

SENEGAL by Anne Dean, Editorial Director, Living Abroad, LLC

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"The name 'Sénégal' is said to come from the Wolof name of the dugout canoe, as it was mispronounced by visiting Portuguese sailors in the middle of the 15th century." *Earth 2000, The Resource for Everything that is Senegalese.*

Sénégal, a country with a current population of almost 11 million people, was fought over for centuries. In its early days it had been occupied by the Portuguese beginning in the mid-1400s, the Dutch, the French and the English. In the 17th century, the competition for the area was fierce, particularly between French and English.

When the French settled the island of Saint-Louis at the mouth of the Sénégal River in 1659, they took an edge over the competition. Eventually the Europeans colonized the whole country by the late 1880s, the British keeping the lower valley of the Gambia River, today's Republic of The Gambia. Sénégal was a mainstay of French colonial rule in Africa.

The French definitely influenced the landscape of cities in Sénégal. The coastal towns, in particular, have some of the most well-preserved colonial buildings in Africa. One example is, the massive government house built in Dakar, which is the current residence of the President, and is a major tourist attraction. When the country became independent on April 4, 1960, its ties with France remained strong. It has enjoyed an incredible stability and a democratic government, despite a few upheavals and some poor economic performance.

Islam reached the region by the end of the eighth century. It eventually became the dominant religion. Ninety percent of the Sénégalese population are Muslims, which makes the view of a mosque one of the most omnipresent parts of the Sénégalese landscape. About 5% of the population is Roman Catholic, mainly in the south western corner, in lower Casamance. The coexistence of the two religions is remarkable, and it is not unusual to find both religions being practiced in the same village or family. Sénégal was, for some 20 years, perhaps the only overwhelmingly Muslim country to have a practising Catholic as President.

Sénégal is often the world's leading producer of groundnuts, which are the country's main export. The agriculture industry produces millet, sorghum, maize, rice and vegetables for domestic consumption, but the country's susceptibility to extreme weather has prevented it from becoming self sufficient in basic foodstuffs. Fish products have become an important commodity, accounting for one-third of total exports, and the Government also collects revenues from the sale of fishing licences to other countries, mostly from the European Union.

Sénégal is the most industrialized country in French West Africa after Côte d'Ivoire. Utilizable mineral deposits include phosphates (the chemical industry draws on sizeable deposits of lime phosphate and aluminium phosphate within Senegal). Some iron ore and gold deposits have been found, and there are potential oil reserves on- and offshore. Its main industries are almost exclusively geared to domestic consumption, and they involve the processing of agricultural products and phosphates, milling, textiles, commercial vehicle assembly, food and drink, farming materials (implements, fertilizers), paint, asbestos, cement, printing and boat building. There is also a growing information technology sector, which is unusual in this part of Africa.

The country remains dependent on foreign aid and has weak finances, but it has shown signs of recovery after an inactive time in the late 1990s. Senegal is a member of the CFA Franc Zone and the West African trading bloc, ECOWAS. France is Sénégal's major trading partner, followed by the EU, Nigeria, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, Algeria, China, Japan and the United States.

In order to travel to Senegal you must have a valid passport. Visas are required for all foreigners, except nationals of Canada, the EU, Israel, Japan, Norway, South Africa and the United States. Citizens of these countries may visit for up to 90 days without a visa.

French is the official language and Wolof is the principal African tongue. The Fula speak Pulaar (or Fula), while the Sérèr speak Sérèr. Arabic expressions are also widely used and can come in handy for travelers.

The food in Sénégal is generally very good. Regional specialties include poulet or poisson yassa, marinated and grilled chicken or fish; mafé, a peanut-based stew; tiéboudienne (chey-bou-jen), rice cooked in a fish and vegetable sauce. Senegalese beer is also good; Gazelle and Flag are popular brands. Although Senegal is predominantly a Muslim country, alcohol is available. The traditional drink is mint tea.

As far as tipping goes, a service charge of 10 to 15 per cent is included in all hotel and restaurant bills. Taxi drivers are not normally given a tip.

Dakar, the capital of Sénégal is a modern city of a million and a half inhabitants with beautiful contemporary buildings, in addition to historical colonial houses. It is a vibrant city with active open-air markets, cafe terraces, and a wide range of hotels, delicious food and a great night life. One can discover Dakar by taking a walk along the ocean or the busy city streets. Art lovers will find an abundance of galleries, artists' studios, museums, and festivals.

There are several nightclubs and places for music in Dakar, playing *mbalakh* (the local modern music), as well as a casino on the route to N'Gor. There are many cinemas showing the latest French films. The Daniel Sorano National Theatre in the Boulevard de la Republique is a popular venue for theatre, concerts and other arts performances.

