

Coumba Bang

The Spirit of St.Louis



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A Peek into the Hidden Houses of St Louis: “Entre’Vues”

During the holiday season, several of the oldest and most picturesque buildings in St Louis opened their doors to the public as part of an interactive exhibition named “Entre’Vues”. Sixteen sites were opened to the public as part of the initiative. An initial failed attempt at seeing some of the listed sites was due to the fact that the principle of an open house had been revoked for the customary lunch break. However, the group of volunteers who had gathered to trawl about town in the hot midday sun were relieved to run into El Hadj, who is one of the volunteer’s English-Wolof exchange partner who also works as a tour guide in St Louis, and who was able to magically open up one of the houses for us so we could look around.

The first house we looked at was the Maison Jamm, in the North part of the Island. From the outside the house doesn’t look like anything particularly special; it blends in with the ubiquitous colonial architecture in this part of St Louis. However, the inside displays a fascinating fusion of modern African art and design with a luxurious traditional setting. For the Entre’Vues exhibition, far from being an opportunity simply to display the historical architectural jewels of St Louis, also provided the space for African artists to display their work and even be on hand to discuss it. In the Maison Jamm we saw displayed the work of Jacob Yakouba, whose work has also been recently shown in the renovated gardens next to the Pont de Faidherbe. On the first floor of the house we saw some interesting works constructed from scrap metal, including a crocodile made of bike chains, and on the roof we looked out over St Louis and asked ourselves if the open-air roof-top shower would be overlooked by everybody or nobody.



Les Comptoirs du Fleuve

We then moved onto the Maison MC Camara on the South side of the Island. This house is a renovated warehouse that has tried to retain the original industrial features of exposed beams and stonework, whilst transforming the building into a chic living environment. Many of the renovation projects

of this nature have included self-contained designer apartments which provide an alternative for tourists to staying in a hotel. In this house we saw the work of Pap Samba Dia on the first floor. He works with paint on glass, which gives a paradoxical impression of clarity of line and fluidity of colour. Samba was there to take me through the series of paintings. I asked him if he studied the works of other artists for inspiration, and he revealed that each of his works had come directly from his heart. Within the series I saw represented a multitude of conflicting emotions even within one tiny face; the initial impression of simplicity provoked when looking at Dia’s art belies layers of complexity within.



Pap Samba Dia

The South side of the Island also afforded us the special treat of Les Comptoirs du Fleuve. The entrance lobby to this extraordinary establishment displays large informative panels on the different writers who have touched upon St Louis in their works. In the reception rooms downstairs we find a combination of well-designed comfortable room-arrangements and micro-exhibitions on the history of St Louis. We saw antique family photographs of different metisse families, some of which, including the Crespins, are still inhabitants of St Louis. St Louis was well-known for its mixed race families, who created a social elite apart from other definable classes. The daughters of mixed-race marriages, *sigares*, were particularly prized for their beauty, and wore elaborate and ornate garments with tall pointed headdresses. In one of the living areas we also saw an exhibition on Birago Diop, a famous veterinary surgeon and writer from St Louis.

The volunteers tried to imagine what it would be like to wake up every day in houses like this, and how it would change the experience of living in St Louis. After building some castles in the air about their future family homes, we all decided that living among the middle classes of St Louis was all the same a more “Senegalese” experience, and we trooped off to a tiny nearby restaurant for the cheapest lunch we could find.



10,000 people come to pray at the mosque on a Friday

Although not necessarily the Muslim brotherhood with the most followers in Senegal, Mouridism certainly gets the most attention. This is partly because it was founded here in Senegal by Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba, and so is a source of national pride as well as spiritual guidance. What with the omnipresent graffiti images and artworks based on the single preserved photo of Bamba and the tendency of Mourides to proclaim the virtues of the brotherhood's founder, few volunteers will get through their stay in St. Louis without at least some knowledge of this important figure in Senegal's history.

