significant and friendly human contact. There is no team or cooperative culture at work (I am reminded by the joke that there is no "I" in the word team, but if you look very closely you can detect a "me". The lack of company is by far the single biggest factor conditioning my life outside work. Although I have had plenty of experience of living alone in the past, it's still an enormous change given the completely different social situation. I am still wondering how if at all I am being changed by this experience.

I have had a lot of aggravation in connection with the formalities of buying and "importing" the Jeep I acquired in September as an investment against paying too much in the way of taxi fares. I rather wish I hadn't now, as it would appear to have unleashed a torrent of officialdom on the top of my head, the last thing I need given the environment in which I have to do my job. I asked Mohamed to deal with the formalities but that may not have been the wisest choice. In getting him to identify and procure the necessary documents from the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), who made

shocking administrative errors on behalf of their employee the vendor, via the Ministry of Transport, who seem both incompetent and obstructive, progress slowed considerably in their respective efforts to cooperate, as they find it beneath them to deal with him directly even as he acts on my behalf. This imbroglio became a circular paper chase between the UNHCR and the African Development Bank. The officials of neither institution saw the problem from a customer's point of view. They each lost concentration and patience because of the will-sapping need for signed original documents in which the signatures need to be witnessed and duly signed, and copies which need to be notarized, stamped, witnessed again, stamped again, taken to the palatial Ministry of Transport (who don't care either) for authentication, and so on to time-warped infinity. Top legal counsel has encouraged me to resort to using illegal number plates. It must be how France and other European countries' bureaucracy would have been about eighty years ago, but it has taken so far nearly six months to register the sale of a car bought in half an hour from an employee of the UNHCR, thanks to which the car has itself become a displaced and illegally alien refugee.

I went to an excellent film directed by a Burkinabe, Appolline Traore, called "Frontieres". It's the story of four women crossing national African borders to conduct their trade as market vendors. The women meet in buses as they travel through Senegal, Mali, Burkina Faso, Benin and Nigeria towards their destination of Lagos where they each have different things to buy, sell, attend or achieve. During their long trip south west travelling on several buses, they pass through the stunning landscapes of the Sahel and along the glorious West African coast. Nevertheless, the trip is a constant battle. They undergo mechanical breakdowns in stifling heat in the middle of nowhere, face highway robbers and become involved in shouting matches, fights, and other contretemps between passengers. But their worst experiences are at the border crossings, where they suffer from official corruption, theft or loss of documents or possessions, sexual abuse, and random violence. Despite their proud desire to stay apart and be independent, the women find themselves forced together by the adverse circumstances and despite themselves start to take care of each other, after one of the women is raped by a policeman. This discovery of a sense of solidarity is the central theme of the film, and it suggests that the quality of African lives (especially women's lives) can be much improved if they find reasons and opportunities to support each other in their problems and predicaments. The film is also a very strong restatement of the principle of removing border controls on the free movement of people (which embarrassingly remains controversial in my own country). I found the film rough and raw, but its slow revelation of the theme of solidarity through empathy was very impressive. It was the first time I had been to the cinema in Abidjan, and I watched the film with Mohamed and two of his brothers, who were in a cinema for the first time in their lives.





The Dembele Family, November 2017

I am invited occasionally to the Dembele family for family events and celebrations, the most recent being the baptism of Mohamed's twin cousins, children of his brother Abu. The wider family group comprises about twenty people and another ten children and babies. The tradition is that as baptisms are expensive (for instance, including the purchase and ritual slaughter of a goat), they are put off until the parents have enough money to afford them, which can be many years. Mohamed's own family of four children are not yet baptized and will not be until he saves enough money to pay for them.

