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WEST AFRICA Mid Season Update (Summer 08)

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The Pilotage foundation is grateful to two yachtsmen who have supplied information about West Africa. We are grateful to them for taking the time to write up their experiences for the benefit of others.
MRW 11 Apr 08

Ed Wheeler sailed this area Nov 07 to Feb 08 and has supplied the following detailed notes - his photographs are available elsewhere on this site; they remain copyright Ed Wheeler.

Dai Rice sailed here Jan 08 and his notes follow:-

[Click here for notes by Dia Rice](#) [Otherwise see notes below by Ed Wheeler](#)

UPDATE NOTES FOR YACHTS VISITING SENEGAL, THE GAMBIA AND GUINEA BISSAU
Ed Wheeler April 2008

INTRODUCTION

Steve Jones's excellent "Cruising Guide to West Africa" was written over 10 years ago and now requires updating. It is still a very good guide to the three countries covered but some things have changed. The following notes were compiled from information gathered during a two month cruise in the area in November 2007 and January/February 2008. I have only commented on topics or areas covered in the book where changes have taken place or errors have been discovered and which I have actually visited.

GENERAL INFORMATION AND PLANNING

Guide Books:

The Lonely Planet guide to Senegal and The Gambia has up-to-date information on the main towns and cities and on things to see and do. There is also a good local bird recognition book which is worth

carrying. It is A Field Guide to the Birds of The Gambia and Senegal, by Clive Barlow and Tim Wacher, obtainable from www.longitudebooks.com or good book-shops.

It is useful to reconnoitre before leaving home using Google Earth, which shows a surprising amount of detail.

Weather:

The weather was as predicted for the dry season, rather hot and humid in November and early December, less humid and generally more pleasant in late December/January and February. Temperatures hovered around 30 - 35 deg by mid afternoon, dropping to 20 - 25 deg at night. Visibility varied from moderate to hazy. We did not experience any severe Harmattan conditions. Winds early in the season were generally less than we expected, becoming lighter the farther south we went. However, fresh to strong winds between NW and NE were experienced on several days on the Gambia River in early December. In late January, northerly winds became well-established from the Guinea Bissau border to about 19 deg. N., after which they became lighter and more variable. No rain fell until just N of Cap Vert on the return passage in February, when some thunderstorms occurred.

Charts:

Admiralty charts as listed in the book are still available but have not been significantly updated. We were unable to source Portuguese charts for Guinea Bissau. These would have been very useful. Once inside the river bars, the charts of Senegal and The Gambia were dimensionally accurate and in most cases the depth information is still reasonable valid. However, detail is lacking. There were older charts of the River Gambia which contain much greater detail but these are no longer available, unless one is prepared to rip them off the walls of bars where they are sometimes displayed. Using electronic charting from Seamap on a laptop, we found that the locational accuracy decreased markedly the farther upriver one progressed, until by Georgetown, approximately 155 nm upriver in the Gambia, the locational error was greater than one mile. One has to assume that the chartwork was not geodetically corrected and that the charts are not referenced to WGS84. Once out of the rivers, the locational accuracy was satisfactory. However, great caution has to be exercised navigating with GPS in the rivers. This would tend to preclude night passages, which are inadvisable in any case owing to the abundance of unmarked fishing nets.

Tidal Ranges and Differences:

There no longer seem to be detailed tide tables available for the River Gambia. As Steve says, tidal prediction up the rivers is something of a dark art. It is worth carrying the Volume 2 of the Admiralty Tide Tables, which include enough secondary ports on the W African coast and rivers to be highly useful.

Hazards:

The unlit pirogues off the coast are still a problem for night passages. They are encountered surprisingly far out to sea. The strategy of keeping farther offshore to avoid them brings one into the presence of massive fleets of foreign trawlers sweeping up everything in their path. Off the Guinea Bissau coast, there was a solid phalanx of these vessels. They seem to operate without any supervision, presumably under government licences, the revenues from which disappear into some African black hole. We heard many complaints from pirogue fishermen about the effect on their catches from these activities.

Boat Preparation and Equipment:

There is still virtually nothing available, except in Dakar, where there is some kind of chandler at or near Mole 10 in the main harbour. It is possible to haul out at the Cercle de Voile de Dakar (CVD) for essential repairs, where a couple of yachts were lying on beach trailers. Limited tidal ranges in Senegal and The Gambia, together with muddy banks and dangerous or non-existent wharves, make drying out difficult. The greater tidal range in the Bijagos Archipelago and harder surfaces make careening a feasible option for cleaning, antifouling or anode replacement. If contemplating much time in the fresh water parts of The Gambia river, you might consider the use of temporary magnesium anodes. I found that a surprising

amount of galvanic action had occurred in the 3 months *Witchcraft* was in these waters and speculated that fresh water might have had something to do with it.

Spares and Provisions: Do not assume that you can easily buy antifouling paint. Diesel, petrol and lubricating oil are widely available, as is Butane gas. However, I did not see anybody selling Camping Gaz, so it is worth carrying ordinary Calor Gas bottles and regulator. There is nowhere on the coast where you can safely go alongside, except at Ziginchoir. Hence, all water has to be brought aboard by dinghy. You therefore need a supply of gerricans. The same applies to diesel. Water should be treated with sterilizing tablets. An online filter for the drinking water tap is also useful. With these precautions, we had no stomach problems from drinking the water. You will always find when you go ashore with gerricans someone who will arrange to fill them and bring them back. Often this involves travelling some distance by donkey cart or taxi and may take some time. Do not grudge the payment of a few dalasis or CFAs for this.

