

## THE TATA RESTAURANT AND THE SAALA FALLS

One of the most remarkable places to eat in the interior of Guinea is the Tata restaurant in Labé, which is less than an hour's drive from one of the most remarkable natural wonders in Guinea, the Saala waterfalls.

Labé, like Rome, was once the capital of an empire and protected itself from its enemies behind massive walls. *Tata* in fact is a Peul word meaning the walled, fortified part of a city. Unlike Rome, though, you can drive through Labé and never get a sense of the history of the place, just as you can live in Guinea for years and never even hear about the Saala falls. There is no signpost announcing their existence, they appear in no guidebook that I have ever seen, and so far as I know there is not even a postcard with their picture on them. And yet, they are extraordinary: you drive out of Labé for about 45 minutes and suddenly with no warning the earth opens up, vertical walls go down, down, down to the bottom of a chasm, at one end of which are giant cascading falls. They are magnificent. If you go to the falls, you can spend the day there, come back to Labé and eat at the Tata, which is another thing that Labé and Rome have in common: the Tata is an Italian restaurant.

The Tata offers a clean, cheery welcome. I suspect that the food is not really great Italian food, but I'm not one to judge since I always thought Italian food was sweet like the Chef Boy-R-Dee spaghetti that I ate as a kid, until a few years ago when I laid over in Rome for three days, eating remarkable food in modest and authentic restaurants, and had a delightful time until I was mugged by a group of gypsy kids who came up to me near the Coliseum, my body language and clothes apparently saying, "Hi! I'm an American tourist. Please take advantage of me!"

One of the kids, a little girl with lovely dark eyes, grabbed my arm and pulled on it imploringly. Her picture belonged on a UNICEF calendar. She was telling me something in Italian, which I don't speak at all. What could it be, I wondered, as her eyes met mine. Was someone in her family sick? She seemed to know me. Could we possibly have met somewhere before in some unlikely encounter that I had completely forgotten? She spoke directly to me, all the while her dark eyes glued to mine, trying to communicate some urgent message, if only I could understand. I had the feeling that I was on the verge of a remarkable cross cultural experience, the exact nature of which kept eluding me.

While my attention was riveted on her, her cohorts were quietly and efficiently going through my bag and pockets, relieving me of my dollars and lira. These kids could have been great surgeons, although they probably wouldn't have made as much money. When they were done, one of them casually handed me my passport and calculator and they all walked quickly off, disappearing among the monuments of the Eternal City, while I stood there trying to figure out what that was all about. I think the whole episode lasted no more than fifteen seconds and it wasn't until minutes later that I realized I got took. Half an hour later, the folks at my hotel shook their head sympathetically and helped me contact my wife, so she could wire me money.

I suppose I got took at the Tata too: they charged three bucks for something called *croutons au caviar*, which turned out to be a slice of buttered bread with a couple of micrograms of caviar sprinkled on it. But I left with no hard feelings. While we were

chatting, the Peul waitress (who like the gypsy girl in Rome had lovely dark eyes) exclaimed *Mama Mia!* which more than made up for the overpricing.

Paul Rippey

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