

**GUINEA BISSAU
JUNE 2010
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5 June: Our entry into Guinea Bissau was quite friendly and we were dropped off in Bissau, where a dilapidated bus waited forlornly. Communication was a slight obstacle and at first we thought all the transport has already left for the day. All of a sudden there was some shouting and we were escorted to the sad looking bus where a lot of pushing and shoving took place. Two guys were selling plastic hand fans on the bus. It was a premonition. 30 minutes later, people were pushed off the bus again, sweat dripping off everyone and the bus got jump started. We were finally on our way.

Several friendly police roadblocks followed where we didn't understand a word being said, but we nodded our heads and smiled. Three hours later my feet started to burn. The next moment, smoke obscured our view. The bus screeched to a halt and with a lot of shouting and shoving, we all staggered to safer ground.

30 minutes later, the fire was extinguished and we were bumping along. The bumps turned out to be too much for the exhaust pipe, but a very relaxed driver stopped to replace it. In Gabu, our bus driver dropped us miles from the motor park on our map. I had been collecting rocks from all ten mountains but put up a brave face walking north past the startled locals to where we thought our hotel was.

After 1.5 km, we asked a local Rasta where the hotel was and he told us to follow him. He made a u-turn and 1.8 km further, he told us to take a seat in his friend's room. Everyone was smoking Ganja. He explained he wanted us to make friends first before showing us the hotel. We declined his offer, raced out of the room and a taxi was called for us. The taxi took us almost to the exact spot we asked the local for the hotel, the Rasta and one of his friends joining us. It's been a taxing day and communication was not going too good. The people spoke Portuguese. I was not expecting any running water and after sweating profusely on the bus drinking hot water, it was such a relief to find a shower.

6 June: Because of the language, trying to find transport, turned into a 007 mission. A UN worker took pity on us and arranged a Toyota Land Cruiser to take us to the mountain. I had marked the place we wanted to go to on a map and an hour later, we were on our way to Lugajole, thanking our lucky stars. According to the driver, the road was sick and it would take us two days. Nine bumpy hours later, we were greeted by the Lugajole villagers. 10 Minutes later, we were back in the Land Cruiser heading to what I thought was a bush camp of sorts. 60 Minutes later, we were back in Lugajole, having visited a war memorial. I kept on showing the driver that we were still 16 km away from the peak. He smiled and pointed to the mountain he had just taken us to.

Just when I had made peace with the idea of entertaining the village children, thinking we would sleep in Lugajole before traveling further early the next morning, our bags were heaved onto the roof and we were told to get in. Four locals climbed in as well. Thinking we must be heading for a place closer to the peak, I developed a permanent grin on my face.



The Lugajole village children

15 Minutes later, the GPS indicated that we were going back to Beli. One of the locals

Sunrise on Africa's Peaks – Guinea Bissau

confirmed my suspicion. I tried what I thought sign language was for climbing the highest mountain in Guinea Bissau, but he just smiled and pointed to the one we have just been on. Then I showed him the map and shouted "HALT!"



The cyclist, who became our reluctant guide and translator – just before a fistfight broke out

Alan gave me one of his famous glares. Then the realization of what was happening dawned upon him and he grabbed the steering wheel. The driver stopped and everyone jumped out, glaring at one another, fists in the air. Before any punches were thrown, a cyclist appeared. The mountain gods were with us. He could speak a little English and 30 minutes later, we were all gathered around the 75 year old chief. He gave us his permission to go to the mountain as well as a room to sleep in and informed the cyclist to escort us to the mountain

The villagers were split in two with half of them on the sulking driver's side. We have arranged with our very reluctant "guide" to start at 06h00.

At 20h30, all the children were finally called to bed and we could eat some of our rations. Between us, we had two small French loaves, 5 liter of chlorinated water, insect repellent and tekkies. Expecting the driver to drop us 5 kilometers from the peak, we had left our boots in Gabu.

7 June: It is 04h00 and I sneak outside to reflect back on my life. Today is my birthday but since I already thought I was 46, I figure God has given me another year." I needed all the help I could get. As the crow flies, it was 20 km to the highest peak. We had a reluctant guide, an upset driver and only 5 liters of chlorinated water. I used the satellite phone to phone home, trying my best not to cry.



