

Çava?



The Newsletter of Friends of Guinea

Advocacy, Information, and Networking for Guinea and Peace Corps Guinea

A Letter From Lansanaya

The family of PCV Jesse Fleisher shared with us last fall a letter they received from him describing his life in Guinea. We encourage all of our readers to pass along any accounts they might wish to share of their own travels to Guinea, or of the experiences of their Volunteer friends and loved ones.

It's September and it's raining. I have just picked the first tomato from my garden....

I had to stand on a chair this morning to pick the okra behind my hut, and I have discovered a fabulous waterfall near my village. I am content, and for the moment, stationary.

Alas, I have been traveling during much of August for various Peace Corps meetings, and each time I come back here for a few days, I find my garden choked with weeds, and vegetables which have rotted or grown hard from want of picking. It must be torture indeed to take a farmer from his fields before the growing season is done, and I understand more and more the attachment to place which farmers and other earthy people seem to feel so strongly. Although my travels away from Lansanaya have been useful and work oriented, I can't help but feel that time away from my village is wasted time. I always feel like I'm missing something important, some little detail of culture that

I'll never see, or some opportunity for meaningful work that will slip through the cracks. I also know that my time here in Lansanaya is limited, and I want to absorb as much of the essence of this place as I can before moving on. I may never again be part of an African family, or belong to a village community, or live in a hut, and I

Friends of Guinea

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Friends of Guinea is a non-profit organization made up of former and currently serving Guinea Peace Corps Volunteers, Guineans inside and outside of Guinea, and others interested in promoting the cause of Guinean development in the world at large. We are a country-of-service affiliate of the National Peace Corps Association. Dues are \$15 annually for individuals, and \$23 for families.

email: info@friendsofguinea.org

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What is...

Çava?

Çava is the quarterly newsletter of Friends of Guinea and seeks to maintain contact and community among members as well as inform them of the official activities of the organization.

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can feel myself missing it before I even leave. □

In any case, seeing new places appeals to me too, and the first of my recent travels was to the eastern Guinean city of Kankan, where Peace Corps has a regional office/flop house... This is where I'm supposed to go to do banking, re-supply my medical kit, shop for "fancy" items and do office work. In travel terms though, Guinea is to West Africa what Gabon is to Central Africa. There are few if any tourists, almost no modern transportation infrastructure, and getting there is always way more than half the fun. "Voyaging" is nearly always adventurous, uncomfortable, difficult, comical, frustrating and interesting all at the same time. □

On this occasion I tried to set off by bicycle, but heard a pop and hiss before I even left the village and had to abort my departure. My bike is an old Trek which has seen many a Peace Corps volunteer before me, and which was pulled out of the "old" (as in recycled or used only for parts) bike shed when I arrived in Conakry.... When I peeled the tire back from the rim and extracted the inner tube, I discovered that it already had eleven patches of varying sizes and colors decorating its exterior. When I halfway re-inflated the tube and stuck it in a bucket of water, I found to my dismay that the new hole was right where the inflation valve met the tube, a nearly impossible place to patch

effectively. Nonetheless, I took the tube to the village tire patch guy, and he went to work on it with great optimism...Lansanaya has at least two varieties of rubber trees...It was with a small vial of this locally extracted latex that the man glued a small piece of rubber (cut from another tube) over the hole in my tube. It seemed to have worked well, so I paid the guy and was happy all the way back to my hut, until I had fully remounted and re-inflated the tire, repacked my bags on the back of the bike, put on my helmet and gloves and sat down on the seat—at which point the tire immediately popped and deflated again, and I came to the realization that I would not be biking to Dinguiraye after all. That was a Sunday. □

"Plan B" involved waiting until the next morning (Market Day in Lansanaya) and riding to Dinguiraye in one of the many bush taxis which I knew would be coming to drop off people and goods. I waited all day in the market, and made a rookie mistake in that I trusted someone else's assertion that I should wait for one specific "good" car and driver which would be leaving "just now." My four months in the States have apparently made me a little rusty in the African public transport department, and thus it was that I didn't leave Lansanaya until nearly 6 p.m. that evening (in the aforementioned "good" bush taxi). □

