

THE RESTAURANTS OF MACENTA

The other day I went to Macenta with three colleagues. Macenta is about twelve hours by road from Conakry, which gave us time to have some nice conversations about a lot of different things, and it was interesting talking to the many Liberians there in their zany English. On the other hand, Macenta is not a great restaurant town, and I can't recommend driving there if all you want to do is eat.

We pulled into Macenta around noon intending to meet with some people at a project there. Of the two people we wanted to see, one was out of town and the other had died. We should have called ahead, and would have if there had been phones that worked anywhere within a hundred miles. We were referred to a third person, who had left work early that day and we drove around for hours trying to find him, but he didn't show up at his house, so around 4:30 we decided to get a late lunch and then drive back to spend the night in Kissidougou. We asked someone where we could eat, and were told to go to the Magnetique. We supposed it must be a "4X4 restaurant", that is, the kind of restaurant you find in most towns where people who arrive in Land Cruisers with diplomatic plates can eat something other than rice and sauce if they like. We were talking a lot about different kinds of restaurants because we were all getting hungry.

For some reason we felt drawn to the Magnetique. A guy came out to meet us as we drove up. After shaking hands solemnly all around, there was a pregnant pause. Not wanting to beat around the bush, we asked him with typical American directness if we could get something to eat. There was another pause. "I'll go see," he said. We started to follow him in, but he turned around and said sternly, "You wait here."

What could be going on inside, we wondered? Guerrilla warfare training? Animist cult sacrifices? Bridge tournament? We never found out, since he came back a few minutes later with the news that there was no food available. We were sort of relieved, because we'd been worried about how many happy faces we would have been able to give the Magnetique for "ambiance".

We set out again, and came across a restaurant called, with more precision than Imagination, Le Restaurant Africain. We asked if they had any food. They didn't either, but they recommended Le Palm, which they said was right around the block.

In French, there is no word for "block", in the sense of a continuous undivided section of a city bounded on all sides by streets. To tell someone in French how to get from the Restaurant Africain to Le Palm, you can't just say, "Drive around the block - you'll come to it." Instead, you have to describe each landmark and turn individually. Another thing that there is no word for in French is "lap", as in, "Come here, Jean-Marie, and sit on Nana's lap". French kids have to sit on their grandparents' bony knees rather than their comfy laps, which may have something to do with how they turn out in later life. We were having a lot of conversations like that, which helped take our minds off our increasing hunger.

We found Le Palm without too much trouble, sat out on the patio, and talked to the waiter who offered us the standard 4X4 options: chicken or steak, with peas or french fries. We ordered our meals, and also sent our driver out to get drinks. He came back a little while later with Coca-Colas that had been manufactured in Bahrain a year earlier. Since the cans were only a little rusty and just a few weeks

past the expiration date printed on the bottoms, we drank them, marveling at how they could have made it from the Persian Gulf to Macenta, Guinea. Had some Guinean made a killing on soft drinks during his pilgrimage to Mecca? How could it possibly make economic sense to import Cokes all the way across Africa from a country that doesn't have anything except oil and sand, when there is a Coca-Cola bottling plant already in Conakry? So many interesting things to talk about in Macenta, and so much time to talk about them.

About twenty minutes later the guy who took our order came back and said that, sorry, they didn't have any food either.

That's about all I can say about the restaurants of Macenta, and if this chapter leaves you unsatisfied, that's the way we felt as we left Macenta and drove to Gueckedou. In Gueckedou we found a nice restaurant where the Liberians at the door informed us, accurately, that there was "plenty chop", and we ate in silence.

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