

RIGHT The Bijagós are not a conventional beach-vacation destination. BELOW With wildlife like the goliath heron, the islands are a World Heritage Biosphere Reserve.

# Tranquil Haven in a Troubled Land



## FAR OFF THE BEATEN PATH

**HOW TO GET THERE**  
You can fly into Bissau, the capital, from Lisbon on TAP (www.flytap.com) and from Dakar, Senegal, on TACV (866-359-8228; www.flytvcv.com). Prices vary widely, but a recent Web search found the lowest round-trip fare in December from Newark to Lisbon to Bissau on TAP to be \$2,195. Delta (www.delta.com) flies direct to Dakar from Kennedy International on Wednesdays and Saturdays; in a recent search, the lowest fare in December was \$1,167. TACV flies between Dakar and Bissau four days a week, charging about \$395 round trip.

United States citizens must have a valid visa to visit Guinea-Bissau. For information, contact the Permanent Mission of the Republic of Guinea-Bissau to the United Nations in New York; (917) 284-7771.

**WHERE TO STAY**  
In Bubaque, an air-conditioned room for two at the Kasa Afrikana (245-658-1667; www.kasa-afrikana.com), all meals included, is 112 euros, about \$171 at \$1.53 to the euro. Kasa Afrikana has four rooms, but three bungalows are under con-



struction. There is Wi-Fi and satellite television service. Simpler rooms, often without air-conditioning, and closer to Bubaque village, can be had at **Chez Dora** (245-692-58-36), for around 15 to 39 euros, and even more inexpensively at **Chez Raoul** (245-610-0149). Both are uphill from the port at Bubaque, turning right at Ciné Kraké.

In Bissau, the **Residencial Coimbra** is centrally located (Caixa Postal 1082, Avenida Amílcar Cabral; 245-213-467; www.residencialcoimbra.com). Rooms run \$130 to \$180 a night. No credit cards; wire transfers accepted.

**WHERE TO EAT**  
These simple restaurants are welcome havens of order and repose after a day tromping the teeming streets of the little capital and its sprawling Bandim market, packed with vendors:

**Adega do Loureiro**, Rua 5 de Julho.  
**A Padeira Africana**, Rua Maríen N'Gouabi No. 30.  
**O Bistro**, Rua Eduardo Mondlane No. 9.

A meal for two with wine at each place runs the equivalent of \$50 to \$60.

**BEFORE YOU GO**  
A hitch for travelers is that credit cards are not accepted in Guinea-Bissau, and I found no cash machine in Bissau that took American debit cards to get West African CFA francs, the local currency (there are about 450 francs to the dollar). Some banks will change dollars or, preferably, euros to CFA francs.

The Kasa Afrikana and the Residencial Coimbra will accept wire transfers; otherwise come armed with much cash, or be prepared to make wire transfers to Western Union offices in Bissau.

Travel to Guinea-Bissau, like almost anywhere in Africa, requires a full panoply of vaccinations. It's also advisable to take along anti-malarial medication. You should consult your doctor before going.

ADAM NOSSITER

FROM NEAR RIGHT Life on Bubaque: a young fisherman at the end of the day; a hotel worker by a bungalow; carrying a harvest of red palm oil kernels.

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there last June — an event not normally considered newsworthy in a place this small (population only 1.5 million), but the old colony of Portuguese Guinea had reached an unusual level of political disintegration. Ministers, a president and the army chief of staff had all been assassinated recently, though little of this turmoil was apparent in nonchalant Bissau.

With the elections over and with flights out of the country sparse, I had several days to kill, and everyone in the capital spoke of the Bijagós as a magical, wild place that must be visited. The Portuguese had not “subdued” them until 1936, and even today, there are islands in the archipelago outsiders never reach.

The Bijagós, with their rich, abundant and untroubled flora and fauna, are classified a United Nations World Heritage Biosphere Reserve: apart from the remarkable hippos, there are 155 species of fish, making the islands a premier though rarely frequented destination for adventurous sport fishermen; and there are dolphins, manatees, crocodiles, monkeys and striped antelopes. Of the world's eight species of tortoise, the World Heritage Center says, five are found there.

The islands are one of the most important nesting places for migratory birds on the continent, with some 96 species. The perils of navigating the narrow channels between the islands, which are loaded with sandbars, have protected the Bijagós from the giant fishing boats that ply the African coast.

This is not a place for a conventional beach vacation. Being there, finally reaching the Bijagós after overcoming the hurdles, translates into a feeling of removal you cannot get by jetting down to the Caribbean.

For all the pleasure of lying on the white sand and not seeing a soul as minutes and hours pass, an even greater pleasure is in being somewhere where you are just as strange to the inhabitants as they are to you. The usual relationship of tourist to native — that mix of wariness, guilt and hostility — doesn't exist.

That the accommodation ranges from spartan to simple but comfortable (no

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luxury) helps. The usual large distance between Westerner and West African isn't grossly amplified by obvious outcroppings of privilege. And even when you are on Bubaque, the small difficulties and discomforts — for instance, the bumpy half-hour drive past goats and market-ladies, in one of the island's few vehicles, to the magnificent main beach at the hamlet of Bruce, or the muddy disorder of Bubaque village itself — are a reminder that while these islands can receive visitors (anthropologists have long favored them because of their isolation), they have hardly been deconstructed for the sake of tourists.