I don't know how many people and goats were packed into and on top of the Toyota minibus, but we didn't make it more than 2 km out of Lansanaya before we got our first flat tire. I barely flinched as we followed the usual flat tire routine of getting everyone out of their entangled sitting positions and unloading the spare tire from its inevitable location under everyone's luggage and goats. The special surprise came with the discovery that one or more of the lug nuts had broken or were stripped to the point of being useless to hold on the tire. This necessitated the shared distribution of the remaining lug nuts among the four tires, all the while using a tire iron/lug wrench that was so inexplicably short that it provided no mechanical advantage whatsoever. By the time these operations were completed, an

hour had passed and darkness had fallen fully. If I hadn't needed to travel, I would have just walked back to Lansanaya and tried again in a week when the Market Day brought cars again. □

Instead, I clambered back in the taxi with everyone else, and we rode another 2 km before a loud pop and a lurch announced that distributing lug nuts had been a short term solution at best, and that the next redistribution of lug nuts would make the situation even worse. At this point everyone got out of the taxi and dispersed into the night. Two people took their stuff and headed back towards Lansanaya, a couple more opted to stay with the taxi, and the rest of us set off on foot and without flashlights in the direction of Dinguiraye, some 21 kilometers distant. I ended up walking the whole way with George, a traveling "dentist" from Ghana. He carried a glass fronted wooden case filled with fake teeth and other dental prosthetics. In his bag he had some scary looking tools, a half empty bottle of lidocaine, and some syringes. He was afraid of the dark, so we walked fast and made it to Dinguiraye at 1:30 in the morning—blistered, dirty, and really tired. □

The PCV there was out of town and hadn't left a key, so I was forced to wake up my Nigerian barber friend who groggily let me share his bed in the tiny room that he rents as his home. A few hours later, I got up again and went to the gare (taxi gathering area) in order to get a place on a big, yellow American school bus, which was the only vehicle going to Kankan. Its only modifications seemed to be the addition of a roof rack for baggage, the addition of an internal roll cage to support the weight on the roof, the removal of all safety equipment (like fire extinguishers, maximum capacity signs, etc.), the addition of numerous Bob Marley stickers and, finally, the addition of multiple stereo speakers which were bolted to the ceiling along the length of the interior. No African taxi would be complete without music blasting the whole way. □

When we rolled out of Dinguiraye at about 8 a.m., I was amazed to find that by all reasonable standards, I had my own seat!...Amazing! Alas, my euphoria lasted

only about half an hour before the terribly rocky and muddy road south of Dinguiraye took its toll on the bus. Tire problems again, and jacking up a top heavy, overloaded bus is no easy task. Whenever these things happen, there are always several groups which form. There are the people doing the work, the people who watch the work and give a constant stream of advice, the people who refuse to get out of the vehicle, the people who sit down in the road, and the people who immediately curl up and go to sleep in the grass. I opted for the grass, and sat observing the bus and the apparently ineffective attempts to find the correct tools to change the tire. □

I noticed that in addition to Bob Marley stickers, the bus also featured a number of Titanic stickers, which I hoped wasn't a bad sign, and one large decal of Rambo above a painted message on the rear bumper. Instead of helpful messages like "I stop for all RR crossings" or "Our drivers are friendly and courteous" or "This truck makes wide right turns," buses and trucks in Guinea usually just say "Bonne Chance" (Good Luck)—as in Good Luck Passing Me, Good Luck Not Breaking Down, and Good Luck Not Plunging Off the Mountain.

The next time we got a flat tire, I noticed that the dashboard of the bus was decorated with a strange assembly of Coca-Cola beach balls, some Bollywood actresses and a signed photo of a famous Muslim cleric pinned up above the driver. To make a long story short, the trip was slow, the rainy season landscape was beautiful, the music got repetitive, and by midnight we were in Kankan, having stopped at every little place along the way to buy food and pee in the bushes. The bus dropped everyone off at the edge of town, and thankfully a passing taximan said he knew where the Peace Corps house was...

