



# WESTERN AFRICA

- MOROCKIN' THE OASES TILL I'M GHANA!



Martin Smedendahl

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*Yet another traveller's journal by*

***Martin Smedendahl***

*I enjoy pretty much all types of travel, save for the all-inclusive variety and/or the staying-put kind.*

*But if I had to chose, the unexpected, the seldom trodded, the sparsely populated, the wilderness-y versions would be my top picks.*

*I had a feeling Western Africa could fulfill my curiosity in that regard, so....*

*I went to Western Africa!*

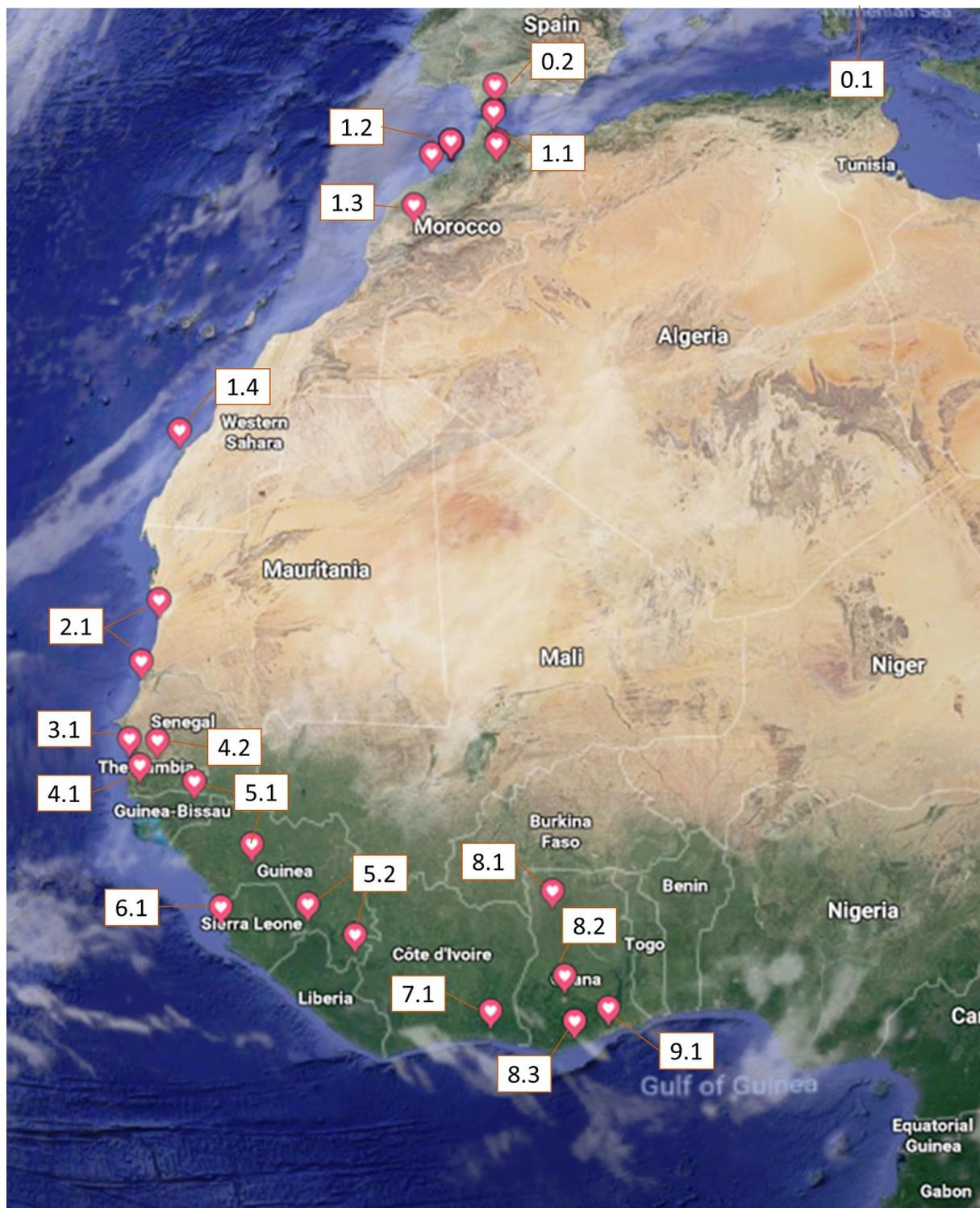
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## CONTENTS

Warm-up .....	5
0.1: Vis-à-vis .....	5
0.2: Singe d'affaires .....	6
Morocco.....	8
1.1: Un chien Andalou.....	8
1.2: Allons enfants de la patrie .....	10
1.3: Nous avons le meilleur des aliments .....	12
1.4: Chèvres dans les arbres.....	14
Mauritania.....	16
2.1: Le livre de Boussière .....	16
Senegal .....	17
3.1: On dit 'dachna' .....	17
Gambia .....	18
4.1: Jour de 'B' .....	18
4.2: Babouins et crocodiles et dauphins, oh mon .....	19
Guineas.....	21
5.1: Guinness dans les Guinées.....	21
Sierra Leone .....	22
6.1: Ohohoho, Jacques Costeau.....	22
Guineas part deaux.....	24
5.2: Singe d'affaires, encore une fois .....	24
Côte d'Ivoire .....	25
7.1: En caoutchouc et plage.....	25
Ghana .....	27
8.1: Regardez, monsieur Frodo: Des olyphaunts! .....	27
8.2: Le roi de les quis? .....	29
8.3: Trois petits cochons.....	30
Cool-down .....	33
9.1: Sacs à dos .....	33

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## WARM-UP

### 0.1: VIS-À-VIS

**F**inally I had my passport in my hand!

It's a well-known fact, for those that know it well, that any trip, travel or odyssey in fact begins earlier than when one step outside from home and lock the door. Sometimes they do, but sometimes the preparation phase is just as much a part of the journey as the rest.

Visas are still a thing in many parts of the world, and Africa is one of them. During overlanding tours, most can be obtained en-route, but not so with Ghana. The visa has to be applied for in advance, and the embassy is not located in any of the two cities in which I dwell. I sent my application (including my passport) through recommended mail, but could not have it sent back that way. I could arrange for a courier (expensive as all that), I could pick it up in person, or I could pay the postage. Now, the Swedish/Danish postal service is, how shall I put it...? Abysmal? Room for improvement? Sarcastically laughable?

Either way, I do have the opportunity to work at the almost local office, one town (as well as one bridge, one tunnel and one border crossing) over. At lunch, after a train and bus journey, and a stroll through a rather posh neighbourhood, I entered the villa in which the embassy was housed. Five minutes later I had my passport, complete with Ghanaian visa, in my hand. After all the emails and phone calls I had made without getting any answers, the casual approach to passport pickup was a bit of an anti-climax.

That being said, the journey was officially on! Granted, I had a fair bit of packing to do, and a few more days of work, but eventually I sat there, with an ale and a few good friends, at my traditional beer hall, for the as traditional farewell beers.



As chance would have it, one of the friends who weren't there, was actually home packing for the very same flight as me early next morning. As such, we could decrease our carbon footprint by carpooling to the airport.

A sad farewell, a not as sad farewell and I was on my way, to what could be construed as a layover. London is not only an airport hub, but also a town worth visiting in its own right. I have been there before, a couple of times, and I didn't feel the need to go touring. I did, however, feel the need for catching up with friends, and so I did. When I'm in London, I have curry, and that's the way the cookie crumbles.

Whether a layover, a change of flights, or an integral part of the trip, by now, there could be no debate on whether the journey was afoot. It was, and bon voyage, moi!



o.2: SINGE D'AFFAIRES

It was still pitch black when I got up. Not surprising, considering I was still in northern-ish Europe in November. But this was before four, even, meaning that I woke up around the same time as some of my roommates returned from the night out. Hauling my arse and my backpack to



Soon the group that was going to be my family for the next week or ten converged.

Diverse in nationality, though not in gender, our male dominated pack clocked mostly in the 30-40 year span, with one or two exceptions on either side.



*Nala the truck*

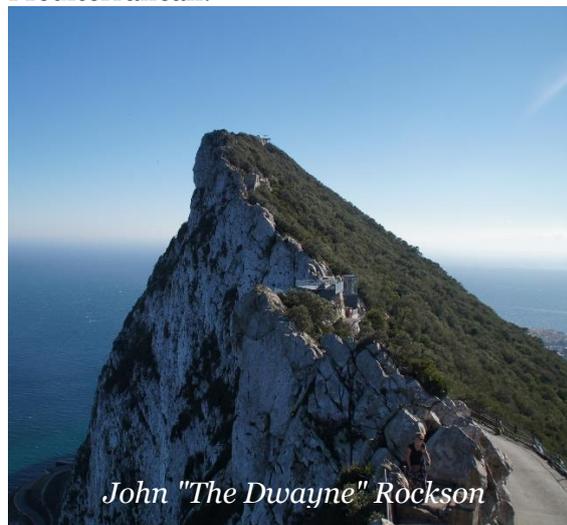
Victoria Station, I soon had upheld my part of the deal with Oasis: to be at Gatwick, baggage dropped and security checked, before the gate closed.

The flight to Gibraltar was uneventful, though longer than expected, until the time for descent. Gibraltar airport is considered one of the most difficult ones in the world. Only 1800 metres long, the runway is split in half by a traffic and pedestrian lane. The traffic is cut off when flights are about to land or take off, obvs, but still.

Parked a quick walk from the Gibraltar border into the sunny Spain, was Nala, in all her yellowness. A Scania truck, converted into an overlanding vehicle, complete with cleverly hidden baggage space and complete camping and kitchen equipment, this was going to be our home for the next week or ten.

The first stop of the Western Africa adventure was therefore not Africa at all, but rather the British enclave of Gibraltar. A tax free paradise, the small town of some 30.000 citizens boasts fine shopping and nice eating at decent prices. Transport

ships line up for the cheap fuel, and the marina is a popular stop for cruise ships and yachts entering or leaving the Mediterranean.



There's also a rock. The rock, in fact. Strategically important, the British have held the rock for ages, despite several attempts from the Spaniards to claim it. During the great siege, the Spanish attempted to scale the north side of the rock, where they were relatively protected from assault. The solution? Digging a tunnel through the mountain, of course! Cannons were placed at various places, and the tunnelling kept on going even after the siege was over.

The rock itself has many natural cave systems, the biggest of which is St George's cave. During the war, plans were made to

use it as a hospital, but those were never put into play. Nowadays they use the spectacular stalactites and splendid stalagmites along with music and light shows to create colourful concerts.

