

DREAM AWAY

“Shall I get you a **hamburger**, Maman?”
- **NO THANKS...**

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I

t's one o'clock in the morning and we're driving down a pitch-black Senegalese highway, our two girls fast asleep on my lap whilst my husband is casting amused glances from the front seat. The driver shrugs at my refusal for a midnight snack and leaves the car

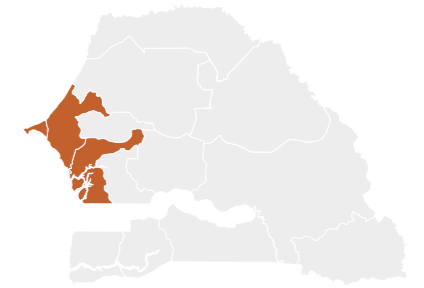
to join the queue at a surprisingly popular hamburger joint that seems to have popped out of nowhere. Also, we just narrowly avoided crashing into a dog. It would be an understatement to say things weren't going according to plan. A delayed flight and near-lost luggage situation messed up my perfectly mapped-out journey: We were supposed to be at our first hotel by 1 pm, giving the children a chance to get acquainted with this new territory in peace and quiet. Instead, we're twelve hours later and still on the road.

"Maman..." The last time I was on African soil, I was "Mamzelle", happily living crazy, kid-free adventures. These days the mother in me would call those previous travels irresponsible. Needless to say, I'm a tad nervous about being here with my children. For now, however, they're blissfully sleeping like happy kittens, seemingly immune to whatever stress this journey might have imposed on them.

It really is dark outside. Whilst chewing his burger, the driver spontaneously offers us a sightseeing tour as we speed past his grandmother's house, the country's oldest baobab tree, two churches, "the best hamburger joint in the county," and other points of interest. Apart from the headlights of the occasional oncoming car, I can't see a thing and just take his word on what we're supposedly looking at. After not running over the aforementioned dog, we consecutively almost hit a pig, a donkey, and eventually a hyena - says the driver. The hyena part means we are nearing our destination: Sine Saloum. This delta in Senegal is listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site and is one of Africa's most valuable ecosystems hiding thousands of migratory birds, monkeys, hyenas and oyster beds. Vast landscapes of pastel-coloured salt pits, white sandy beaches and the deep green mangrove forest dotted with lively fisherman villages.

In recent years, the place has increasingly been on the radar of travellers seeking luxury and authenticity. Admittedly, part of me chose this destination for the mere joy of saying we are not travelling to Cap Skirring, Senegal's best-known holiday area, full of luxurious all-in resorts and golf courses. Instead, we opted for a road trip along the Petite Côte, the stretch of coast between Dakar and Sine Saloum. You can cross it entirely in three hours, making the short car rides bearable for young children, yet see and experience a lot of different layers. We were meant to start our tour near Dakar on the island of Gorée, bearer of a tragic history as it used to play a pivotal role in the West-African slave trade. The island's face has changed into a relaxed little resort, a set of colourful streets full of flowers and artisans. We missed that part, however, thanks to a rearranged flight schedule, and are thus heading to Sine Saloum in the middle of the night, from where we'll slowly move up north again in the coming two weeks.





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LES COLLINES DE NIASSAM

It's three o'clock in the morning by the time we arrive, and we're all drowsy as we step out of the car. Voices in the dark whisper a warm welcome. A torchlight appears out of nowhere, showing the way towards a flight of stairs leading into our room. More whispered words suggest we'll check in properly in the morning but should get some rest first. After that, the light beam fades out, and we're all alone in our makeshift headquarters, lulled by the sound of a thousand insects and the rattling of an old fan. As expected with sleep-deprived little children, we are woken up only a few hours later. Not that we mind, as it allows us to witness the first of many breathtaking sunrises in Senegal. Stepping out of the cabin means stepping into an astonishing black, orange and grey painting. We spent what was left of the night in a baobab treehouse, so it appears, overlooking a sandy beach and sparkling lagune. A handful of cabins are scattered along the waterfront, connected by a rickety wooden pontoon: welcome to Collines de Niassam, a place that prides itself on having zero stars yet boasting all the luxury Mother Nature has to offer. The lodge proudly adheres to the “*négawatt*” philosophy, choosing simple, environmentally friendly solutions over any excess. Everything that wasn't deemed essential was simply banned. No air-conditioning, but old-school fans to keep everyone cool. There is no warm water in the makeshift bathrooms, but heated buckets if needed. No ever-present WIFI, just a slight hint of internet access at the reception area. In short, everything is in place for a healthy disconnection on every level. Ecology, not as a constraint but as a privileged return to basics.

