

What I Found in Africa

By Ed Knox

“Last night I woke up startled when my house alarm went off about 4 AM. I grabbed my loaded shotgun standing in the corner and opened my door to the hallway, instead of using my radio to contact the Marine guard on duty. Down the hall, my house guard in his usual blue tunic was standing at the alarm trying to turn it off. Something was very wrong, because the guard should never be in the house. His place was in my garage or just outside the perimeter.”

This was how the embassy’s defense attaché opened the morning country team meeting in Abidjan my first morning on duty. I’d arrived in August 1990 after three years in Amman via a vacation in the Greek islands. We were in the ‘bubble’, a locked plastic room inside a standard room with no windows. Amid stale air and tired body odor government department heads reported to the ambassador and each other twice a week. I had expected dull bureaucratic chit chat. But this was more like it.

We sat stunned as the story continued, “My guard gestured ‘come here’ to me. When I hesitated to leave my open bedroom door, he started down the hall as if to pass me and take a look at some other place in the house. Instead, he grabbed my shotgun from me as he passed and turned it on me. He pulled the trigger. The gun misfired and I stepped back into the bedroom, locked the door and while standing there, pulled a dresser in front of the door. Then I radioed the Marine guard at the embassy and asked for help, immediately.”

Our lucky colonel continued, “Security guys arrived quickly and found thieves fleeing my home over the wall, dropping stuff as they ran. It turned out that they had come over my 9’ wall in the night, beaten up my real guard, stripped him of his shirt and questioned him roughly about whether or not anyone was home. He stuck to his story that no one was home and while ransacking the house, they accidentally set off the alarm.”

That was when I learned why embassy houses all had 9’ walls topped with broken glass, 24-hour guards, security lights, and constant radio contact with the Marines at the embassy. Every Thursday morning, early, we had to radio into the net with our code names, announcing we were present and ok. My codename was Arnab, roughly Arabic for ‘Bunny’. Some officers didn’t have phones and used the radio for social matters. Those of us who didn’t have lives of our own could listen to the net to hear first hand about who was visiting whom. Or we could hear about roving road blocks set up by voleurs, thieves, who rented police uniforms from the underpaid constabulary or about young gunners running around with AK-47’s.

I was in Africa to lead a small group of Africans and Americans in monitoring the media of West Africa for leader speeches, policy statements, editorials, reactions to US foreign policy, stories about economic development, wars, civil violence and so on. We listened to radio, watched tv, and read newspapers in a leased villa in the suburb of Deux Plateau, the first plateau being the heart of downtown Abidjan. I was there 1990-92 on false pretenses, my boss had insisted that my career needed further seasoning in another management position. The truth was no one else wanted the job.

I had already heard about how lucky we were to be going to the Ivory Coast. The skyscrapers of Abidjan, a coastal city on the Gulf of Guinea, had been built on cocoa wealth and the continuing presence of thousands of French planters and businessmen. Most importantly, 600 French paratroopers remained stationed near the airport. The embassy ensured tall walls around each leased home property and contracted for the local security. Later I learned that the security outfit, though unarmed, was

considered formidable. They had become feared in the larger community because after being hired, they deliberately beat a few attempted robbers to death, “pour encourager les autres.”

After returning from home leave in December, we learned that life had moved on in Abidjan. An evening outing for dinner at one of the area’s fine restaurants was always a minor adventure, partly due to the security situation. When you rolled up to your restaurant, you locked your car and found a local in the area to guard your car for a small amount of money. Then you knocked at the door and the waiters unlocked the door, let you in, and then relocked the door. Then you were ready for fun. Our favorite Chinese restaurant, the Beijing, was a small place. If you were lucky enough to be seated in the small section at the rear, the place with the lowered ceiling, you could eat with the added accompaniment of the rush of tiny feet overhead scurrying to and fro.

