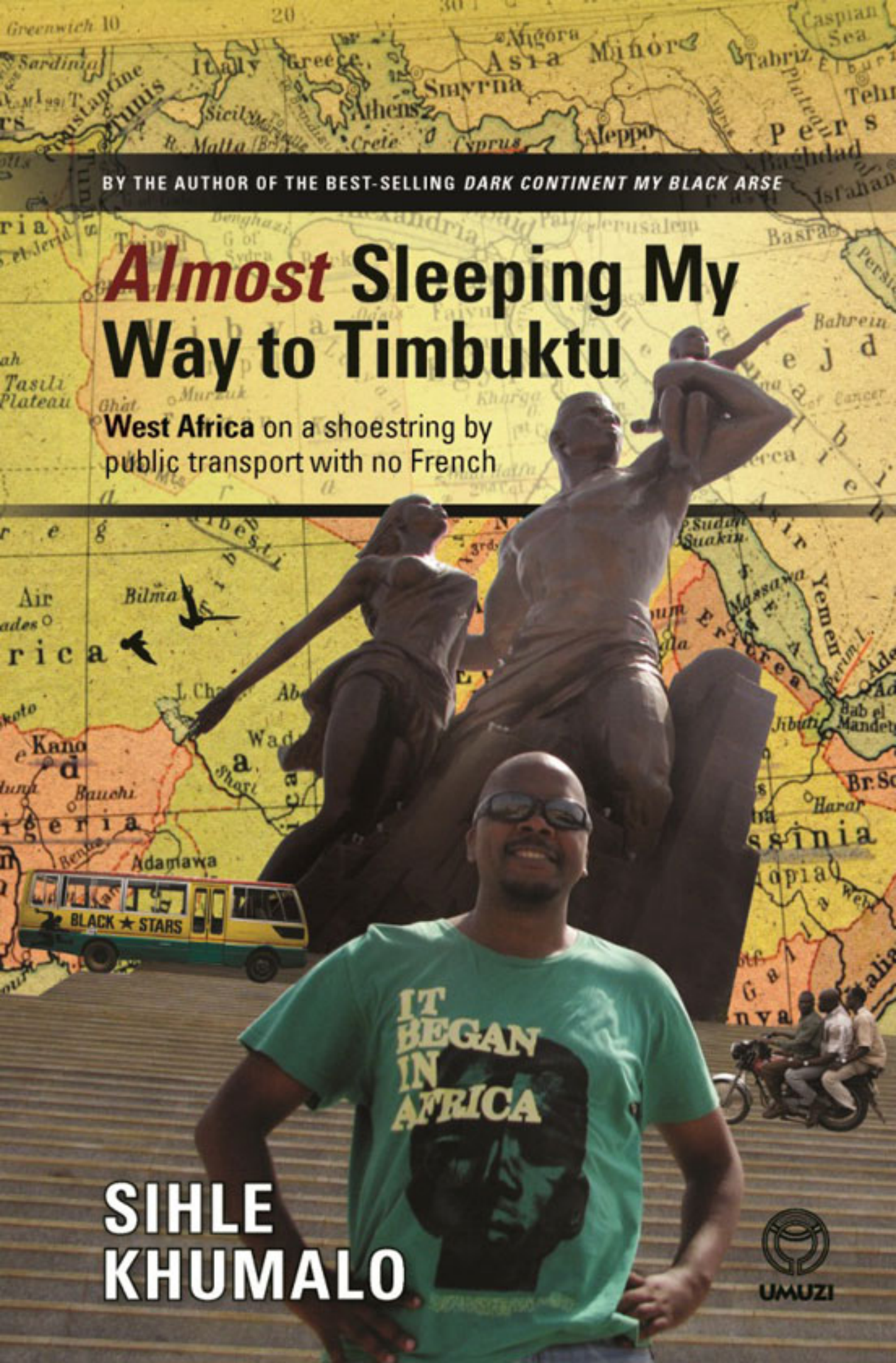
BY THE AUTHOR OF THE BEST-SELLING *DARK CONTINENT MY BLACK ARSE*

Almost Sleeping My Way to Timbuktu

West Africa on a shoestring by public transport with no French



SIHLE KHUMALO

UMUZI

ALMOST
SLEEPING MY WAY TO TIMBUKTU

By the same author:

Dark Continent My Black Arse
Heart of Africa

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West Africa on a shoestring by public transport with no French