The kids love it from the very first moment, barely even noticing the lack of window glass in their room or that the bathroom is little more than a tap in a tree. They do immediately cheer at the fact that the floor is littered with a zillion shells and the “*huge dinosaur*” (a monitor lizard) swimming in the lodge's beautiful pool. “*Precipitez-vous doucement,*” urges the hotel owner as we eventually check-in. He means for us not to waste time discussing tedious formalities and to dive head-first into the beautiful universe of the Collines. We're to do it softly, however, as the lodge's primary mission is to shake off all the unwanted stress we can't help but drag along. Adrenaline is welcomed with open arms as we speed into the bush in a horse-drawn cart to look for hyenas. The same excitement is reached as a herd of great big cows casually invades the lodge's beach and grounds in the afternoon: a daily tradition, so it seems. How to sum up a stay in this compelling little corner of the world? Lazy afternoons of hammocking, perfect naps, comic books (the hotel has the best library!), endless card games on the terrace of the treehouse and building shell castles.

The Collines only employ locals instead of hiring far-away staff that spend the year away from friends and families. The local providers are paid directly for any activity as the lodge refuses to take a commission. It creates a very easy-going and friendly atmosphere between staff and guests; we even get invited for a playdate by one of the gardeners, who wants our girls to meet his daughter. A lovely gesture that perfectly illustrates the famous Senegalese spirit of “*Teranga*”. *Teranga* stands for hospitality, solidarity, and respect for the community. More than just an open mindset, this philosophy is rooted deep within the culture and gets passed down from generation to generation. It explains why tourists feel so welcome, as well as the fact that different ethnic communities have managed to live side by side peacefully for ages, albeit each honouring their traditions and cultures. We're not trying to paint you an overly perfect picture here; just describing the warmth and colour of a Senegalese welcome.



YOKAN

Speaking of paintings, let's hop from one sunset to another. The best way to enjoy the sunset at the Yokan Lodge is by admiring it through your own two feet whilst you hang upside down from its well-known beachfront swing. It's our very own pre-dinner ritual here: we literally swing the sun goodbye and then start a very long, intense debate with the girls; trying to convince them to leave the playground and follow us into the delicious restaurant of this epic lodge situated only fifteen minutes from Collines de Niassam. Intrepid travellers can ask to move from one neighbour to the next in a horse-drawn cart, straight through colourful salt pits and vivid countryside villages. The Collines are all about nature and going back to basics, whereas everything at Yokan revolves around family. The place was designed with wandering tribes in mind by a couple of adventurous entrepreneurs who used to roam all over Africa with their children and grandchildren. They bought a home on the beachfront near Palmarin to gather the whole family. But they quickly outgrew that house, the Patrick's Lodge, as other people kept asking to rent it for vacation. Hence the decision to build a hotel next door, the Yokan Lodge. It's all about details in this family-friendly paradise: the beautiful play hut by the pool, the discrete chest with pool-side toys, the charming wooden baby chairs, the beach playground, the alarmingly cool playroom (I spend an entire afternoon there myself, let's say it's tough to resist...) and even the sleeping arrangements. At Patrick's Lodge kids can bunk together in a dormitory, whereas little hotel guests can choose between sleeping on beautiful stone beds or having a sleepover on the floor. Ours choose the latter, so every night, I fall asleep facing a pile of brightly coloured sheets on the floor opposite my bed, moving simultaneously to the sound of two little girls giggling inside it. The hotel's philosophy is simple: it's a place where everyone feels good - children, parents, grandparents, and people without

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kids. To obtain this, the lodge is subtly divided into different areas, some with kid's club and family sunbeds and some cosy private corners. You will find a spa, an extensive gym, a smaller beach gym, and several swimming pools. Parents can call on a private nanny or participate in many excursions with their children. Personal trainers are available, as are guides and wellness experts. Birthdays also get celebrated with all the necessary bells and whistles, including traditional dancing and cooking pots on the head (much appreciated, by the way, I don't want to take mine off...). And I want to buy every single interior detail in this very stylish place, from the woolly towels to the soft yet sturdy linens on the beds. Seriously, the linen is so appealing that we join in on our children's afternoon nap every day, sleeping like babies and unwinding the way only kids can.

