**Liz’s 15 Minute Guide to Dakar**

**Meeting people:**  Whenever you interact with people in Senegal, you should greet them before anything else. Greetings follow a pretty standard format. It is fine just to say “Asalaam maleekum”, but if you can follow it with the next two sets of responses in the traditional script, you will get a lot of credit for it.

**Basic Wolof**

**Greeting script:**

**1:** Asalaam maleekum *Peace to you.*

**2:** Maleekum salaam. *And to you peace.*

**1:** Nanga def? *How are you doing?*

**2:** Mangi fi rekk. *I am fine (lit- I am here only)*

**1:** Ana waa ker ga? *How is your family (lit- where is your family?)*

**2:** Nunga fa. *They are fine (lit- they are there)*

**Other useful phrases:**

Waaw *Yes (pr “wow”)*

Deedeet *No (pr “day-date”)*

Ba beneen *Next time. (pr “ba ben-NEN”. This phrase is very useful. It is the polite way to refuse beggars or vendors, and can also be used to say goodbye.)*

Jerejef *Thank you*

Neex naa *It is delicious (pr “Nairc nah”. This can be used to describe food, or more broadly. People will like it if you say, “Senegal, neex naa.”*

Am naa jekkar/jabar *I have a husband/wife*

Amul solo *No problem.*

Toubab *White person*

Amuma xaalis *I don’t have money (pr. Amuma hall-ees)*

**Beggars in Dakar**

Begging is prolific in the streets of Dakar. The most common beggars are young boys, called talibé, who are studying the Koran. Traditionally, talibé begged for food as part of their religious education, and paid for their shelter and education by working in the fields of their imam. Today, the talibé beg mostly for money, most of which is taken by the imam. Few of the talibé receive adequate food, shelter, or education in return for the money. It is estimated that 300,000 talibé live in Dakar, mostly sent by their families in rural areas because their families could not afford to raise them.

There are also people who beg because they have truly debilitating conditions. Daily charitable giving is a requirement in Senegalese Islam, and there is an almost symbiotic relationship between givers and those with real need in Dakar. If you are going to give, I recommend giving to those with disabilities, or giving food to the talibé, to avoid having your charity go towards a more extravagant life for an imam.

Senegalese Food

Food to Try:

1. Ceebu Jen (*pr- chebu jen*): Practically Senegal’s national dish, this is served with a rice base similar to jollof rice, and topped with fish and vegetables that have been stewed with the rice.
2. Yassa ginaar/Yassa poulet : Yassa, a flavorful onion sauce, can be paired with different proteins, but the most common and most highly recommended is grilled chicken.
3. Chokary/Fondé: The Senegalese dessert is yogurt with sweet millet porridge. It is good but very rich. In Wolof, “Jaay fondé” literally means to sell fondé; figuratively it means to have a large ass (and this is a good thing there.)
4. Baguettes: They are real, Burkina-style, crisp on the outside and soft on the inside.
5. Maffe: A little more of an acquired taste, this is a groundnut sauce with red meat, usually served with millet. It can often be fishy.
6. Moroccan couscous: You can get nice couscous (and other pasta) in Senegal, often served with brochettes or meat sauce.

Don’t try:

1. Soupe Kandja: This is a slimy concoction of fish and okra.
2. Fish balls: Unless you like whole fish mashed up, including bones and eyeballs, rolled into a ball and fried…

Beer: The most common brands are Gazelle and Flag. As I am not a beer drinker, I have no input on which is better.

**Social divisions**

Social divisions in Senegal are unlikely to have much impact on a short-term visit to Dakar, but they are interesting. The major social divisions are based on ethnicity/language, religion, and caste.

**Ethnicity:** The major ethnic group in Dakar is Wolof; they make up about 40% of the Senegalese population. The second largest group is the Fula (Fulani, Peul). As in much of West Africa, other ethnicities often harbor negative stereotypes towards the Fula.

**Religion:** Five percent of the Senegalese population is Christian; most of this is in Dakar. The rest of the population is Muslim; the two religions get along fine and both hold traditional beliefs as well. Islam in Senegal is unique in that brotherhoods play a very important part in religious life. The main brotherhoods are the Qadirya (the oldest, originated in Baghdad), the Tijaniyah (highest membership, originated in Fez), and the Mourides (the wealthiest, originated in Senegal). The Mouride brotherhood was founded by Amadou Bamba, whose picture can be seen everywhere—you can identify it by his all-white robe and head wrap that covers half his face. The great mosque in Touba is a Mouride mosque, and Bamba is buried there.