Sihle Khumalo

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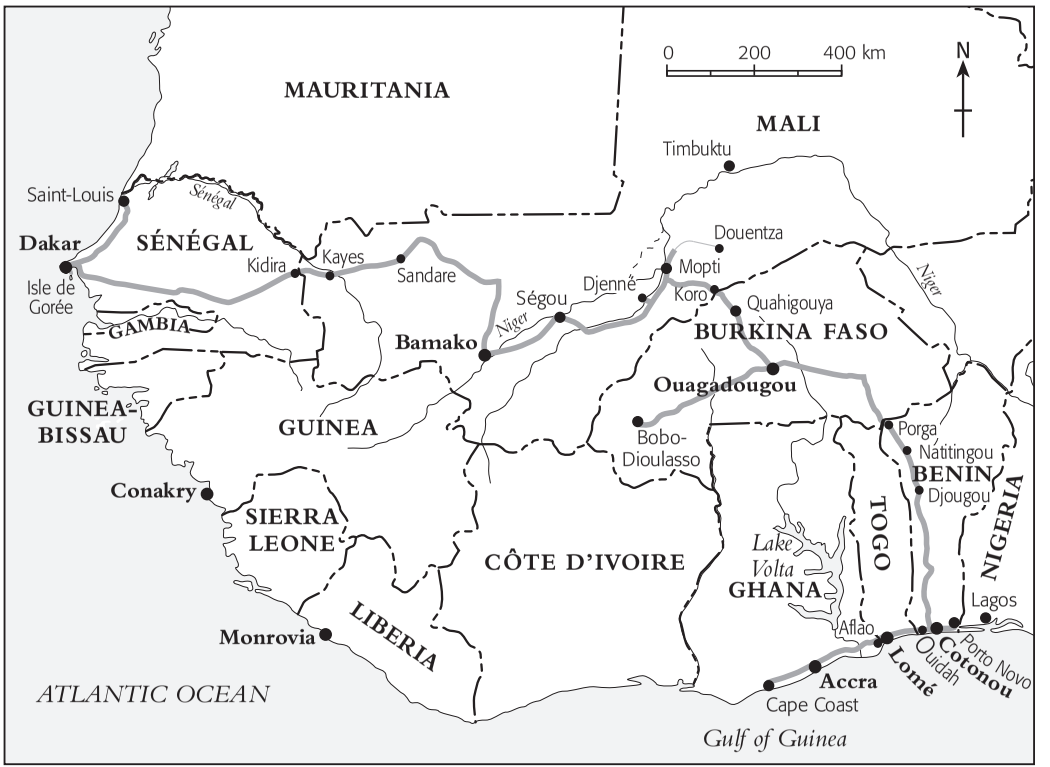
To our two precious angels,
Nala and Zawaadi

‘The darkest thing about Africa has always
been our ignorance of it.’

– George Kimble



My route through West Africa

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LOOKING FORWARD

THE SPOT WHERE EVERYTHING WAS GOING to start was now only a thousand or so metres below me. The aeroplane was about to touch down gently; the moment beckoned when the road trip, the real deal, would start at the end of the runway. The Airbus 330-200, Emirates flight EK797, was gliding over the Atlantic Ocean on its final approach to Léopold Sédar Senghor International Airport just north of Dakar. There was no turning back. I had reached my point of no return. After all, I had flown here with a one-way ticket and was about to embark on my West African adventure and explore Francophone Africa – unchartered territory for most English-speaking Africans – by public transport.

I was hoping to finish in the land of the Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa four weeks later, in a country named after Africa's third longest river, the Niger, laying claim to being the most populous country on the Continent. Yes, I was hoping to finish in the Federal Republic of Nigeria, in Lagos, more specifically, the country's economic capital and, after Cairo, the second most populous city in Africa.

En route through Mali, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Togo and Benin, I planned to visit five World Heritage Sites listed by UNESCO for their historical and cultural significance, generally inform myself about a part of the world I would be visiting for the first time, and hopefully have some fun along the way.

But besides running away from my wife, which is what every

married man must do now and then to ensure that his marriage will last, I was doing this trip, like my two earlier African adventures, to calibrate my life. In life we more often than not get bogged down by day-to-day issues and the race to prosperity and success, a race with no finishing line. And in the rush to get there we become bitter about how much we do not have. Only trips like these, I find, put things into proper perspective and show you what is of ultimate importance in life. They separate the needs from the wants. If you can survive for a whole month with only the clothes in your backpack, you realise with how much unnecessary stuff you have cluttered your life.

Even though I was on an exploration trip, and as much as I wanted to discover a few more of Africa's treasures, I had over time come to understand that travelling alone by public transport through other African countries is less about discovering things out there than about discovering things about yourself. Like what makes the real you tick.

Quite by coincidence, earlier on my ten-hour flight from Dubai I had spotted an article by Wael Al Sayegh in the inflight magazine, *Open Skies*, which encapsulated my belief about travelling, in particular travelling the way I do:

> When we travel, we are reunited with our adventurous selves. With destination set and path determined, our senses are heightened, our souls tuned to the frequency of the expanding universe. We are aligned with its flow, its energy, its force. We feel at home … Adventure is a purifying experience because it propels us outside what is comfortable to where real living begins. This is something we should all try to experience.