Costs of diesel and other provisions are now much the same in all three countries. Guinea Bissau now uses the CFA as its currency. Typically, diesel costs about £0.75 per litre. Dakar and the greater Banjul area have supermarkets, where a reasonable variety of European-type foods are available, except for durable loaves of bread, which we could not find anywhere. Towns and villages have shops which stock staples such as rice, groundnuts, sweet potatoes, cooking oil, etc. Most towns have a market selling local produce. Local Fruit and vegetables are good and abundant in Senegal, much less so in The Gambia and Guinea Bissau. Meat is chancy generally, with an almost equal weight of meat and flies on the scales. Ditto fish, which is best bought fresh from dugouts or pirogues. Alcohol is widely available in Senegal and Guinea Bissau. Do not expect the wine to be Grand Cru Classé. A local gin is available in Banjul for the adventurous, which costs the princely sum of £1.50 for a litre bottle. For the suicidal, a spirit known as Cana can be found in the Bijagos. Both Banjul and Dakar have breweries, although beer is difficult to find in The Gambia upriver, being largely Moslem.

Health:

Malaria is the principal problem. It is widespread and Chloroquine resistant, which means taking either Malarone, Doxycycline or Mafloquine Hydrochloride (Lariam). Malarone is expensive and has to be taken daily. Side effects are mild, but it is not recommended for prolonged use, ie for a protracted stay. Lariam can have very severe side effect, including but not limited to severe depression, anxiety, paranoia, nightmares, insomnia and seizures. It is recommended that people try it out before travelling, to ensure that they are not subject to these side effects. As it happens, I was able to take it without ill-effects but I have known others who have suffered very badly, including permanent irreversible mental damage. I was never asked for proof of vaccination while in Africa. It is advisable to be vaccinated against Yellow Fever, as there have been recent cases in W Africa. This disease is believed to be carried by apes and monkeys, which are widespread in the cruising area covered. Vaccination against Typhoid, Hepatitis A and B, Rabies, Polio and Tetanus should all be considered. From my observations, it would not be advisable to fall ill in this area of the world. Yachts should also carry antibiotic courses and topical cream, anti-diarrhoea tablets and rehydration salts. A case or two of Delhi belly is quite likely, especially if sampling local street fare, which can be very tempting.

Bugs:

To Steve's impressive list, I would add poisonous spiders, which can inflict necrotising wounds which take a long time to heal and may require surgery. My boat minder in Lamin Creek had suffered from one of these concealed in a tee-shirt and had to be hospitalised. I found out about this when I asked him about a large spider, which had spun a web in the rigging of a nearby yacht. He said that all their spiders are poisonous, which you can take with a pinch of salt or not, as you choose. A frequent and unwelcome visitor was the African hornet, a large hovering beast which can give a severe sting. They are not aggressive but like to build nests. I found vestigial nests behind the switch panel below and in the cockpit. Regard all flies as potential biters. Even small house-type flies bite.

Other wildlife is as covered in Steve's book, except that crocodiles are now rare in The Gambia and we

only saw one in the Bijagos. Comments about hippos apply and these animals cause more fatalities in Africa than any other. We didn't see any snakes, probably because they saw or heard us first.

Officials:

I did not meet any officials in Senegal. We entered that country three times, but on each occasion it was a weekend and Senegalese officials apparently don't work weekends. Entering The Gambia, one has to run the gauntlet of immigration, customs and harbour authority. This can be time consuming, hot and frustrating. The only official there to expect a bribe was the customs officer, who insisted on coming aboard in our tiny dinghy and demanded a present. Bars of chocolate and a few tins of soft drink did not satisfy him and he virtually held us to ransom until I paid him 100D, about £2.50. However, when we entered the country a second time, a different customs official signed us off without expecting anything. Guinea Bissau is a different matter. Visas can be obtained from their embassy in Bacau, a suburb of Banjul, without any trouble. However, once in the country, things have changed since Steve Jones's time. We made the mistake of going to Bissau town to clear in. Officials descended on us armed and mob-handed. In spite of having valid visas, I was told that our papers were not in order, we should have had some kind of permit for the boat before entry, etc. This was a prelude to the levying of "Charges" for each person of CFA1,000 per day and CFA5,000 per day for the boat. For a ten day stay, this amounted to about £90 and we were told there would be no more formalities or charges anywhere in the country. Transactions were in cash and receipts were not issued. On top of this, the only official who spoke any English demanded another CFA7,000 for a facilitation fee. However, when we reached Bolama and Bubaque in the Bijagos, each set of officials claimed that we had arrived in a different administrative zone and demanded more "Fees" at similar daily rates. The total added up to around the equivalent of £5 per day for the boat and £2 per day per crew member. As well as cash, demands were for made for "Kind", especially from the medicine chest.

Non-Officials:

People are generally extremely friendly in all three countries we visited. However, there is a "Bumster" element in the more tourist-frequented areas around Banjul and in Dakar city, who are very persistent and difficult to dislodge. I came across no instances of crime or stealing. It is now much more common for ordinary people to greet one and strike up a conversation than it was when the first edition of this book was published and this is no longer regarded as impolite. However, his comments on dress are still valid and men and women in Senegal and The Gambia do not wear revealing clothing. Shorts are rarely worn by locals. It is best to observe this convention, although nobody will say anything if you do not.

We were advised to carry a supply of footballs and pumps and these were much appreciated in remote village communities. It is also a good idea to carry plenty of boiled sweets to give to children (although this may not be recommended by dentists).

Language:

Previous comments on language are still valid. To add to this, we found that virtually nobody in Guinea Bissau speaks English. Because of the presence of Senegalese fishermen, one can often get by with French, at least at a basic level. We did not speak Portuguese, so cannot comment on the quality of the Criolo, the local Portuguese dialect.

Communications:

The mobile phone is now widespread in W Africa and the service covers all but the most remote areas. European mobiles work in Senegal and The Gambia but not in Guinea Bissau. In any of these countries, you can purchase a SIM card and credit for a very modest sum. Make sure your mobile phone is not "Locked" if using these. Internet coverage is unreliable. There are internet cafés in Banjul and Dakar but speeds are very slow. The postal service is not to be relied on in any of these countries.

DAKAR

The currency is the CFA, which exchanges at around CFA 950 = £1.00. The only cards which work there are Visa and, to a lesser extent, MasterCard. Bank cards do not work in ATMs here or in The Gambia or Guinea Bissau. Euros are readily exchangeable and are the best currency to carry.

