

Exploring The Gambia by Amy Flannery

Sometimes life provides you with an experience that wakes you up and makes all your senses come alive. Going to The Gambia, West Africa with Professor Bill Roberts and the students of St. Mary's College, Maryland was that kind of experience. I went to make a documentary film about the students' adventure into a new world and see how it changed them. What I didn't realize was how much it would change me.

I went off with a fairly blasé attitude toward the whole trip. I had just come back from West Africa six months previously and feared that I would never have an opportunity to travel anywhere else. My husband, Papis, is Senegalese, so all our vacations take us back to Senegal, and for me (and most Senegalese) The Gambia is nothing but an obstacle to overcome when traveling from the north of Senegal to the southern Region known as the Casamance.

I lived in the Casamance in the village of Belaye from 1986 to 1988 as a Peace Corps volunteer. I traversed The Gambia so many times that I had to have additional pages added to my passport for the stamp-happy Gambian Immigration Officials whose English I could never understand. I coined a phrase to express my distaste for the place. "The Gambia -- it's your problem." Gambians are always chanting, "No problem." And they sell a lot of t-shirts sporting the same slogan. My corruption of this phrase would come to mind every time I sat for hours in the heat waiting for the decrepit ferry to take me across the Gambia River. That ferry crossing is one of the dirtiest places I've ever been, and I'd always end up there at the hottest part of the day breathing the fumes of the backed up trucks and public transport vehicles of every conceivable genre.

After spending five weeks in The Gambia, and seeing a bit more than that miserable ferry crossing, my attitude has changed completely. I have come to know and love the place, and I even made some quick friends. The two Gambians who stick out most in my mind are Hatabou Sane, a part-time employee at the Friendship Hotel and Max of Eco Friends Drink Stop.

I met Hatabou my second day in The Gambia, when all the students had gone off to a beach with a couple of young Lebanese fellows. I was supposed to go and shoot the event, but I missed the boat due to some snafu in communication. So there I was -- all alone and hungry. I asked one of the guards at the hotel where I could get a bite. The Friendship doesn't serve food at all hours. You have to arrange for it in advance. The guard pointed me down the street to the African Village Hotel. I took off in the direction indicated and came upon a young man yelling to another hanging out of one of the Friendship Hotel windows. They were speaking Jola, the language of my husband. I struck up conversation in my limited Jola and we walked together. It was nice to have Hatabou's company,

because it deflected all the attention I might have gotten otherwise. A white woman walking alone is a fair target for any young, bored, African male. Hatabou was a very polite young man and a pleasant walking companion. He had to turn down a side road after awhile, but he pointed me toward the African Village.

Arriving at the hotel, I chose a table near the pool and ordered an egg burger, which I imagined to be something like a bun with an omelet in it. It turned out to be a beef patty with a fried egg on top. Oh well. It tasted pretty good. I then headed down to the beach where there appeared to be a bar right on the water's edge. Unfortunately, they weren't serving, but a man who worked there said he would go back up to the pool bar and bring me down a beer. I gave him some dallasis and he was back in no time with a cold Julbrew. I sipped the beer and looked at the surreal waves through the haze of exhaustion and jet lag. There was a guard on duty to make sure no miscreants entered the hotel from the beach side, so we started talking. He told me about his family and I about mine. We spoke of politics, international relations, marriage, religion and spirituality. Had anyone come upon us, they would have thought us old friends. In The Gambia, and I think, all over Africa what people appreciate most, is just having someone to talk to. Every once in awhile, my new friend would stop and say,

"This is such a nice conversation. I'm so glad you came."

"Me too."

"You must come back."

"I will."

I never did though. It is my loss.

But I digress. I was speaking of Hatabou Sane, the Jola who worked at the Friendship Hotel. I quickly learned that he had befriended the St. Mary's College group, and was always there for them when they needed something. They all called him "Mighty" -- the name of a Gambian DJ. Hatabou loved music. He could listen all day and dance all night. And if there wasn't any music playing, he would just sing. He has an excellent ear, and would probably be a great musician if he had the opportunity to study an instrument.

Mighty was one of the many characters that worked and hung out at the Friendship Hotel, which was bigger on Friendship than it was on service. It didn't matter though, because although you may go two days without toilet paper, Babacar the life guard might show up at your door in the mid-afternoon with a glass of tea, or one of the local boys would stop by and see if you were free for a game of tennis. But if you did need service, Mighty was the man. Just mention the word toilet paper and he would be back in a flash with three roles. When we wanted to eat cheap African style meals, Mighty would hop on a bicycle and return with a giant bowl of rice and chicken at the local price. And if you just wanted to sit around and shoot the breeze or sing, he could rock and roll until 3:00 a.m..

Though he appeared carefree, Mighty didn't have any easy life. When he was only 15, his father died of malaria, so he was forced to quit school and go to work to support his younger brother and sister. With the \$15 a month he made at the Friendship Hotel, Mighty put his two siblings through school and somehow managed to eat. Mighty told me he hadn't seen his mother for six years. When he finished his job at the Friendship taking care of all of us, he planned to go and visit her in Senegal. I don't know if he made it or not.

Much to the students credit, they embraced Mighty and treated him like a brother. Senta and Rita bought him a bicycle and Andrew plans to send him money on occasion to help him make ends meet. Mighty's energy and joy, despite the lousy hand that fate dealt him, were inspirational to me and the students who knew him.

Then there was Max -- the proprietor of Eco Friends Drink Stop. Max was a Rasta in the purest sense -- a man who embraced all humanity and the mother earth. His drink stop was entirely furnished and adorned with recycled materials. The seats, arranged in a circle under a thatch roof, came from a local metro bus, a small airplane, and a landrover. Hanging from the thatched roof from fishing line were coasters, empty cigarette boxes, bits of foil and various colorful recycled boxes. In The Gambia, where trash is everywhere due to a lack of organized removal strategies, Max's "Drink Stop" was truly a beautiful thing. He was clearly a man with a vision.