SÉNÉGAL: FINDING MY FEET BUT LOSING MY TONGUE

My thoughts as the plane was about to touch down just after 16:00 were interrupted by the sight of a massive bronze statue on the left-hand side of the aircraft. I had, as part of my research for the trip, read about this statue. I had seen the pictures and knew it was huge. Still, the sheer size of the family emerging from a hilltop – a woman, a man with his right arm around her waist, and a child sitting on his left shoulder pointing towards the open sea with her small left hand – took me by such surprise that my jaw dropped.

South Africa's former president Thabo Mbeki, an African Renaissance man, and former Sénégalese President Abdoulaye Wade must be beaming with African pride whenever they fly past the monument, I thought. Both gentlemen were part of the Africa-can-and-must-solve-her-own-problems-the-African-way philosophy. What a pity that neither man lasted very long as head of state. Mbeki couldn't even attend the grand opening of this monument as president of South Africa, because by April 2010, which was also the 50th anniversary of Sénégal's independence from France, he had long been succeeded by a sexy singing-and-dancing man from Nkandla.

As we were disembarking I was hit by a wall of hot, humid air. I practically staggered back. Although I knew that Sénégal, as well as all the other countries that I was planning to visit, was hot, I was not prepared for the sudden and endless impact of hot, humid air.

The airport was not busy – there was one other stationary aircraft, a Kenya Airways plane – yet our pilot parked quite a distance from the terminal building. While making myself comfortable in the runway bus, I noticed that the grass-mowing contractor had not been paid and had decided to quit cutting the grass along the runway and parking areas.

Once inside the terminal building, which had probably seen its best days back in the 1970s, it was time to go through the dreaded immigration process. The queue for international visitors, unlike the one for returning citizens, was moving very slowly.

While inching forward painfully slowly in that old, dilapidated, hot terminal building where the temperature must have been above 30 degrees, in a line of passengers fanning themselves with anything from passports to airline magazines, I sorely missed Dubai International Airport where, on my way here, I had spent more than fours hours in transit. That modern, air-conditioned airport of shiny chrome and glass and marble runs like a well-oiled machine. Besides the sleek, comfortable chairs on which I reclined for a while, I was pleasantly surprised to come across computers in one of the corridors where one could surf the internet for free for half an hour. I had been under the impression that such privileges were reserved for business-class passengers only.

Airports like Dubai International have no choice but to offer professional, efficient and outstanding service. To put things into perspective: during the 2010–2011 financial year OR Tambo International handled fewer than 19 million passengers, and that included all the international tourists who came to watch the FIFA World Cup; more than 47 million passengers went through Dubai International during the same period. The encouraging news, however, is that the Sénégalese government is constructing a new airport further inland, that will be named after Blaise Diagne, the first black African elected to the French parliament in 1914.

In the meantime, it took me more than half an hour of shuffling before I came face to face with a blue-black male official sitting in a small cubicle.

Despite the less-than-glamorous arrival, I was happy to be in Dakar, the western-most city on mainland Africa. Since my teenage years I have been intrigued by the annual Paris-to-Dakar Rally, better known simply as the Dakar, which was started in 1979. Unfortunately, after the killing of four French tourists, the 2008 Dakar had to be cancelled due to safety and security concerns, mainly in Mauritania, one of the transit countries. Since 2009, although still called the Dakar, the rally has been held in South America. And that is like holding the Rio Carnival in Monrovia – or Johannesburg. It's just not the same.

Still, imagine driving almost 10 000 km in less than two weeks, averaging more than 800 km a day, under challenging and mostly sandy conditions – even in South America. It sounds like fun, it looks like fun, and that is exactly the reason why I'd love to do it.

Still daydreaming about the off-road vehicle I'd buy, I suddenly found myself facing the immigration official.

'*Bonsour, mesour,*' I greeted him with my first attempt at a French phrase.

He nodded without showing much enthusiasm. Not that I was expecting him to jump up and hug me. Stamping an endlesss stream of people in and out of the country all day long, week after week, month after month, has to be one of the most boring jobs on earth.

Immediately after handing over my passport and completed immigration form, I realised why our queue had moved so s-l-o-w-l-y: each and every international passenger had to be fingerprinted – not just one finger, but both the left and right index fingers – and once that was done you had to look into a webcam to have your photo taken.

While this tall, dark official was processing my form, I started

suffering, just by looking at him, from BDE – Big Dick Envy. Yes, it is said that men from West Africa are way, way better endowed than the South African brothers. In fact, there is speculation that *that* was one of the main contributing reasons for the so-called xenophobic attacks of 2008.

