

## Senegal – beach paradise and diverse landscape

When you think of African travel destinations, North African countries such as Morocco or Tunisia usually come to mind, as well as South Africa and Namibia in the south and eastern countries such as Tanzania and Kenya. The west coast usually remains undiscovered – completely unjustifiably! The small country of Senegal, surrounded by Gambia, Mali, Guinea and Mauritania, is definitely worth a visit. It offers magnificent landscapes, beautiful, unspoilt beaches, a great insight into the life of the locals, baobab trees in abundance and many pelicans and other bird species.

My girlfriend and I arrived in Dakar on Saturday evening and were welcomed by our driver and taken to the farm. It is located 3-4 hours from Dakar airport. Despite the late hour, a delicious vegetable stew awaited us, which we ate with appetite and joy. We tried to communicate with our host, but after the long flight and drive, our French was not quite up to scratch. After the late meal, we soon retired to our room and enjoyed our first night in wonderful silence. The rooms are simple but functional, with two beds and mosquito nets for each bed – the bathroom is directly adjacent to the room.



The next day, we were awakened by glorious sunshine and summer temperatures. We explored the grounds and shortly afterwards discovered the horses, who were quietly eating their breakfast. The small herd currently consists of eight horses – two stallions, three geldings and three mares. All of them are very

peaceful and friendly in their manner and appear healthy and well-fed. After we were able to tear ourselves away from the soothing sight of the horses grazing peacefully, our hungry stomachs reminded us of breakfast. There we were surprised by an international family who were to complete our group: a German woman with her Spanish husband, who now both live in France with their child, and a French friend. They were all very nice, and we were going to spend the week in a convivial, fun group! For breakfast, we were treated to a wide variety of jams, chocolate spreads and baguettes – in keeping with the traditions of the former French colony. Afterwards, we waited eagerly for our first ride, but had to be patient. We first explored the village and finally arrived at the harbour. Everywhere we went, we felt safe and everyone greeted us warmly. We were allowed to get into one of the smaller boats and drift across the water. There were a few fishing boats out doing their work, and we saw many different species of birds and a huge number of pelicans.

Our destination was a small, idyllic jetty with sun loungers right by the sea – perfectly equipped for a wonderful beach holiday!



We watched some locals washing their sheep in the sea on Sunday and slowly walked towards the church. Catholics and Muslims live peacefully together on the island and everyone is free to practise the religion of their choice. Mass had already begun, and we quietly entered the large but simply designed Catholic church. Unlike in our country, the church was full, with children, men and women in separate sections – all dressed very festively in

beautiful clothes and headdresses. The service was held alternately in French and the local language. It was exciting to watch the mass, with cheerful singing and drumming throughout.

Afterwards, we passed a large market – somewhat more touristy, with clothes, homemade jam and small souvenirs. After a delicious lunch back at the farm, we got to know our horses. I was assigned one of the stallions and we set off on our first ride at a walk, trot and canter. The landscape in Senegal is very flat, with small herds of cattle and villages dotted here and there. The vegetation is rather sparse overall, but is interrupted by small mangrove forests, palm-like trees and baobabs.



Time and again, we saw hundreds of crabs burrowing quickly into the ground near the water when they sensed vibrations or horse hooves. One of the great things about Senegal is the many sandy paths that are everywhere – everything is very natural and horse-friendly. There are many routes that are suitable for trotting and galloping, which we took full advantage of.

Surprisingly, almost every local in the region has a horse and usually several pigs or goats. These live in the "front garden" of every hut, so to speak, and are harnessed to the carriage to transport vegetables and other goods – a real horse country!

Some flowers were already blooming in the villages, and we were repeatedly greeted by a wonderful, colourful picture full of flowers and bushes.



Back at the stable, we helped unsaddle and bridle the horses and wanted to head to our rooms for a nice, cool shower, but unfortunately the water had run out for the day – welcome to the real Africa! There was a water supply in the village and the water was limited, so it was good that our host lived at the beginning of the village, where there was usually more water available. Late in the evening and at night, the water supply is generally much better again. However, if showering was not possible, everyone had a large bucket of water at their disposal, which we could use for showering. Afterwards, we sat together in a convivial atmosphere for dinner – the food was always more than plentiful and absolutely delicious! There was chicken, rice, couscous or sometimes pasta with lots of fresh, delicious vegetables and fruit for dessert.