If there was no traffic in the mornings, I would have a 5 minute drive to work, as I live just across the lagoon from the Plateau district in Cocody Danga. But the traffic makes that impossible, and my journey to work is generally between 15 and 20 minutes. I notice that the other vehicles on the road, whether they are taxis, buses, coaches or private cars, are always full to the limit, the buses often with people hanging off the side, the cars often with people sitting on each other's laps, and the taxis always alarmingly full, given their state of repair and the black smoke pumping out from the exhausts of many. Petrol is very expensive here, the same price as in France, and so there are precious few spare seats in the vehicles on the roads into central Abidjan in the mornings and from in the evenings. I understand that the average taxi driver needs to make at least 50,000 FCFA per day (about \$70) in order to make a decent living, as he would normally pay at least 20,000 (\$28) per day for the hire of the car and about the same per day for petrol, and car insurance at about \$4 a day leaving no more than the equivalent of about \$10 per day to live. In recognition of this, whenever I take a taxi I always give a large tip. Almost no taxi driver is personally insured and accidents in which they are badly hurt have the immediate effect of destroying their livelihood and turning them into beggars. There are many of these on the larger arterial roads leading to and from the centre, and it is a heartbreaking sight. They are in utterly wretched circumstances. In the mornings they and other beggars buy small items in bulk from shops in order to sell individually to motorists stuck in traffic jams, desperately trying to break even by the end of a day spent dodging the traffic and being abused or ignored by the drivers. Most try to sell small toys, newspapers or salty snacks, but some seem to think they will be able to sell copies of the country's

unreadable constitution, history books or original paintings featuring beautiful African women with large eyes. Some beggars simply show you their afflictions - bad amputations, horrible burns or leprosy scars.

In Islamic teaching, there is an interesting precision about the habit of giving money to beggars, a requirement of all Muslims, especially on holy Fridays. Zakat is a time at the end of the year (coinciding with Christmas), when Muslims are supposed to give away 2.5% of their earnings to the poor. It is striking how similar in some respects are the details of the different religions of Christianity and Islam when it comes to charity. Both the Bible and the Koran feature stories showing that the quantity of giving is far less important to God than the donation proportionate to the capacity to pay – that it is the act of giving that is significant. The imams, defenders of the faith, also advise that it is better to give a lot of money to one recipient than to give a lot of money divided into small amounts to many recipients. The thinking is that more can be done by a person with a larger amount, for example to give it to others, especially their own families, so that the bounty is, theoretically, shared more widely through the filter of just one recipient rather than through many, for whom the much smaller amount will always remain pocket money, and will be quickly spent.

My exposure to Islamic activities was partly balanced when I was invited to attend the Catholic Cathedral of St Therese in the Markory district of Abidjan to celebrate the 60th birthday of a colleague at work. She had organized a full day of celebration and being religious had decided to book a Mass, a practice quite common throughout the Catholic Church. Her colleagues arrived during an enormous thunderstorm which cleared just after the Mass started. There was a lot of singing, dancing and waving hands in the air as the Sung Mass continued, bearing a close similarity to such Masses all over the world. There were bells but no smells, and afterwards a big fete champetre was laid out in the garden near the Cathedral and we all sat down to lunch. There was a lot more dancing meanwhile and while I left early the party evidently continued long afterwards, aided and abetted by beer and wine that had not been intended for the Communion.

The rainy season should have finished in late September or early October, but there are still regular and torrential storms during which rain hammers down from a bulging grey sky for hours at a time, quickly turning unmade roads into mudslides and making streams of roadsides and storm drains, which promptly overflow and back up. Such storms are very serious for the poorest of the city who live in the slum areas. A big thunderstorm often destroys many of their dwellings, rendering them instantly homeless. Almost nothing is done by the public authorities in these cases, and people are not insured. They are at the mercy of the weather, which this year has been unusually bad. On the National Day of Peace, a public holiday for the whole country, there were repeated thunderstorms and cloudbursts all day from about 10.00 am onwards. I had left early with my beach bag, towel, book and dark glasses, to sit by a swimming pool in a local sports centre and was looking forward to relaxing with my reading in the sun, having a leisurely lunch and perhaps going on an invigorating walk by the lagoon, sink a few sundowners in the evening before getting back to my apartment, full of the joys and relaxation of a day off spent on myself for a change. The weather had earlier been promising, the sky blue with a few clouds here and there. But it somehow changed in little less than 20 minutes. Even as I arrived at the club, the optimistically entitled Sol Beni, light and feathery threads of drizzle were blowing across an empty terrace and pool. Optimistically I dragged out a sun-lounger and hauled a mattress on it, assuming the rain would give up after a while and wander off somewhere else across the lagoon as I prepared for a first morning swim. It didn't. It just got worse, and 10 minutes later I had beaten a retreat to a nearby gazebo where I bought a coffee and opened a book that I wasn't counting on reading until much later.