This also explains why, after 1994, when we became more welcoming to our African brothers and sisters, so many penis enlargers set up business, right from Beit Bridge down to the Cape of Good Hope. And if you are in the penis-enlargement business, irrespective of scientific evidence showing it to be a scam, you will never run out of clients.

My trail of thought was cut short when the official stamped my passport and immigration form with two loud bangs.

I once came across a renowned aviation columnist's description of Léopold Sédar Senghor International Airport as the 'world's worst airport'. Surely Patrick Smith had never been to Lubumbashi Airport, which is constantly under construction, and where on a good day only one official will try to solicit some sort of a bribe from you. On a bad day you lose count.

On my way to collect my bag, I had to hand the stamped immigration form to an old, grey-haired official seated not far from the carousel. Out the corner of my eye I noticed that my bag was already circling. After grabbing it I had to squeeze through passengers still waiting for their luggage to emerge.

As I left the terminal building – after one unofficial-looking guy offered to help me carry my bag, which I politely refused, and another official-looking one insisted on scanning it, which I couldn't refuse although I didn't understand why – I stopped to scrutinise the crowds behind the fence. I was hoping to see someone holding a sign with my name on it. Before I left South Africa I not only made a booking at a budget hotel, I also asked them to organise a transfer for me. Everything was confirmed by email.

None of the signs held up by all sorts of people had my name on it. Damn! Not being met by someone was going to complicate my life no end. Firstly, even if I wanted to take a cab, I couldn't as I didn't have any West African franc (CFA), the currency used locally and in the rest of the *Communauté Financière d'Afrique* (Financial Community of Africa). Secondly, my nonexistent French was going to make communicating with a taxi driver more or less impossible.

Naturally, the first thing I did was to phone Kingz Plaza Hotel where I was booked for three nights. It still mystifies me how people could've travelled seamlessly and without glitches in foreign places before the advent of internet and roaming cellphones.

A woman answered. Once I had told her my name and that I was waiting for a transfer, she said, 'The man is in airport.'

That was very comforting. At least she knew my name and about the transfer. It meant I just had to look more carefully. The good thing was that I was still standing just outside the terminal building under the shade of the extended roof looking out across the crowd of taxi drivers, incutras (informal currency traders), boys selling simcards, and people who had come to pick up family and friends.

As I moved closer to the fence I finally spotted the small Kingz Plaza Hotel placard. I had not noticed it earlier because, to protect himself from the blazing sun, the guy was holding the placard more on top of his head for shade, not at an angle that made it visible from the exit of the arrivals hall.

It turned out that he did not have a car at his disposal. I only realised that when he started negotiating with some taxi drivers. In the end we boarded an old yellow Peugeot 504 with a cracked front window. Not a just a chip or a small line running through it, no, the whole thing was just short of shattered. I struggled to work out how the driver could see the road through such a windscreen. I did peep at the dashboard but the speedometer, like the petrol

gauge and the rev counter, was not working. We couldn't have been travelling at much more than 60 km/h, and I was convinced that if the driver had accellerated to 100 km/h the whole window would disintegrate and land in our laps. Thank goodness the car was so old it couldn't go any faster.

As this old *skorokoro* was graciously making its way down a dual carriageway, it dawned on me how quickly I had had to adjust: less than an hour earlier, I had disembarked from an airline that had recently won the Skytrack 2011 Airline of the Year Award, and here I was crawling down an unknown road in an unroadworthy vehicle.

The eight-hour flight from Johannesburg to Dubai had passed very quickly, mainly because of two – ok, three – reasons. One, the wide variety of music on offer ensured that I could satisfy my eclectic musical taste: on the funky earphones I listened to hits by Madonna, George Michael, Paul Simon, Ladysmith Black Mambazo, Alicia Keys, Michael Jackson and Prince.

Two, the dry red wine was bottomless, like the coffee at Mugg & Bean. My ears ringing with music, I spent most of the overnight flight sipping fermented grapes. As the wine was warming me nicely, I got stuck listening to one song over and over again: 'Three Little Birds' by the late Bob Marley. As I was embarking on a trip on a 'road less travelled', I found the lyrics, especially the chorus, almost too reassuring:

> Don't worry about a thing,
> Cause every little thing gonna be all right.
> Singin': 'Don't worry about a thing,
> Cause every little thing gonna be all right!'

Lastly, I had chosen an aisle seat on the advice of my 57-year-old colleague, a typical dirty, old white man. 'Because in that aisle seat

now and then,' he reminisced, 'especially during meal times when they are serving passengers on the other side of the aisle, the air hostesses are forced to move their backsides deliciously close to your face.'