Kankan is the home of the opposition to the current President (Lansana Conte) and thus has no electricity, but the PC house has an array of solar panels on the roof and a diesel generator for emergencies. There's also a mini-water tower which we fill whenever the municipal water supply is on, and which provides about a day's worth of water when the city pump is off. Talk about

luxury. This house also has a shed full of bike parts, a storage room for people's stuff, a seed bank, a library of technical books and a bed furnished garage....A spankin' new laptop computer w/ printer, a powerful HAM radio and a digital "World Space" satellite radio (which gets NPR!!!) completes the luxury scene. Too bad it takes 16 hours (and then some) to get there...□

It was a good stay, and the trip back to my village was a multi-part affair involving long bush taxi rides, an unplanned 3 a.m. arrival/stay at a Volunteer's hut along the way, and finally a motorcycle adventure all the rest of the way to Lansanaya. I love the feeling of coming back to the village.

Advocacy Notes

*Brian Farenell ('95-'97), Advocacy Director
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This report is going to be a bit different than others. Rather than telling you what I've done, I'm going to ask for your feedback.

□ Friends of Guinea is a relatively young organization, so a lot of what we do as officers has been continuously refined with experience.

□ One challenge I have as advocacy director is that my role is less well-defined than the others'. The financial officer collects dues and crunches numbers. The newsletter editor collects information for and puts together a fine publication. The advocacy director's job is to advocate; but for what? And how?

FOG is linked to Peace Corps Guinea. I see my job as being an advocate both for the Peace Corps and its volunteers and for the well-being of Guinea and Guineans. But how to transform that interest into concrete action is not always self-evident.

□ I am on many different listservs. One of the big ones is the National Peace Corps Association's (NPCA) advocacy listserv. The other major one is the listserv of ADNA, whose full name I forget but which is a coalition of dozens of non-governmental organizations whose work

encompasses Africa, either partly or entirely. In addition to FOG, other members of ADNA include groups like Amnesty International, Friends of Liberia, Oxfam and Medecins Sans Frontieres (Doctors Without Borders).

□ Via ADNA, I am informed of dozens of issues each month. Some of which touch on pan-African concerns, like HIV-AIDS and trade policy. Some of which affect Guinea's neighbors, especially recently. Almost none of which concern Guinea exclusively.

□ Both the NPCA and ADNA send me several alerts each month. The NPCA's alerts tend to regard Peace Corps' funding or legislation concerning the PC.

□ ADNA's alerts will sometimes urge me to contact a Congressperson about a particular issue. But they also will ask me if FOG will sign on to a letter drafted by another member organization addressed to President Bush (and often to cabinet members and/or Congressional leaders). Basically, these letters go something like this:

"Dear Mr. President, We are concerned by such-and-such an issue because... Therefore, we strongly urge you to take this action immediately. Sincerely, [List of all the organizations who agreed to the letter]"

□ Although I receive dozens of requests each year, the FOG board has been understandably reluctant to affix the organization's name to such sign-on letters without consulting of the membership. Since these letters are typically in response to breaking events, the decision to sign on or not to a letter usually must be made within a few days, thus making such broad consultation unfeasible. As a result, FOG has only signed on to one such letter, in the earliest days of our organization, which concerned blood diamonds.

□ So my questions to you, the members, are these:

•Should I be an advocate solely for Guinea-only issues? Only West Africa-specific issues? Or should either of those be supplemented with pan-African issues also affecting Guinea like AIDS, trade policy, refugees, etc?□

•Whatever you answered above, to what degree should I inform and involve the membership at large? □

•Would you be interested in an advocacy-only list for FOG members?

•Are there any other issues you think I should be an advocate for? How would you prioritize those issues?

•Would you be interested in serving on an advocacy advisory committee? Do you have any particular advocacy interest (like education, AIDS, environment, etc) which you would be willing to help out with? Like all officers, I am looking for volunteers to assist me, in any way and to any degree they feel comfortable.

•Should sign-on letters be approved the membership at large? Only by the board? By a future advocacy committee? And by what percentage? I don't anticipate that we would be doing something like this on a regular basis but I would like to have a process in place for when such a situation arises.