The next two days we spent 6-7 hours in the saddle, enjoying the beautiful landscape. I tried out a mare that trotted along briskly. We hardly encountered anyone and enjoyed the silence and the clatter of the horses' hooves. At lunchtime, we stopped in the shade, fed and watered the horses, and then spread out a large blanket for us to enjoy our hot lunch, followed by a long lunch break, which we could use for reading or a siesta – it was like paradise!

On the second longer day, we reached the long-awaited beach. There were hardly any tourists here and we enjoyed wonderful, refreshing gallops along the beach. The horses were absolutely sure-footed, so we were able to gallop for longer distances. The sandy beach was almost deserted and it was a great

experience to hear the sound of the sea and see the beautiful sand under our hooves.



There were lots of large mussels, which delighted our Spanish friend and his son, and we enjoyed the ride until we arrived at our accommodation for the next two nights: a monastery with rooms right on the beach. Everything was very simple and modestly furnished, but perfectly adequate for us, as we spent most of our time outdoors. Here, too, dinner was freshly prepared and very tasty – we sat together and enjoyed ourselves.

One evening, we took a trip to the nearby harbour. Here, fish were caught and traded and transported by large and small ships. Some of these ships try to take stowaways to Europe. However, the condition of the boats suggests that not many actually survive the crossing. Mostly colourfully painted pirogues are used – simple historical types of ships consisting of a dugout canoe with raised side walls made of attached planks.

Anyone who sets sail here has to be tough! The waters off West Africa are among the richest in fish in the world, and most of the inhabitants of the surrounding villages and towns live from fishing and the fish trade, but more and more environmentalists are warning of overfishing. The atmosphere at the harbour is bustling, and the smell takes some getting used to. Pirogues come relatively close to shore and porters run back and forth to collect the caught fish and bring them ashore – a hard and very strenuous job. There they are washed and collected in fish baskets or plastic crates. They are then sold and usually transported with the help of donkeys and horses

or packed into large transporters that have to reach the cold stores in Dakar that same night.

Behind the transporters, a market had been set up where mainly women sold fruit, vegetables, meat and electronics. We then made our way back to the monastery along the beach at sunset. For us as Europeans, it was difficult to see the hustle and bustle, the amount of rubbish and the hard work of the fishermen. However, it gave us an important insight into the everyday life of the locals and at the same time showed us how good we have it in Europe...

We took it a little easier the next day – we went for a wonderful gallop in the morning, spent a few hours on the beach and returned to the monastery for lunch in the early afternoon. In the afternoon, everyone was allowed to take their swimming things with them on horseback and we went into the water with the horses – great fun! Some splashed around at the edge, others went deeper into the water until they were swimming and enjoying the cool water. We then brought the horses back to the monastery and made ourselves comfortable for dinner together. The next day awaited us with a long ride of about 7 hours. We rode past baobab trees and stunning lonely landscapes and reached a large square where tons of fish were stored. These were smoked and then transported further by horses and donkeys.



Afterwards, we continued on to the Saloum Islands. These consist of intertwined mangrove trees, and the area was declared a World Biosphere Reserve in 1981 and a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2011. We rode to

to the island of Fadiouth, one of three shell islands in Senegal. There we left the horses behind and visited the cemetery, which consisted entirely of shells and contained both Catholic and Muslim graves.



We walked across a wooden bridge to the island and visited the villagers. Around 9,000 inhabitants live there in a very densely populated area. We walked through the village, passed a few shops and a school, and stopped at a small shop along the way. There, everyone was allowed to choose a cold drink and enjoyed it as a welcome refreshment in the hot weather (how happy we were to have a Coke!) before we made our way back and swung ourselves back onto the horses. On the way, we crossed a strait and the water reached above the horses' bellies. It was really fun to wade through with the sure-footed horses and everyone enjoyed the cool water!



We reached the farm in the evening and enjoyed the sunset with a drink and a nice chat before tucking into dinner.

A slightly shorter ride was planned for the next day. We rode in the vicinity of the farm, passed a huge termite mound and once again enjoyed the silence and the wonderful gallops on sandy paths. We rode through small villages and stopped to let the horses drink. The locals are very horse-friendly and were happy to see us. Two of our fellow riders were allowed to practise driving a carriage today, and we met them again at the picnic lunch in the pleasant shade.

We enjoyed ourselves there until early afternoon, when it wasn't quite so hot anymore, and then rode back to the farm at a brisk pace. There, my girlfriend and I had to say goodbye to our horses, as we were flying back to Germany that night. It was difficult for us to say goodbye to our horses, our host and the wonderful group, and we looked back on this beautiful week with many memories as we boarded the plane in Dakar – hopefully we will see each other again soon!

April 2018, Angelika Kaiser