As the most iconic aspect of Gibraltar is The Rock, the most iconic aspect of The Rock is the monkeys. The only indigenous species of monkeys in mainland Europe, the rock apes (or barbary macaques, which is their real name, and a more fitting too; they're not apes at all, but monkeys\*) populate the higher-up parts of the cliff, and they are, even by monkey standard, incredibly clever and evil. They are known to break into hotel rooms and steal wallets and purses, they can open car doors and are completely unafraid of humans.

It is said that as long as there are monkeys on the rock, Gibraltar will remain British. Naturally, Churchill took heed, and imported more monkeys, made laws for protecting them, and demanded that they should be properly fed, which they still are to this day.

This day ended eventually, though. Early to bed was probably a good idea, as it was still pitch black when I got up. Not surprising, considering I was still in Europe in November, albeit the southernmost part. But it was time to take down the tents in the dark, and finally catch the ferry to Africa!



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\*) Teehee, I said butt monkey....

## MOROCCO

### 1.1: UN CHIEN ANDALOU

The border crossing from the Spanish enclave of Ceuta on the African side went refreshingly smooth, and we were in Morocco. After a few money changes, Nala steered inland and upwards, taking us to Chefchaoen in the Atlas mountains. Known as the blue city, the houses and cottages lined the steep hills and caught the eye of whomsoever likes the combination of blue and white. The blue was mostly too light for my taste, but the city was wonderfully beautiful nonetheless.

significant meat of the region, lamb, it tastes yummy.

As if the sizzling plum-and-almond lamb wasn't enough to remind me that I was in Northern Africa, the call for prayer that started pretty much the same time as my lunch was served certainly confirmed it. Through the megaphone speakers of the minaret came the so called adhan, reminding muslims that it was time for worship. The practice takes place thrice

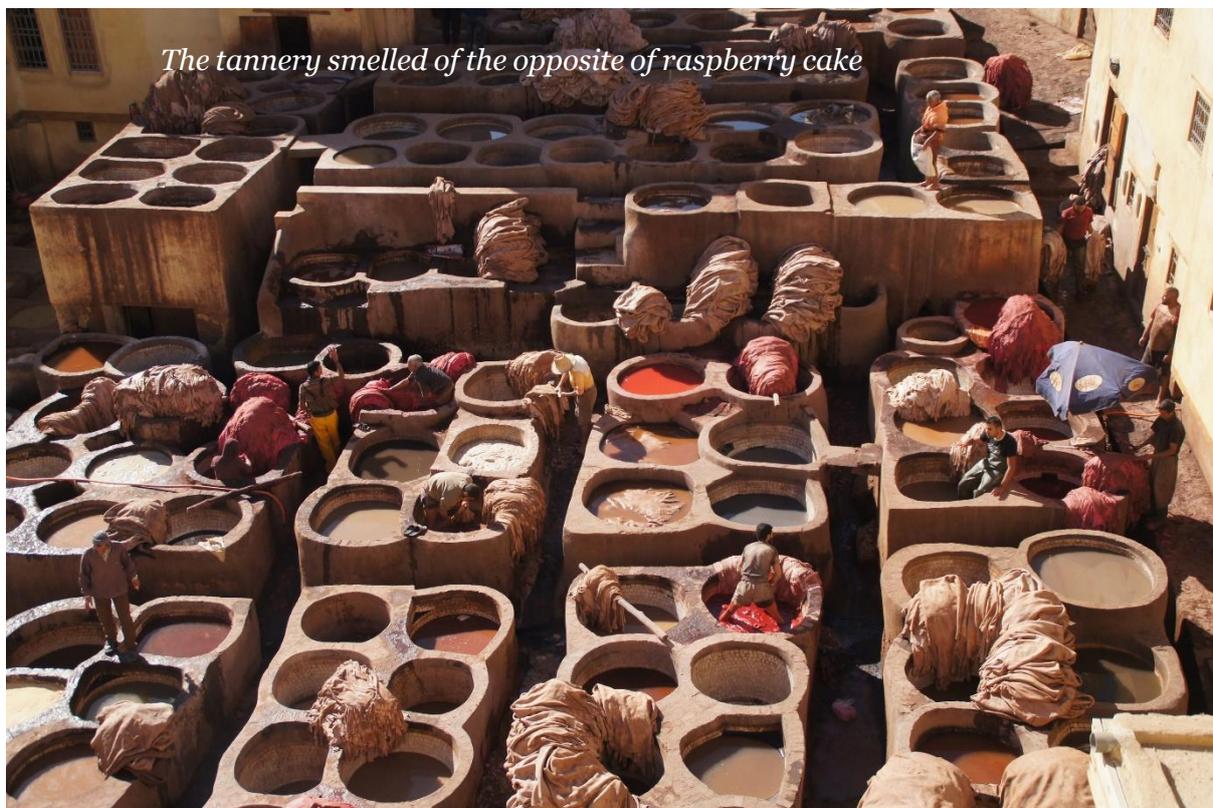


A speciality of the Maghreb generally and Morocco specifically is the method of cooking called tajine, which is basically putting the ingredients in a ceramic bowl, attach a combined lid and chimney and heat it up. The result is a thoroughly cooked meat with all the flavours contained. Along with prunes and almonds and the most

during the daytime, once after sunset and once before sunrise, totalling five times a day. I can easily attest that the one an hour or so before sunrise is the most annoying of the lot. Moreover, if the muezzin (the man calling for worship) is accompanied by a pack of howling dogs, well that makes the alarm clock even more redundant. And unnecessary. And redundant.

One normally tend to think of Africa as a place where it's always hot, and even moreso in the desert. Well, Africa is a huge continent, with heaps of different biotopes and climate conditions. Northern Morocco is not all desert, the Atlas mountains reach high altitudes, and mid-november in the northern hemisphere is still late autumn. So the warmth coming from the friendly rays of sunlight during the day quickly escapes back to space during the night, leaving the dark hours chilly, cold even. That would be a bad time to discover that my therma-rest had a tiny puncture, slowly deflating during the night, and leaving me

home of the largest tannery in northern Africa, the leather business is all the rage. After watching (and mostly smelling, because the odours from the tanneries are so strong and foul that the wise person brings a bundle of mint stems to sniff occasionally) the leather getting soaked in concoctions of water, olive oil and pigeon poo and then dyed with poppy, indigo, saffron and the like, we were promptly offered to buy some quality leather goods for rather hefty prices. The gang, consisting of backpacking overlanders with little coin and even less space promptly declined the offers of €2.500 for a goat leather bag, no



*The tannery smelled of the opposite of raspberry cake*

flat on the cold, hard ground in the middle of the night. Finding the hole to fix it would be tricky without a pool of sorts, and buying a new one proved equally tricky. A yoga mat came to the rescue, and would hopefully suffice until reaching warmer lands.

The trading and handicraft hub of Morocco is Fez, and that was our next destination. Exploring the labyrinth \* of narrow alleyways of the medina, the souks offered the usual spread of produce, meat, trinkets and pottery. But most specifically, leather. As Fez is the



matter how awesomely fireproof and soft it was.

The same went for the other major handicraft forms of the region. Intricate and beautifully made as they were, with meticulous attention to detail and undeniably skilled craft, none of us opted to purchase neither the €46.000 hand tied, 2 million knots carpet, nor the €4.500 mosaic dinner table. That would have been out of everyone's price range even if the carpet would have been flying and the table would have been magical, setting

*\*) or possibly maze*

itself with delicious and healthy food and drink three times a day. But at least shipping was included.

Camel skin and ceramic tajines aside, the one product that springs to mind upon hearing 'Fez' is undoubtedly the red, cylindrical, tassled hat made famous by Grunkle Stan, the Shriners, and the Eleventh Doctor. On most of my travels I tend to buy headgear that are useful and/or symbolic of the region, so the 30 dirham

(around €3) fez I bought felt like a no-brainer.

Freshly outfitted in headwear befitting the locals, me, Tony and Kyle navigated the maze<sup>†</sup> of the medina in search of the reputed monstrous camel burgers of Café Clock. Perhaps the camel they were made from was monstrous, who knows, but the burgers themselves were rather moderate, size-wise. Tasty, though (best camel burger ever!) and the place was cosy and atmospheric, with a nice view of Fez.



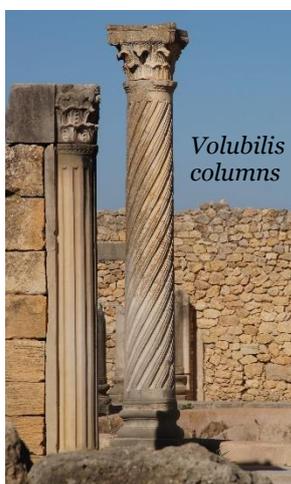
Having not spent €46.000 on a non-flying carpet, having bought a hat for about 1/5 of what I had expected and realising that these ten weeks travel are actually dirt cheap, leaving room in the budget for splurge, I decided to upgrade at the campsite. A bungalow, shared with three co-travellers, shouldn't dig too deep into the wallet, and while camping is perfectly cromulent, a bit of variation is always welcome, especially when the therma-rest is wonky, the dogs are a-howling, and the cold that I've had since London is constantly on the verge of turning mannish.

Yes, the dogs from Chefchaoen seemed to have followed us, or at least their howling.

Perhaps they were Andalusian dogs, having crossed the border from the Spanish enclave of Ceuta.

## 1.2: ALLONS ENFANTS DE LA PATRIE

Wherever I go, there seems to have been an empire or other that has boldly been there before. More often than not it's the British one, but sometimes the Mongolian, sometimes the Incan, sometimes the Chinese. But in Northern Africa, the Romans took hold, back in the first century, effectively kicking out the former colonial power: the Mauritanian empire.



Evidence of this can be found in one of Morocco's many Unesco world heritage sites: Volubilis. The archaeological site itself is a rather well preserved city, with whole sections of more or less intact mosaic floors and a still standing sun arch.

Volubilis, with its drainage and sewer systems, was just a quick stop towards our first bush camp of the trip, though. Well, bush camp is a bit of a stretch, seeing that we set

<sup>†</sup>) or possibly labyrinth

camp in what was basically a park which, during the days, was visited by many a local picnicker. Sounds of the not too distant motorway filled the night soundscape rather than the noise of untamed wilderness, and burglars were the fear during the night, not lions.