Past frustrated – who knows what tomorrow will bring.

A visit to the chief followed at 7h00, and when he indicated that he was coming with us and that the driver must take us, we realized they still were under the impression that we wanted to go to the koppie behind the village. I almost popped a vein, but deep breaths, lots of sign language and the GPS did it. The chief signed that he couldn't walk 20 km, our driver told our guide to have us back by 11, and finally we were on our way.



Some serious Bundu Bashing

I was leading, almost running with our only clue the GPS coordinates. Taking 5km/h as an average walking time, I thought the guide was pushing his luck telling the driver he would have us back by 11h00. But communication had been an obstacle so I just walked faster. Five hours later, we entered a forest.

With 200 m still to go, our guide refused to take another step. Alan and I leopard crawled through the last thorn bush, shedding more blood and at 13h00, we burst through the last bush, before stumbling onto a meadow with beautiful flowers. I had to shout! We forced

Sunrise on Africa's Peaks – Guinea Bissau

ourselves to eat some of our rations before going down to Babu, officially now our translator since he did not guide us anywhere.

My GPS was low on batteries, our translator had abandoned us at a stage and the chance that our driver was still waiting for us was almost zero. The going down was slow and painful but we all had our sense of humour (our translator found his after we paid him handsomely and he realized we would not be back by 11).

More bundu bashing followed and 12 hours after we started our hike, all 3 of us limped into the village. Our driver had left. Asking for some water to have a wash with, we were given a shower. It was definitely one of the best showers in my life. Some anti-inflammatories were taken and I rubbed some deep heat on my blisters. All was well in Africa.



Blisters, blisters everywhere

8 June: By 07h00, we were walking the 12 km to Bali, hoping that the two ladies we met along the way and followed were indeed going to Bali. Every step was torture, but I kept imagining myself on a motorbike and before long, we were in Bali, where our presence caused a lot of excitement. A translator was called for and we were informed that the motorbikes were 32 times the price we expected to pay. Alan said we will walk. I wanted to cry. I could not picture my feet lasting for another 40 km. After a lot of pleading (they must have seen me crying whilst limping), they accepted half the money they asked for. Alan was not a happy biker.



Just hoping that we are indeed walking to Beli

A heavenly, although bumpy 2 hours followed on the motorbike. Once in Cheche, we were told that the vehicle to Gabu had already left. I could just picture us sitting under a tree, enjoying the first 5 minutes of rain, and spending the rest of the day/evening trying to keep positive while picking green mangoes to eat and washing in the river. Suddenly someone shouted, we

were told to get to the ferry and voila - a vehicle waited on the other side. My prayers had been answered. We left in a Land cruiser 90 minutes later and arrived in Gabu at 17h00. A 2km mentally challenging walk followed to the hotel, then the realization that there was no running water, but we could find water to drink and I could have a wash in 200ml water. We were both exhausted and kept falling asleep, waiting for the running water. At 23h00, I could hear the water and had the long awaited shower.



A Grumpy Al next to our motorbikes

Sunrise on Africa's Peaks – Guinea Bissau



This was pure agony!



The vultures – waiting!



Alan passed out waiting for running water

9 June: Alan said we'll walk but I insisted on taking a taxi to the taxi garage, Thank Goodness, because it turned out to be hidden 5 km away. Our luggage was thoroughly searched twice in Guinea Bissau and then once again in Senegal.

SENEGAL TRANSIT

9 June: We arrived in Zigaunchor at 14h00. It felt as if my whole life was falling apart, and I could barely put on a brave face.

THE GAMBIA TRANSIT

10 June: A 7 seater Peugeot got us back to Banjul, where we spend quite some time in the internet café before going for a walk on the beach, where we bumped into the coconut boys. They were busy with coconut tree planting. They had eaten two of their three coconuts and were trying to sell the third one to get tea.

11 June: I felt very lost and uncertain about our Liberian visa, flights to Sierra Leone etc. After visiting the travel agency, things changed dramatically. Two hours later, we were watching the opening of the World Cup Soccer in South Africa on the airport, our flight ready to leave for Sierra Leone.