I am told that there is some kind of chandlery, which also sells charts, inside the harbour complex at Mole 2 or Mole 10 (check with CVD).

Ports and Customs:

As we did not clear in or out of Senegal, this information is hearsay; however, at the CVD (Cercle de Voile de Dakar), we were informed that one has to visit Mole 2 and Mole 10 in the harbour area in Dakar itself. The yacht can be left at the CVD.

Hann:

If approaching the anchorage at night, watch out for a sunken schooner just E of the outermost yachts. It has just masts and the top of the deckhouse showing.

The CVD now seems to be the more active club and runs a ferry service. The cost of using the club, including the ferry service, was CFA 4,500 per day, for 2 crew. I think it has a basic charge of CFA 2,500 for the yacht plus 1,000 for each crew member. They are rather casual about this charge, at least at weekends, when the office is closed.

There is a large number of yachts off Hann beach, mainly French. Some are on moorings and look as if they have been there rather a long time. Holding seems to be quite good, in sand. It is advisable to buoy the anchor. Depth is around 3m all over the anchorage. When the NE trade is blowing, there is a very fresh wind across the anchorage, up to F 6 or 7 at times. Good ground tackle and plenty of chain are advisable. You will get wet in the ferry on the way out.

Water containers can be filled at the CVD. It is usual to have a boy do this and take them out to the yacht in the ferry for you. Standard charge for this is CFA 2,000. You may have to pay a deposit of CFA 5,000 for a filter, which is returnable. Diesel and petrol can also be obtained in the same way at the CVD, for a similar charge plus, of course, the cost of the fuel. There are (tepid) showers at the CVD and you can also wash clothes or get one of the women at the club to do it for you. The club serves basic meals and has a bar. It is rather an agreeable place.

Hann beach is a swarming hive of activity, colour and smells. The pirogue fleet lands its catch there and this is all very colourful. The market is just along the beach from the CVD and is worth a visit, although the smell of rotting fish is quite strong. There are various small restaurants in the vicinity and fresh fruit and vegetables can be bought from stalls nearby.

Gorée

You can use the N pier there. However, most of the bollards are missing and there is usually one or two pirogues alongside. In a fresh northerly, it is untenable. I have seen yachts moored outside the harbour but this would require very settled conditions. If visiting by ferry, note that it costs a surprising CFA 10,000 return for non-residents. The island is worth spending a day on, for the museums, restaurants and the general ambiance, which is that of a small southern French hill village, plus goats.

DAKAR TO BANJUL

The route is quite straightforward, the only caution being the ubiquitous unlit pirogues. Going straight to Banjul requires a night passage.

THE GAMBIA

Currency is the Dalasi. The exchange rate is around D 40 = £1.00. Note that the only card which works in this country is Visa. Nothing else works, at all. However, it is easy to exchange pounds, euros or dollars during working hours. Outside working hours or at weekends, there is usually somebody who will do it from a market stall.

Approach and clearance:

The approaches to Banjul have not changed. The main shipping channel is still buoyed

The yard at Half Die is now closed. Anchor in about 4m near the moored boats off the disused yard. Do not be tempted to anchor too close, as there is a proliferation of wrecks. The Harbour Office is a blue 4-storey block right in the SE corner of the harbour complex. Leave your dinghy on the beach near the drawn-up pirogues. You can get out of the yard through the container depot during working hours but this is dirty and hazardous. Alternatively, you have a long, dusty walk through the shanties W of the yard and round by the road. Immigration is inside the harbour estate, past the Harbour Office and they will stamp passports there. All the crew need not attend. Before going into the Harbour Authority, you need to clear customs, which is at the next gate to the North of the harbour complex, about 200m from the blue building. They may wish to inspect the boat. Patience is required for this and they will expect a present. In exchange for this, you will receive a customs clearance paper. It is useful and impresses the officials to have a ship's stamp for these papers. Take the paper to the harbour officials, who can be found right at the top of the blue building. They will issue you with a permit for the vessel, which costs about D 700 for a month.

Having cleared officialdom, you will probably wish to remain in the area for a few days. Banjul and the surrounding towns are busy and colourful. You have the choice of Oyster Creek or Lamin Creek as anchorages and each has advantages. Oyster Creek is right on the coastal highway at Denton Bridge and it is easy to get bush taxis or minibuses from there to Banjul, Serekunda, etc. However, it is a busy anchorage with a lot of pirogue movements daily. Lamin Creek is farther from towns and shops but is tranquil and safe, with excellent holding. A yacht can be left there in safety.

Banjul to Oyster Creek:

Take particular care when entering Chitabong Bolon, as it is very shallow until you enter the Bolon. Hold very close to the E point. Thereafter, follow the directions carefully. Half tide rising would be best for all but shallow-draught yachts. Going towards Oyster Creek, it is reasonably easy to avoid the large false creek to starboard but coming back it is much more difficult to pick out the turn to starboard. These creeks are not shown in any detail on current Admiralty charts, so follow the pilotage instructions in the book very carefully. You will emerge into Oyster Creek quite suddenly from the winding Turnbull Bolon. Anchor south of the moorings and watch out for a nearly-covered wreck in the fairway (see photo). You will be tide-ride and holding does not seem to be particularly good. After a few days there, my anchor was bunched up with chain. There is a wooden jetty and a jumble of shacks dispensing beer or coffee and catering for the charter angling businesses which operate out of Oyster Creek. There is no problem leaving your dinghy ashore. Water is available from the back of the police post on the seaward side of Denton Bridge. You can take your dinghy right down to the beach below the standpipe but courtesy demands that you call into the police station and ask permission. The tap is very slow. Diesel, petrol and lubricating oil are available from a nearby garage. Boys at the shacks will arrange for your containers to be filled for a modest fee, plus the cost of a taxi to fetch them.

