

Happy Monday from Dakar, Senegal!

A couple people asked me to send some trip updates while I'm in Africa. I've included you on the list...feel free to delete it if you don't have time to read it. I won't mind. In fact, I won't even know!

I've already hopped through two countries before landing where I am now. I had about a 10-hour layover in Paris, France from 6AM to 4PM on Friday. Even though I was exhausted from the 'red-eye' flight, I figured that I hadn't been to Paris before and didn't know when I'd be there again, so I left the airport and took in a few sights. I took the train in to the Arc de Triomphe, and walked down the Avenue de la Champs de Elysee to the Louvre. I think all told I probably walked about 10 km in all that day, and it was SO worth it. As the day went on I was more and more impressed with what a beautiful city Paris is, with a fabulous layout and lots of public space for reflecting and general hanging out. Unlike some of us, the French prioritize that. My brief visit to the Louvre was certainly the highlight. What a place! I think it's really turned me into an art-lover. I've never seen anything like it.

After dragging myself away from the Mona Lisa (literally - it really is amazing) and finding my way back to the airport, I jumped my plane for Bamako, Mali. We don't have a partner agency in Bamako, so I headed straight to Timbuktu on Saturday morning. We flew over the Niger River Delta, which was fascinating to see. It's actually the perfect time of year to visit Mali. The rainy season has just ended, so everything isn't completely desertified, yet. However, from the plane I could see where vast pieces of the delta had already dried up. The seasons for growing rice and catching fish are pretty defined in this part of the world.

How can I put this any other way? Timbuktu is like another world. For you Star Wars fans out there, think Tatooine (as I betray my closet sci-fi interest). Sand dunes, round huts, and people wrapped in all manner and colour of turbans and flowing robes. Their turbans hide the pre-maturely wrinkled eyes and weather-beaten faces of a historically nomadic people who have decided to put down roots in Timbuktu over the past couple of centuries. You can see vestiges of their heritage as people drive herds of various animals all over the place, riding donkeys and covering themselves head-to-toe against the sand. It's hard to keep your camera clean in a place like this!

The partner agency we are working with in Timbuktu is led by Nouh Ag Infa Yattara (we call him Noah). Timbuktu (did you know it was a real place?) is the fifth holiest city in Islam. Noah was born into a Muslim home there, and decided to follow Jesus after hearing about Christianity through a Western missionary couple in his teens. The city has between 40,000 – 50,000 inhabitants. It's approximate, because many nomadic families come and go from the city, and they don't like to be counted because they are superstitious and also afraid of taxes! There are 180 Christians in Timbuktu, including 120 in Noah's church, 40 in an Assembly of God church, and 20 Roman Catholics.

Noah enjoys a great reputation among the local people, and can get almost any request granted by local leaders. This is because of the church's selfless, compassionate work within their community, especially within the city's 'belt of misery', an area populated by many poor nomadic families who have suffered some hardship and have nowhere else to go. Noah and his wife also have seven orphaned children and a widow living with them at the moment. Walking around the Timbuktu airport with Noah is like a who's-who tour of the city, meeting the national press correspondent, all the senior politicians and other leaders. They all seem to love him. Noah is a ray of hope in this community. Of that there is no question. Without him, there would be much more misery.

I have to admire a guy like Noah. His three sons are all studying in the U.S. He did too. He could probably move away if he wanted to, but he chooses to stay there and help his people. With people like Noah, you can just see it in their manner – it's a calling.

One hiccup I've encountered so far is a slight language barrier. It's been a while since my last French class in grade 12, and a few years since I've been to Quebec, so I'm just a little rusty. You've heard of 'spanglish'? Well, meet her hideous sister, 'franspanglish'. This is a phenomenon in which the hapless speaker, confused by a few years of traveling to Latin America, mixes up his Spanish and French, while adding in the occasional English word, resulting in complete communication breakdown. It goes something like this, "Puis-j'ai uno petit fajita por favor?" or "Hablamos tout les lignes maintenant". Another disturbing happening is that random French words come crashing in on my mind unawares from the nether regions of my brain. This results in some giggling, and utter confusion: "Je parle le francais un peux seulement, mais mon amis le bohomme de neige veux avoir une gateaux avec fromage! Comme ci comme ca. Aujourd'hui. N'est pas? Le printemps! Sacre blue!"

I need help.

That's all for now I guess. After uneventful flights back to Bamako and then on to Dakar, Senegal, I'm now comfortably resting, for the first time in a few days, in the guest house of Inter-Senegal Mission. I look forward to seeing their work tomorrow.

Until then...

Tom

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