Luxurious as the hotel may be, it's still an excellent gateway to learning more about the local culture. We hop onto another cart to visit some of the surrounding villages. This outing has resulted in somewhat of a transformation: the dolly glued to my daughter's arm since we arrived now sleeps blissfully on her little momma's back, snuggling like a real African baby. The proud glow on her face! We also notice some wardrobe changes as the days go on and the girls spend every rain shower - it's the rainy season in July - hiding away in the hotel shop, from where they emerge wearing ensembles full of crocodiles and local symbols. It is indeed hard not to get inspired by the notorious African sense of fashion, noting the little Sound of Music situation at Yokan: all staff members wear a different design made from the same fabric and print. The hotel has this tailor, it seems, who creates a different silhouette according to each's personal preference. And of course, I want to meet this genius designer and order some mini dresses, but unfortunately, he's away on holiday at the time of my visit...







As the days pass, we get on and off fishing boats, go horseback riding, barbecue at the beach, see the sun rise and set multiple times, and I manage to squeeze in another birthday celebration for myself, but all good things come to an end. The sky matches our nostalgia as we drive away from the lodge, soaking the land with the heaviest rain showers yet. Not exactly the ideal circumstances for an island visit by boat, but I'm sure you've caught up on the fact that we don't do ideal. Rain or shine, there is no skipping Joal Fadiouth, a commune consisting of a town, Joal, and two artificial shell islands. The latter were formed by the sedimentation of thousands and thousands of living cockle shells - hence the place is also known as Ile Aux Coquillages. Over the years, the shells became entwined with the roots of reeds, mangrove and baobab trees and the beautiful buildings on these peculiar islands, fixing them in place for centuries. One of the islands, connected by a great wooden bridge, is home to the only cemetery in the world where Catholics and Muslims are buried side by side in shell graves. The population lives off shell trade and fishing and still leads a traditional lifestyle. During our visit, the bells gather all the elders onto the town square to discuss issues regarding the youngsters. We're witnessing it all, hidden beneath our umbrellas. It's raining cats and dogs, and pigs -surprisingly enough. Nobody warned us, but a pretty joyful population of pigs completely overrules the island. The grunting fellows roam the streets and act like they own the place, which is as funny as it is fascinating. Another bell sounds, and they all race down the main road towards the entrance of the wooden bridge. Piggie lunchtime is a thing here.

TAMA LODGE

More shells await at Tama Lodge and its beautiful stone huts. The lodge is located at a public beach between Mbour's fishing port and the seaside resort of Saly. Birds of prey circle above the coconut trees all day long, and guests witness the vivid ballet of local life: young men work out on the beach every morning (the Senegalese are crazy about workouts, I have never seen so many people voluntarily indulging in squats, planks and push-ups), followed by ladies carrying vast baskets of groceries to and from the market. Afternoons are for lively groups of children and farmers rinsing off their goats and horses in the water, and in the evening, there's always a live soccer match unfolding. As we arrive, I spot a man driving an entire cart, loaded with goats, out of the ocean! As much as the rustic edge of the place may alarm older travellers, children just go along with it. Even more so: it is virtually impossible to get bored at this beach, and for the first time since we arrived, I find myself chilling uninterruptedly for an entire hour because the girls are so busy gathering coconuts, making shell necklaces, completing a makeshift obstacle course and befriending local kids. I love how they interact without being confined to the high walls of some resort. The only time I somewhat panic is when three-year-old Giselle goes missing for five minutes, only to be found discussing her newly made palm crown with an older woman at the beach... As the night falls, all goes quiet, and we fall asleep to the sound of crashing waves and the occasional nightbird.

Wild as it may be, this hotel has been described as a living piece of art more often than not. Its nine rooms are decorated with traditional African handicrafts: Kuba fabric from Congo, bed covers made of Mali's bogolan, Touareg tent stakes, mortars and pestles... Altogether, they form a somewhat surprising yet perfect harmony - which is ideal to counter the impressive cacophony that is M'Bour. Loud rap music is blaring from the speakers of our ride - yet another horse-drawn cart; we're starting to get the hang of it - as we make our way to the big port to witness the spectacular arrival of the fishermen in the late afternoon. Hundreds of traditional pirogues come home after a journey at sea, unloading their catch in front of eager fisherman wives who immediately start estimating and negotiating the day's ware. It smells like fish, thousands of people are shouting, and you're bound to get smacked in the face by a fishtail at some point, but it's one of the most colourful and exciting visits you'll have in Senegal. The girls are thrilled by all the animation going on. They beg our guide to take us to the town market, where we're in for more haggling, singing and outbursts of laughter as one little four-year-old proudly decides to catwalk her brand-new local dress between a butcher's stall and a hardware boutique. You can also attend Mbour's traditional mass, where prayers are sung to the rhythm of African tom-toms, or discover Peul or Serere bush villages, but before arriving I solemnly promised not to "do" too much, so we're skipping those. In truth, it is a bit heartbreaking to leave some of Senegal's beautiful experiences untouched, but it's also refreshing. We're not rushing anywhere, there's no Must See and -Do list to tick, just us letting the days flow whilst enjoying and digesting all the excitement this place has to offer.