Lamin Creek:

This is accessible at any state of the tide but it is best to make the passage on half flood. A moment's carelessness or disorientation can lead to a grounding but the bottom is soft. There are many spots on the

way to Lamin where one could anchor in seclusion. It is all well sheltered once under the lee of Chitabong Island. Lamin Creek is dominated by Lamin Lodge, an idiosyncratic structure on the W bank of the creek which provides cold beer and meals and caters for a healthy river tourist and birdwatching trade. It lies down four kilometres of rough dirt road from the village of Lamin, which is on the main road to Banjul airport. Follow the directions carefully and you should have little difficulty until you approach the anchorage. Keep centre stream until about 1/2 cable downstream of the Lodge, then hold over to the E bank, leaving all the moored boats to starboard. There is a line of two or three yachts on moorings close to the E bank. Leave these close to starboard and anchor in 3m in line with but past the end of this line. Holding is good. There is an unofficial "Harbour master" there who looks after some of the moored yachts. His name is Llanda and he is reliable. If you wish to leave a boat there, he will look after it for a very modest sum. His mother also does washing and he or other boys at the Lodge can get diesel and water for you. This has to come by donkey cart from the standpipe in the village, so may take some time. Lamin Lodge is owned by a German called Peter Loess, who has been there since the seventies, having sailed there in his own wooden gaffer, now sadly defunct. He is consequently yacht-friendly.

THE RIVER GAMBIA

Planning:

The buoyage upstream of Banjul is now completely missing, except for two buoys marking a cable crossing at Farafenni. There seems to be no fee for navigating the river, apart from the boat residence permit mentioned above. In addition to nets, one fixed fishing installations, often built from a number of dugouts lashed together with poles. These are for prawns and shrimps and do not have any outlying nets or dangers.

The river appears to teem with fish, although we did not have much luck angling for them. You can buy fish from dugout fishermen. D 50 per kilo seems to be the going rate.

There are some concrete or timber wharves and jetties on the river, built for the groundnut trade. None of these is really suitable for a yacht to lie alongside. Many are in disrepair.

Banjul to Bintang Bolon:

The No. 6 buoy at Dog Island is no longer in place.

James Island does not really offer anything in the way of an anchorage, except in flat calm conditions. The anchorage mentioned upstream of the island is exposed to the prevailing wind and the tidal streams are strong.

Bintang Bolon:

The entrance to Bintang Bolon is about 25m upstream from Banjul and would make a good first stop on a passage up the river.

Bintang village now has a tourist camp where one can get a meal and a cold beer. However, holding is not good off the camp and it is better to anchor on the opposite side of the creek.

Bintang Bolon to Farafenni:

The Kemoto Point Hotel is now closed, although the hotel and village are worth a visit. It was quite an ambitious project and gave employment to many local villagers, who are now sadly much reduced financially.

There is no sign of the tourist camp at Tendaba, although we did not go ashore there.

Jurunka Creek is accessible and has 2m in the entrance at LW. It winds up past a primitive village and into a large lagoon, with shallow water in the middle. Anchor anywhere convenient. Lots of bird life.

Tabirere Creek, a short distance upstream from Jurunka Creek, is even easier to access, with deep water inside and 3m over the bar. Again, plenty of bird activity and this creek is wider, allowing one to anchor well clear of the banks to reduce unwelcome nocturnal visitations by mosquitos. Approach all of these creeks with care, remembering that banks form naturally on the inside of bends and downstream of points.

Mandori Creek is still as described and is recommended.

The ferry crossing at Madina Creek carries the trans Gambia Highway between Dakar and Ziginchoir. You may be able to lie alongside the spare ferry at Madina Creek (see photo). The crew were very helpful. It is 4 km to Farafenni, where stores may be purchased and there is a market. It is something of a white-knuckle taxi journey, as the asphalt highway has deteriorated into gaping potholes; consequently, the paved surface in the middle is only used by pedestrians and animals, while the traffic, mainly lorries, thunders along the verges on either side, choosing the side with the best surface, regardless of left or right.

Farafenni to Kudang Tenda:

You can pass either side of the Elephant Island. We did not encounter many tsetse flies, although Steve Jones mentions them as a nuisance in the fresh water sections of the river.

Kudang Tenda is a traditional fishing village with friendly people. You can anchor off the concrete wharf (see photo). The son of the headman will give a guided tour of the village. His house looks out over the wharf. Among his treasured possessions are Admiralty charts of central America, Brazil and the Caribbean, for some reason.

Kudang Tenda to Kuntaur:

The channel at either end of Bird Island makes a good anchorage, out of the main stream. Holding is poor off the beach below the Red Hill of Kassang. The hill is worth climbing, as it is one of the very few places where one can get a view over the river country.

Kuntaur to Georgetown:

You should see hippos and chimps as you pass the Baboon Islands. You may not go ashore there and the area is patrolled by wardens. It is possible to visit the islands via the tourist camp nearby on a supervised tour; however, we were unable to contact them on the telephone number given.

Pass the Kai-ai Islands using the N channel. The W (downstream) entrance to the channel is narrow but has plenty of water; however, the channel at the E end of the islands has much less depth than that shown. We slid over some kind of obstruction in the channel just abeam of the NE end of the largest island.

Georgetown is now also called Jan Jan Buleh. There is an overhead power-line immediately upstream of the ferry crossing. This is supposed to have 16m clearance but locals say it has sagged considerably. This effectively bars the river upstream of Georgetown for any other than the smallest sailing yachts.

Georgetown has declined further since the first edition. Power goes off every day from 12.00 to 18.00. There are few facilities. Water and diesel are available. Anchor downstream of the ferry jetty, leaving enough room for the ferry to turn. (See photo). The Talamanca Bar and Restaurant is run by an enterprising local and is the best local bar to use.

THE RIVER CASAMANCE

Planning:

In settled weather, the entrance is not difficult, although there is usually some breaking water near the bar. An overnight passage is required to reach the bar in daylight. It is best to cross the bar on a flood tide. Early flood is optimal, to carry the tide as far up the river as possible. Previous remarks about unlit pirogues apply.

Although the political situation is still unstable, and there was a border war in 2006 involving Guinea Bissau and the Casamance separatist movement, this does not seem to cause problems for visitors and we

saw no overt military presence.

Unlike the River Gambia, the buoyage on the River Casamance is mostly still in place and maintained.

