

37 Tilton Avenue

Kittery, Maine 03904

Getting Around

By

Bob Miller

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As Peace Corps Volunteers, we encounter many challenges, some more serious than others. But even conquering a relatively simple challenge can bring a sense of accomplishment that spreads into how we approach and deal with more complex issues.

At 58 I was one of the older Peace Corps volunteers in my country of service, Mali, West Africa, and the idea of traveling in it unguided seemed daunting, especially because I didn't know the local language very well and its system of travel is a challenge given the fact that the majority of the roads are not paved, and some could be quite rugged, or as one volunteer said, "This isn't even a road!" So arriving at a point where I felt comfortable with getting around on my own was a major milestone for me. This happened very early on in my service during my first solo trip from Tougouni (my village of service) back to the capitol city, Bamako.

And at the time it seemed to me that Tougouni was way, way out in the "sticks," and that the trip to the capitol would be a major challenge. But my thinking on all of that changed. It started like this:

It was my first trip back to the capitol city, Bamako, from my village. And even though Bamako is only 130 miles away, it was going to be at least a five hour ride, and that was if everything went well – three quarters of the trip was over dirt road.

I waited for the local version of a "bus", called a bashée, to come by. A bashée is a van refitted to hold as many passengers as possible, it is not an elegant form of transportation.

In the distance I could see its dust cloud. It was coming from Nyamina, a town on the Niger River. When it stopped I noticed that its roof was piled high with bags, boxes, furniture, and a goat, and that it was already packed full of passengers. I was afraid that I'd have to wait another two days to get a ride to the capitol. But at that point I didn't realize that for the bashée operator

there was no problem. All bashée operators have as a motto, "there is always room for another passenger." So I was crammed into the bashée.

When I sat in the only available space that looked like I might be able to fit in it, I noticed that there was a brace of fowl at my feet. The animals that one finds on a bashée are varied, sometimes numerous and, strangely enough, quiet -- usually. The birds made no sound as I gingerly moved them a bit to the side with my foot and sat down.

And there we were, me, the birds and the rest of the passengers, happy as canned sardines. We got going almost immediately. This was in March; it was the hot, dry, and dusty season. The glass in the windows of most bashées has been removed, which is good, because there is no air conditioning at all, ever -- no working speedometers either -- I know, I sat up front with the drivers a couple of times after that.

There I was happily breathing in the red dust blowing in from the road as we skirted around holes and bad patches of road, which sometimes forced the driver to go completely off the road and into fields to find a smoother route. But I was happy, I was on my way to the capitol city and I was using the local transportation system.

I was excited and pleased with myself as the bashée careened down the road. I noted the little villages; their mud brick buildings clustered together; the cows, sometimes in the fields, sometimes in the middle of the road; donkeys in rapt contemplation often in the middle of the road; sheep all over the place. Only the goats stayed off the road. The old nursery rhyme, "the sheep's in the meadow, the cow's in the corn" seems to be at odds with my experience in Mali. The sheep and the cows were often in the road.

We came to a large village, Sirikorola, and stopped briefly for passengers to relieve themselves in whatever way they could and for numerous food vendors to tempt us with their culinary delights -- fried dough, gristle laden meat with bone fragments, bananas, flavored drinks (ginger or hibiscus), and peanuts. I bought a hibiscus drink, very tasty, very sweet, and very refreshing. The drinks were typically put in clear plastic bags, which the vendors filled at home. The drinks come in several sizes from half a cup to a quart. To drink, you bite a corner of the bag and suck...it's really quite effective, and once you get the knack, you don't squirt it on yourself or anyone else.

We started up again. The dry sparse countryside was dotted with mango and neem trees, trees that seem to love piercing sunlight and arid surface conditions. I'm told their roots go deep to get water; they have to. Cows meandered through the fields, goats scattered at the sound of any kind of motor vehicle. A donkey cart packed high with fire wood was going down the road -- the donkeys pulling as best they could, while a couple of boys no older than 10 drove the cart, occasionally flogging the donkeys to get them to turn or to move faster. Yes, this was the real Mali, dust and all.

We had been riding for two hours and we were about to stop at another police checkpoint, when something started violently attacking my feet. I nearly jumped through the roof. The birds had been so quiet, that I forgot about them. They were flapping their wings, squawking, apparently trying to nip one another, and incidentally pecking at my shin, in short, they were carrying on with abandon. I just happened to be the luckless bystander.

The owner of the birds looked at me. I couldn't tell if he thought I did something to the birds or if he was silently apologizing. The birds were tied together at the feet. He reached down and shook the cluster of feet. The birds bounced back and forth, but they got the message and quickly quieted down. For a time after that I looked down at them, to be sure they weren't preparing to attack again. But they settled down and though there were two other minor outbursts, I was used to them by then and wasn't as alarmed.

No matter, we arrived in Bamako, three hours later. I was covered with a layer of red dust, as were all the other passengers. We had been jostled, bounced, and were soaked with sweat. But, I was happy. I had negotiated the Malian transportation system without any real mishap. Though the range of travelling companions was broader than I had originally imagined, I knew that I would be able to handle the return trip with ease. I was in Mali now.