Lions may not be found in Morocco, but probably in some of the countries for which we obtained visas. Rabat, being the capital of Morocco, hosts many embassies, including, but not limited to, Côte d'Ivoire and at least one of the Guineas. Passports and forms properly provided, we had a few days to kill, and so took off to that city of white houses, made famous by that Marx brothers film from 1946. After a trip to what might be the largest sports goods store in Northern Africa to replace my retired sleeping mat, and a quick stop for a beer at a rather shady bar, I arrived at what would be the main reason for going to Casablanca: a gin at Rick's Café. The gang had arranged a shared minivan back to camp at 15:30, so when I got there at 15:05 I had plenty of time. Or so I thought. The fancy gin joint, modelled after its namesake in the 1942 film starring Ingrid Bergman and Humphrey Bogart, closed at 15, and wouldn't open until 18:30. Therefore I stayed back, got myself some tasty fish dinner at an up-scale place by the docks, and awaited the reopening.



It has all the sway of its Hollywood inspiration, and they make a very passable G&T. Posters for the film, and related

movies (such as the Swedish documentary *Jag är Ingrid*) decorate the walls, and a few tv screens show the film on repeat.

Mission accomplished, I returned to camp via commuter train, and lay my head and body on my newly bought therma-rest.

The capital beckoned once more, and not only for shuffling papers and passports. I left the gang for a day and a night in town, upgrading to a room in a hostel in the middle of the medina.



Rabat is less hectic than Fez or Chefchaoen, and outside the medina there's almost a European feel to it. I managed to take in the main sights, such as the mausoleum of Mohammed V and the Hassan tower, as well as the museum of contemporary art, before perusing the labyrinthine alleyways of the medina in search of a typical Moroccan restaurant. I found one, hidden away in some nook or cranny, and was welcomed like a French aristocrat. The staff were all very proper, bowing and curtsying in all their finery, and I soon understood why: the price for beer or wine was higher than in Sweden, and there was no *à la carte*, just a set menu, the smallest of which started at 500 moroccobobs (around €50). This was an expensive place, so I excused myself, crawled out of the medina and to a nearby ship that doubled as a restaurant.

Waking up the next morning to a sunny day with just the right amount of bustliness, I hauled myself to yet another embassy to rejoin the group. The Roman empire may only have reached as far south as Volubilis,

but the French grasped farther down still. As such, our resident Canadienne was more than helpful during the days of embassy visits in Rabat, translating back and forth. Perhaps that helped getting our Côte

d'Ivoire and Guinea visas comparatively smoothly, and off we went to Marrakesh.

### 1.3: NOUS AVONS LE MEILLEUR DES ALIMENTS

Perhaps the most touristy, and certainly the most vibrant city in Morocco is Marrakesh. Known as the red city, it boasts a busy town square and a medina filled with restaurants, cafes and eateries amongst the many many souks. Plotting my plan on the digital map, I found a route that would take me to most of the sights in Marrakesh.

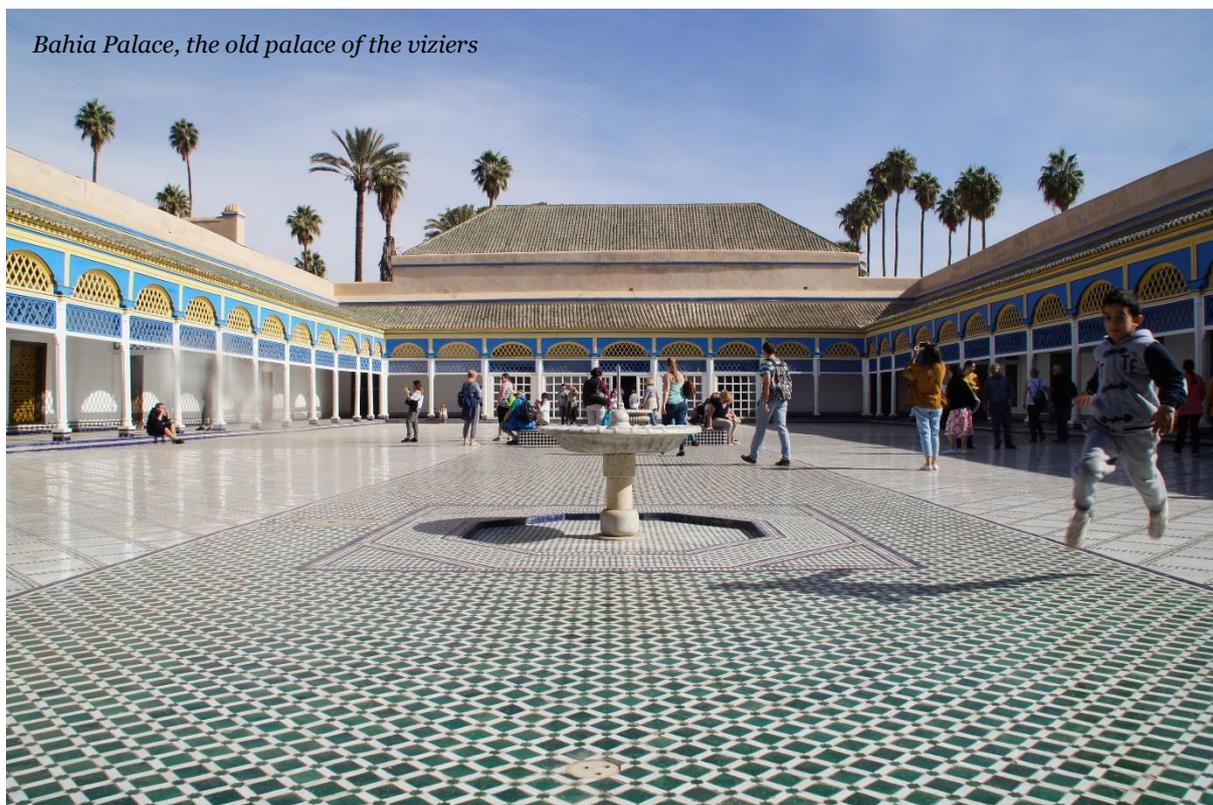
As is on par for any Moroccan city, the sights include the medina, the mosque and most probably a mausoleum, presumably in memory of a king Mohamed or other. But Marrakesh, being a former capital as well as a long-standing destination for the rich and/or suave, also boasts palaces and parks.

Having been dropped off at the direct vicinity of Koutoubia mosque, that seemed

the obvious starting point. Not far away lay the top pick of Marrakesh, some would say. The grand town square, named Jemaa el-Fna, home of hawkers, horses and hoodlums, was filled with life, sounds and smells. Berbers, dressed in traditional garb (minus the sneakers and the camera phones, of course), beckoned to have their photos taken. Monkeys in leashes, dressed in baby clothes, was used by their owners to lure in tourists for other photo scams, and defanged cobras was supposedly charmed for the victim's amusement. Needless to say, I payed them little mind and fewer coins, and made my way through yet another medina.

The goal was the old palace of the viziers, Bahia Palace. Eventually I found the well-hidden entrance, and I could get away for a while from the hustle and bustle of the

*Bahia Palace, the old palace of the viziers*



souks. A short stroll through a small park led to a modest, yet intricately designed little palace. Well worth a visit, as well as the symbolic entrance fee.

The hunt went on, though the search for the larger, older, and supposedly more grandeur El Badi palace proved preylless, since I couldn't find it, even with the help of three independent apps.

Having finished my old town endeavours with a rooftop shawarma, I set course for Jardin Majorelle, Yves Saint-Laurent's memorial botanical garden. A fair walk off, I fretted upon seeing the entrance fee of 70 dirhams (€7), but I had walked far, and eventually saw that they offered a student discount. As I actually am currently at uni, I promptly produced my student ID, and needed only to pay 35.

To be honest, that was about the right amount to pay for entry. Any more would have been overpriced. Though pretty and neat, the garden was small and with very little variety. The royal blue and distinct yellow pots and walls heightened the experience, though, and I do like most cacti.

Jemaa el-Fna is slightly different after sunset. The monkey men and snake



charmners have taken a back seat to other types of scammers (cups games, coin tosses, fortune telling etc) and the during daytime surprisingly open square has been filled with street food peddlers, all shamelessly nagging you to buy their food specifically, not from any of the other 99 identical stalls.

Much as I detest being harassed (I'm perfectly fine making my own decisions, thank you very much!), I still needed to have a genuine street food in Marrakesh experience. I chose the least naggy purveyor of shish kebabs

and it was good.

Having booked my hotel (cheap, with a bed, four walls, a ceiling, a floor, a toilet and a shower, with no extra frills) in Ville Nouvelle, I got to see the more modern parts of the city as well, and it has all one could ask for as a Westerner wanting to explore the African (in particular the Saharan) culture and mystique, yet with relative ease retreat to slightly more familiar surroundings. Therefore, it's no wonder that Marrakesh, the most touristy, and certainly the most vibrant city in Morocco, is a long-standing destination for the rich and/or suave.



#### 1.4: CHÈVRES DANS LES ARBRES

One of the quaint little boni with overlanding is that you get away from the proverbial beaten path. Between Marrakesh and Senegal, there's not much to see or do, though. Towns are small and rundown, few and far between. There is, of course, the mighty Sahara desert, which is an impressive sight in its barrenness.

For the most part, it's not the undulating dune sea of postcard and tourist brochure fame, but rather a flat, rocky wasteland with scattered low bushes, windswept and vast.

keep the view in my mind, rather than capturing it on sensor.

There is also the rocky Atlantic coast. Erosion has shaped the coastline into a jagged zigzaggy denture, with razor sharp cliffs and the occasional sinkhole, waves unyieldingly tearing down the sandstone. Sometimes the cliffs, more often than not towering some 30 metres above the sea, give way to sandy beaches, and after a few days of bushcamping, a dip in the waves did a decent job of getting rid of some of the traveller's dust, especially with the help of one Dr Bronner.



*The Dune abides*

There are some parts that look more Tattoinesque, though. One of the many bushcamps we did was in the shadow of an impressive sand dune, 1600 jawa feet tall.

The call from the ridge was clear, and we climbed, scaled and hiked up to the peak for a spectacular view of the sunset and the moonrise. The wind was playing wildly, though, and the sand and dust was pretty much everywhere. Leaving my camera in the relatively dust free truck below, I had to

A welcome break from the long driving days and the camp dinners spiced with a not neglectable amount of sand, was the fishing town of Essaouira. Fresh fish, practically still flapping, was on offer at the many beachside eateries and grilled to perfection after having been chosen by the customer. A sit-down, non-vegetarian meal was like a feast, and hitherto unbeknownst to me, was that freshly grilled sardines are tasty as.