In the first week of February, Mourides worldwide will be celebrating one of the most important moments in the Mouride calendar: le grand maggal. This celebration takes place at Touba, which is the seat of Mouridism and home to the great mosque of Touba. The mosque itself is frequented by 10,000 worshippers each Friday for the principal prayer of the week. Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba underwent a number of trials and performed miracles to prove his faith. These included his exile into the jungle of Gabon, where he had no food, and could only demonstrate his breaking of the fast by licking water from the leaves. He also prayed on the surface of the water, and allowed himself to be eaten by ants. The maggal celebrates Bamba's departure for his exile to Gabon, and some say there are 4 million visitors for this event. Every house opens its doors to receive travellers from all over the world.

During the day of the maggal, various official delegates pass through the court of the Khalife, who, descended from Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba, is the current leader of the Mourides. The president of Senegal, Abdoulaye Wade, is a Mouride: he arrives in Touba the night before the anniversary, to be joined the next day by the Prime Minister and other politicians. Other important visitors to the Khalife include diplomats, celebrities, and representatives from other Muslim brotherhoods. Meanwhile, elsewhere in the world Mouride representatives hold celebrations in countries such as Egypt and Iran where there are Mouride mosques. In their own homes, Mourides can sacrifice any animal from a chicken to a camel, and those who are unable to travel to Touba create a mini-maggal in their homes by inviting their friends over for a feast.

Information from the article "Touba, une grande cite islamique", by Cheriffe Mohammadou Ould Abdallah, in the magazine "Periodique du Maggal: Maggal des 2 Rakaa", 32nd edition, September 2007 at Ndar

Lamp Fall, the biggest minaret of La Grande Mosquée at Touba



La Taverne

Vanessa Douyon, US

La Taverne is the bar/live music venue where we have our weekly quiz nights and often watch concerts. Vanessa discovers the secret side to La Taverne..

For weeks we lounged, danced and sipped Fantas on the back patio of the Tavern, completely unaware of what had taken place in our favorite hangout decades before. But having been there dozens of times - for the weekly world trivia quiz game or Friday night live music - the peculiarities of the building vanished and the distinction between visits blurred. So when the owner's sister took us on a private tour of the property, we were both shocked and humbled to learn that our second home was also an old slave house.

The balcony, just above our usual set of tables, is where men would sit to bid on the slaves displayed below them. Accordingly, men and women, stolen from their families and villages, were herded into the courtyard to which I have grown so accustomed. Taking a minute to close my eyes, I realized that I have been fortunate enough to choose a table in either place - the courtyard or the balcony. Years ago, the choice would have been made for me.

Just beyond our corner there is an archway and corridor I have always noticed but never followed. That corridor contains a row of dungeons where the slaves were kept, original bars still intact though chalked with



Vanessa and friends explore the cells where slaves were kept.

rust and peeling paint. Each dungeon is bare, save one small window, no bigger than a sheet of paper, to let in air so that the prisoners could breathe.

Farther down the corridor, there are old cement cut-outs in the ground: the opening to underground passageways used for the transport and commerce of slaves prohibited from walking the streets of St. Louis. Around the corner, there are more dungeons - exactly like the first, large empty rooms, each with a single window.

After climbing a rickety ladder, we made our way up to the second level of the house, where the slave owners lived. With its rich architecture and grand sculpting, I was uncomfortable with how quickly my surroundings changed. While familiar with both the sight of luxuriant living and intense poverty, this was the first time I had switched so quickly between the two worlds, with only the old ladder between them.

The next week, while lost in the crowd before a live reggae band, my eyes caught sight of that corridor and the memory of what I had seen returned. My mind fixed on the betrayal; I took a break from that dance floor.



One of the trap doors leading to underground passages in St. Louis.

The Beye Family

Malin Karlsson, Sweden

1) Please describe the members of your host family.

- Soda (host mother): She is a warm and open but also determined Senegalese woman, who cooks excellent food.
- Pa Adama (father): Pa Adama has two wives but he comes to see Soda more often than he should, perhaps because of Soda's excellent cooking?! Every time I meet him he greets me as follows: "Ca va, ca va? Ca va merci, ca va? Ca va merci, ca va."
- Maniang (brother): He is in his late 20s and is a primary school teacher; he lives at home. He's a really nice guy. When there's a conversation in Wolof he translates it for me quite often, which is not something people always think to do.
- Fama (sister): She stays home and looks after the house, and goes to her classes at the university in the afternoons. She's funny but not always easy to get.
- Penda (sister): She's the most naturally kind and gentle member of the family, but is quite babied. She goes to school during the day.