If you are interested in shopping bargaining is customary. At Soumbe-dionne, on the Corniche de Fann, you will find a wonderful craft village where one can watch craftspeople at work and buy their handicrafts. Purchases include the woodcarving of African gaming boards, masks and statues; musical instruments; and metalwork, including copper pendants, bowls and statuettes. Most markets and centers sell traditional fabric, embroidery and costume, pottery, necklaces of clay beads and costume jewelry of wood or various seeds. Shopping hours are generally Monday through Saturday 0800-1200 and 1430-1800. Some shops open Sunday morning, others are closed Monday.

Proper greetings are in order when coming across local people, and you should make the effort to learn these in one of the local languages. Handshaking on meeting a person is normal; no matter how many times a day one meets the person. Should you visit a village, it is customary to call upon the village headman or schoolteacher to explain that you want to spend some time in the area. They may act as an interpreter and can be helpful guides regarding the customs of the village. In regard

to money, they might ensure that a traveller does not find himself in the position of paying for hospitality that was given in friendship. Hospitality should be returned with a gift of medicine, food or money for the village. It is not wise to give money to people on the streets, as tourists have encouraged the practice of begging. Casual wear is widely acceptable. Provocative swimwear should be worn on the beach only. Smoking is prohibited in some public places (especially mosques).

A lightweight suit for men or women is acceptable business attire. French will generally be spoken at meetings. If you do not speak French, you might want to consider hiring an interpreter. Appointments should be made in advance and you are expected to be punctual, even if your contact may be slightly late. Business cards are essential, preferably printed in French on one side and English on the other. You must always use your right hand for shaking and for passing items. The period from July to October should be avoided for business visits, as many people are on holiday. Also, during Ramadan, meetings should be restricted to office visits only. Normal business hours are Monday through Friday, 0800-1230 and 1300-1600. During Ramadan, some offices are open from 0730-1430, only.

The CFA (*Communauté Financière Africaine*) Franc (CFAfr) is the currency in Sénégal. One CFAfr is equal to 100 centimes. Notes are in denominations of CFAfr10,000, 5,000 and 1,000. Coins are in denominations of CFAfr500, 200, 100, 50, 25, 10, 5 and 1. Sénégal is part of the French Monetary Area. Only currency issued by the Banque des Etats de l'Afrique de l'Ouest (Bank of West African States) is valid; currency issued by the Banque des Etats de l'Afrique Centrale (Bank of Central African States) is not. The CFA Franc is tied to the Euro.

American Express is the most widely accepted, however, Diners Club, MasterCard and Visa have limited use. Check with your credit or debit card company for details of merchant acceptability and other services which may be available. Commissions are added for the use of credit cards. There are ATMs located in Dakar.

Traveler's cheques are easy to cash in Dakar, but to avoid additional exchange rate charges, travelers are advised to take them in Euros.

Sénégal's national airline is Air Senegal (DS). Other airlines serving Senegal include Air Afrique, Air France, Alitalia, Iberia, TAP (Air Portugal), SN Brussels Airlines and South African Airways. Flight time from Dakar to *Paris* is five and a half hours, to *London* is seven hours and 35 minutes and to *New York* is just over eight hours.

Dakar (DKR) has an international airport called Leopold Sedar Senghor which is 17km (10.5 miles) northwest of the city (about 25 minutes from the city). Regular coach and bus services go to and from Dakar. Metered taxis are available. Airport facilities include a duty free shop, bar/restaurant, bank/bureau de change, post office and car hire. There are two other operating airports in Cap Skirring and Saint Louis.

Sénégal has a warm climate. The dry season runs from December until May with cool trade winds in coastal areas. Throughout the rest of the year, a hot monsoon wind blows from the south bringing the rainy season and hot, humid weather.

All water should be regarded as being potentially contaminated. Water used for drinking, brushing teeth or making ice should first be boiled or otherwise sterilized. Milk is not pasteurized and should be boiled. Powdered or tinned milk is available and is advised, but make sure that it is reconstituted with pure water. Avoid dairy products which are likely to have been made from milk that has not been boiled.

Only eat well-cooked meat and fish, preferably served hot. Pork, salad and mayonnaise may carry increased risk. Vegetables should be cooked and fruit peeled.

Although swimming is not advisable anywhere but in a well-maintained and chlorinated pool, some 20 miles from Dakar is the Pink Lake ('Lac Rose' in French), which is a major attraction for tourists and worth the trip. The lake is in the middle of an area outside Dakar which produces huge quantities flowers and vegetables for domestic use and export. The lake is particularly spectacular at dawn and dusk. The unique vibrant pink color is produced by feldspar deposits reflecting the sunlight through the salty waters. The lake is the remains of a fossil sea that once occupied all of Sénégal. For a long time, the local Wolof villagers thought that it was a haunted place at night. However, they never seriously thought about moving, because the salt extracted from the lake is an important source of income.

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