*Blue boats in the fishing town of Essaouira*

Ever southwards, Nala the truck steamed on. If there ever was a doubt we were in Africa, any hesitation had left by the first sight of goats in trees and herds of dromedaries.

As quaint as a week of bushcamping is, with no access to showers, proper beds or toilets, a vacation it is not. How I longed for a bed and an ensuite! But alas, such luxuries are just that. In those circumstances, even a

simple campsite is akin to a Four Season's resort; to be able to set up the tents before sunset, to have time to relax, taking in the sun while the sleeping bags airs, to wipe away the sand from clothes, liners and tents without them being refilled immediately; such pleasures!

The first campsite after the long sequence of bushcamping still had its fair share of sand, even though it was located in town. But it had toilets, warmish showers and even a little lounge area, with an actual table at which we could have supper. And even though it lacked regular sheets and pillows (and obvs bathroom), the room upgrade for around €6 was an easy choice. So, I suppose one of the quaint little boni with overlanding is that after long enough time in the bush, the simplest campsite can feel like a Four Seasons resort.



*The dromedary, also called the Arabian camel (*Camelus dromedarius*), is a large, even-toed ungulate with one hump on its back*

## MAURITANIA

### 2.1: LE LIVRE DE BOUSSIÈRE

Of course, the desert and the Anikin grade sand doesn't stop just because Morocco does (or the country of West Sahara, but that's a hot potato). No, even south of the border the sand roams free and the booze does not.



Apparently Mauritania is the place where 1990's Mercedeses come to die. Roughly every third car is an old 190 or 220, and most of them seem to be assembled from other 190:s and 220:s, with little to no regard for colour, vintage or even model.

Even more so and less so. Vegetation is sparse in northern Mauritania and there's nothing to bind the dust. The uncountable little particles get everywhere, especially when the truck has one side open and the other closed; it's pretty much a roach hotel for smaller-than-clay fractions: dust checks in, but it doesn't check out.

Mauritania might also be a place for good news, everyone! Through a series of events, mostly related to hard-to-get visas, the itinerary changed for the better: one detour to an even drier (in all meanings of the word) country would be skipped in favour of another much more sociable, and widely regarded as one of the top destinations in Western Africa. Nothing was set in stone, though.

The dryness is bad enough with every crevasse, nook and cranny covered and filled with nanorocks, and to add insult to injury, there's not even anything to wash the dust away. In Morocco alcohol is legal, albeit difficult to obtain and pretty expensive. No such options exist in The Islamic Republic of Mauritania, and beer and bacon are off the menu.

Sand, rather, because the desert and the Anikin grade sand doesn't stop just because Mauritania does. Well, almost. The southern parts, near the Senegalese border, have decidedly more vegetation and less dust than the northern and central, and at the (hopefully) last bushcamp without beer in the eskie, the biotope seemed to change towards the savannah rather than desert. And just there, across the river, lay Senegal invitingly.

Apart from the abundance of sand and the absence of booze, Mauritania is little more than a vast strip of land needed to cross in order to get to Senegal. It has nice food, though (Yassa is highly recommended; it's a mix of onions, spices, herbs, oil and a main ingredient such as chicken or lamb) and the people are friendly and less opinionated than their northern neighbours.



*Nouakchott, Mauretania*

## SENEGAL

### 3.1: ON DIT 'DACHNA'

St Louis is a colonial coastal town and former capital on the Senegalese side of the border. It is also the place of Nice Burger (which it not completely is) and its accompanying beer (which it most definitely is).



Zebrabar lies in a bird sanctuary, and although the place certainly had more feathery friends than any other place so far on this trip, someone apparently forgot to tell the birds.

After exploring the chaotic, loud, bustling mainland part of town, a quick walk across Pont Faidherbe took me to another world, it seemed. French colonial architecture lined the quiet and virtually vehicle free streets, references to the air mail era was abundant, and by the water quaint restaurants lined the shore.

Overlooking the silently bobbing colourful pirouges (the local style of boat) and the bridge itself, we sat down for a few local brews before heading on towards our camp for the next couple of days.

A nice and relaxing stay it was, nevertheless, with some kayaking and nice local fish.

The itinerary had definitely changed by now, and instead of turning east towards Mali, we steered south, bushcamping close to the border of The Gambia. Many were the sticky little thistle-y pods in the reed among which we pitched our tents, and the favourite pastime the next day was to painfully de-burr shoes and clothes. That and, at least for me, reading the Swedish newspapers they seem to export to Senegal, and even moreso where we were now, The Gambia.



*Colourful fishing boats out of St Louis, Senegal*

## GAMBIA

### 4.1: JOUR DE 'B'

**T**he smiling coast of Africa they call it, and the country and its people are certainly friendly.



lack of tomato juice ruled out the Bloody Mary, and since everyone had been raving about the pepper steak at the restaurant called The Butcher's Shop, I chose that in favour of any pork.

Crossing the vast mouth of the mighty Gambia on a rickety ferry, we disembarked in Banjul, capital of the Gambia, and set course for its twin city Serrakunda, home of the embassies.

It was divine! Best beef outside of Argentina, I wouldn't wonder. Ordering it rare, they brought it to me rare, with the creamy and well-balanced pepper sauce on the side. The sauce worked equally well with the tender meat as with the crispy chips, and the rich, mildly sweet aroma of Guinness completed the finest lunch in a long time. A long time.

The idea was to get Nigerian visas for the people heading therewards, and the wait was spent one cheap taxi drive away from the beaches and resorts of the Atlantic coast, the smiling coast.

Many other B:s were ticked that day, including going to the beach, bakin in the sun and bathing in the ocean, whereas banking and bottle shopping had to wait for the next day.

B-day was coming. Not someone's birthday (that would still be a few days off) mind you. Nor a less than an A+ day. No, B-day was just a day of doing, buying, going to and spending by things that starts with the letter B: Bikes, beach, bottle shop, Butcher's, bus, bath, beef, bacon, Bloody Mary, bakin', beer....

The update from the Nigerian embassy was that the visas would be ready by Monday, meaning we could truck on inland for the weekend, halfway upstream the mighty Gambia.

Unfortunately the bikes weren't available, and buses were few and far between. The



4.2: BABOUINS ET CROCODILES ET DAUPHINS, OH MON ....

Halfway up the mighty Gambia lies Tendaba. Home of a large variety of birds, as well as the odd simian and lizard, the village bordering on the Kiang West National Park provided ample opportunities for exploring the wilderness.

A bumpy truck ride into the bushy surroundings, and a short hike to the watering holes resulted in a few animal sightings: hawks, vultures and a group of baboons in the distance. There were tracks from porcupines and the local bush pig, but the animals themselves were nowhere to be seen.

The mighty baobab tree stands still, though, and we picked some fruits and gave it a try. Unlike any other

fruit I've tried, the baobab is almost completely dry. A hard, crisp shell covers a fibrous inside, with some fluffy, porous, slightly crispy material covering the rock hard seeds. The taste and texture is more reminiscent of some foreign candy than fruit, and I couldn't easily make the



*Great egret*



*Baobab tree, the most significant tree in Western (if not all of) Africa*

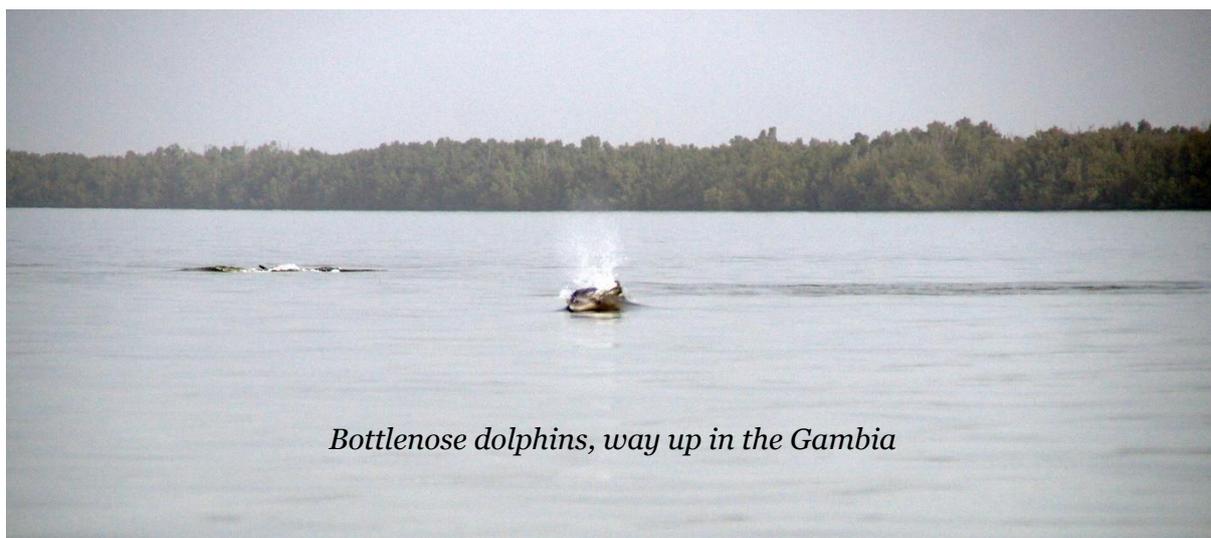
connection to the baobab juice I had tried in a café a few days prior. The art is in the making. Unlike basically all other types of fruit and berry juice, where you extract the fluid from the source, with baobab you add water to the fruit, letting it soak, and you shake it all about. That is often enough (but it's recommended to filter away the seeds and the stringy fibres), but often they add sugar, and/or mix it with other fruits, such as banana, turning it into a smoothie.

As the area is located by the brackish waters of the river and the mangrove wetlands surrounding it, a small, silent boat with six passengers proved to be a better choice than a 14 person diesel pickup for approaching the local fauna without it fleeing well ahead.

Hérons and egrets, kites and kingfishers, pelicans and sandpipers were aplenty, sitting in the trees, sweeping closely over the water's surface or scurrying over the muddy riverbanks.

But the excursion offered not only specimen of the avian persuasion. The odd monitor lizard was seen, and crocodiles glided silently into the water as the boat approached, all before I had the camera ready (though I did see them).

The biggest biological bonus, however, was not in the mangrove swamps, but in the river proper. There, in the distance, a small pod of cetaceans was swimming. As we got closer, some put on a show, jumping out of the water, splashing all around. And they weren't the smaller, darker, river varieties either. These were bottlenose dolphins, and the closest I've ever been, without actually being in the water myself.



