A taste of Africa

Fresh from the Kitchen

by Sandra Phinney

My sister Carmen and I recently spent three weeks backpacking in Senegal, West Africa. We celebrated the first day of spring at the Banaba Café "campement" on Lac Rose. Campements are a cross between a campground and a cottage colony. They usually consist of small cement huts with thatched roofs. They have beds with foam mattresses and mosquito nets. The doors may or may not lock. And the plumbing may or may not work.

We arrived there after a six-hour journey from the northern part of the country. Hot and tired, we were looking forward to a swim – our first since landing in Senegal ten days earlier.

Alas, because of a two-year drought, Lac Rose had shrunk. Ownership of the campement had changed. Things are not as they were. The anticipated ride in a pirogue (comfortable wooden canoe-like boats, used for fishing and getting around on the water in Senegal) turned out to be a jaunt in a seven-foot punt that was used to collect salt from the bottom of the shallow lake.

There were no seats, so we sat precariously on the edges as our guide poled across the water. He then proceeded to proposition us. We were not amused. Later, we discovered that many women from France come to Senegal for sex.

But it wasn't a total disaster. The evening's meal was Poulet Yassa, a typical Senegalese chicken and rice dish – and it was incredibly good.

Optimism and hope

Many people have since asked "Why Senegal?" Well, two years ago, at the ripe age of 56, my sister graduated from the Dalhousie School of Nursing. In order to celebrate this milestone, we decided to take the "trip of a lifetime." She read something on the Internet about drumming lessons, pirogue rides and bird sanctuaries in Senegal. It sounded exotic and fun.

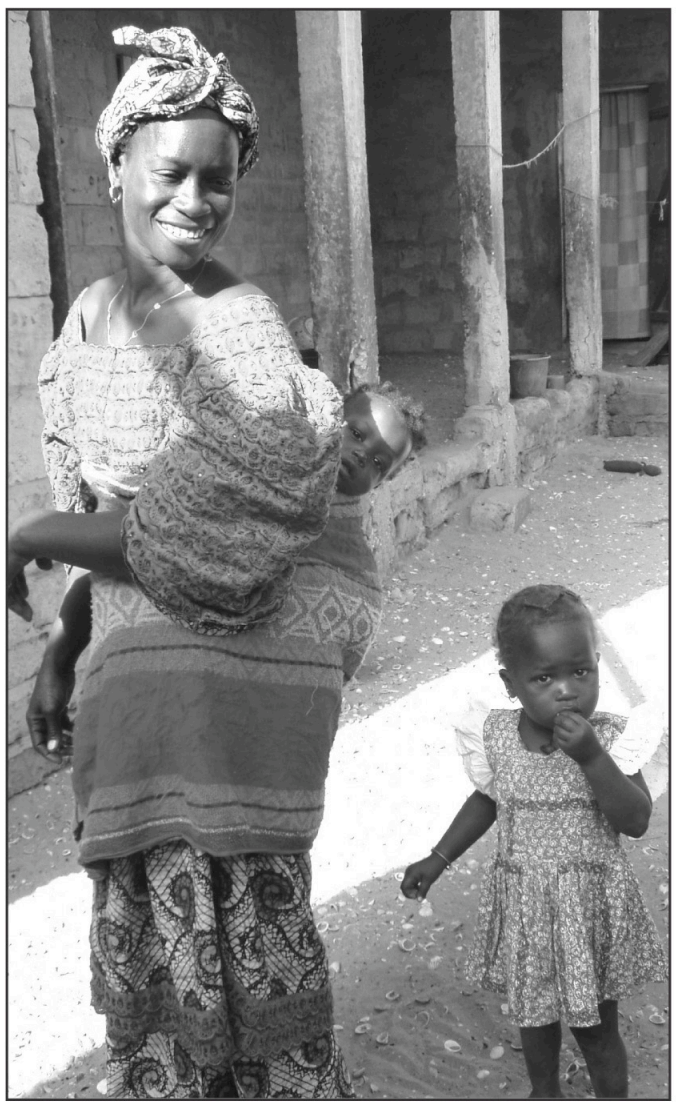
But the guidebooks don't prepare you for the extreme poverty; how to avoid being swarmed; or how to haggle for "bush taxis". Nor do they talk about the thousands of "talibes" in the capital city of Dakar—children who beg for their religious leaders.

I don't mean to paint a bleak picture of the country. It was an incredible experience. And the further away we were from the city, the more we could relax and appreciate Senegal and her people. They are resourceful, spirited, optimistic and kind. They are superb hosts.

Five days later, we arrived at Campement de Palmarin, situated on a magnificent beach. It seemed to be deserted, yet Robert Diouf, the gerand (manager), warmly greeted us. We were the first guests to visit in weeks. I'm sure he had to scurry to gather ingredients for our meal, yet he cooked an amazing meal over a grate of coals – fresh mullet (a dense white fish), home fries, and an onion-mustard sauce: Poison Yasseh.

