Why I Love Dakar

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Dakar is a dirty city. If you study abroad there, you will live in neighborhoods that are full of sand and dirt. As you go downtown towards the plateau, you'll smell the uncovered "canal" which carries raw sewage directly to the sea. If you look up, you'll wonder how buildings could have gotten so dirty and black. In the poorer neighborhoods (and even some of the nicer ones), raw sewage runs through bustling markets, where people buy fish engulfed with flies. Goats, sheep, and cows wander neighborhoods at random. Apparently, the cows live in Amitié VI (I don't get it either).

Nonetheless, I loved my time in Dakar. People are nearly universally friendly and helpful. I have had conversations I would never even dream of. Once, while walking to my friend's house, I said hello to an old man in Wolof. We started talking, he learned that I was an American student and I learned that he was a professor of chemistry who had studied at the University of Indiana (for some reason, everyone in Senegal has a relative or a friend at the University of Indiana). We walked and spoke Wolof together for about ten minutes. As we parted, I wondered why we had had such a conversation in Wolof as he most certainly spoke English and French, two languages I speak pretty well. My time in Dakar was very punctuated by fantastically friendly interactions like this one, curious but great.

Dakar est une ville qui bouge. Dakar has the best (and most affordable) night life of any city I've been to, with the possible exception of Budapest. Just 4 U, on Rue de Oukam aka Ave. Cheikh Anta Diop, has excellent live music every night, as does Pen Art around the corner. Make sure you go to Thiossane (Amitie II) to see Yousou Ndour, the king of Mbalax in his own club where he's most at home. There are also great venues for reggae and hip-hop. Senegalese hip-hop is drastically different from the American version. It is highly political, has strong messages for social equality, tackles issues such as globalization, imperialism, and migration and is likely to make you really like (some) hip-hop.

For me, Dakar was the optimal place to study away. I wanted a truly different experience where I could really learn a language but I was reluctant to give up the "good time" to be had in a place like Barcelona. Dakar was great in that I had really mind-blowing experiences and had fun. Teranga (Wolof for hospitality) is one of the best aspects of Senegal. Many people fed me, invited me to share a round of tea, sang a song with me (I brought my guitar), and invited me into their homes.

If I could pass along one word of advice, it would be to make sure you spend time at the Universite de Dakar (Université Cheikh Anta Diop, or just Cité). It is there where you will really have an opportunity to meet people in similar positions to you and where contact can be the most natural. Everyone there speaks French and most speak English to some degree. I was immediately welcomed into the community by an English major named Pape. Although we never spoke English together, he introduced me to many of the activities taking place at the Cité. The University is a truly vibrant place where you can learn a lot more about the country. I learned about hardships my host-family had hidden from me. I struggled to find books in the library. But most importantly, at the University, I made some great friends.

One friend insisted that I stay with his family while I was traveling in the interior. I stayed in his family compound in the small town of Tambacounda, meeting his grandmother, mother, father, sister, brother, niece, aunt, and everybody else.) I should also mention that the Senegalese concept of family is very expansive. I called my friends' mothers "mama" or "yaay" and they called me their son. I enjoyed Senegal because I experienced crazy things, managed to have a lot of fun, and felt included into several groups of friends and several families.

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