•Do you have any other suggestions?

I desperately welcome any feedback on these questions as well as any other thoughts you might have on advocacy. Please send your comments to me either by e-mail at advocacy@friendsofguinea.org or by letter at P.O. Box 2612, Glens Falls, NY 12801. Thanks.

Listserv and GPS Notes

*Marilyn Pearson, PCV parent
listserv@friendsofguinea.org*

The **Guinea List** continues providing updates and information about current Peace Corps related topics. □Membership on the list is hovering at 307. □After the storm of the Regional House closing discussions, this last quarter has been fairly quiet! □To join the list, visit the Friends of Guinea website at <http://friendsofguinea.org>.

A new **Guinea Parent Support (GPS)** group of parents, family, and friends has formed for the July 2003 batch of Peace Corps Trainees that left for Guinea on July

7th. □They are sharing information, tips, and getting questions answered from parents from previous groups. □There are a total of 137 members in three different GPS groups. □There is also a general Parent listserv that is not dependent on a specific departure date. □To join a GPS listserv or for more information, contact gps@friendsofguinea.org.

Project Notes

*Cherif Diallo, Projects Director
projects@friendsofguinea.org*

Since our last newsletter, several important things have happened concerning our cooperation with Partage Quebec Guinée, the organization which collects books in French and sends them to schools in Guinea. Friends of Guinea has raised \$300.00 so far on behalf of PQG, and we are about to organize a vote to decide whether to add another \$300.00 to that sum and to donate the total to PQG.

Adam Trotta, a PCV in Lelouma, Guinea, has organized the building of a library for the local high school. When he saw the article on PQG in the last issue of this newsletter, he contacted us and we forwarded his request to PQG. They agreed to provide his library with about a ton of books, to be sent there in a couple months.

Friends of Guinea is currently working on making contact with the Guinean community living in the US and Canada in order to enlist their support for Partage Quebec Guinée. We think PQG is a really good organization to partner with. They have the books, and have arrangements to ship them for free, but need some help to maintain their daily operations. So far we have received some encouraging results, and it seems that there may be several Guineans willing to donate money to the PQG project and to others of its kind.

For the next few years, FOG is thinking about focusing its fundraising efforts towards projects that deal with environmental preservation and restoration (e.g. planting trees), education (building libraries, schools), and health issues. We

welcome your input on these matters and on anything related to our priorities as an organization.

Current PCVs working in Guinea are highly encouraged to follow the example of Adam Trotta and to contact FOG about their projects; FOG will do all we can to provide them with assistance.

Financial Notes

*Jody Sites ('94-'96), Financial Officer
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As of the beginning of August we are almost \$560.00 dollars ahead of last quarter. We took in \$270.50 in membership dues and donations, \$300.00 in pledges for Partage Quebec Guinée, and \$326.50 from a cloth auction we held to benefit the Girls' Conferences which are our major initiative at present. Against this we spent \$338.79 for expenses related to the production and distribution of the newsletters in February and May (an average of \$169.40 per newsletter) leaving a net gain of \$558.21 for the quarter. Our new Membership Director, Megan Wilson, is doing a great job of reaching out to remind people to renew

their membership, thus boosting membership payments. Thanks Megan!

Le Griot Nous Dit...

Stacy Hess (*née* **Stacy Cohen**), '93-'95, has been busy. First she sailed around the world with her husband Dave on a catamaran called "Ladybug." You can learn about their trip in detail at www.ladybugadventures.com. Now she is expecting a baby. She reports: "We now live and work in Green Bay, Wisconsin. We are very excited about the new addition to our family which should arrive some time late in September. Anybody coming to Northeast Wisconsin always has a place to visit & crash." Stacy can be reached at ladybugcrew@hotmail.com.

Jill Mariani ('93-'95), and her husband Ashish Parikh announced on July 10 the birth of their baby, Nikhil Charles John Parikh, weighing in at 7 lbs 12 oz and 20 inches tall. Two weeks later Jill reported that the baby had grown one pound in weight and one inch in length. Ashish has pictures of the baby on the web. You can reach Jill at jillmariani@hotmail.com.

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