**Baye Fall:** The Baye Fall are an order in the Mouride brotherhood. They hold that hard work can take the place of other religious requirements. They wear blue and have long dreadlocks. Ironically, the Baye Fall are better known for smoking pot and hitting on toubab girls than hard work. The Baye Fall are the “Giddipass Boys” of Dakar. Try not to get in a fight with them though, as one job they sometimes do is providing security for mosques and pilgrimages, and they may be armed.

**Castes:**  There are three main castes in Wolof culture: the geer, or noble landowners; the jaam, or slaves; and the neeno, or craftspeople. Within the neeno is special subclass, the griots, who serve as traditional religious experts and oral historians. In modern life in Dakar, castes are largely ignored, but it is still somewhat taboo for a member of the geer caste to marry into a lower caste.

There are some interesting complexities in the caste system. Traditionally, if someone in a lower caste asks for something from someone in a higher caste, it must be given. In addition, many in the geer caste, who own land, are now poor farmers, while many in the neeno class have become well-off through trade. These two factors—gifting and the economic advantage to working in trade rather than farming—mean that today, economic power may be reversed from tradition. Lastly, griots, while in some ways the lowest within the caste system, demand a certain amount of respect even from the most powerful geers, because of the griot’s ability to commune with the supernatural and because of their key place upholding tradition and history.

**Money:**

Senegal uses the CFA franc, often pronounced “seffa”. You can easily get money with Visa debit cards. To convert CFA amounts to U.S. dollars, knock off three zeros and then double it:

10,000 CFA ≈$20 USD

Most Recommended Things to do:

**Ile de Goree:** This is a great day trip. Ile de Goree was used as a transport location for slaves and the infamous “door of no return” is here. Today, the island has a small museum at the slave house. The ferry ride to the island is nice, and the island itself is a great place to walk around. It has a friendly, relaxed feel. There is a nice beach where you can swim, or you can grab a beer at one of the bars or restaurants along the water.

**Kayaking at Oceanium:** Oceanium felt a little past its prime even when I was there, but it once had a reputation as being the go-to place for several varieties of toubab activities, including boating and clubbing. When I was there you could still rent kayaks, and paddling around the cliffs on the swanky side of Dakar makes for a fun couple-hour activity. Oceanium also still has dancing in evenings, but I found the scene a bit of a let-down.

**Lalibela Ethiopian Restaurant:** This was my favorite place to eat out in Dakar. They have good, authentic Ethiopian; creative cocktails made with local juices; and a nice ambience. To get there, take Avenue Cheikh Anta Diop from downtown, and turn right at the On the Run intersection. The restaurant will be a couple blocks up on the left. The meat and vegetarian Beyenatu (samplers) are both highly recommended.

**Travel by Car Rapide:**  Car rapides, the Dakar equivalent of the trop-trop, are the most colorful part of the Dakar transportation scene, literally and figuratively. They are conspicuous in their bright blue paint and yellow paint. Figuring out which Car to take can be a challenge. Each car has a small boy “apprenti” who hangs out the back of the car and yells the destination over and over. If you hear him yelling where you want to go, you flag the car. You get in the back, where the apprenti is. Once in, there is an etiquette to choosing a seat—generally, you should move to the front, and to window seats, unless you know you are getting out soon. There are regular stops, and the driver will usually call them out, at which point you should raise your hand and yell. You can also tell the apprenti where you want to go (he will ask when collecting your fare anyway) and he can help alert the driver for you.

**Buy metal bracelets:** One of my favorite souvenirs from Dakar were some lovely handcrafted bracelets. They are made with wire, including copper wire and electrical wire coated in various colors of plastic. They are inexpensive (about $1 each when I was there) and very attractive. They can be found at stands around the market areas in downtown Dakar. I haven’t seen anything like them in Ghana.

**What’s the deal with Cheikh Anta Diop?**

Cheikh Anta Diop was a Senegalese scholar who is known for promoting the thesis that the ancient Egyptians should be considered Black Africans in the 1970s. He supported his thesis with evidence of linguistic similarities between ancient Egyptian language and modern Wolof, and with examples of varying skin colors, from light to very dark, in Egyptian art. Today, it may seem unsurprising that Egypt would have had cultural connections with other ancient African civilizations, but his work highlighted the nuances of cultural connections and racial classifications at a time when the ancient Egyptian culture was viewed simply as Mediterranean, and it was assumed that cultural and technological advances flowed one-way from Egypt to the rest of Africa.