One night in Treichville, an area of popular eateries, four would-be patrons entered a well-known Lebanese restaurant, took out guns, and announced a robbery in progress. Someone seated pulled a gun and fired at the voleurs. They fired back. One of them hit the Italian ambassador in the chest, as he was dining with American friends. In the melee that followed the robbers got away and the Americans threw the ambassador into their car and sped toward the hospital. The ambassador died in the arms of the American wife, bleeding to death before reaching help.

A year or so later, when there were riots in Plateau, the downtown of Abidjan, I had to drive by a small group of rioters armed with large clubs. The closest to my car, a couple of blocks from the embassy, gave me a look and waved me on. The mob burnt a number of cars nearer the government building that day. I’ve always been grateful to that clear-eyed rioter who must have noticed my diplomatic plates and spared me.

One day we signed up for a trip to downtown shopping led by our Community Liaison Officer (CLO), complete with embassy drivers. On our expedition, we met a little unexpected trouble. While we were examining some sale items, we heard a commotion. Turning around we saw one of the women on our group holding on to an African. The crowd was yelling, “Kill him, kill him, voleur, voleur.” After the thief escaped, the woman explained that she had seen the thief’s hands in the pants pocket of another person in our party. She grabbed the arm and shouted, “Voleur!” Then she noticed that the arm was very strong and had instant second thoughts. By that time the crowd was ready to commit frontier justice. When calm returned, our CLO reached for her radio to inform the embassy guard about this contretemps. Her radio was in her front jean pocket and when she pulled it out, she noticed precise knife slices at the bottom of each jean front pocket. Some surgeon of a thief expected to pick up what fell out of the CLO’s tight jeans. Then another of our group noticed that a shopping basket brought along for expected purchases had been slashed. Our shopping lust satiated, we returned home.

Meanwhile life in Deux Plateau, the rich suburbs, went on. In time we learned to describe life in Africa to those without direct experience of it as ‘long periods of boredom punctuated by moments of sheer terror’. We lived just off the main street in town quite near the local supermarket. One day two thieves broke into the market, stole some money, and ran off in the other direction toward the outdoor fruit and vegetable market up the street from the Agency for International Development compound. They were chased by the forces of order and attempted to accelerate their departure with the loot by car-jacking the car belonging to the wife of the air attaché. Fortunately she was clear-headed enough to lock her doors. The voleurs gave up tugging at the car doors and one ran toward the gate into the AID compound, which was manned by the usual unarmed guards. One thief still up at the fruit stand, half a block away, fired at the guards and in the process killed his comrade who had run down to the gate.

Another evening, we sat in the peaceful garden of the AID personnel officer, drinking gins and tonic and chatting. We heard gunshots, possibly a quarter of a mile away, or were they backfires? We found out that while we had been spending a pleasant social hour, four voleurs in a Mercedes had attempted to hold up another supermarket across the road. They had been successful and as they ran back to their car, they spotted a bystander behind a fence. Their chance shot killed him.

But perhaps you need further evidence that life in Africa was more savage than you thought. Next door to the Ivory Coast was Liberia, a country that had fallen apart under the weight of warring tribes and colossal egos. My own employees had a video that showed Prince Johnson interrogating and torturing the former military dictator Samuel Doe, including cutting off various portions of Doe's anatomy. I declined to watch but I continued to read the daily reports from the besieged embassy that monitored the descent of the country into total barbarity. Many of the reports concluded with little stories of the days events. Very funny, many of them.

The Ivory Coast's western tribes took in many thousands of refugees and shared what little they had with those who fled death and massacre. African traditions include incredible generosity to the downtrodden and oppressed. Even so, some of that violent wave spread outward into the rest of the country.

We befriended three young women volunteers from the Peace Corps. They all had projects they were working on up country where the accommodations were primitive and the privacy nil. We and some friends became their down country homes away from home, giving them room for showers, a little shopping, videos, and coke and popcorn on the couch, a place to unwind, speak English, and recover their spirits. We loved those girls and became protective. One day we learned that one girl, from Ohio, who planned to complete her assignment, go to med school and become a doctor, had taken a car trip in the bush with three other colleagues. The driver had lost traction around a dirt curve and crashed the car. Our friend had been thrown from the car and died shortly afterward in the arms of a young man. We attended the missionary funeral service, with the eulogy given by the ambassador.