*Bottlenose dolphins, way up in the Gambia*

With nature sometimes comes culture. The Tendaba community centre was founded by a Swedish couple some years ago, and run by a few more generations of Swedes before the Gambian government took over. The Swedish flag still flies on the premises. Schools, handicrafts and international exchange with other students are on the agenda. We timed our visit with around 120 British students in their teens, but luckily they left by the very next morning. But not after having contributed to the cultural bonfire by the beach. Lit by the locals, the youth, including the children, gathered to

dance, sing and play the drums. Everyone was invited, of course. Our little gang mostly stuck to conversations with the locals rather than joining the singing and dancing, but the teens from the UK shared a bit of their culture, by means of a rendition of Wonderwall.

Waving adieu to the friendly people of Tendaba community, we once more turned to the mouth of the mighty Gambia, and the visas that were hopefully there.

Indeed they were. As was the embassy for Sierra Leone, and with it a promise of a quick issuing. The days spent in the Gambia were therefore nearly over, and the last full day was another B-day. Some of the B:s we lucked out of last time became rectified. Breakfast included bacon, Butcher's Shop was revisited (this time with bacon) and it was a birthday. In two senses, I suppose, because birthday girl Mary also became an aunt that day.

The last B of the day was a booking. With the visas done for the immediate future, the itinerary could reasonably be considered set until Accra, and I could therefore book a flight home. A big plus for the airline that best suited my wishes was the fact that I could reserve a seat directly upon booking, rather than 48 or 72 hours before lift-off, thereby avoiding the dreaded middle seat.

And so, roughly halfway through the trip, I had a better grasp of the future.

## GUINEAS

### 5.1: GUINNESS DANS LES GUINÉES

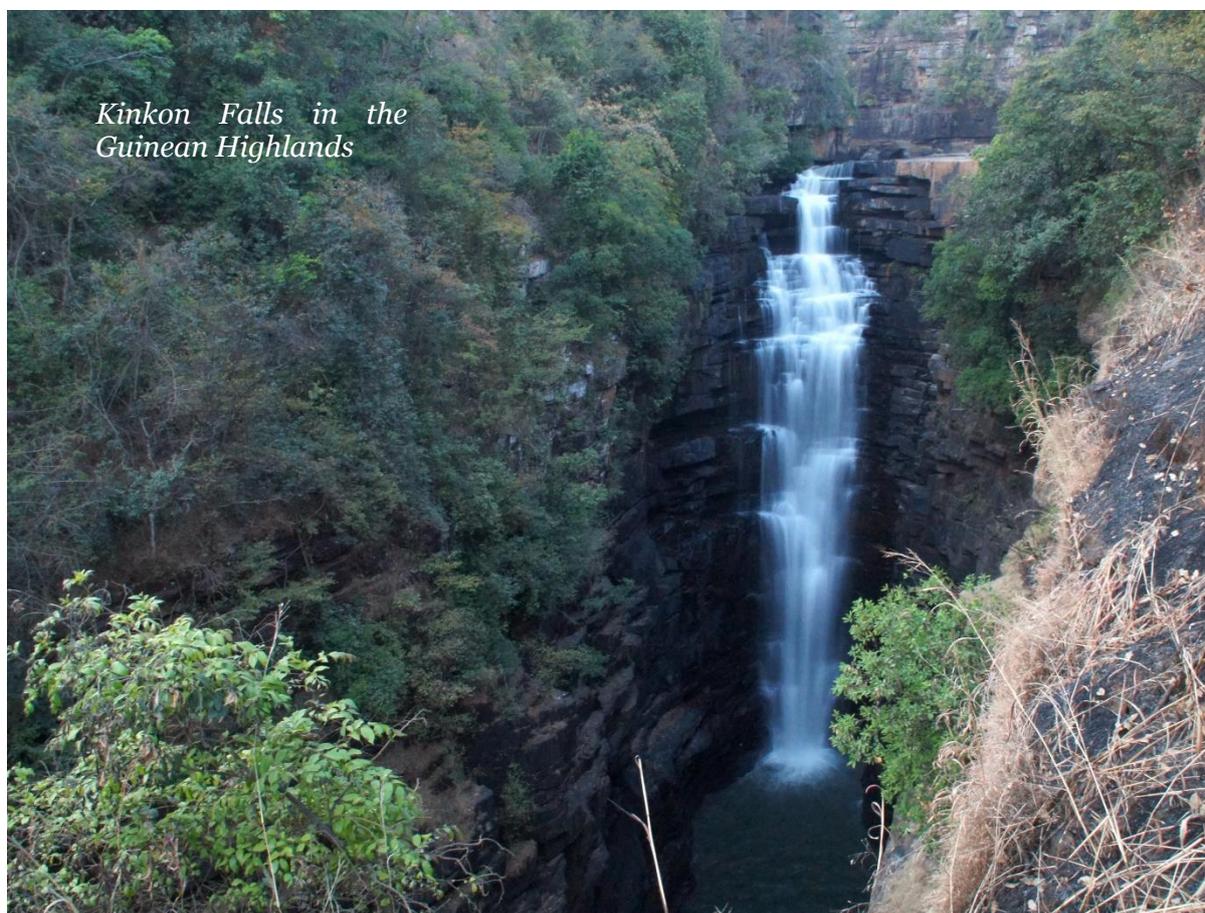
Halfway through the trip I started to know decidedly less, actually. Guinea-Bissau is maiden territory for most overlanding companies, and certainly for Oasis. So what would follow was obscured. The border crossing from Senegal into Guinea-Bissau was smooth as, though, and with the same currency some of the bureaucracy was lessened.

Not that I spent any money. Campsites are not a thing in G-B, and hotels even less so. As per previous warnings, I had stocked up some beer in Senegal (the juice is, though not illegal, difficult to obtain), and the former Portuguese colony was crossed in two days, despite the roads being bumpy and ill maintained, bushcamping all the way.



One of those days was the day that I stopped being 42, and so the christmas licorice from the old homestead was opened, to the delight of all Scandinavians aboard (Preben and myself). The half-dutch passengers felt wrongly about salty licorice, so more for me. It might even last all the way through christmas.

If crossing into Guinea-Bissau was relatively hassle free, then crossing into regular Guinea was almost European in its smoothness. Which is more than can be said about the roads. Roughly three hours after we had entered Guinea it was time for lunch, some 40 kilometres inland. So, the lumpy, humpy, bumpy dirt roads allowed Nala the truck to move in decent running tempo.



More bushcamps in quarries followed, but as Christmas was coming up, we stayed one night in Labé in order to get the final shopping done, overnighing on the grounds of a local hotel, thereby at least having access to the essentials.

Christmas itself was spent in the wild, though. In Kinkon Falls in the Guinean Highlands, to be precise.

Sporting my brand new (well, second hand) mozziepants (bought at the market for 6000 guineabobs, about €0.60) and my too small Santa hat, I celebrated Scandinavian Christmas (24:th) by opening one of the two gifts I had carried from home. More licorice, obvs, and the deck of cards with Moomin motives was inaugurated immediately.

Christmas day is when most of the English speaking world celebrate the holidays, and so I did the traditional Xmas laundry in the morning, before heading to pancake breakfast and Secret Santa.

In addition to the other present from home (even more licorice, yay!), my Secret Santa brought me a little eskie\*, with two beers in it. Other secret gifts consisted of a jar of Nutella, a shaving mirror and a slingshot.

Contrary to the usual weather conditions in the end of December, I was so hot my head nearly fell off.

Luckily, the very same river and waterfall that had provided me with the laundry water, offered pools and springs of cooling water, and I packed my little Xmas eskie\* and spent the hottest hours in or near the babbling brook, including swimming as close to the waterfall as possible.



*Beer and bubble bath*

The roads of Guinea are often bumpier than those of Guinea-Bissau, but eventually we stopped some 60 km from the border and bushcamped (in a manner of speaking) at a football pitch in front of a large audience of locals, clearly intrigued by the big yellow truck and the bunch of white people trying to cook over an open fire. The goal was to cross over to Sierra Leone and get to the beaches of Freetown for a couple of days around New Year's, and crossed we did.

## SIERRA LEONE

### 6.1: OHOHOGO, JACQUES COSTEAU

Well, we crossed eventually. Technically, we spent a night bushcamping in no-man's-land between Guinea and Sierra Leone. But after that, it was surprisingly smooth sailing. With relative ease and speed, we trudged through the Leonian landscape on paved roads, coming to a slowdown in the bustling traffic of Freetown and eventually

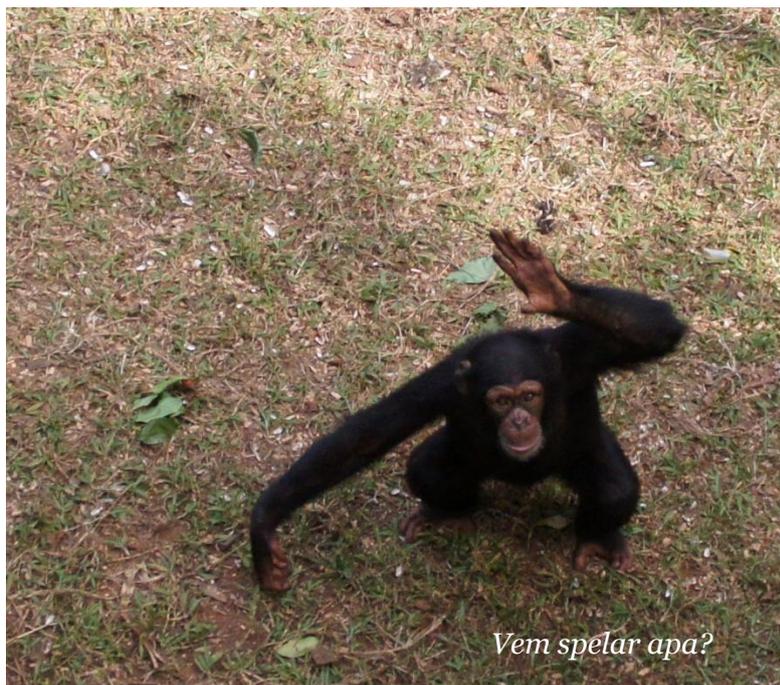


breaking free and reach one of the many beaches of the peninsula.

The scarcity of ice for the eskies and the hotness and humidity of the coastal region spurred the thirst of the gang, and luckily the bar by our beach camp was ready. Soon we all had a chilled drink to cool down with.

\*) Cooler, chilly-bin, ice box....

