

READER TRIP REPORT: PODOR, SENEGAL

Words and pictures by Sheelah Turner.

# Shiny, happy people





When a man took down his fence so that we could drive into his back yard to camp, we realized what an unusual and special place Podor was.

But our visit to Podor, Senegal, had really started a few days earlier in St Louis. We had taken a few days to rest after driving through Mauritania and crossing the border, and used the time to chat to other travellers in the campsite about places worth visiting in Senegal. Since some travellers – and our trusty little guide book – mentioned Podor, we thought it would be worth a visit.

Podor is probably the northernmost town in Senegal. It lies some 200 kilometres east of St Louis, on the banks of the Senegal River, and across the water from Mauritania. The people of Podor are very proud of their up-and-coming tourist town; they value tourists and welcome them with open arms.

We meandered our way to the two hotels on the tiny quay – both renovated warehouses of the French colonial era. Our arrival in the afternoon coincided perfectly with the Senegalese equivalent of “siesta time” – all was quiet. Finally, we roused the hotel managers, but unfortunately neither was happy for us to park and flip open our rooftop tent.

A young chap had been hanging around during this time, watching and listening. Our search for a campsite had not fallen on deaf ears – he told us that there was indeed camping in Podor! We were sceptical, but followed him as he directed us to La Terrasse, a restaurant which offered simple rooms and camping.

It didn't look promising when we arrived – no real camping to speak of, and the same siesta activities seemed to prevail. But then Kaz appeared, all smiles. Of course, he was keen for us to take a room – and proudly showed us his basic offering. However, we were keen to sleep in our own bed after

a long day on the road. It took some explaining – in French, naturally – that we had our own “maison” (house) with the “chambre” (bedroom) on the roof, before he understood: we needed to move our vehicle into his backyard. ‘No problem,’ he declared when we pointed out that there was no gate. He merely took down a section of his fence so that we could negotiate our way between the tree and the standing tap into

the back of the property, and park. At this stage, the whole extended family, and everyone else passing by, was waiting to see Viking Explorer flip open the tent to reveal our “chambre;” after which I proudly opened the tailgate to show where my “cuisine” (kitchen) was. Much head shaking, open mouths and laughter followed!

Kaz was an interesting man. He spoke a little English – and was keen to practise – so the conversation was carried on in broken English, punctuated by French. One of his sisters lives in Germany and is a professor of sociology. His other sister lives next door, and works at a hotel south of Dakar. He commented particularly on the European style of marriage being more of a partnership than the Senegalese style – I believe an element of polygamy is still practised in the latter. He certainly seemed more

worldly than either of us had really expected an inhabitant of a tiny, tucked-away African town to be. Stereotypes are just too lazy, sometimes.

The day was drawing to a close, but there was still enough time for us to explore. We wanted to see the old fort, which had been restored in some way, and so went out for a stroll. Suddenly, in this late afternoon, the village came to life. Previously the doors had been shut, with only a few people around; now doors were flung open, students from the college and school emerged, a soccer game began, and business resumed. ▶



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The fort itself was closed, but with helpful phone numbers written above the door if anyone wanted to go in. We stopped a smartly dressed, very tall man – Djembé – to ask about the building opposite the fort, which looked as if it was a newly renovated hotel, but was also closed. We also chatted for a bit about Podor, and about him: he told us he was a musician. He had no music planned for the evening, but mentioned that he had played at La Terrasse for a New Year festivity and knew Kaz very well. He became our self-appointed tour guide: he kindly decided to escort us back to where we were camping, and chatted to us the whole way, telling us all about the town. He even complimented Viking Explorer on his French. Many smiles and much laughter ensued as Djembe delivered us back to Kaz.

We decided to eat dinner at Kaz's restaurant, which was rumoured to be very good, and we were not disappointed. We were treated to the traditional "yassa poisson" dish – a spicy meal of rice and deep-fried marinated fish with an onion sauce.

After a long day and a tasty meal, we collapsed into bed – for one of the worst night's sleep we'd had in a long time! Apart from the mosquitoes which seemed to have found a back door into the tent and tormented us all night, the household and village just seemed to become more active as the night progressed. It seemed that a steady stream of goats, dogs, cats and various villagers wandered casually into and out of the property throughout the night, and the occasional big truck rumbled past. Eventually, and to our dismay, dawn broke and any chance of sleep evaporated.