The port of entry is Ziginchoir.

Wildlife, especially birds, is prolific on the Casamance. There are bottle-nose dolphins in the river all the way to Ziginchoir.

River Casamance Entrance:

There are three possible passages across the bar, the Passe du Nord, the Passe Mediane and the Passe du Sud. Only the Passe Mediane is buoyed. The large Dakar ferry uses the Passe du Nord, so it must have plenty of water. On the approach, the Safe Water Buoy shown on the Admiralty chart in N 16deg 33'.0 W 016deg 49'.7 is missing. The No. 1 channel buoy is 1 mile south of the position shown. Its position in Jan 2008 was N 12deg 32'.5, W 016deg 50'.0. There is then a buoyed channel leading across the bar, with 4 pairs of pillar and can buoys. The final buoy to starboard is a red can with 2 balls, which may mark a wreck shown on the chart, no longer visible above water. From this, follow a course of 050deg M until you pick up the old No. 8 red pillar buoy. This used to mark the inshore end of the buoyed channel and care should be taken not to shape a course for this buoy until inside the bar. Leave the old No.8 a cable or so to port and you should shortly sight a starboard hand lateral buoy, which marks a wreck and also a 3.5m bank.

Djogue to Ziginchoir:

Immediately past Pointe de Nikine, which lies in the mouth of the river south of Pointe de Djogue, is the entrance to Bolon Kachiouane, the channel to the W of Isle Karabane. Since the port of entry is Ziginchoir, you may be entering this on the way back down the river. If so, take great care, as the bank extending N and W from the NW tip of Isle Karabane is now shallower and more extensive than shown. If entering from upstream, go right past the entrance in midstream until Pte de Nikine bears approximately 145 deg M before turning in to the point, which should be held close aboard until inside the channel and depths have increased. Bolon Kachiouane has 8 - 12m inside the bar.

Jones mentions a possible anchorage in Boulababene, the creek just upstream from Pte de Djogue; however, we found depths too shallow to enter this creek at half flood.

The wreck buoy off Karabane is missing. Follow the marked channel up the river as directed.

Marigot Ariandaboul provides a convenient anchorage on the way upriver, with no particular difficulty at the entrance. The bar has about 2m on it. Note that the No. 16 is missing and the No.16b has been moved a little upstream to the edge of the bank S of Pte Djougoute. The odd numbered (starboard hand) buoys have in some cases been moved to reflect changes in the channel but it is generally well marked.

We did not enter Marigot Diagoubel but were told that Elora Creek, the narrow W-tending channel inside, has a village off which yachts can be left at anchor safely.

Ziginchoir:

There were 10 other yachts anchored off the town, nearly all French. The water is quite deep and you will need to anchor in 8 - 10m, wherever you find a space. The Perroquet restaurant is still there and serves good meals and quite excellent house wine; however, the modern tourist hotel beside it now has a jetty with a small pontoon and deep water alongside and a fresh water tap. They don't seem to mind people leaving dinghies there. A visiting yacht came alongside there to take water, the only place in W Africa we saw where this seems to be feasible. It would be courteous to massage the hotel management a little for the use of their facilities, although no charge was sought by them while we were there.

Ziginchoir has a good market and plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables, not something easily found in The Gambia.

I don't know anything about clearance formalities at Ziginchoir, as we arrived at a weekend and did not find any officials on duty.

GUINEA BISSAU

Guinea Bissau has been in a state of economic meltdown since the first edition of this book. It had a major civil war 9 years ago and there is an sporadic low-intensity conflict on the Cacheu - Casamance border. As if this were not enough, the country, and in particular the outlying islands of the Bijagos archipelago, has become the cocaine smuggling centre for the African continent. Drugs are brought ashore in remote areas of the Bijagos and then ferried to the mainland by fast launch or light plane, whence they are split up for onward shipment to Europe or back to the Americas. This situation appears to be tolerated or even encouraged by Government ministers and senior officials, who are presumably receiving substantial rakebacks.

Another activity which is badly affecting the economy and welfare of the people is the rape of the sea fisheries. We came up against a continuous wall of trawlers fishing off the coast, mostly Korean. These trawlers come into Bissau port for R&R and fuel. What their licencing arrangements are is unclear but one has to assume that revenues from licences do not find their way into the general economy. There appears to be no regulation of their activities and the local pirogue fishermen say that fish stocks are being badly reduced.

Officials, of whom there are many, may not be regularly paid. This is certainly the case with a schoolteacher we met in Bolama, who had not been paid for 4 months. Consequently, officials have to seek a living wherever they can get it, which leads inevitably to sidelines, bribery and corruption. All officials we met in Guinea Bissau, without exception, demanded money and/or goods and materials in kind.

These officials, on first meeting, were rather unfriendly and intimidating. As soon as money had changed hands, however, attitudes changed completely and broad smiles broke out.

We were only boarded once by a military patrol, off the Canal de Santa Caterina, and this was quite alarming, as two Kalashnikovs and an RPG 7 were trained on us. One official, who knew his way around our GPS, asked very hard questions about why we had a waypoint named Cacheu. (It was well off the mouth of the Cacheu river). For this reason, I do not recommend visiting the Cacheu area.

Apart from officials, the people are friendly and helpful. Language is of course a problem, as virtually no English is spoken. Knowledge of Portuguese would be highly useful. Religion is mainly animist or Christian, hence one encounters plenty of pigs and alcohol is generally available and enthusiastically consumed.

Planning:

It not necessary, nor recommended, to go to Bissau Town for clearance. The anchorage is exposed and tide-rotted, the harbour is choked with traffic and wrecks and there is nowhere to leave a dinghy safely. Officials are predatory. We were charged CFA 90,000 for a 10 day stay, which we were told would cover us for the whole country, including the Bijagos islands; however, both at Bolama and at Bubaque, we were then charged again by immigration and the Policia Maritima, on the grounds that these were different administrative areas.

I did not stay in Bissau long enough to comment on availability of goods and services.

Clearance can be obtained in Bubaque and Bolama.