It is a well-known fact, for those that knows it well, that any beach is guaranteed to



*Vem spela apa?*

infect every fold and nook on your person and belongings within a 15 kilometre radius with sand. And that's roughly where Tacugama Chimpanzee Sanctuary is in one direction, and Banana Island is in another.

In the sanctuary, they attempt to reintroduce stolen, abandoned and otherwise incapable apes into the wild. They do so in four stages, from being completely looked after in small enclosures, via testing their social compatibility with other groups, to large enclosures where they pretty much get to get by on their own, thereby making it worth reintroducing them.

The success rate of reintroduction is rather poor, but one could argue that the chimps are better off in the sanctuary than eaten as bushmeat or trapped in a cage in a zoo. And of course, it raises awareness about the imminent danger our closest relatives are in.

In the other direction lies Kent\* beach, from where the local fishermen set oar and the tourists

get into wobbly dinghies for transportation to Banana Island, two of which were another passenger of the yellow truck and me.

Secluded and definitely more quiet than on the mainland, this is the home of West Africa's only diving centre (not counting the offshore groups of islands, such as the Canaries or Cabo Verde). A delicious dinner from freshly speared fish with tasty groundnut sauce was served, after which we got our gear together, signed away our lives, and went to bed, getting ready for next morning's dives. I've had better dives, and I've had worse. Shallow but interesting, including a shipwreck and some big schools of fish. It was great to be back in the water, though, as

it had been almost a year since last time. And it's a great way to start celebrating New Year's Eve.

Back at the beach, the fire got lit, and upon the fire grate was laid a big-ass barracuda, wrapped in aluminium foil. Yummy, and the end of 2017 was celebrated.

As our group had representatives from all over the globe, we had a little mini 'Happy New Year!' every time some other country passed into 2018. First off was New



*Shallow dive*

\* ) Most of the beaches of the peninsula are named after places in England, or in English history: Kent, York, Sussex, Hastings, Waterloo

Zealand, natch, and then followed Australia and Scandinavia before the local big strike of midnight. The party didn't last all the way to North America, though.

Relaxing at the beach on New Year's Day, the pizza was nowhere to be found, so we had to settle for lobster.

After the beach and sea getaway, it was time to move on towards Côte d'Ivoire. But alas, between Sierra Leone and Côte d'Ivoire lies Liberia, a country not really advisable for travellers. We therefore headed north rather than east, rounding one of the last three countries still not understanding metric, by means of the rocky roads of Guinea.

## GUINEAS PART DEAUX

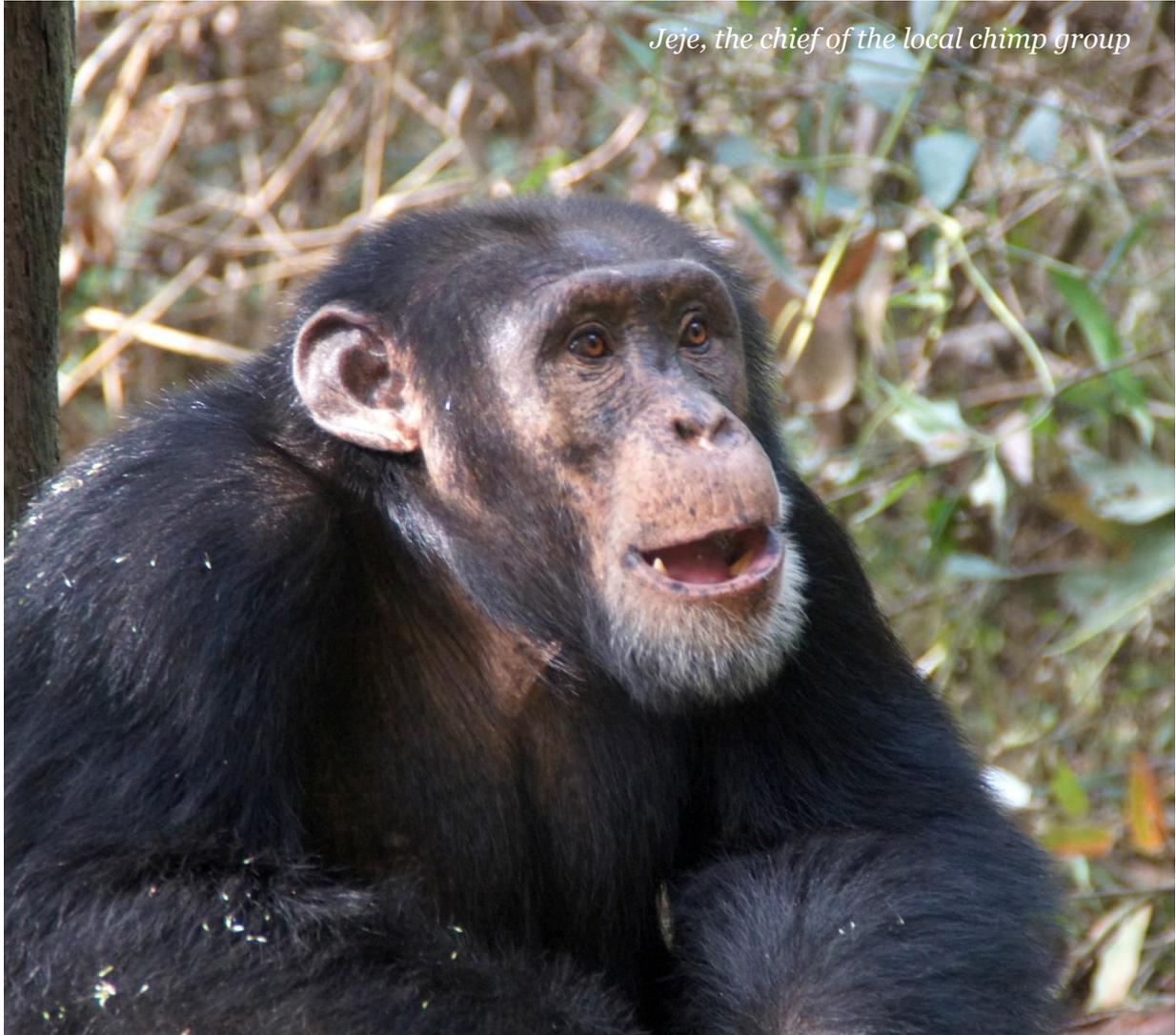
### 5.2: SINGE D'AFFAIRES, ENCORE UNE FOIS

**B**ack in Guinea, the bush beckoned. The bushfires roared, sometimes right beside the road. Controlled bushfires, though; a necessity in the extremely dry landscape in order to avoid the natural, and way more devastating ones.

Rounding Liberia and heading south to the tri-nation border, the altitude rose, as did the humidity. Near Bossou, the forest could now more reasonably be called jungle, and that's where the Guinean chimpanzees like to live.

Unlike their brethren in Tacugama, these apes are free and wild. The area is a natural reserve, and we got to camp at the research centre before trekking into the jungle in search of the 7 or so chimps that were known to live in the neighborhood.





*Jeje, the chief of the local chimp group*

About an hour of trekking, and Jeje, the chief of the local chimp group, appeared, solemnly munching on the nuts he had cracked open with some rocks.

So I have now finally seen the other of my two favourite childhood animals in their right place, and despite the fact that my phone, and with it a lot of writing I had done, had died on me, I left Guinea waving to the locals.

## CÔTE D'IVOIRE

### 7.1: EN CAOUTCHOUC ET PLAGÉ

**A**t the border crossing, the green, white and orange flag waved, and a bar provided beers while we were waiting for immigration to process our passports. No, we hadn't gone through a portal and materialized on the Emerald Isle; the orange part of the flag was to the left and the beers were large bottles

of chilled lager, rather than pints of foamy black stout.

We bushcamped right by the customs building, and had enough time to sightsee the local village. In this case, it was rather the local villagers coming to sightsee us; never before had the large





*Orderly rubber*

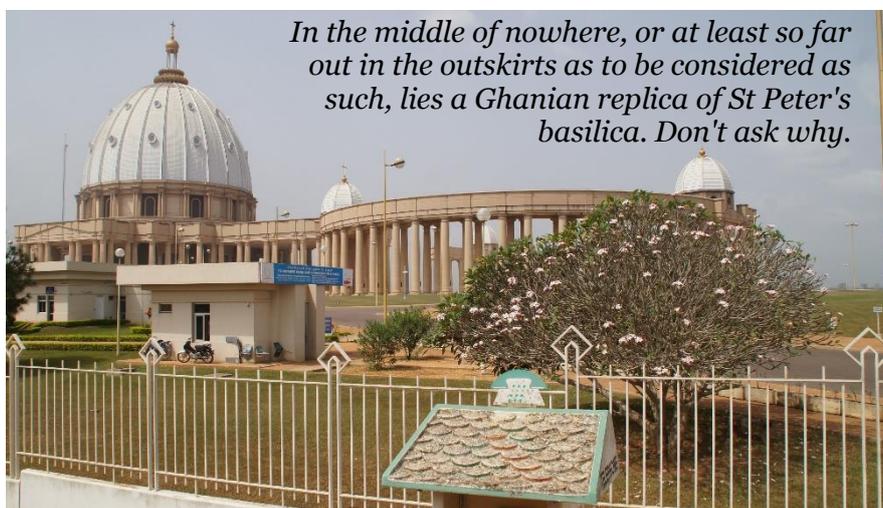
yellow truck full of white people cooking on open fire drawn such a big crowd.

Moving on, we had another bushcamp right at the edge of a kautschuk plantation with perfectly lined trees.

Further south, outside Yamoussoukro, the capital of Côte d'Ivoire, they had built a big church in the outskirts of nowhere. Apparently it's a replica of the basilica in the Vatican, only without the crowd, and, you know, the pope.

Swiftly passing through the Ivorian landscape, aiming for the actual coast, we soon got to see a rare sight in Western Africa: a city skyline, complete with high-rise buildings.

Abidjan, the capital in all but actuality, was passed through, and we stayed at a beach resort pretty much halfway between the city and the smaller and cosier town of Grand Bassam, with taxi distance to both. The days by the beach were spent relaxing, and in my case getting back to the digital world. I found a decent enough phone for a small penny and started perusing the recently released programme for the upcoming film festival back home. I managed to get through it, select and cull my selection, puzzle all the films into my schedule and ordering the tickets. With dealings with upcoming events at home turf all sorted, we left the coast and moved on, leaving the francophone parts of the trip behind, and entering the last country of this my Western Africa odyssey.