The next morning I heard swish-swishing sounds. A handful of men, bent over homemade whisks, were painstakingly sweeping the grounds – a daily ritual. In spite of not having visitors for weeks, they were preparing for guests. Every movement was like an unspoken prayer. It was poetic and powerful.

This campement is a co-operative. Over the years, the profit has gone into the community of Palmarin (four small adjoining villages) to improve their health and education. But there is a problem – the campement is run down.



The people of Senegal are superb hosts: resourceful, spirited, optimistic, and kind.

The sign at the entrance is dilapidated; the plumbing no longer works; the huts need to be painted; the mattresses and bedding should be replaced; and there are no towels. The campement's future is in question.

Carmen and I are going to brainstorm ways and means to help the community. If anyone would like to pitch in, please contact me at s.phinney@ns.sympatico.ca. Somehow, the spirit of Africa has seeped into my bones.

Recipes

I've selected two traditional Senegalese recipes, which we never tired of. West African meals often consist of a staple like rice, millet or fried potatoes served with a piece of fish or chicken, usually with a sauce. Sauces range from a lemony onion-mustard sauce to one called mafé, made from groundnuts. Mustard is a popular condiment and is frequently laced with generous portions of crushed garlic. Great on fish or chicken!

Poulet Yassa

5-6 pounds of chicken cut in serving portions

Cover with:

3 lbs. onions, thinly sliced
1 tbsp. coarse black pepper
1 tbsp. salt
1 handful chopped parsley
1 tsp. thyme
2-3 jalapeno peppers, chopped
1 C lemon juice
1 C oil
1/2 C mustard
3 cloves garlic
4-5 carrots sliced thin (optional)

Marinate for 2 hours or more.

Remove the chicken and brown in some oil. Place the chicken with the onion mixture in a pot and simmer for 30 minutes. Serve with steamed rice.

Thiebu djen

(spelled countless different ways; pronounced Che-boo-jen)

1. Make a coarse paste by grinding together 2 onions, a handful of fresh parsley, 2 tbsp. of Soya sauce (or a Maggi cube), 1 tbsp. dried chili peppers, 4 cloves of garlic, 1 tsp. salt, and 1 tbsp. black pepper.

2. Take 3-4 pounds of white fish (whole and cleaned, or fish steaks). Make cuts in the fish and stuff with the above paste. Fry in a cup of hot oil until cooked. Remove fish and place in warm oven.

3. In the remaining oil, place 1/2 C of tomato paste, 3 tbsp. of Soya sauce, one or two hot peppers chopped, 2 onions chopped, a piece of salt or smoked fish the size of your hand, then add hunks of vegetables like carrot, tomatoes, sweet potato, squash, eggplant, whole okra, sliced cabbage, cassava, sweet peppers (Enough vegetables to feed 6 people). Add water to barely cover the vegetables then cook until tender. Remove the vegetables and keep warm.

4. Use remaining broth to cook 3 C of rice. (You need 6 C of liquid so you may need to add water.) After the rice is cooked, turn it out onto a platter and spread the warm cooked vegetables and fish on top. Serve with fresh slices of lime or lemon.

PANORAMA

National

Carol Hunter named CCA Executive Director

Carol Hunter has been appointed Executive Director of the Canadian Co-operative Association (CCA). Ms. Hunter was previously CCA's Director of Member Services.

Ms. Hunter brings 16 years of experience with CCA to the position as well as a long-standing commitment and loyalty to the Association and the co-operative movement. Ms. Hunter is well known in the co-operative community for her service excellence and responsiveness, a strong focus on strategy execution and content, and a passion for all things co-operative.

"With Ms. Hunter, we have a winning combination of someone who is passionate in promoting, developing and uniting co-operatives, as well as someone who has a demonstrated track-record in strategy implementation and relationship-building with key stakeholders and partners," says Dave Sitaram, CCA President.

Ms. Hunter began her career at CCA in 1989 as an Information Officer where she was responsible for managing Canada's largest library of co-operative and credit union research materials. She went on to become Manager of Information Services where she assumed responsibility for corporate communications and publications, and the development of a business plan to cross-promote co-operative products and services.

"I'm thrilled to be given the opportunity to lead the Association. CCA has a committed and talented staff, a dedicated Board, and a diverse membership that brings great strength to the Association. I am very honoured to be given the responsibility to serve the staff, Board, and membership. It's an enormous responsibility, which I approach with great respect and excitement," says Ms. Hunter. "Co-operatives remain as relevant today as they did more than hundred years or more ago. And a national association that exists to promote, protect, and preserve co-operatives is as important today as it was when the Co-operative Union was formed in 1909."

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