I lost my chief of communications, in my second year, to a disease associated with AIDS. He was young and able. After he became sick, he kept trying to return to work but lacked the strength. He went downhill rapidly. I learned that most of the beds available in the hospitals in Abidjan were filled with AIDS patients. We prayed that we not be in any automobile accidents and have to have blood transfusions. When Claudia had to have dental work, we medically evacuated her to Frankfurt, Germany rather than risk open wounds in West Africa.

We were astounded to learn that embassy visitors behaved badly. They would all be briefed on arrival at post about the presence of AIDS locally and that local prostitutes, all with AIDS, did not use or dispense condoms because they were too expensive. The embassy doctor told us about how many of these feckless visitors would, as they would customarily anywhere in the world, find a local bar, drink too much, and find comfort in costly, warm friendship. When the doctor confirmed their activity, in sober morning meeting, he advised them to tell their wives on return home, so everyone could get checked. He guessed that most did no such thing. In the meantime, AIDS in Africa was decapitating an entire national leadership, killing all who could read, write, and make decisions. In war torn areas, warrior leaders were confining their sex lives to one woman, the youngest he could find, his only assurance of virginity and clean health.

Car-jacking was a popular past-time in the Coast. One evening our young Chief of Station (COS) was out on a rolling meet, where his asset was driving one car with the windows down and the COS was driving

slowly alongside with his window rolled down so they could converse, from car to car. As they slowly drove along, the COS was alarmed to hear a gun cocked next to his left ear. He was lucky. He survived although he lost his car. It was recovered a few days later. He was promoted about a year later.

As we were about to wrap up the African portion of our lives, we heard about the new replacement for the Centers for Disease Control officer for the study of AIDS in Africa. As many families are when they arrive at a new place, they were eager to find new and interesting places to visit. They traveled to a coffee plantation not far from the capital for show and tell. On their return they found themselves driving next to men brandishing weapons who shot out their tires, robbed them of their cash and video camera, and vanished. By this time, we thought they were merely unlucky.

Africa changed my life. I can still hear the inner ear echo of Karen 'Isak' Dinesen Blixen's first line of her classic story *Out of Africa*. As spoken by Meryl Streep in her Danish accent in the movie, "I had a farm in Africa..." A failed romance amid glorious Technicolor shots of vistas of the Kenyan uplands gives us all the wrong picture of the rest of Africa. West Africa was nothing like East Africa. I learned more than I wanted to know about the impact of violence on people I knew, the casual greed of companies, the limitations of power, the need for security, the dimness of governments, and the failure of great institutions.

My very vision changed after 18 months or so of living in Africa. One day, out of the blue, I saw how beautiful African skin was, how well it went with the colorful cloth favored by my Ivorian neighbors. I saw my own face and those of my fellow Europeans were truly not white but pink, pasty and underdone. We appeared as raw, unsavory, and blurred at the edges. I finally understood what living as a minority might feel like, how standards could shift, and how my own self-image could deteriorate amid a black majority. How subtle power can be.

In the African winter we were visited by yellow skies filled with the sands of an encroaching Sahara from the north. Sometimes airliners from Europe could not land at the airport for lack of visibility. Yearly the desert grows closer to the Gulf of Guinea. In the meantime, we often had to contend on narrow highways with giant trucks from the north carrying their rich loads of exotic hardwood logs to the coast for transshipment out of the continent. Today the once heavily forested country has less than 16% of its forest canopy, less than a sustainable level.