Tragically, the gym was closed. The rain was torrential, falling hard and heavy on the lawn for over three hours as I stared at it, the book, and my lunch in the club house. The lawn had turned into a lake by the time I finished lunch and decided to call it a day. My sunny dreams were killed by the rain, which did not stop until very late in the evening. In short the day was a wash-out and I went to sleep worrying about the hundreds of people at least who must surely have lost their shelters and homes and would have to sleep outside. Of course there would be no news about it in the local media the next day. I had to ask Mohamed what had happened in his neighborhood, which had been flooded but in fact there had been no other permanent damage near his house although it had flooded. Substantial damage had been caused in a different but equally poverty-stricken part of the district, and whole streets had fallen down a small ravine in which a vast pile of rubbish had been collecting for years. This had mingled with backwash from the cesspit due to the lack of street drainage.

The stark contrasts in Abidjan being what they are, I am bound to mention a highly entertaining walk I had around Abidjan's golf course a few days earlier with a friend who has a dog (a Husky type). The walk had to be prematurely cut short after a vibrant altercation we had with someone claiming to "own" the course, an old, short, fat, choleric Frenchman who walks his poodle regularly on the course. Earlier, two of the ground staff in a motorized caddie had told us that we should not be walking a dog on the course on special days while a competition was going on, which apparently was the case. We disagreed as we had kept to the public paths and the dog was on a lead but after some discussion decided to take their advice and were making our way back after crossing a bridge for a parallel route that looped straight back to the car park. While on our way back, the florid Bonaparte, accompanied by one of the ground staff we had seen earlier, was gunning his motorized caddie in our direction and made straight for me, showing no sign of slowing down. I moved aside but he turned the wheel and deliberately targeted me until he made a dramatic last minute emergency stop a few inches short of my shins. I couldn't help laughing at the absurdity of it all, as the man could hardly speak for rage, for he was shouting and spluttering even before he clambered with difficulty out of the little car, his temples pulsating alarmingly. I will draw a partial veil over his colourful language, but he threatened us with imprisonment for our daring to take the dog on the paths in contravention of the rules of the club. We soberly reminded him of our public rights on the public areas, but he became more and more abusive, threatening us and the dog with dire consequences. He seemed to be goading himself on to a stroke or a heart attack. It was a shame, but I thought it might not help to remind him of his charming poodle and of his evident lack of a pooper-scooper for its natural needs on the course when I had last witnessed it. I had become worried that he would blow up into small pieces in front of us. He told us to foutez le camp, that we were branleurs and that he would phone his good friends in the police and the government security services to have us thrown into an Abidjani jail if we ever thought to mettre nos gueules within his golf club again. He also spoke darkly of the severe danger that the dog was in. I said I was more worried about him, at which point he swore again trooperly, then putputted off in the caddy, realizing, I suspect, that he may have said too much and that his apoplectic performance had not been effective. Even his sidekick was having difficulty keeping a straight face as he then stalled on a slight hill.



Wedding of John and Bene, January 2018

I have managed to attend my first local wedding, a happy event involving an English friend of mine who met and fell in love with a local girl and had proposed to her last summer. It was a hot Saturday under a marquee and generous tree-cover, with around 120 guests on some 12 tables decorated with flowers and fabrics in the colours of the ceremony in the rural village of Gbagba in the district of Bingerville. For the ceremony of the presentation of the dowry, the bride's family and the groom's adviser, of whom I was one, were packed into a small stuffy room with little air. The requirement was a box packed with whisky, rum, gin, champagne and fine wine. Also, a dozen lengths of the fabrics used to make traditional clothes (the ubiquitous plagnes), a fat wallet of folding money and a few other ceremonial bits and pieces, all prescribed in a neatly typed list of items. It seemed a good bargain for the family's permission to marry the beautiful Benedicte after a couple of years of what I am sure they would both call courting. The dowry discussion was the single traditional aspect of the nuptials on the day, and had more than a hint of pastiche about it (all traditions develop into pastiche then parody before ending in complete farce). John, facing his first marriage in his 50s, told me that this discussion was where it could all break down: was the whisky a good enough brand? Were the plagnes good enough quality? Was there enough money in the wallet? One of the witnesses had, in a crowd-pleasing aside, enquired loudly after the expected (but unlisted) goat; another chancer had hidden one length of fabric inside another to make the dowry look insufficient; another stormed out of the meeting dramatically shouting over his shoulder to a totally confused John to "just leave the stuff here, elope with the girl and be done with it". Once everything was double-checked, the father brought the play to an end with a wide-ranging prayer partly in French and partly in Baoule, part-Christian and part-animist, calling on the spirits of the forest and the Holy Spirit and a host of saints, sinners, seers and celebrities. While intoning, he was carefully dribbling good rum onto the linoleum, and offering tots from the bottle to the witnesses.