Virtually no buoys are still in place in Guinea Bissau. There appear to be no functioning lighthouses. The only navigational aids still visible are old stone perches and light towers, all unlit. However, the Admiralty charts of the Canal do Geba and of the Bijagos are still mostly accurate where available in large enough scale (except, as noted below, in the approaches to the Canal de Santa Catarina). Unfortunately, the Bijagos are only partly covered by detailed charts.

A visa is necessary before entering the country. The easiest place to get this is in Bakau, a suburb of Banjul, where the Guinea Bissau embassy is located on Atlantic Road. Visas can be purchased over the counter.

The currency of Guinea Bissau is now the CFA, the same as Senegal. These can be obtained in exchange for hard currency, preferably euros. ATMs and banks do not appear to be present in the islands

The Northern Isles:

We attempted to enter the Canal de Jeta through the Canal de Catarina. The Canal bore no resemblance to the chart and banks seem to have extended right across the entrance. We did not find it possible to enter.

Bijagos Islands:

A deep-keeled yacht is not ideal for exploring these islands with their 6m tidal range, strong currents and lack of detailed charts. Shallow draft with the ability to take the ground, bilge keels or a lifting keel would extend the cruising area considerably. A comprehensive spares and tools inventory, together with a good medical chest are important. It is probably not possible to have any work done on engines or other equipment.

That said, they are still a wonderful cruising ground and one quite unlike any other in the author's experience. Paradoxically, the difficulties mentioned above have meant that tourism has not yet touched the islands in any quantity. There is some tourism, especially on Bubaque, but it is as yet unthreatening and mainly involves angling and bird and wildlife watching.

Bolama:

The buoy marking the S end of the Restinga da Areia Branca is missing but the old steamer wreck shown on the chart 1.7 nm to its NE is still there and makes a good waypoint (leave it well to port).

Anchor in about 6m to the N of the stone jetty. Holding appears to be reasonable. Tidal streams are not too strong here.

Bolama is an atmospheric place. It gives the impression of having been deserted by the Portuguese administration, which it was in 1941, but the grand colonial buildings are still there, with the old military barracks, all decaying gently. There is an enormous square with diagonal pathways and dry irrigation channels in front of the old administrative building. The main local village is outside the old town. Diesel and basic stores are available from the shops. There are restaurants and bars, not for the faint-hearted. Mussolini's grand and bizarre concrete monument still dominates the sea-front, donated to the town after the crash nearby of an Italian transatlantic flying boat in 1931. Good water is available from a stand-pipe just off the beach, behind some buildings.

Bolama to Bubaque:

This area is covered by detailed Admiralty charts and presents no difficulties.

An anchorage recommended by Jones and which we found delightful is at Ilheus dos Porcos. Approach is simple if you follow the directions in the book and the anchorage is well-sheltered, with slackish tides. The larger island, which you anchor near, has an excellent beach and is visited only by occasional fishermen, a couple of whom we met and who shared their lunch of fish and groundnuts with us. There are various animist symbols ashore and one has to be careful not to offend the spirits by disturbing any of these. There is more water in the approach than shown previously and it should be accessible at any state of the tide, although, as always in these islands, arriving on a rising tide is to be recommended.

Rio de Bruce makes a useful passage anchorage if heading to Bubaque, as it is difficult to work the tides all the way round Ilha Roxa and back up to Bubaque. Approaching the entrance to Rio de Bruce, watch the GPS, as the gap in the coast is hard to spot until you are very close. Once sighted, follow the directions in the book. It provides a tranquil creek anchorage with lots of bird life.

Bubaque is not a good anchorage. Tides run through it at up to 4 kt and the water is deep. You have to anchor very close to the beach in 7 or 8 metres. It can be difficult to get the anchor to bite and even more difficult to recover it. Because of the strong tides, a tripping line is likely to turn into a terrible bird's nest.

Laying a kedge out into the deeper water to hold the boat clear of the beach at the turn of the tide is a possible option, although we lost ours when we left. Anchor between the ferry pier and the old concrete jetty to the N. The officials' office is at the head of the concrete ferry pier and you must clear in there on arrival. Take great care with dinghy work because of the strong tides. It is advisable to land on the beach, not at the ferry pier. There is a profusion of small shops and businesses in shacks above the pier. Diesel and other basic provisions are available from these.

Bubaque has a several bars and restaurants.

Bubaque to Caravela:

Because of the lack of detailed charts, the safest option for a deek-keeled yacht is to leave Bubaque via the Canal de Bubaque, going between Ilheu de Anagaru and Ilha do Galo and following the old buoyed channel through the Canal das Galinhas (buoys now missing), then back out into the Canal de Geba through the Canal de Pedro Alvares. It is a straightforward passage to the anchorage at Caravela, which it is feasible to enter at night by watching the GPS carefully (the passage from Bubaque cannot be completed in daylight).

Otherwise, for the more adventurous or for shallow draft yachts, the directions for Formosa above can be followed as per Plans 75 and 76.

Caravela is a highlight of any cruise to the Bijagos. It is a most attractive island, with a couple of very primitive villages on it. Anchor as shown on the chartlet, in sand, about 3.5m. Holding is good. The village of Bichau is about 2 miles from the beach, ending in a wood of enormous kapok and elephant trees, from which one emerges into a village unchanged in millenia, except for the football shirts worn by the boys. The footballs and pumps we carried made a big hit here. There are no provisions to be had on Caravela.

Caravela repays dinghy exploration. There is a long (at least 2 miles) creek leading from a sand spit on the beach, with about 1 or 1.5 m water at HW, then deepening and broadening inside. At first sandy and lagoon-like, the creek narrows and deepens as you go up, palms giving way to mangroves. It has the most prolific bird life we saw anywhere and at least one crocodile.

Caravela is an indifferent anchorage as regards swell, as it is protected from the prevailing wind only by a long sandbank, which covers at HW. Although somewhat rolly, it seems safe enough.