The Ivory Coast received three world-class visitors in the 2 years I lived there, the Pope (in 1990), Dan Quayle, and Michael Jackson. Jackson, the American pop idol on an African tour to get in touch with his African roots, stepped from the plane's fuselage in full view of live TV cameras and was instantly written off by Africans, because his nose wrinkled in disgust as the smell of Africa, a rich mixture of heat, rotting vegetation, and aviation fumes, hit him. Vice President Daniel Quayle preferred to blow off a meeting of area finance ministers in favor of playing golf. He and his wife, Marilyn, remarked dismissively on the country, while on a limousine ride, in the ready hearing of their bilingual host, the prime minister.

The Pope, fresh from helping to 'liberate' eastern Europe, arrived to bless the new cathedral built in the almost uninhabited 'capital' of the country, Yamousoukro, inland 150 kilometers from Abidjan. The basilica, built at huge expense by imported labor, is the largest in the world, featuring stunning stained glass windows and air-conditioned pews. The ghost capital has alligators in the moat that surrounds its walls. The city was built by capital stolen from one of the poorest countries in the world by Felix Houphouet-Boigny, long time president of the Ivory Coast and the leader of the then small town of Yamousoukro back in 1939. Apparently the Pope concurred with the impulse to spend money from the poorest of the poor on a gigantic basilica for the greater glory of God.

I worked with the Ivoirian Foreign Ministry, which was overjoyed when I donated an outdated IBM Selectric to them. They had nothing, even paper, to work with. The Ministry begged me to gift them with a subscription to Time or Newsweek, so they could keep up with world events. Houphouet-Boigny steered his country to independence without violence and thus maintained close relations with France. He, of course, became Catholic, spoke French fluently, and followed Western ways. He was first in line of all those who administered a predatory capitalism to his own people.

My employees, mostly Ivoirians and Ghanaians, used to have pensions administered and backed by the US Government because they were among the many thousands all around the world who had signed up to act as open workers for the USA. In many countries, this attachment to America is a risky business and requires courage and vision. In a move to economize, our government in the 1990's (after we won the Cold War) abolished the system and threw all our employees on the uncertain mercies of their local governments. In a more perfect world this strategy might work well, but in the Africa that actually exists, this means that long-time employees of ours, who threw in their lives, families and futures, in support of US aims, faced the likely potential of living their 'golden years' in poverty because the local retirement systems were well-known to be bankrupt, raided by criminal African governments.

We responded to Ivoirian needs by funding a vigorous program run by the Agency for International Development. It never seemed to make much progress. But, in the early 1990's we found ourselves with an opportunity. We had 'won' the Cold War. The Soviet Union no longer threatened us and hence our worldwide attempts to organize the rest of the world's people and governments no longer had any reason to exist. That sort of vacuum is anathema to bureaucrats, who immediately searched for new reasons for maintaining budgets and staffs. Some identified the Islamic world as our next target, not seriously but as a means of keeping the money pumps primed.

In 1991 we discussed the issue in the 'bubble'. The ambassador broached the issue of the disappearance of the Soviet Union as our primary enemy. No one favored ramping down our bloated missions. The question was 'What do we do next?' The best we could come up with was the suggestion that we 'bring democracy to Africa'. How, specifically, do we do that? The best answer forthcoming that day was to fund a program to bring more computers to Africa and load them with a variety of constitutions that African legislators could use as boilerplate to write their own national laws. And to think we rule the world with creativity like that.

In a precursor to events yet to unfold in Africa, our assistant security officer, a young woman in her mid-30's, was sent to Mogadishu, Somalia, to allow the embassy's security officer to take leave for a few weeks in late 1990. When she returned she told us about her interim duty. Amid a deteriorating political and military situation in which over 300,000 Somalis lost their lives to starvation and war, she strapped 45's on each hip and carried an automatic rifle daily for weeks as the Western communities in Mogadishu drove their cars and families into the US Embassy compound and waited for either resolution of the local situation or evacuation. She only had a few marines to assist in perimeter defense. The day the navy showed up out of the Indian Ocean and began an evacuation (Operation Eastern Exit), she did a last survey of the wall and found all of them stacked with scaling ladders on the exterior ready for an assault the next morning. My blood ran colder than the air-conditioning that day.

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