Malin with Soda

2) What were your first impressions of the house?

The house was much bigger than I thought it would be. Soda really likes plastic flowers! Everybody who comes to the house is made to feel like they are part of the family; there are always people in the TV room and it feels like home there. There are cockroaches in the kitchen and toilet, which I found surprising, but I know now this is normal!

3) What is your favourite moment of the day at home?

After the evening meals, because all of the family is there and this is the moment of the day when people are most talkative and cheerful. First we eat dinner, then we have fruit, then we have a break, then we have two rounds of tea...the family stays together for several hours.

4) What has been the hardest thing to adjust to in the house?

Two things: firstly the set gender roles. Maniang is not expected to do anything in the house. He can choose to do things, but that is his choice entirely. Pa Adama comes round and sits watching football, and if he asks for water Soda fetches it even though she has just been cooking for several hours. Secondly, they keep insisting I eat lots and then the same people tell me I'm getting fat! A woman at my work told me I must eat a lot as my stomach was looking big, but she has a very impressive body size and is only 2 years older than me, and she has no children yet!

5) What has been the funniest moment so far?

One evening I helped Emily prepare dinner for the family. There was a great atmosphere that evening as Soda's brother and niece were visiting from Switzerland. Soda kept coming and interfering in the kitchen but was thankfully replaced by Penda who was actually of help. During a quiet moment of the recipe, they put music on and told us to dance. I did my stupid chicken and fish dances – not for the faint-hearted! We were all goofing around, making jokes and having fun: it's always more fun when somebody is embarrassing themselves! After a while even Soda danced, and we were all in hysterics.

Première journée à Espoirs de demain

Julie Demale, Belgique

Je suis arrivée au centre le matin et j'ai commencé par faire la rencontre de toute l'équipe. Aussi bien des volontaires étrangers que des volontaires sénégalais. Déjà, tout le monde t'accueille avec le sourire et te pose directement plein de questions sur l'endroit d'où tu viens, ce que tu fais... Donc, une bonne ambiance d'entrée de jeu.

Je fais le tour du centre et découvre des salles avec vraiment peu de moyens. Une table qui sert de table de médecin, une cuisine, un bureau, des douches-toilettes, une salle commune et une bibliothèque dépourvue de livres et jeux. Voilà la première visite.

Les enfants commencent à arriver.

Avec Caroline, une autre volontaire, je les lave.

Ils se mettent tous à la file indienne dans les douches. Bay nous prépare une bassine, une brique de savon et des gants et nous enchaînons les douches. Bien-sûr, l'eau est froide, et les enfants sont super heureux de pouvoir se laver de temps en temps.

Lorsque nous les lavons, nous remarquons en même temps quelques plaies. Une fois découvertes, ces plaies seront soignées dans la salle des soins.

Après avoir fini avec les douches, je vais dans la salle des soins. Ceux-ci sont multiples et divers.

On passe des soins des yeux (du sérum ophtalmologique à cause de la poussière), à la guérison des croûtes et autres blessures.

Chez nous, lorsqu'un enfant a une croûte, on dit souvent de ne pas toucher sinon ça va faire une cicatrice. Ici, ce n'est pas pareil, nous devons enlever la croûte, parfois surinfectée, et la soigner et panser sinon ça fait un bon repas pour les mouches.

L'ambiance entre volontaires est indescriptible tellement elle est géniale. Tout le monde sait ce qu'il a à faire, même si on est là que depuis une demi-journée. Tout le monde aide tout le monde.

En attendant les soins il faut gérer les enfants, jouer avec eux, faire leur connaissance. Pas facile car la plupart des enfants ne connaissent pas le français juste « donne moi des sous » et « donne moi un bonbon ».