[Click Here to return to notes by Ed Wheeler.](#) [Otherwise see notes below by Dia Rice.](#)

VISIT NOTES BY DAI RICE Jan 08

10 Jan 08

I have now arrived in Dakar and will be here for a few more days before sailing round to Banjul. My planned itinerary is Dakkar-Banjul-Cachau-Bijagos Islands-Bissau-Port Kamsar-Guinea Conakry-Freetown-Cape Verde-Caribbean. This itinerary could change of course as I'm already hearing scare stories about drug-crazed young men on the rampage in Guinea-Bissau! I hope to get a clearer picture as I sail further south.

With regard to some updated information for the 'Cruising Guide to West Africa' I hope the following will be useful.

1. The approaches to **Dakar** are unchanged. Many navigational buoys remain unlit and there are quite a number of tankers and freighters anchored in the roads to the east and south-east of Goree Island.
2. Checking into the country is as described in the Cruising Guide (the current going rate 'present' for the

Port Police is CFA 5,000 - about £5. (The Port Police also function as the Immigration Office and stamp the passports). In addition one has to visit the Customs at Ave Felix Eboue. This costs another CFA 5,000 which is clearly a fixed fee as they issue a receipt.

To check out of the country one has to visit the Port Police again to get passports stamped. No 'present' is needed on this occasion!

2. The two yacht clubs on **Plage du Hann** are still functioning and busy. The CVD appears to be the most frequented by visiting yachts although the ADP is to be preferred if work is needed on the boat. Here they have a number of large wheeled cradles which are used for launching and recovering yachts. At present there are four yachts ashore here including a modern 46ft wing-keeled boat so they can handle quite a size. Yachts can also be stored ashore here long term although it is normal to hire a local security guard to look after the boat when the owner is away.

At present there are 54 yachts at anchor off Plage du Hann. Of these about 20 are visiting 'tourist' yachts. The majority are French but with a sprinkling of German, Belgian, British and Swiss. A further 15 or so are laid up afloat and at anchor, with no crew on board. (Most of the owners are back in France). Most of these yachts have local guards living aboard, arranged through the yacht clubs. It doesn't seem that these guards have the ability to move the yacht in the event of dragging anchors, etc, they are there simply to prevent theft. Two of these yachts are sunk at their anchorage - a sad sight!

3. There is WiFi Internet Access at CVD where laundry can also be done. Fruit and vegetables are available from a stall immediately outside the club. There are now numerous ATMs in Dakar. (At present £1 is about CFA 1,000.) The nearest ATM is about 15min walk from the CVD on the main road into town. Gas location unchanged. Diesel from local garages by jerrycan/taxi.

4. The 'Corvette' restaurant is still owned by Jean Rey and provides excellent food with a very comprehensive menu. He is now less involved with the ADP but still a source of useful information.

19 Jan 08

We sailed directly from Dakar to Banjul, arriving on Monday 14th Jan. I have been using your Cruising Guide to West Africa as my main source of info together with the Admiralty Pilot and C-Map. The paragraph on **Page 7 'Tidal range & differences'** appears to be inaccurate now. My own observations so far together with locally published tide tables give the time difference in hours from Banjul as:

Dakar . . . -1
Saloum Estuary . . . -0.5
Banjul No. 3 (unlit) . . . +0.5
Banjul Harbour . . . 0
Casmance No. 1 Buoy . . . ?
Lower Casmance (Djogue). . . -1
Ziguinchor . . . +2
Lower River Cacheu (Bolor) . . . +0.5
Cacheu . . . +1
Lower Geba (Ponta de Caio). . . +0.5
Bissau . . . +1.5
Bubaque . . . 0

The same paragraph also gives the tidal range for Senegal and Gambia as about 2 metres. The Spring Range is, in fact, about 1.5 metre.

Please also note the printing error and somewhat confusing sentence on Page 27, second column. For clarity I think it should read: 'High Water at No. 3 buoy is about 0.5hr before HW Banjul.

21 Jan 08

With regard to **Banjul**, the following notes may be of interest:

The official entry procedures for yachts visiting The Gambia are still slow and frustrating. Banjul is the only Port of Entry and yachts must anchor off the dockyard quay to complete the formalities. All of the officials now have their offices within the dockyard. The first stop is the Immigration Office where passports are stamped with entry permits (these cost 300 Dalasis in 'presents' - about £7). Next came the Customs Office where the official insisted on inspecting the boat but refused to be transported in our dinghy as he 'couldn't swim'. A compromise was reached where we brought the yacht to within 50m of the quay. He inspected our yacht with some rigour but didn't ask for a 'present'. (Two Immigration Officers also wanted to be transported to the boat as they had to check for 'illegal immigrants' but I suspect this was just a ruse to ask for more money, which they did, but didn't get!). Finally one has to visit the Port Authority Office and pay 650 Dalasis for a Cruising Permit (about £16). Another permit is required to sail on the River Gambia upstream of James Island but this doesn't cost any more. Tide tables are also available from this office and cost 250 Dalasis (about £6). These formalities took about 4 hours to complete. In Dakar, on the other hand, the procedures were relatively easy and took us about 1 hour.

We have carried out a crew change here in Banjul and this was a tortuous affair. The departing and arriving crew have each to be 'escorted' to and from Banjul airport by the Immigration officers. Naturally this involves an 'escort' fee of 600 Dalasis (about £15). It has taken us some to shake off the Immigration officers - I'm sure they see us as easy pickings as we have a relatively large (44ft) and well equipped yacht. Dealing with them has not been a pleasant experience. However, all of our other experiences so far in the Gambia have been very enjoyable.

Denton Bridge (Oyster Creek) is still a popular anchorage for visiting yachts though it has been somewhat overrun with tourist touts, bumsters and handicraft shops since the original Cruising Guide was published. Several tourist piroques operate from the new jetty and the local boatmen are keen to rent out their 'visitors' moorings. However it is preferable to anchor as the moorings are of uncertain size. There were three foreign yachts there during our visit: Belgian, US and ourselves with 3 more resident yachts on moorings. Mr Cessay is still the resident 'security' guard and I'm sure he would do a good job of looking after a yacht if there were no crew on board for a period of time. Certainly our inflatable tender and outboard were well looked after.