As I leaned back in my dirty and slightly torn upholstered taxi seat, I thought that just more than 24 hours earlier, as I was leaving my office in downtown Johannesburg, the 'young lions' were marching from the city centre, through Sandton, to Pretoria as part of the 'economic freedom youth mass action' organised by the ANC Youth League. Many of the very same people singing their way to Pretoria had probably spent some nights outside court during one of Jacob Zuma's court cases before he became president. Now the shoe was on the other foot, so to speak, but they were again allowing themselves to be duped, just to be dumped later. It seemed completely unreal from 10 000 km away.

Eventually, the yellow Peugeot 504 shuddered to a stop in front of the Kingz Plaza Hotel. The reception area consisted of a small desk and two fridges filled with cold drinks and bottled water. Next to one of the fridges was the entrance to the Afro-Caribbean Cuisine Restaurant.

My very basic room on the first floor, which came at a cost of €35 per night, could only be reached via a steep staircase. At least it was self-contained and in addition had an air conditioner and a 37-cm colour TV. After a quick flick through the mainly local channels, I happened upon CNN and a discussion programme called 'Europe Courts China'. The topic interested me. I dumped my backpack on the floor as there was no wardrobe, and sat down on the bed. The panel was talking about European leaders going to China cap in hand. Who would have thought this was possible, I said to myself. There is no doubt that China has become a global powerhouse, and the Chinese know it too, so they've started to throw their weight around. Remember His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet who

was refused a visa because the guys in Beijing didn't want him to attend the birthday party of his friend, Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Mpilo Tutu?

I switched off the TV. As it was still an hour or so before sunset, I went downstairs to check out the neighbourhood.

My first impression of Dakar, based on the few kilometres we had covered from the airport, was that it was much smaller than I had anticipated. We mostly drove past low-rise buildings that looked as if they had been built a few decades ago, with additional housing still under construction in between them.

My first impression of the Sénégalese, especially the men, was that they were tall and dark. I am not so sure about handsome. My impression of the women – at least the ones I saw on the plane, at the airport and now on the street – was that they were all tall and thin and wore chipped nail polish. Now a woman who fails to keep her nails perfectly manicured gets a thumbs down in my book. So I decided to study my surroundings instead.

The further I walked in the humid heat the more convinced I became that I was not in Dakar proper. I seemed to be on the outskirts of the outer outskirts of the city in what could only be a middle-to-lower-income residential area. With these blocks of old, low buildings on either side of the big dual carriageway, it seemed like one of those urban areas where the inhabitants are not poor, but if they had the choice they would live elsewhere.

Since I'd spent the previous night drinking and singing along to all my favourite tunes, I'd hardly slept. So I expected to sleep like a log that night. But no. The older I get the harder I find it to sleep soundly in an unfamiliar environment, especially the first night. Come to think of it, not everyone in their thirties is like that. Some people I know actually prefer to sleep in unfamiliar environments, sharing a bed with a stranger.

Lying there staring at the dark ceiling, it crossed my mind that

Dakar played a crucial role in the recent history of my native land. It was in Dakar that the then banned African National Congress met for the first time with civil-society representatives and academics, many of them Afrikaners, in July 1987, at a meeting organised by IDASA, the Institute for a Democratic Alternative for South Africa. Those very early preliminary talks, which were preceded by talks at Mfuwe and Lusaka in 1985, led to more formal talks about talks that eventually led to the talks that brought about the democracy that we as South Africans enjoy today. Those talks in Dakar inspired the formation of the Gorée Insitute, a pan-African civil-society organisation which, to this day, is 'promoting peaceful, fair, self-sufficient societies in Africa'. That was why Gorée Island, where the Institute is based, was at the top of my list of things to see the next day.

The first thing I had to do the next morning, however, was to find a place where I could convert my euros to the local currency. After about a kilometre walk I came across a CBAO Bank, as the receptionist at Kingz Plaza had promised.

It was not even 10:00 yet, but it was already hot and sticky, and because I have a healthy skin with unclogged pores I was already dripping with sweat. I decided to change €300. I wasn't sure of the exchange rate and how much I was supposed to get. The lady in the bureau de change cubicle spoke perfect English, and in no time gave me a stack of crisp new banknotes, mostly purple CFA10 000 ones. As I was about to leave, the attendant, to my surprise, said, 'Enjoy Sénégal!' with a bright Colgate smile, carefully avoiding looking at my wet face.

When I got back to Kingz Plaza I was asked to pay CFA90 000 for the three nights, and in one go the approximately R3 000 I had changed seemed to have gone. I was still not sure of the rate, but I had that sinking feeling that I was being short-changed: I could not

decide whether by the woman at the bureau de change or the new guy at the hotel now manning the reception desk.