Of course, when we started our journey back towards St Louis, we took the scenic route along the Ile a Morphil. This is an island that runs for about 100km and lies between the main Senegal River and an adjacent channel. From what we could see, it was primarily agricultural in nature, with many people working the lands. We waved as we passed by, and received large grins and energetic waves in return.

Eventually, the road ended. Literally. It stopped, just past the last village. We spotted a small track, and progressed slowly down that. Not convinced that we were heading in the right direction, we thought it best to check, and stopped next to a field. A couple of guys wandered over to help us. As it turned out, it was not quite the right direction. We were advised to return to the village (a few kilometres back) and take the ferry across the river. We made our way through the village down to the water's edge... and saw the little flat-bed ferry – attached to a rope spanning the river – making its way to the other shore. Priceless. Only in Africa.

Now we had to wait for the ferry to return. And the ferry needed a full load to return. So we waited patiently, and watched the activities of the river's edge. There were

little pirogues which were in competition with the ferry, and carrying small groups of people to and fro. It was washday in the village – women with their young children were standing in the water washing their clothing, before draping the trees with freshly laundered articles. One toddler took one look at me and broke into a shriek – this white face was as frightening as any ghost or spirit. Everyone else – me included – laughed. Three youngsters were loading their donkey cart with 50 kg sacks of rice. Seeing that they were struggling, Viking Explorer went over to lend a hand. They were initially surprised and then grateful. 'Tres gentile,' they said. 'Very kind.'

In dribs and drabs the ferry filled up. Soon it was on its way back. The ferry emptied as was possible only for such transport – the guys on board started jumping from ▶



#### ABOUT THE WRITERS

Oyvind Helgerud (Norwegian, aka Viking Explorer) and Sheelah Turner (South African, aka African GirlChild) embarked on their overland adventure from Nordkapp (Norway) to Cape Agulhas (South Africa) in October 2012, down the west coast of Africa. Unfortunately, political instability in the region contributed to their decision to ship their vehicle – a Toyota Landcruiser – from Dakar, Senegal to Cape Town. They plan to continue their adventure in southern and eastern Africa. You can follow their exploits at [www.kapp2cape-blog.net](http://www.kapp2cape-blog.net)

the edge of the ferry to the bank as soon as it was almost leap-able. Clearly a competition. The ladies – in their long skirts – preserved both their dignity and beautiful attire by waiting until the ferry was a little closer. However, with everyone pushing to the front of the ferry, it quickly became “nose-heavy,” and so was beached before actually reaching the river bank. It was surprisingly difficult for the ferryman to persuade the passengers to move to the back of the ferry so that he could steer the ferry closer to the bank. A little organisation ensued, and soon the ferry was correctly moored and the remaining passengers – those with shorter legs, longer skirts or just more patience – headed into the village.

The ferryman was all grins when he saw us, but not in a ‘here are tourists: I can make a quick buck from them’ sort of way. He was proud of his ferry. He was very proud of the service he was offering. Like those in Podor, he was so glad to see tourists in the area. We did end up negotiating the ferry price, as everything in Senegal seems to involve negotiating,

but this time we were trying to up the price: he would only accept a very minimal amount to take us across. He said a ‘thank-you’ was enough.

Our second attempt at boarding the ferry was successful – I thought the car would end up in the water the first time – and we were soon gently traversing the river. The locals on both sides of the river were amused – loading and unloading the vehicle was clearly the best entertainment they’d had in a while!

I was quickly swamped by the village ladies on the opposite bank. It was all good-natured and friendly – they were intrigued by the vehicle, intrigued by me. But I soon realised that the idyllic travel in Podor and Ile a Morphil

had ended. The conversation soon ended in requests for money, for the clothes off my body (despite the gorgeous Senegalese dresses they were wearing), and for the tiny stud earrings from my ears (despite the elaborate earrings they all wore).

The dream travel experience of the last 2 days was over. But the memories remain. ■



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