

BY HELICOPTER TO BOKE

One Friday I was coming back from our program site in Boké. I had a return ticket on the Guinea InterAir flight from Boké to Conakry

I've had some memorable experiences flying Guinea Inter Air and its sister airline Guinea Air Service. They both use converted Russian cargo planes, with Russian pilots who speak almost no French. The airlines have a Spartan attitude towards passenger amenities, as you might expect from companies with Guinean-Russian management. There is more than a little overbooking. I once was in a near-riot at the Kankan airport when a dozen passengers with boarding passes were refused places on a flight to Conakry. Some sat down on the runway in front of the plane – "If we don't go, no one goes!" Others forced their way into the luggage compartment and refused to leave. I was too American to do either of those things, but I'd lived here long enough to think that I might get on the flight anyway because my regional director was in the same university class as the brother of the airport manager. Finally, the police removed the people on the runway, the plane took off with people sitting on suitcases in the luggage compartment, and I stayed in Kankan for an extra two days. So much for knowing someone.

The two airlines occasionally make unscheduled stops in remote prefectures if there are paying passengers to be found, so arrival and departure times can be a bit fluid. For all that, I have never had a bad flight on either of the airlines and I've taken many trips on them. (Reading this sentence a few years after it was written, I realize that when I wrote the above, my standards were such that, for a flight to be classified as "bad", it would have to include dismemberment.) The pilots swoop among the clouds to avoid bad weather ("Do you know why we're flying on our side?" another passenger once asked me nervously) and the planes are as stable, solid and loud as you would expect Russian cargo planes to be.

Anyway this particular day I was surprised to find that Guinea InterAir had started helicopter flights to Boké and Kamsar. The helicopter is of course a converted Russian cargo carrier, which looks like it started its career dodging Stinger missiles in Afghanistan, as do the pilots. When I got on board in Boké, there was one empty seat, next to a window. It took me a moment to realize that the window was open. A fellow passenger urged me to leave it open. *C'est bon pour l'air*, he said. I bet it is, I thought, but left the window open.

I had never been in a helicopter before and I loved the flight. The flight took less than an hour. For seeing the country a helicopter is a great way to travel. We followed the coast of Guinea all the way from Kamsar to Conakry. I could see farmers in their fields, fishermen in their boats, and amazing landforms. In the rainy season all of coastal Guinea looks like it is half under water. We were never out of sight of meandering rivers, mangrove swamps, and submerged rice fields. From the halfway point in Boffa you can already make out the Conakry Peninsula, Mount Kakoulima, and the Iles de Loos.

The only real problem was that in Kamsar there were about 30 ticketed passengers for the 22 seats on the helicopter, and the seats are cramped to begin with. After a lot of discussion, they let everyone in. Those who could not fit three across in the double seats or find a suitcase or box to sit on stood up like strap-hangers in the metro. There were so many people in the cabin that I was glad my window was

open: by the time we got to Conakry, a couple of other people had opened their windows too. It was indeed *bon pour l'air*.

A few months later I repeated the helicopter trip to Boké and this time I invited my daughter Caity, who was twelve at the time, to come along.

During the time on the ground in Boké, Caity made friends with one of the pilots, a nice young fellow named Wladimir, who wrote out his name and address for her: he is from Petrazawodsk, which is located somewhere in the Former Soviet Union. Wladimir speaks about twenty words more of English than I do of Russian and for emphasis he tends to repeat the few words he knows many many many many times.

When we were getting ready to leave Boké, Wladimir shook my hand and spoke solemnly:

Wlad: You [*points to me*] ... Son [*points to Caity*]

Me: "Daughter".

Wlad: Yes yes yes yes yes. He very very very very very... [*long pause*]

Me: Yes? My daughter is very...?

Wlad: Good! He very very very very good!

Through a similar process he managed to tell me that he had invited Caity to visit him at his home in the old country, whatever country that is. I hesitated for a moment, thinking that there might be nuances to the invitation that I should talk over with her mother before letting Caity go off to Petrazawodsk with a total stranger. For instance, does she have enough warm clothes? Perhaps mistaking my fatherly concern for ennui and a desire to see new parts of the world, he generously expanded the invitation to include me. Because of the language problem, I wasn't sure that I succeeded in declining the invitation, but we haven't seen Wladimir since.

REAL CONVERSATION THAT HAPPENED WHILE I WAS WAITING IN MY CAR AT THE NIGER MARKET

First Kid: Hey, Mister, want to buy some caviar?

Me: No thanks. I'm American. You should find a French person to sell it to.

Second Kid: Hi. Want to buy some Crisco?

Me: No thanks. I don't eat Crisco.

Second kid: All Americans eat Crisco.

Me: Nope. I don't.

Second kid: You should. You eat it with caviar.

Me: You eat Crisco and caviar?

Second kid: Yeah. it's good!

Me: Okay, I'll buy a can of Crisco and a can of caviar and watch you eat them.

Second kid: Okay!

{Unfortunately, my wife came back from shopping at this point and the experiment was never carried out}.

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