AND they are not likely to be anytime soon, simply because the islands are difficult to get to. There are two options, public and private, and both are inconvenient; but the first can be dangerous, while the second is merely costly, if also thrilling. The public option is a Friday after-

noon ferry from Bissau to the main island of Bubaque. Crowded and time-consuming (seven hours), this is the true West African travel experience, recommended for the impecunious (the cost is about \$15) and hardy, and those who don't mind riding with the goats.

It's even cheaper (about \$11) to take the local pirogue on Tuesday and Wednesday, but these have been known to sink. The water can be rough. If you can afford it, rent a speedboat for about \$400 one way and bounce over the blue water in about two hours, depending on weather.

I took the speedboat route on a cloudless day and immediately felt the sense of adventure that comes from venturing out where I knew there were few Western tourists.

The gateway to this adventure is as unreconstructed as the islands, and in some ways just as rewarding: Bissau. You must fly into this tiny capital — TAP has flights from Lisbon, and the Cape Verde airline TACV from Dakar — to get to the Bijagós. If you have a taste

for decay, ruins, moldering colonial architecture, a first-hand glimpse of West Africa's social and political troubles, and excellent Portuguese restaurants, you won't regret spending a night or two in Bissau, principal city of one of the world's poorest countries.

There, the Portuguese-speaking world's predisposition to melancholy (at least outside Brazil) has ample justification: colonial rule that was by turns negligent or brutal, and a heartbreaking post-colonial history of coups, political assassinations (four so far this year) and civil war. This is a place that looks literally unpainted since Portugal was kicked out 35 years ago; finishing destructive touches were added by the civil war of the late 1990s that took place right in the capital.

## A magical, wild place in a decrepit but beguiling country.

João Bernardo Vieira was assassinated in March; the teeming flea market of Bandim.

At night, the capital is pitch-black — there is no electricity — and the citizens sit in the tropical darkness drinking beer kept cold by constantly humming generators. The challenge is to find your way through the black and across the giant potholes to one of the capital's delightful restaurants: the classic, tiled A Padeira, where graying left-behinds of Portuguese colonial rule can be glimpsed eating bacalhau; the relaxed semi-open-air Adega do Loureiro, for excellent grilled fish; or the more sophisticated O Bistro, where the cuisine shades toward the French.

At the Adega do Loureiro, the kebab, or espada, of grilled fish — chunks of succulent firm white fish, perfectly fresh from the local market that day — arrives piping hot on its skewer, accompanied by local rice. You sit at a table in a long whitewashed room open to the sky along one end, the myriad stars of the black Bissau night infusing the meal with a special stillness. There is no background music, just low, musical conversation in Krioulou, the local Portuguese-infused dialect, or in Portuguese itself. If you have ever wondered what it might have been like to have worked, say, as a shipping agent marooned in a tropical colonial outpost, Bissau provides the answer.

For lodging, there is the central Residencial Coimbra on the Avenida Amílcar Cabral, whose faded white walls and dim, high-ceilinged rooms give out onto a roof garden have a melancholy charm in keeping with the spirit of the place. The backdrop is Bissau's jaunty and haunting gumbé music; the classic 1980 album of the national band, Super Mama Djombo, is well worth having on your iPod.

IN the morning, there are the sparkling waters that separate the Bijagós from the mainland, a break from the capital's mournful ruins. If you cross those waters and stay with Gilles Develay at the Kasa Afrikana in Bubaque, as I did, he'll greet you at the hotel, take you up a stone flight of stairs and serve you fresh grilled fish for lunch.

His four whitewashed rooms are arranged around a small swimming pool and open-air bar, in a walled garden of palms, bougainvillea and other tropical

plants. The effect is cozy, relaxed and comfortable, an unpretentious but well-run oasis where all else is crumbling. Gilles admits it was a challenge to set up.

“After the war, there was nothing,” he said. “You couldn't find a nail in Bissau. It was an adventure.”

He was obliged to go to the king of the village of Bruce, the roi Koya, to ask his permission. A ceremony was performed, a few chickens sacrificed and permission was duly granted. The result is Kasa Afrikana.

Don't go to his place expecting night life or fancy restaurants. As Gilles says, “I like my life to be a little difficult.” Instead, there are the rhythms of village life outside your door — women carrying mangos on their heads, children playing soccer in the dirt road, outdoor clothes-washing, a muddy village down the road — and the magnificent beach, which you will have to yourself. Evenings are silent, still and dark, the sky covered in thousands of stars.

Gilles will take you fishing on one of his boats, or simply on an exploration of this island universe he knows as well as any outsider, for a beach picnic on a deserted island, or a visit to one of the villages. At the entrance will be a giant tree in which the tutelary spirit, the iran, is said to dwell; the children and women flocking around an elderly woman will be a clue to the unusual matriarchal social structure of the Bijagans, whose men, anthropologists say, recognize in women a life force (Arebuko) that is superior to their own.

“Look at all the millions of boats and Jet Skis,” Gilles says, smiling out at blue water broken, in fact, only by the archipelago's outcroppings. “There aren't too many places this close to Europe that are this wild and this beautiful.” It is difficult to disagree.

BELOW The Kasa Afrikana hotel in Bubaque has four rooms around a walled-in garden with a pool.