I took a breather in my room, just getting over the shock, before heading back into the streets. A block away from Kingz Plaza, I flagged down another old yellow-and-black Peugeot sedan taxi. Before I left the hotel, I asked at reception how to say 'how much' in French. '*Combien*,' the new guy said. I found it easy to remember: just think of 'kitchen' in Afrikaans: '*kombuis*'. So before I jumped in I asked the tall, dark driver '*combien*' he would charge to take me to the port, where I wanted to catch a boat to Gorée Island. The man rattled off a figure but I did not understand a word. Using hand signs, I asked him to *show* me the amount, whereupon he took a reddish brown CFA1 000 and a blue CFA2 000 note from the ashtray and waved them at me. I nodded but had no clue how much it was in real terms and whether it was reasonable. I also didn't know how far the harbour was.

I was indeed staying on the outskirts of Dakar, it appeared. We almost at once joined the Route de la Corniche Ouest – basically: 'Western Marine Boulevard' – which skirts the Atlantic Ocean. We drove past a Radisson Blu and other swanky hotels on the edge of the sea. Soon afterwards we got to the city of Dakar proper: skyscrapers, heavy traffic, loads of people walking on the streets. And soon therafter we arrived at the port.

As I was stepping out of the taxi a guy approached me and announced that he was a guide at Ile de Gorée. ('Ile' in French, I realised, was 'island' in English.) I gently turned him down. The guard outside what I assumed was the terminal building answered my silent question by pointing at the board standing on the floor. The next departure was at 12:30. I looked at my cellphone. It was 11:15. It meant I had just about an hour to kill.

So I took a walk around the block. After about 100 m I came across the railway station. The building must have been really grand

in its heyday but it was no longer so great. In fact, it urgently needed some patching up here and there and the actual railway tracks and rail sleepers needed a major overhaul.

Sauntering around the station I could not help but think that that was the very station where the legendary Dakar–Bamako train journey used to start. The construction of the railway line connecting these two capital cities commenced in the late 19th century. Once completed, it was considered one of the 'world-class' rail journeys one could undertake at the time. After independence in 1959, with corruption, no maintenance of the infrastructure and the appointment of useless and clueless staff, it was only a matter of time before things had deteriorated so badly, including a few disastrous accidents, that the service had to be suspended. Currently only the line between Kayes and Bamako, both in Mali, is working. Former President Abdoulaye Wade tried, in vain, to coerce the Chinese into revamping the decayed line between Dakar and the Mali border. Naturally, we Africans won't take responsibility for our actions, and especially our inactions; instead, as usual, we blame it all on colonialism. And imperialism. And racism. And God. And the ancestors. And anything and everything else under the sun but ourselves.

Even under normal circumstances, crossing a street can already be a bit of a hazard; but in West Africa, where people drive on the wrong side of the road (from my perspective), it became one of my biggest challenges. Someone who is used to cars driving on the left tends to look in the wrong direction for oncoming traffic. So to ensure that all angles were covered I would – even when crossing a one-way street – look both left and right before crossing. You can, after all, never be too safe.

I made it back to the port in one piece and I sat down on one of the steel chairs outside the terminal building. Within a second or two another man took a seat next to me. Moments later one of those wonderful African things happened: an acquaintance or

friend came over to talk to him and not only shook my neighbour's hand but also mine, as well as that of a woman sitting nearby. It was a small thing but it moved me. It was one of those subtle acts that distinguish us darkies from white people. To black people, greeting is much more than just saying 'hello'; by shaking someone's hand you're actually saying, 'I acknowledge you as a person.' That was why this man shook my hand. He could not acknowledge his friend while ignoring the human being next to him. Not greeting people, even strangers, is considered more than just rudeness, it borders on being arrogant and stuck-up. Sadly, as the world gets smaller and faster, we are less and less likely to acknowledge other people.

Noticing other passengers getting ready to enter the building, I joined the queue. Soon we found ourselves inside a spotlessly clean high-ceilinged hall – except there was no ceiling, just the underside of the corrugated-iron roof. When I got to the cashier I was informed a ticket to Gorée cost 5 000 franc. But then the woman took a second look at me and asked where I was from. When I said 'South Africa,' she wanted only half the amount. I suspect it had to do with me being from elsewhere in Africa. I doubt it was because she liked my cute face: appetising lips, often accompanied by a hard-to-ignore dimple in my right cheek. Whatever the reason, I was only too happy to be spared the full fare.

While waiting for the boat, I went up to the first floor to get a bird's-eye view of the waiting passengers. Most of them were relaxing on a row of blue chairs facing the waterside. Not much to look at, so I went back downstairs and bought myself a 350-ml, ice-cold Fanta orange. When the woman behind the counter asked for 500 franc, I was thrown off balance once again. I was still not able to figure out if something was expensive or not. To be honest, if she told me a Fanta cost 1 000 francs or even 2 000, I would have paid without blinking.

