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Arrival in Dakar

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Journals from ACI Baobab Center - Senegal, Africa

2010-09-28 Arrival in Dakar

Written 9/20/2010

Asalaa Maalekum! Bonjour!

We have been in beautiful, bustling Dakar for over a week. Well to be more accurate: a noisy, dusty, and very sweaty Dakar. Although only days have passed we have an astonishing number of experiences to share, yet as complex as assimilation into a new culture can be, these experiences are just as complex to explain to others. In a strange way it's a bonus to be the first Linfield students in Dakar because we are like explorers without a map. We get to clarify and redefine our own understanding, our own perception of Senegalese life, without help from a cheat sheet former study abroad students often provide. Every moment is truly an adventure, whether we are eating Yasa for the first time, dodging taxis, or learning the joyful art of Senegalese greetings.

<u>From Then to Now</u>

Our final flight from New York to Dakar went well. Fortunately, I had a row to myself to lie down and dream away my last moments of American life. As we flew halfway around the world

we fed off each other's nervous excitement and speculated about what life would be like in Dakar. It was still dark at 4 AM when we landed and as we walked in the humid, florescent-lit parking lot I caught a glimpse of a magnificent bat. Unlike the small bats we have in the Northwest, this bat had a wing span of about three feet! Its fur gleamed silver in the light before it disappeared again into the night. While the dark provided few clues about the city, the sight of that bat reaffirmed that we were in a very different environment!

Officials from the Baobab Center (where we are studying) took us to a temporary apartment where we stayed for the next day and a half. I was shocked at first that they dropped us off in an unknown neighborhood – without a map I should add—yet as time passed I realized having that day to rest and bond as a group was the best for everyone (the students, the center, and our host families).

For the most part we were on our own the first day except when a soft-spoken woman brought us meals every few hours. She wore a beautiful green headscarf that floated behind her as she walked, often hiding her squirmy baby swaddled on her back. At the apartment we had our first series of Senegalese meals. For breakfast we had coffee, French bread, chocolate spread and Laughing Cow cheese. For lunch we ate fried whole fish— presented with teeth and all—with rice and sauce. Dinner was more sauce and rice. Through our stomachs we experienced our first taste of Senegalese culture.

At breakfast the next morning we met very cheerful Samba, who works for the Baobab Center, and he walked us to Sicap Baobab – the neighborhood where our school is located. Like ducklings, we followed Samba closely till we arrived at the center where we were greeted by the Baobab Staff. After a tour of the center we were taken to meet our new families!

<u>My Family</u>

I arrived at my family's house around dusk and as I entered there were six or seven kids who were playing cards and scrabble. After I greeted my host mother and a few of my new siblings, I wandered awkwardly for a few minutes before deciding to join their card game. This turned out to be a great way to break the ice because I used to play cards all the time as a child. Quickly I discovered they were playing a Senegalese version of Crazy Eights and after communicating to them I wanted to play, I ended up winning my very first card game in Senegal! They were all surprised the new girl played well!

Adjusting to my new family's way of living has been easier than difficult, aside from a few changes such as getting used to being treated like a guest (which means having to do very little – a difficult adjustment for an independent young American). The practice of hospitality is called Teranga. I live with a family in a neighborhood about a twenty-minute walk from school. My family is large, with six birth children, but many family members stay the night and one niece is living with us during school break. My family is Catholic and both the parents and children are very active in the church. Living with a Catholic family is a unique experience from

the rest of the Linfield students who are all staying with Muslim families. Faith aside, my host parents and siblings are a very generous and vivacious group!

I apologize for taking so long to write this entry but gaining consistent access to internet is difficult – the only place I get free internet is at the Center where I can use my laptop. And as I am writing this the power went out – an everyday Senegalese experience...

Au revoir!

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