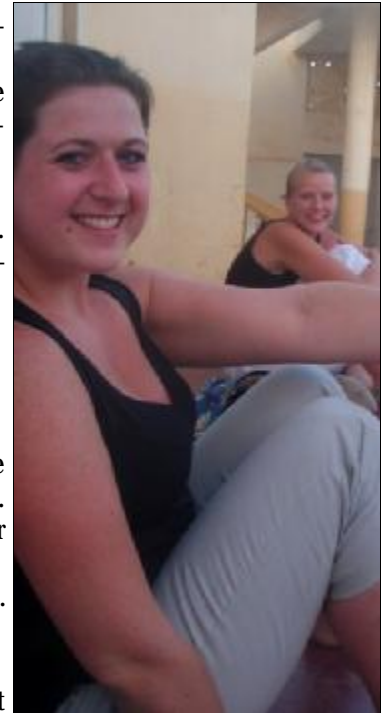
Vers 12h30 tout le monde arrête, on nettoie les salles à fond et on se retrouve dans la salle commune. Endroit où on discute des cas qu'on a eus, où tout est noté dans un petit cahier afin d'avoir un suivi médical de l'enfant. Ensuite nous rentrons et nous nous retrouvons au centre à 16h00.

Le soir nous faisons quelques soins de base (les yeux et les plaies). Je dis « de base » car il arrive qu'on ait des circoncisions à faire, ou encore qu'on soit amené à soigner la gale, enlever des kystes (sans pommade anesthésiante pour l'enfant)...

Vers 18h00, nous nettoions à nouveau les salles à fond et prenons le thé ensemble pour ceux qui veulent.

Là, nous ne parlons plus des enfants mais de nous. Comment nous avons vécu la journée, ce que nous avons appris...

C'est surtout un moment d'échange et de communication entre nous.



La Garde (The Watch)

Amelia Clifford, Australia

As we cleared the last of the Yassa Poulet I noticed with pleasure that tonight I'd managed to get more rice in my mouth rather than down my front. My skills sans cutlery were finally improving. After dinner I checked for the third time that my phone was in my pocket, and then that it wasn't on silent. No missed calls, so I waited, fidgeting.

My phone vibrated off the table when it started ringing, the much anticipated call had arrived.

« Nafi, c'est Fatou, viens tout de suite ! »

I flew out of the house and into the first taxi I could find on the main road. I was overly keen, my white coat buttoned up long before I arrived at the hospital. It was dark and deserted and incredibly quiet in comparison to the hectic pace I was used to during the day. I doubted my initial excitement even more when I found the guard snoring in his chair; this picture lacked the commotion I had expected my first night on call in Maternity.

I found Fatou, the midwife on call, with three women in the birthing rooms. One was crying out in pain and seemed unable to find a position in which she was comfortable, "première grossesse" Fatou dismissed her with a wave. Another woman was more tranquil as she lay reciting the Koran in between her bouts of nausea. The third I later discovered was a highly respected, elderly midwife who somehow managed to snore gently through all three births that night.

We monitored the position of the babies and attentively recorded as the time between contractions shortened. The women moved into the next room where they would give birth along side one another. Although the room was obviously old, it was brightly lit and the remaining white tiles were scrubbed so that they matched the stiff bleached tunics of the midwives. The stark contrast between this sparse clinical environment and the requests for water births, sound tracks, and masseurs I'd heard from women at home was not lost on me. The first birth I witnessed was quite confronting and I had to remind myself I was supposed to be helping. I was able to play a more active role later on when the element of shock had worn off. I went to see the mother and her daughter after and it seemed like half of their village had come for the birth. All aunts, sisters and grandmothers were there to celebrate. The mother told me she wanted to call her baby Amelia after me despite my protests that it was the midwives that did all the work.

I lay top to tail with Fatou on a sterile hospital bed and realised I was still wearing my white coat. The glowing hands of my watch told me it was 5:30am and I could hear the peculiar melange of music from a party somewhere along with the chanting from the mosques. The exhaustion that had been held at bay with adrenaline suddenly hit me and I struggled to keep my eyes open, I fell asleep thinking of twins.



Amelia and Fatou



Baby Amelia!

Nicholas Boatwright, US

Favourite Memories...hmmmm, way too many!