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LES MANGUIERS DE GUEREO

Time to leave the masses behind as our journey is nearing its end. The only crowd we encounter at Les Manguiers de Guereo are the majestic pelicans circling overhead as we dip in the infinity pool. This eco-lodge is our final stop and has proven popular with bird- and nature lovers. It has secret garden vibes like no other, set within eleven hectares of tropical, colourful greenery hidden behind a lush lagoon. The grounds boast countless beautiful observation stations and corners for unwinding and watching the local fauna up close. As we’re trailing past vegetable patches and little ponds, a road appears in front of us, pushing deep into the mangrove forest. We follow it until it just... stops, making way for a massive lagoon full of wonders. The hotel organises guided boat excursions to explore these waters, admire its abundant wildlife and witness the local oyster farms - women actually “walk” the lagoon to pick oysters from the mangrove trees’ roots. Where our previous stays had us embracing local culture, this one is about animals. Our suite has a private plunge pool where sassy birds stop for a swim, adding even more beauty to the majestic view. The infinity pool at the lodge’s common area is built just off the terrace edge, overlooking the lagoon towards the coast. You can wander to the beach, only 800m away, through mysterious lanes and sand paths. Beware, though, of the three hotel dogs holding court in a romantic little gazebo halfway through the gardens. No need to be scared: they look like the main characters of a family-friendly Sunday afternoon movie. Yet somehow, I can’t help but freak out when they come charging towards me for a dose of hugs. It only takes thirty seconds to awaken the worried mother in me, and I throw one of my children into a tree while commanding the other to stand on my head. All the while ordering my husband to sacrifice himself for the team so we at least stand a chance to walk away from the canine assault. Oh well...

Les Manguiers is only a stone’s throw away from Bandia Reserve, one of the better tourist traps in the region. I have this thing with tourist traps; I find them fascinating in all their kitsch vibes. This one turns out to be worth it, for that matter, giving the kids a first taste of what a “real” game drive looks and feels like. Except for the big carnivores, this private reserve is home to most of the best-known African animals: white rhinoceros, zebra, giraffe, buffalo, giant eland, Cape eland, Oryx, roan antelope, waterbuck, kudu, nyala, impala, warthog, patas monkey, green vervet monkey, crocodile, giant tortoise, ostrich, and many more, as well as over 120 bird species. As a big sturdy safari truck drives us past intimidating baobabs, thorny bushes and watering holes, I notice the signs of ancient human presence. Machete cuts in the trees, an old charcoal maker’s grindstone and even a thousand-year-old baobab tomb containing the bones of countless “griots” - traditional storytellers. Maybe that is what I like about this place, the traces of the different cultures that have crossed paths on these lands and the stories they left hidden in plain sight.

Talking about surprises, the animal thing continues at the lodge, where a giant crab invites itself to dinner in the open restaurant. A nice fellow that probably crabbed - how would we say ‘walk’ in crab language? - all the way from the mangrove, but now has to retreat in the face of a furious hotel cat and giggling restaurant staff. Props to the latter, who welcome and entertain our little girls with incredible kindness and warmth. There’s that teranga thing again. The girls watch it all slack-jawed, and soon enough, I’m answering crab-related questions (“Do crabs like forks? How do crabs say ‘no thank you’?? Where do crabs go on holiday???”) for the rest of the trip. Not even an Acrobaobab adventure can take their minds off the crabby subject, but it’s okay. The past two weeks have been so relaxing that I’m simply incapable of getting annoyed by anything. A state of mind that takes root even further after a massage at the cutest spa in the world: a wooden shed hidden amongst the enchanted gardens surrounding Les Manguiers, separated from the outside world by no more than a whimsical curtain that dances to the rhythm of an old fan - I think I might need to install my own rattling version of this at home. I drift off before I know it, my mind trailing past sacred baobabs, treehouses, and a well-behaved crab saying “no thank you” to a plate of bananas. “Maman, are you sleeping?” asks the lovely masseuse. “Yes, mamzelle, and I believe I’m dreaming. Please don’t wake me up, not even for a hamburger.”