After the ceremonial the pleasure could begin. John had won the girl for a mess of pottage and received the blessing of her extended family (one of whom still looked doubtful, to say the least – although her expression brightened considerably over the next few hours). We all trooped out from the dark stuffy

room into the dappled sunlight and light breeze for the reception party, with John blinking rapidly like a liberated pit pony in relief and refreshment. The excited bride and worried groom underwent a total of four complete changes of dress over the next few fun-packed hours, variously themed on classical Cote d'Ivoire, Neptune and the Sea, the spirit of the forest and, impenetrably, Ancient Rome. With each change they had to sway their way around all the tables to a Eurodisco beat, John gaining in confidence with each unexplained change of apparel. Music blared all day from over-egged amplifiers. Various DJs commanded performances, toasts, public humiliations and other rituals. There was dancing, drinking and delight. The nuptials will be completed with a sober Protestant wedding somewhere in Hampshire in a few weeks when Benedicte may in turn also wonder what on earth is going on in the stained-glass psalmody and dusty sunbeam profundity of the Low Church Southern Counties.

Back in harness for the New Year I joined the Presidential delegation in a short visit to Liberia, where I met and shook hands with George Weah, the new President who took over in a uniquely peaceful democratic transition from the previous President, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. George Weah is already well known as the greatest footballer of his generation, the 1990s, winning the Ballon d'Or, the Onze d'Or, three times the African Player of the Year, and FIFA World Player of the Year. The previous evening we had all, including the impressive Mrs Sirleaf, danced away the early hours with the Liberian Armed Forces Jazz band at a drinks celebration following her presentation to the Bank President of Liberia's highest civil honour.

After a pitstop in Abidjan, I was off to Nigeria in the same week, on my first visit there since 1981, and before that, since 1960 when my family moved back from Nigeria. We were in glitzy Abuja, the official capital, where a mix-up at the customs on entry led to the extraordinary result that after paying \$175 for a visa to enter the country, I was somehow and rather suspiciously allowed entry but did not get the visa stamp or a receipt for the money. Our delegation had long departed before my passport had been scrutinised. In a bewildering series of quick-handed transactions which involved me giving some money to another Englishman who did obtain his visa but had paid too much, the Nigerian customs officials then reimbursed me with \$200, gave me back my passport claiming that the visa and the receipt for my payment were there, and welcomed me into Nigeria with a smart salute. Upon later examination at the hotel I found I had neither of the promised items but I had clearly been let into Nigeria. In other words I ended up a few dollars wealthier, making me surely the first person in recorded history to leave a Nigerian customs post with more money than when approaching it. My fears on exiting the country visa-less two days later were needless; I was waved past with a smile. Clearly, I should go more often.

I have completed a full year and two months in Abidjan. Can I last another year? I have no idea. I am sure the year to come will turn out to be utterly different but probably in parts just as exciting, and just as monotonous and lonely as this past has been. We will see. My plans include more exercise, fewer carbohydrates, more society and less alcohol. I shall probably move to a livelier neighborhood and I shall take more weekend breaks by the sea. I may try to get back to Europe a little more often as it's unlikely to come to me, and I look forward to a London party in April, a family holiday in Korea and Bangladesh in June, and a quick visit to South Africa in November. I will of course continue my monthly Ahem newsletters (I cannot stop myself doing this), although updates on the particular perspective of this short memoir Into the Ivory will become irregular; I shall extend it when I can and when it seems appropriate. My health insurance is likely to be used more often, to complement my advancing years. For now, this is all my crystal ball will offer. I know that I am lucky to have a job and lucky to be having this experience in West Africa, which my family left after ten years in 1960 with me a mere toddler while

my brother, Clive, a source of lifetime advice and counsel to me, was 12. Clive's advice to me just before 2017 ended was, as usual, wise, predictable and positive. I should dedicate myself to the task of making good connections and building a social and professional network. Clive's approach is reassuringly founded on constructive optimism. It is also true for life in general.



Clive and Lionel, Istanbul, June 2016

In short, make the most of it!

**Lionel Stanbrook**  
**Abidjan, February 2018**