*In the middle of nowhere, or at least so far out in the outskirts as to be considered as such, lies a Ghanaian replica of St Peter's basilica. Don't ask why.*

## GHANA

### 8.1: REGARDEZ, MONSIEUR FRODO: DES OLYPHAUNTS!

**W**ith three blank pages still available in my passport, I was now in country number 70\* on my globetrotting CV. Ghana is sometimes described as West Africa for beginners, and



*Mole National Park in Ghana: Dry, hot and full of elephants*

I could get behind that sentiment. The roads are decent, electricity is available almost 24 hours a day and many places sell ice and meat. At the same time it has some of the attributes of the region, such as villages of huts with thatched roofs, waving children, busy markets and elephants.



*Clingy buggers*

*\*) Depending on how you count, of course. It's a country if it was recognized as such by the UN or IOC at the time of visit, and it counts as a visit if you've been outside any points of entry (airports, harbours, train stations etc), stayed at least a night and sampled the local food and/or beer (if they have any). The staying a night is not necessary for mini or micro nations such as Monaco, and the sampling is not necessary for nano nations such as the Vatican or places without permanent population, such as Antarctica.*

The elephants dwell mostly in the rural areas, though. Mostly. A nice place to see the largest land animal in the world is Mole<sup>†</sup> National Park, which also hosts warthogs, crocodiles, a bunch of antelope species and a particularly nasty type of ant.

Taking a game drive in the afternoon, we saw a ton of some of the above, a decent amount of some, and about two dozen per sock of the last, burrowed into them, biding their time until I would let my guard down for a full frontal attack on my groin. I didn't let my guard down, though, and ruthlessly showed some 50 ants who's the boss, and also 25 million times larger.

I went to bed straight after dinner, for I, along with a co-traveller, was booked for a night drive at 3:30. Apparently there's a 3:30 in the morning now, but nobody seemed to have told neither the driver, nor the guide. The night drive was a no-show, and I went back to bed, hoping to catch two hours of sleep before the morning's walk. The morning walk went on as planned, though. Similar sights, and this time even crocodiles.

We left Mole with full memory cards and mosied on, desperately trying to find a decent bushcamp not too far from our next destination. As luck would have it, Mr Charles, the proprietor of a cocoa plantation, welcomed us with open arms to camp in his backyard and letting us use his outhouse. While the pots were boiling, we ventured into the hamlet and actually found a rooftop bar called The Rooftop Bar. It was closed though, but below lied an



establishment called The Roofdown Bar, were we got to sample the local spirit (booze spiced with different herbs and sugar, not completely dissimilar to Jägermeister) and its premixed counterpart, Orijin.

Next morning Mr Charles took us to see the plantation. A government run facility, they grow and care for cocoa seedlings, which the farmers of the region can collect, free of charge, thereby helping struggling farmers to get enough crops to make a decent living, while at the same time ensuring the highest possible level of quality for the Ghanaian chocolate.

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<sup>†</sup> ) Not pronounced like the burrowing, almost blind animal, but rather Moll-e

## 8.2: LE ROI DE LES QUIS?

In Central Ghana lies the cradle of the Ashanti (sometimes spelled Asante) kingdom, and nowhere is Ashanti influence more obvious than in the regional capital Kumasi, Ghana's second largest city.



In a rare, or actually unique, instance, we camped in town rather than a 15-60 minute taxi ride away. An almost as rare instance was that dinner wasn't cooked on open fire on a tight budget, but rather free of choice. Guidebooks and websites all agreed that the best restaurant in Kumasi is The View Bar and grill, so half of us went\* there.



Fitting name, the place offered spacious dining with a 270 degree view of the city and the best steak in 2018. Quite a difference from the fufuo (a cassava/ plantain flour porridge or dough) I had for lunch. Different, yes, but not necessarily better. Well okay, better as well.

Guidebooks and websites all agreed that the number one thing to do in Kumasi is a visit to Kejetia market, the largest in West Africa. 11.000 stalls and four times as many people working there, the market covers the ground of an entire neighborhood. One could get lost in the maze<sup>†</sup> for hours, and what you can't find here in hand-me-downs simply hasn't been handed-me-down yet.

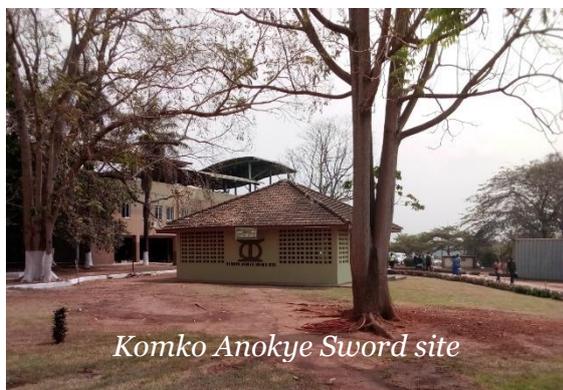
Obviously I tried to avoid that literal hell as much as possible, but the thing infects its surroundings, swelling into the actual streets, and I found myself all but stuck in a noisy, crowded, suffocating place with no apparent route of escape. Frantically clutching my wallet and my mobile I struggled through, and eventually found myself in relatively open air again, took some deep breaths, getting my bearings, and making it to the National Cultural Centre. There was an opening to a different world. Open space, air, peace and quiet, with streets lined by arts and craft shops, cafés, jazz clubs, museums. There were people there, yes, but they weren't yelling and they weren't everywhere.

There were the selling of stuff, yes, but they didn't nag you and harass you and not even once shouted 'Hey white man!'. There were vehicles, yes, but they were few and far between, and neither honked, nor spewed exhaust fumes on idle. A nice oasis in a city that, other than the market, is busy, but not overly hectic.

*\*) With 5 km away from where we were staying, we figured it'd be smoother and quicker taking a taxi rather than walk. Not necessarily so; the adress given is not the same as the actual place, maps.me and Google maps disagree on the location (though not by much) and for being touted as the best restaurant in Kumasi, neither the locals, nor the taxi drivers have any idea of where it is. Thus we stepped out of the taxi somewhere between where the adress indicated and where Google did, and walked the last bit, eventually finding it, just 30 minutes after our reservation.*

*† ) Or possibly labyrinth*

The museum of Prembeh II Jubilee is situated here, which for a very affordable fee will provide you with a personal guide to show and tell a brief history of the Ashanti kingdom.



*Komko Anokye Sword site*

Another place where the Ashanti heritage is presented is Komko Anokye Sword site. That is the place where, in the 17th century, the local clans gathered, agreed to join

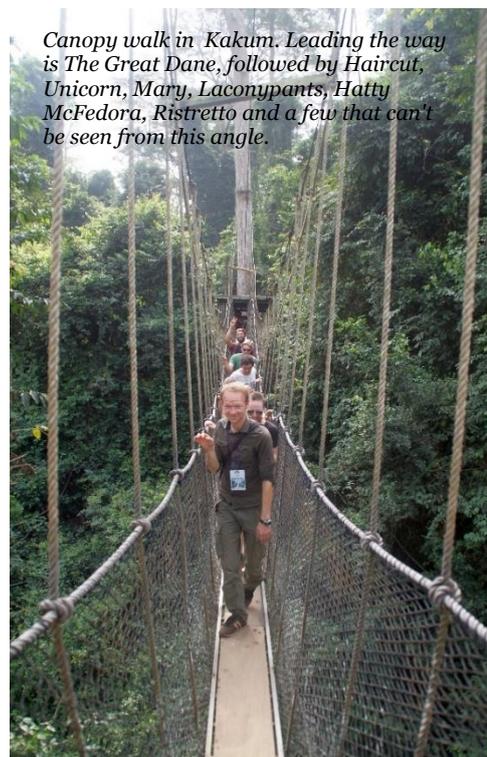
forces with each other and thereby forming the Ashanti kingdom.

A kingdom needs a king, of course, and since all the chiefs aspired for the throne, the obvious solution, according to the high priest, was to pray to the gods for a sign. And so, after a night of praying, and definitely not making any shady deals, treason and backstabbing, the priest gathered the chiefs anew, whereupon a golden throne appeared in midair, gently dropping down to one of the present chief's lap, thereby declaring him king<sup>‡</sup>.

The priest then stuck a sword in the ground, and it has never been removed since. Many have tried, yes, but neither bulldozers nor Muhammad Ali could pull it from the earth, and so the Ashanti kingdom remains. True story.

### 8.3: TROIS PETITS COCHONS

Between Kumasi and the coast lies Kakum National Park. A rainforest with many of the usual suspects, including, but not limited to, trees, insects, forest elephants, monkeys, snakes and leopards. The thing with jungles, as opposed to, say, the open savannah, is that there are trees and other vegetation pretty much everywhere. The consequence for the non-human inhabitants is that they tend to be smaller than their open-air cousins (for example, the jungle elephant might as well be called pygmy elephant, but don't say that to their trunks). The consequence for the human visitors is that the other animals are difficult, if not impossible, to see, what with all the vegetation and pygmy-ism and all. Therefore, a cool\* experience in Kakum is a canopy walk. Rickety, but perfectly safe, rope bridges are suspended 15-40 metres in the air, making for a fun walk just above the foliage.



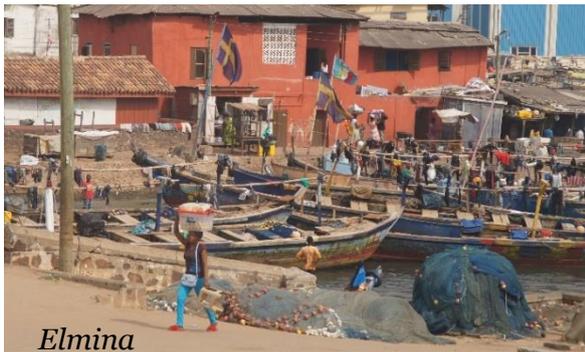
*Canopy walk in Kakum. Leading the way is The Great Dane, followed by Haircut, Unicorn, Mary, Laconypants, Hatty McFedora, Ristretto and a few that can't be seen from this angle.*

<sup>‡</sup> ) *Strange invisible gods hanging in midair, distributing thrones, is no basis for a system of government.*

*Supreme executive power derives from a mandate from the masses, not from some farcical aerial ceremony.*

<sup>\*</sup> ) *Though not in the literal sense; the temperature was close enough to 40 degrees, and humidity felt like it was in three digits*

The goal of the day, however, was to reach the coast. That we did, but unfortunately the place we stayed was a fair bit out of the way. As I had to get to Accra before the truck did, and the local bus would leave Cape Coast (at least an hour taxi drive away) at early o'clock, I did some quick rearranging of my itinerary. Both Elmina, the closest town, and Cape Coast, the next town over, are coastal towns with an important historical affiliation with the slave trade of colonial times, and definitely worth a visit.