He served cold soft drinks from a cooler for 10 dallasis (50 cents), and a hundred meters beyond his drink stop, there was a palm grove where people were tapping the trees for wine. If requested, Max would go buy palm wine at the local price and drink it with you, or you could even get some to go. In addition to the beverages, Max served tropical fruit for free. There were all kinds of trees growing around his Drink Stop, and he would feed you mangoes, papayas, and cashew apples all day.

I met Max across from the Abuko Nature Reserve where Will James had embarked on a project counting monkeys. Arriving there with Will for the first time with fellow videographer Eric Kruize, Max approached us when we descended from public transport . He shook our hands and pointed across the street and said please come have a drink. I said, "We have a job to do, but when we're finished, we'll come see you."

After walking through the nature reserve in circles for what seemed like an eternity, we headed over to Max's. As soon as we walked in and I saw the recycled decor, I fell in love with Max. My appreciation for his Eco mission and the fact that I'd kept my promise to come see him earned me the title "Queen." Because Will had to get up at the crack of dawn everyday to count the monkeys,

it was hard for him to find breakfast anywhere before going to the nature reserve, and once there, it was impossible to get a meal. I suggested he work out a deal with Max. Max was more than happy to cook for Will, as he eventually hoped to expand his business into a sort of restaurant.

During the two weeks Will worked at the nature reserve, he saw Max nearly everyday. Max cooked him omelets and various African stews on rice. Each time I went to shoot Will counting the monkeys, I'd pop in to Eco Friends Drink Stop. I always looked forward to seeing Max, because shooting Will was exhausting. I had to get up at 5:00 a.m. and chase him through the forest with the camera, battling the heat and mosquitoes. Max always had plenty of fruit and time for conversation. As his affection for me grew, my title was elevated to "the queen of queens."

It's not anywhere in the world you can go and immediately acquire a title like that. In fact, since I left the Gambia nobody has noticed my queenly status. The last day we saw Max, he gave Will two wood sculptures to show him his appreciation. Will had nothing for Max, nor did I. I don't think he was expecting anything, but I felt kind of bad none the less. He had taken good care of us and I hope nature takes good care of him.

Maxi and Mighty reminded me of what is most important in life -- being kind and generous and showing your love for people. They were both poor in the material sense, but they gave us their time, affection and shared what little they did have. The students from St. Mary's were not blind to these qualities, which they saw in many Gambians. And I was impressed to see, that they too, exhibited them.

Most of my friends are between the ages of 40 and sixty, and I haven't spent much time with people in their twenties since I was in my twenties. I assumed the students would seem shallow and foolish to me. I couldn't have been more wrong. Not only did I enjoy their company, but I found them to be wise, generous and brave.

After they got used to me following them, asking them questions, and shoving the camera in their faces, they befriended me and did their best to help me create the documentary. Their observations about the different things they encountered never ceased to amaze me. Realizing immediately how spoiled they were and praising the Gambians for their fortitude and joy despite the poverty, hunger and deadly diseases they confront on a daily basis. The students began to think of ways to help and wondered why on earth they had so many clothes in their closets.

When the students had free time, they would pay me visits in my hotel room, share their thoughts and feelings and invite me on outings to the beach or restaurants with or without the camera. On my birthday, they took me out to an

Italian restaurant and showered me with love and champagne. I felt truly spoiled by the affection they showed me. The colorful batik wall hanging they gave me is now on display above my bed, so I am reminded of them each night before I turn in.

During the last two weeks of our stay in The Gambia, each student embarked on a research project. Heading off on their own, into situations that were totally alien to them, they introduced themselves to Gambians working in various fields and briefly became involved in their lives.

I followed Summer Wember to a busy health clinic, where she was studying midwifery. It was not an easy place to be -- it smelled and the sanitary conditions were frightening as were the moans of the women giving birth on sheetless beds with no support from friends or family. Calmly and sweetly, Summer washed one baby after another and asked the midwife on duty as many questions as possible, all the while taking time to address the camera with her observations and feelings about the whole thing.

I didn't have the courage to follow Andrew Turner out to sea on his project. He went miles out in the Atlantic in fishing canoes without any navigational equipment and no protection from the elements. He did bring his own life jacket, but it made him uncomfortable because nobody else had one. His respect for the fishermen and their abilities grew with each outing.

Will James patiently observed the behavior of the Calatrix monkeys and took copious notes. He was up before sunrise and braved the heat, mosquitoes and solitude quietly moving through the Abuko nature reserve. Of course he always had Max's meals to look forward to.

Pam Wye spent many an afternoon with the former principal of an award-winning elementary school named Yahar Jallow. Listening tirelessly for hours, Pam recorded on audio cassette Yahar's entire life story. After videotaping the two of them one afternoon, much to my chagrin, I succumbed to the heat, the soft living room couch, and Yahar's soothing voice and drifted into slumber.

Anne Dailey carried pails of water for women in their collective garden, watering plot after plot of young plants under the beating midday sun. It was exhausting, and she was amazed to think that when the women finished the task of gardening, they would continue their daily chores of washing clothes by hand, cooking, cleaning, and looking after the children.

Each student worked on a project and touched someone in their efforts to understand the culture or lend a helping hand. The Gambians of course were hospitable and patient with the students, who took up their time and asked endless questions.

Thanks to St. Mary's College and Professor Bill Roberts for believing that exposing young people to other cultures is a powerful way to teach them to love the world. I hope the documentary can do, to some extent, the same thing.