- Tabaski...never before have I (nor will I likely in the future) slit a sheep's throat and eat its meat only moments later. Who knew how a little killing could bring a family so close! Plus I still have brown tips on my pinkies! haha Thanks henna!

- Volunteer Thanksgiving! Getting the entire group involved with decorating La Linguere! Amazing... and passing around the cans of gravy and cranberry sauce to legitimize the celebration.

- Daily patisserie loafings. "Where everyone knows your name!"

- Antoine Simon!

- Getting "lost" around the city. I had the greatest times wandering around the city and finding places that I had never seen before (and searching for Cheikh Amadou Bamba murals of course!)

- Café Touba. I have yet to master how to make it!

- Weekend outings and listening to the sweet Reggae lady belt, "Africa Unite." Unforgettable!

- Head shaving at the Talibé Center. I was a pro, ask Touba!

- And my greatest of all memories...Family dinner with the Syllas! I miss so greatly eating with the entire family, talking about the day, watching RTS, and the wonderful food! I'm about to cry I miss it so much!

As for what I am up to now...

I am back at school in Charleston, and still trying to settle into "normal" life. I am just starting my Junior (3rd) Year as a Biology major with minors in both Health and African Studies. My classes this semester include Plant Taxonomy, Physics, Anthropology of African Peoples and Cultures (impossible, I know!), and Nutrition. I am also continuing my research at the Medical University of South Carolina, studying cocaine relapse prevention. My typical day consist of performing catheter surgery (inserting a tube into the rat's heart that runs through to its back for self-administration purposes. It is not nearly as bad as it sounds!) on the rats and collecting data on the effects of self-administration, extinction, and relapse on different test groups. It is going to be an interesting semester! I truthfully have daily cravings for walks around the bustling market, going to visit my tailor, a café and croissant in the patisserie, or maffé with my family. Miss you all !



Nicholas aka Tickles, surrounded as ever by a crowd of smiling people!

Wolof Saying of the Month

Provided by Fina Senghor, Desk Officer

Wolof is a language rich in proverbial expression. We have undertaken to include one such saying in each newsletter:

"kou bott bouki khathie mbow la"

(He who carries the hyena on his back will be barked at by dogs)

The fat cat gets all the attention from the dogs.

Interview with Fina Senghor, Desk Officer

For each new volunteer, Fina is the first contact you have with our team in Senegal. This interview aims to give you an insight into the role Fina plays in the Senegal office, as well as who she is! Since joining the team in November 2008, Fina has welcomed over 170 volunteers to the country, so she is practiced at reassuring both the volunteers and their families.



1) What was your background before joining Projects Abroad?

I was a student at the Gaston-Berger University of St Louis for five years; I studied applied foreign languages with English and Spanish Civilisation, and I specialized in tourism. I come from Dakar originally and came to study in St Louis.

2) Can you describe the steps you take to inform and reassure volunteers before their arrival?

First I accept their application. I send them an email to explain, to say that I will be at their disposal for all their questions, to reassure them about how to prepare their stay, to be the first contact. We decide the host family, I send a second email and photo to discuss the project and to discuss extra information and specific interests. I mail before arrival with extra information about the airport, give staff information, e.g. on Banda, I wish the volunteer a safe journey. I call one week before arrival to check the arrival date, to check that everything is fine.

3) What is the most rewarding side of your job?

When volunteers arrive – the introductions, meeting new people, making new friends, I am a girl who is hungry to learn, that's why I need to meet new people every day, every moment, and to exchange cultures, to see what happens around the world: that's an amazing experience.

4) What are the challenges of your role?

When we have many arrivals at the same time the allocation is difficult and getting all of the details onto the computer system. During the summer with the two-week special I get many calls from anxious parents which can be stressful.

5) What has been your favourite moment working as desk officer?

The first social, when Moctar told me to introduce myself to everyone – it was very hard to do it before this big group of people. It was at Flamingos, and there were not only the volunteers but many other people at the restaurant. I could see that it was very different from university – it was at that moment that I felt I had really entered the professional world. After this day I trusted myself professionally.