*Elmina*

And so it was that I packed all my stuff<sup>†</sup>, said my good byes to the people who stayed at the campsite, and shared a taxi to Elmina with some who didn't.

Elmina Castle, sometimes called St George's Castle, is presumably the oldest European-built building in West Africa and marks the starting point of any visit to the former Portuguese colonial town. But rather than focusing on the slave fort, we

took a town walk with a local guide. Noticing the three major sources of income (salt mining, fishing, and tourism) we perused the streets, the forts, the convents and the markets in the 40 degree heat. After a well-earned cold beer, I said even more goodbyes and took a taxi with my diving-buddy co-traveller for a tour of Cape Coast Castle.

Built by the Swedes in the 1600's, the Castle served as a slave fort and waystation before they were shipped away to unknown destinations. It was later claimed by the Danes, then the Dutch, and finally the British. The cells in which they kept their slaves were devastating to see, the solitary cell even moreso. The stories about, especially, the female slaves went straight to the heart. The impact made by learning about the horrible, unimaginable conditions these people had to endure was strengthened by the stark contrast of the luxury of the governor's quarters.



*Part of Ghanaian sculptor Kwame Akoto-Bamfo's exhibition "In Memoriam: Portraits of the Middle Passage, In Situ"*



*The coastal towns of Elmina, Cape Coast and Accra have a dark history. Pretty much every European colonial power (including Sweden) has at some point claimed one of them, and the colonial legacy lives on through the many different flags the fishing fleet is flying*

<sup>†</sup> ) Except, as I noticed later, the lower parts of my zip-off trousers; they were unfortunately left on the truck.

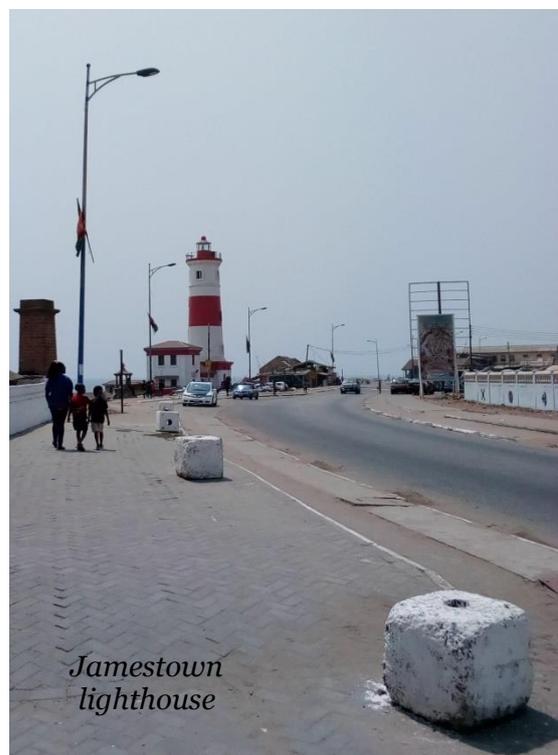
After one more goodbye, I went to my hotel, getting ready for next morning's early bus ride. Although crowded and a bit late, the bus ride itself offered luxuries I had forgotten existed. The seats were comfy, there was plenty of legroom, the headrest cushion was so soft it could have served The Spanish inquisition<sup>‡</sup>, and there was aircon.

The inclusion of air conditioning was even more obvious as I stepped out of the coach in Accra, walking right into what felt like a wall of hot steam.

The capital of Ghana is a city in the usual sense of the word. There are streets and avenues, parking lots, high-rises, museums, asphalt, nightclubs, bars and restaurants, and even a shopping mall.<sup>§</sup> There are also, of course, the wrong side of the tracks, shady areas, bustling markets and people trying to scam and/or sell you goods and/or services.



Armed with my inconspicuous small camera, I put on my walking shoes and set off to explore this my last destination of this odyssey.



Kristiansborg, a former Danish slave fort marks the Eastern end of the city along the coast, which stretches westwards towards Ussher Fort and Jamestown lighthouse to indicate the Western border of the city proper (although the metropolitan area does continue to the west, starting with a sewage treatment plant). In between lies Independence Square and Kwame Nkrumah Memorial Park & Mausoleum. The square was empty and the park was closed due to a wedding, though. The activity tracker on my sports watch had a couple of field days (quite literally) as I perused the streets of Accra, including the poor fishing district of Jamestown and the perfectly non-hectic market quarters.

Passing through the cozy neighbourhood of Osu, I found myself at the, according to TripAdvisor, second best eatery in town: Burger & Relish. And with an item on their menu named Three Little Piggies (named so due to the burger being endorsed with

<sup>‡</sup> ) *The Pythonesque one, of course; the one nobody expects*

<sup>§</sup> ) *Though no cinema, as far as I could tell, so Star Wars ep VIII: The Last Jedi would have to wait*

chorizo, bacon and bacon jam), who am I to disagree?

Time flew, and soon I had to, as well. Rearranging my luggage, throwing away what I not needed and optimising the rest, I eventually got in the taxi to the airport. The adventure was drawing to an end, and

as I spent my last cedis at the duty free (for reasons unknown, there's no bureau de change after the security check at Kotoka International Airport, so one would have to either repeat the tiring procedure or simply spending the remaining moneys buying goodies at the duty free or trinket shops), this African Adventure was over.



## COOL-DOWN

### 9.1: SACS À DOS

The flight home was uneventful. Upon booking, I was giddy over the fact that I was able to choose my seat immediately. There was a mixup however, and my chosen seat was apparently in business class. Since I hadn't paid for business class, they had changed my seat, but luckily I was still in aisle, and not the dreaded middle, so no fuzz. I watched *The Force Awakens* in preparation for what was to come and tried to get some shut-eye. After a short, but not stressful, layover in Istanbul I made my final flight. Passport control was surprisingly inefficient by

European standards, but the baggage carousel started moving pretty soon, and my distinctive backpack was among the first.

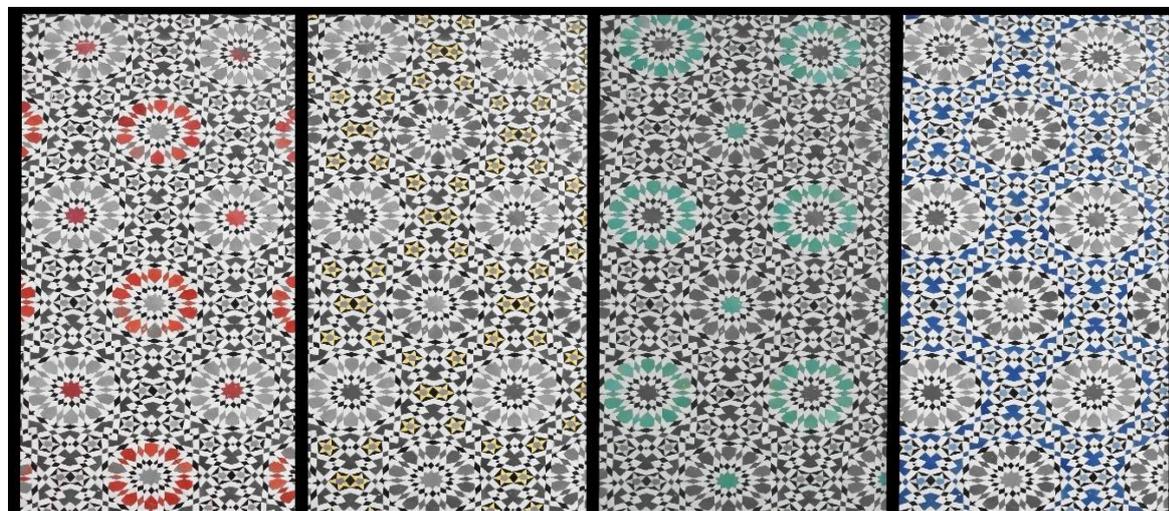
At the exit, some of what I had missed the most waited \*, and I got a ride home, dumped the luggage, had a shower, and pretty much went straight from a continent quite quite close to a galaxy far far away....

And as is tradition, or an old charter, or something, it's time to present this trip's....

*\*) Definitely whom I had missed the most*

## THE BACKPACKS

<b>Backpack</b>	<b>Winner (and possibly other nominee)</b>
<b>The Brick Backpack (for best city)</b>	Rabat
<b>The Calico Backpack (for best surprise)</b>	Dolphins in the river in Gambia
<b>The Celluloid Backpack (for best photo)</b>	Goats in trees
<b>The Copper Backpack (for most price-worthy experience)</b>	Mozziepants, haggled down from 10 000 to 6 000 guineabobs, roughly € 0.60
<b>The Cotton Backpack (for best accommodation)</b>	Niagara Inn, Accra
<b>The Fur Backpack (for best nature experience)</b>	Boat tour on the rivers and mangrove swamps, Tendaba, The Gambia
<b>The Glass Backpack (for best hang)</b>	At Sukuta Lodge
<b>The Granite Backpack (for best landscape)</b>	Guinean highlands
<b>The Jade Backpack (for best cultural experience)</b>	Elmina town walk
<b>The Khaki Backpack (for best guide)</b>	Felix
<b>The Malt Backpack (for best drink)</b>	Guinness (other nominee: The first beer after the dryness of Mauritania)
<b>The Neoprene Backpack (for best dive)</b>	Half sunken shipwreck, Banana Island
<b>The Plush Backpack (for best transport)</b>	The coach from Cape Coast to Accra
<b>The Silver Backpack (for best eating)</b>	The steak at Butcher's (other nominee: some of what Preben made)
<b>The Terry Backpack (for best swim)</b>	Kinkon falls
<b>The Goathide Backpack (for best medina)</b>	Rabat
<b>The Velour Backpack (for softest experience)</b>	The beaches of Sierra Leone



**THE GOLD BACKPACK (FOR BEST EXPERIENCE IN TOTAL)**

I entered country number 70 and did dive number 50. I slept in a mozzie net under the stars in the wilderness and met a bunch of cool-ass people. But the one thing, the unique thing, unlikely to be repeated ever, was to trek into the jungle and have a close encounter with one of my absolute favourite animals from my childhood.

Therefore, the Gold Backpack of 2017-2018 goes to:

**CHIMPANZEE TREKKING IN GUINEA**



***Dachna!***