The anchorage at **Lamin Lodge** is a great contrast to Denton Bridge. It is peaceful and serene. Peter Losens still owns the beautifully eccentric lodge and the set dinner menu is both inexpensive and tasty. The Norwegian farm mentioned on page 47 of the Cruising Guide closed down some 8 years ago. Lamin Lodge would be a fine and safe place to leave a yacht for any length of time. Given the relatively cheap airfares from UK to the Gambia this could be an attractive possibility. Peter Losens can arrange for a mooring to be laid and for a security guard. (Currently there are five foreign yachts on moorings here with owners back in Europe). However there are no facilities in The Gambia for slipping and antifouling other than at the main commercial dock in Banjul which is not recommended. As an temporary measure Peter can arrange for the hull to be cleaned whilst afloat.

The pilotage described in the Cruising Guide for both Denton Bridge and Lamin Lodge remains accurate and comprehensive.

31 Jan 08

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Guinea Bissau:

After the relative comfort and security of cruising the River Casamance in Senegal, Guinea-Bissau came as quite a shock! Our first port of call after leaving the River Casamance was **Cacheu**, about 20 miles up the Rio de Bolor. There are three Ports of Entry into Guinea-Bissau: Cacheu, Bissau and Bubaque in the Bijagos Islands. Entry into the Rio de Bolor ideally has to be timed to coincide with daylight and a flood tide as there are numerous shallow banks across the entire entrance and running 15 miles out to seaward. However we did find the Admiralty Chart 1726 to be very accurate apart from the buoyage which is now non-existent. In fact we followed the line over the banks where the buoys SHOULD have been and never had less than 3.8m at 2 hours before HW. So with an accurate GPS and depth sounder there should be no problem. But we had calm conditions. I can imagine that a large swell would break heavily across most of the entrance. As we were to discover later Cacheu is no longer visited by ships. Only trading pirogues now use the port. Once inside the river there is deep water all the way up to Cacheu. We anchored for the night in Rio de Elia. This is a deep, safe and tranquil river with no evidence of human habitation whatsoever.

This peaceful illusion was shattered when we arrived at Cacheu the next afternoon! We anchored about 200m downstream of the town's jetty and were boarded within minutes by a group of eight men in civilian clothes. They all tried to clamber below until I hauled them out and asked for their ID! In fact they turned out to be the Port Captain, Customs Officer and 'Security Officer' with a group of hangers on. They were not a very friendly bunch and we had to keep a watchful eye on our possessions. After about 30 mins of drinking our beer they left with our passports, ship's papers, and my Yachtmaster Ocean certificate, instructing me to report to the harbour office in the morning. We were allowed to go ashore but only if 'escorted'.

Clearly things have changed quite a bit here since Steve Jones visited. Considering that shipping movements in and out of Cacheu have now all but ceased it's surprising that all these officials are still in place. In fact we were the first sailing yacht to visit for at least 5 years we were told. The next day brought another unpleasant experience - I was to be fined 3000 Euros for not giving the Port Captain 72hrs, 48hrs and 24hrs notice of our arrival, as required of commercial vessels. I told him that he was being ridiculous as we were simply tourists. Fortunately a pleasant Immigration lady agreed with me so he backed down and we settled on 80 Euros for a 'Cruising Permit'. This was just a crude attempt to extract money from us and was to be a sadly familiar occurrence throughout our cruise in Guinea-Bissau. Whilst the local population were friendly and kind and the islands and rivers stunning, it was always the greed of the petty officials which discoloured the experience. Perhaps with more visiting yachts around they would be forced to moderate their demands. We haven't seen any other yachts since leaving the Casamance so we are something of a rarity and doubtless seen as easy pickings.

To move on to more positive things. We carried out a crew change from Cacheu which proved to be surprisingly straightforward. The departing crew took a taxi from Cacheu to Bissau airport (about 2 hours on a good road) and picked up the new crew. It's also possible to stock up in Cacheu on basic grocery items, fresh fruit and vegetables and fish. There is a garage 30 minutes away which stocks good diesel and water is available from a standpipe near the jetty.

Our next destination was the **Bijagos Islands**, about 35 miles south of the Rio de Bolor. Again this should be done in daylight as the banks of the Bijagos are numerous and changing and not all rocks are marked on the charts. Our plan was to cruise from north to south generally sailing in the mornings on a fair tidal stream whenever possible and aiming to be at our next anchorage by mid afternoon. We used Admiralty Charts 1726, 1727 and 1724. There are no Admiralty Charts which cover the SW of the archipelago unfortunately. I understand there are Portuguese charts which do, but we couldn't source them. With our 2.2m draft a large portion of the SW would have been very tricky for us anyway.

During the next two weeks we visited **Caravela, Caraxe, Formosa, Rubane, Bubaque, Roxa, Joao Viera, Bolama and Pecixe**. Without going into our detailed itinerary I can say there are a very beautiful and unspoiled group of islands. The local population is friendly and helpful (with the exception of most officials!), the beaches endless and empty and supplies (including diesel and water) are available at Bubaque and Bolama if needed. We had heard many scare stories about the Bijagos Islands which I can happily dispel: we were not attacked by pirates, the place is not overrun with narcotics traffickers nor was any of our equipment stolen. In fact we would like to go back to the Bijagos and spend more time there. But in a different boat!

My 2.2m draft severely restricted our cruising itinerary and choice of anchorages. Due to the high tidal range of between 4 and 5 metres I frequently had to anchor over a mile offshore. This meant that our inflatable had a long trip to get ashore (not always possible in the strong NE winds) and we always had to leave a competent individual on board. In certain places, like **Bubaque and Bolama** one can anchor close in but with care as the depths can go from 10m to drying in the space of 10m!

The ideal yacht for cruising the West Coast of Africa would undoubtedly be a catamaran. This would have enabled us to get close in to the beaches and dry out for a tide. Next time I would also have a more substantial tender, ideally a RIB.

So we have now returned to The Gambia where Peter Losens has arranged a temporary mooring for me at his Lamin Lodge.

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18/12/2008