In no time the boat arrived and moored next to the jetty. After the passengers from the island had disembarked, it was our time to board the tall, sharp-nosed white boat with black bottom. The deck was enclosed at the back, windows all round; the front part was open to the sky.

Posted on the bulkhead was an official notice that said the boat could take a maximum of 350 people. Naturally, it crossed my mind that they might overload the the thing – we were in Africa after all. So I went up a flight of stairs to sit on the upper deck, figuring my chances – and view – would be better there. More and more people were streaming on board. It did not reassure me when the man next to me told me that locals didn't pay. 'We just show an ID at reception,' he explained.

Did they count the people who flashed their ID cards, I wondered as the heavily laden boat left the quayside at 12:33. Only three minutes late. It meant the boat was running on global standard time, not African time.

Some of the passengers upstairs, mainly Europeans, started applying their sun-protection lotion. With the sun optimally darkening my shaved head and the sound of the humming engine in the background, I started thinking about African slavery. Records show that the slave trade in Africa was initiated by the Arabs, as early as the 7th century, mainly in the north and on the east coast of the Continent, with the slave routes running across the Indian Ocean, and on land through North Africa. When the Europeans, centuries later, jumped onto the bandwagon, they dominated the slave trade on the opposite side, routes running across the Atlantic Ocean.

The transatlantic slave trade was a triangular affair: boats loaded with manufactured things like cloth, iron bars, weapons and ammunitions, alcohol and glass beads and the like would sail from Europe to West Africa, where these goods were exchanged, mainly

for slaves which the African chiefs had captured, mostly from rival tribes. On the next leg of the journey the ships transported African slaves across the Atlantic to be sold in the Americas to work on plantations in both North and South America and the Caribbean. On the third and last leg, the ships transported basic stuffs like molasses, sugar and rum, cotton and tobacco, back to Europe. A place like Gorée Island featured at the beginning of the second leg as slaves were kept there before being shipped west.

In approximately 20 minutes we had covered the 3 km voyage from Dakar harbour to Ile de Gorée, which, even before the Atlantic slave trade started, was one of the first places in Africa where Europeans dropped anchor and called home away from home. The Portuguese settled here as early as 1444. More than 100 years later the Dutch came and kicked the Portuguese out, but the Portuguese recaptured it, and then the Dutch kicked them out for a second time. Eventually the British arrived and kicked butt, but just more than ten years later, in 1677, the French captured the island and, except for brief periods during times of war, they occupied it until 1960 when Sénégal eventually got its independence from France.

As we motored into the small harbour at the northern end of the island, a stone fort in the shape of a horseshoe caught my eye. It sat right on the water's edge, above a grey wall with small windows, and with cannons on top. Across the little port, bright burnt-orange and ochre double-storey buildings basked in the shimmering heat. In front of them a row of palm trees ran along the fading white quay wall. Further back was a green hill covered in lush vegetation. Spoiling this great view was a tall steel structure – no doubt a television or cellphone tower – planted smack in the middle of the hill.

While our boat, aptly named *Beer* (yes, beer), was docking and

my eyes feasted on those brightly coloured buildings, I just fell in love with Gorée. It was literally love at first sight. There was this serene and calm atmosphere on the island, notwithstanding the enormous atrocities that were committed on its tiny 0.182 square kilometres of earth until the middle of the 19th century. It must be said, though, that there is still a raging disagreement about the number of slaves shipped from the island. One historian, Raymond Mauny, went as far as denying that any slaves were shipped from Gorée at all. Interestingly, soon after raising that question in 1951, he was appointed professor of History at the Sorbonne, as the University of Paris is better known.

After disembarking, I turned right and walked past a number of restaurants in the direction of the stone fort with the cannons on top. Understandable, considering the kind of action the island had seen in earlier times. The burgundy building that I was heading towards turned out to be the *Musée Historique*. (See how easy it is to figure out some French words?) I opted not to go in. You see, Gorée Island has to hold a world record for museums per square metre. There are no fewer than four on its small surface of more or less 900 m by 350 m: the History Museum, the Fort Museum, the Museum of the Sea and, finally, the Slave Museum. Instead, I wandered through narrow, cobbled and dusty alleys, towered over by beautiful, brightly coloured buildings with blue wooden window frames and red-tiled roofs. Even if you are not into photography, once you are on Ile de Gorée you cannot resist clicking away non-stop.