Talibe Centre: Generous Gift

A generous donation has been made to the talibe centre Espoirs de demain by one of the volunteer's parents and friends. The Centre opened in July 2009 and is the result of years of cooperation between Projects Abroad and Touba Diop, who is esteemed as a local hero due to his unfailing enthusiasm and energy for helping children in need. The donation will go towards improving the equipment in the centre and also act as an emergency fund for when the weekly budget does not cover the needs of the children. We are immensely grateful for this gift!!

Youssou Ndour Concert

Past volunteers will be extremely jealous of those currently in St Louis: Youssou Ndour, Senegal's favourite singer and the cause of many impromptu dancing sessions among volunteers and their host families, finally came to give a concert in St Louis stadium. A group of volunteers went to the concert and it apparently was even better than expected.

French Centre

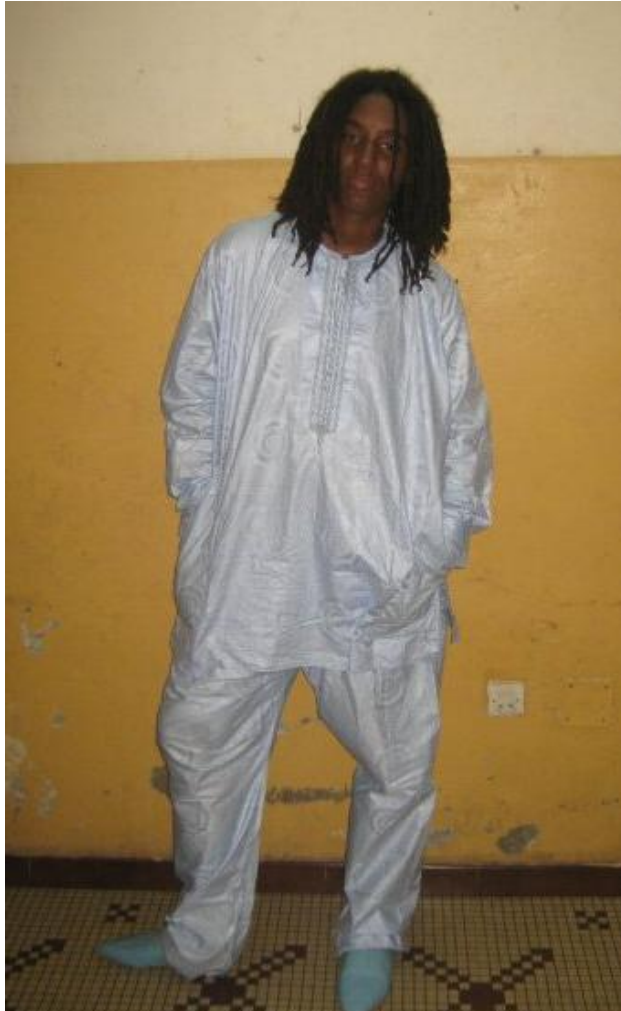
The French Cultural Centre afforded the volunteers two very different experiences this month. We had a concert from local group Duneya, a mini-orchestra made up entirely of brothers from the same huge family! They are originally from St Louis, but have made a success of their music and even appeared on TV. They got everyone dancing with their upbeat reggae numbers, and the volunteers present were even inspired to do a conga round the arena. The Centre also ran a vintage Senegalese film week, so we went to see *Yangf*, which turned out to be a retro 70s number about the evils of marijuana. The flared trousers and velvet jackets made us realize that the 70s hadn't passed Senegal by, and luckily they gave us some amusement as we nodded off during the rather slow arty shots.

Staff Change

Assistant Country Manager, Emily Henderson, is moving on to pastures new in order to complete the work experience in the field of education and gender which is necessary for her to qualify for the Masters she has applied for at the London Institute of Education. She has had a wonderful time in St Louis and has very much enjoyed working with the team and volunteers. She will leave Projects Abroad in early February.



Friday afternoon snack-time at the Talibé Centre now attracts 250 children!



Tamxarit, or Muslim new year, is the one time in the year when cross-dressing is allowed, encouraged in Senegal. Patrece, US, (see above) abandoned her usual flowing skirts for a man's boubou, and fooled most of the town. Meanwhile her host brothers (top and bottom right) were less realistic in their costume choices.