Alas, the further away from the harbour I walked, the less glamorous the houses became. In fact, some of the houses had lost not only their paint but also the plaster that used to cover the grey stone building blocks. But the colourful flowers along the path and at the base of the buildings brightened the place. The locals sitting out in front on wooden benches continued with their normal conversation

as I walked past. To them I was just one of the thousands of visitors pouring on to the island each month.

Even before I came to the island I knew that I simply had to hike up a small hill to get to the castle in the centre of the island, from where I hoped I would have the perfect view of Dakar.

As I was walking up a steep street lined with arts and crafts and souvenir vendors, I started sweating profusely. What was strange was that most people seemed to walk up the same street without perspiring. I tried to console myself with the thought: When you weigh 95 kg, it is never going to be easy to climb a hill, so just take it easy.

On the way to the top I went past both the St Charles Church and the *Mosquée*. I was happy to know that Christians and Muslims peacefully coexisted on such a small piece of land.

The view from the top of the hill was indeed, as the young people would say, a-w-e-s-o-m-e. It was truly breathtaking, and the refreshing breeze from the ocean made it extra special.

The laid-back lifestyle of the locals, coupled with the architecture of the buildings, most of which were built in the 18th and 19th centuries and restored in the 1980s and 1990s, make this small land mass a great destination. Even seasoned travellers, I am sure, will be charmed by its picturesqueness. No wonder UNESCO listed it as a World Heritage Site in 1978. It is just one of those places that you cannot help but fall in love with.

Without thinking, I started humming, 'Love the one you're with.' Sung by the late Luther Vandross.

Viewed from across the ocean, the sheer size of the city of Dakar became apparent. It being a sunny day, I was able to see the skyline clearly: at the left end of the city the tall harbour control tower overshadowed every other structure, and further back to the right a multitude of skyscrapers rose from the centre of the city, with the ships' cranes and quay cranes – which keep the port, the

city and the country's economy going – visible in the foreground.

I must have stayed for more than an hour at that highest point on the island. The white ship-shaped Slavery Monument, which commemorates all those who died on the island, or were forced to leave Africa for a lifetime of servitude in some strange country, was nearby, but I spent that entire time sitting on a rock, doing nothing but taking in the panoramic and endless view of the sea.

Then it was time to head to the House of Slaves, the most famous of the four museums on the island.

After paying the entry fee, I was allowed into the dusty pink building. At the entrance a plaque – placed there in January 2004 by American Austin College students – quotes W. Bosman who in 1701 wrote: '*If all skies were paper and all the seas ink, I would not be able to describe the brutality of the slave trade.*'

It further reads:

> Placed here in memory of the millions of Africans who died on their way to Gorée, here in its dungeons, and on the way to the Americas. We remember the descendants of those most strong to survive. Share the knowledge, spread the history and live the dream of freedom.

This museum looks like a compound. Once inside, it is impossible to see what is happening on the outside. Just beyond the cemented courtyard and almost in line with the entrance I recognised the Door of No Return, based on photos I had seen before the trip. The courtyard is dominated by two semi-circular staircases that lead to the first floor of the building. Instead of cutting straight across the courtyard, I turned left and came across the first dungeon. 'Cell' would be a better description of this room, which was exclusively used for male slaves. It consists of solid walls with no windows, thus no natural light or air could reach

the men. A lamp had to be used – only when the keepers decided it was fit to do so.

So this is where the male slaves spent their last months on African soil before they were shipped across the oceanr, I thought to myself, as I made my way to the women's and young girls' underground cells. Being a person who is not comfortable in small, crowded rooms, I felt claustrophic with only four or five other tourists present. I could just imagine what the slaves must have gone through living under such inhumane conditions – dark, damp, crowded, and probably filthy too.

There were of course many other people looking around the *Maison des Esclaves* (as it is called in French), it being a major attraction for foreign visitors to Sénégal; about 200 000 visitors a year pass through the museum. While squeezing past two African-Americans in the vaulted corridor, I overheard their guide (for hire at an extra fee) explaining how slaves would cry hysterically and in anguish as they were taken from these unhygienic, poorly ventilated cells to a waiting ship. As I turned around to continue my own private little tour, I noticed a man, who must have been in his fifties, wiping tears from his cheeks.

A tour of the House of Slaves is an emotional experience. Even more so, I can imagine, for folks who know for sure that their great-great-grandparents were uprooted and taken away from Africa. For them it must be much more of a personal journey of self-discovery than just a tourist visit.

It is worth noting that France initially abolished slavery in 1794, after the French Revolution, during the so-called First Republic. However eight years later, in 1802, Napoléon Bonaparte, who was in charge then, reintroduced the trade in human beings after some heavy lobbying by wealthy slave merchants who were losing money because of the abolition. In 1815, Napoléon – whose motto was: Freedom, Equality, Brotherhood – abolished slavery for