INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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U.S. Embassy
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A Tale of Corruption

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Dear Peter,

I believe I am among the more honest of men, if one were to divide that multitude into halves on such a basis, but traveling overland to Ghana from the Ivory Coast is an odyssey that would try stronger souls than mine.

The ticket seller said be at the bus station by 5:30 a.m. and bring a thousand francs.* Like a fool who has learned nothing after living more than a year in West Africa, I was there at the appointed time and wearily sat on my bags while the dawn broke and the thin ranks of the naive were slowly thickened by the arrival of the more knowledgeable. Passengers began to climb aboard a bus about 6:30, but I was told to wait for another. The announced departure time of 7 o'clock passed without the first bus, which appeared to me to be fully loaded, showing any other sign of leaving, nor the second bus opening its doors to those of us still on the ground. An authoritative fellow joined us and shouted some instructions in a local language. A passing vendor told me to get on the first bus. I was closer to it than most of the crowd, so I found myself near the head of the newly formed line and succeeded in getting one of the few remaining places, handing over my thousand francs and my passport as I mounted the steps.

We were packed seven across, wedged together so tightly from wall to wall we might not have needed seats for support. The ticket seller had said the trip would take about 24 hours, depending on how long we were at the border—surprising, for it is only about 400 miles from Abidjan to Accra by road.

We left at 8, right on schedule if one considers African Standard Time as local time plus one hour. Before we had traveled 10 miles, I saw the wisdom of depositing our passports at the driver's side. We were halted at a police barrier and a man in uniform asked to see our papers. Had we kept them, it would have meant another half-hour delay. The driver had already bounded off with the documents to locate the man in charge. I realized, too, the importance of the extra thousand francs we

*CFA (Communauté Financière Africaine) francs. A thousand CFA franes are worth about $4.

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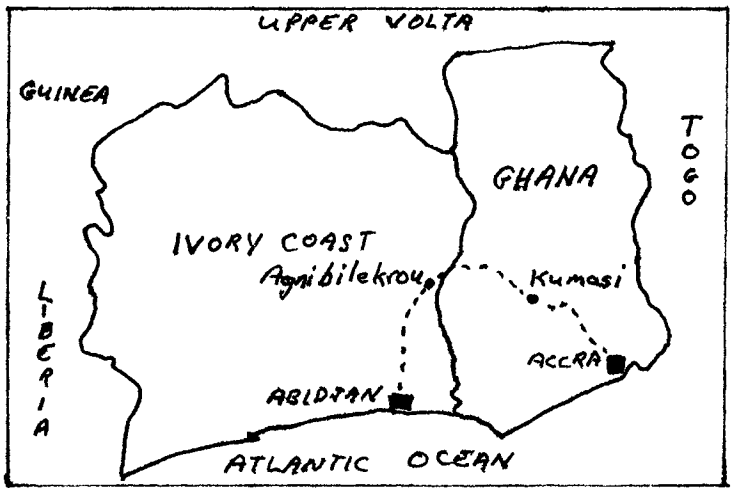


The road from Abidjan to Accra. A coastal route is under construction.

had paid, for after the passports would come the luggage, and a lot more waiting in the hot sun and wrangling over petty details, if the officers should feel compelled to do their duty to the limits of the law.

A half dozen times at least on the 150 miles of paved road to the town of Agnibilekrou, the green Ghana State Transport Company bus was stopped by the whistle of a guard sitting in a roadside shack. I was glad I had chosen that day to travel. A lot of unpleasantness had passed between Ghana and the Ivory Coast. Two weeks before, the Ivorian police, in one of their Saturday night sweeps picking up people without identity cards, had put about 60 fishermen in a small jail cell. Forty-six of them had suffocated. They were believed to be mostly Ghanaians, and the Ghana government protested strongly. Ghanaian students ransacked the Ivorian embassy in Accra. Reconciliation had come only the day before my journey, with a meeting of the two countries' presidents in neighboring Togo. The TV newscast that evening was devoted almost entirely to the occasion, with film clips of smiling heads and shaking hands and a Togolese dance troupe singing the praises of the Ghanaian and Ivorian leaders and of their own head of state. The morning papers we carried had banner headlines, "Ghana—Cote d'Ivoire: tout va bien".

We arrived in Agnibilekrou around noon. After passing through emigration procedures and eating lunch, we resumed the journey at 3. Before we got out of town, we had to stop at a customs station. Instead of checking our luggage, the guard went through our passports again. Not enough visa stamps, he said. Passengers began digging in their pockets for coins.

"We're buying more stamps," the woman next to me said.

"I got mine in the immigration office," I replied.

"Oh, well, never mind then."

I don't know whether some of the passengers had somehow avoided buying the two stamps, which looked like Easter seals, that the immigration officers had sold to me, or if the customs guard just had some extras to sell. I do know we were not all innocents aboard the bus. At another stop on the way to the border, a man got on to count us.

"Forty-nine, fifty, fifty-one, fifty-two, FIFTY-THREE."

"Forty-seven, forty-seven," two men in the front row whispered. The counter smiled.

We stopped another half dozen times along the 22-mile dirt

road to the border customs station, not reaching it until 5. By that time, we had exhausted our Police Benevolent Fund. An argument arose over the collection of a supplement. The collectors wanted a thousand more from each of us. A faction in the middle of the bus would only contribute five hundred. Time passed. The driver got annoyed. "I have 19,000 francs," he told us. "The guards are demanding 35,000. If they don't get it, they'll go through the luggage and confiscate your excess currency." Those of us who were eager to get on the road chipped in another 500 francs apiece. We managed to appease the guards' appetites and the bus crossed into Ghana.

Ghana has a law that vouchers for their currency, the cedi (pronounced SEE-dee), must be obtained with a visa, in the amount of ¢140 for the first day and ¢70 for every subsequent day one plans to stay. I was unaware of this when I applied for a 14-day visa, but an understanding gentleman in the consular section made me purchase only three days' worth of vouchers. Since the amount was written on the visa, I decided not to trust my luck at the border and wrote "3 days" after "Duration of Stay" on the entry form. In retrospect, I consider that a wise move, for the border guard was most unfriendly. He pointedly questioned my response and asked to see all my currency. I showed him the five 1,000-franc notes I had in my pocket. I neglected to show him the 50,000 francs I had in my sock.

All right, I'm probably not among the most honest of men.

The trouble is that the cedi is vastly overvalued. The official exchange rate was about 2.8 cedis to the dollar. On the black market you could get 25 or more cedis for a dollar. A thousand CFA francs sell for at least 100 cedis, whereas I had paid ten times that ratio for my vouchers. Although I had enough awareness of this situation to keep most of my money out of sight, its ramifications became clearer to me as I chatted with a fellow passenger while the shadow of evening crept from Ghana into the Ivory Coast. Another collection was being taken, this time for the Ghana customs guards. Again, people resisted making the donation, and my companion expected we'd end up spending the night where we were.

"Ghana is not expensive," he told me, contradicting all I had read about the country. Speaking in his terms, in which he used francs and cedis interchangeably on that ten-to-one black market par, prices are much the same as in the Ivory Coast. For a Ghanaian without access to foreign currency, however, or for a traveler changing his money at official rates, the cost of living is oppressive. Two pounds of sugar cost 45 cedis. Officially, that's about $15; at black market rates, it's $1.80. A loaf of bread costs 25 cedis; a small tin of evaporated milk, 10 cedis. School teachers, better paid than most civil servants, make about 500 cedis a month.

The CFA franc, which is used in most of the former French colonies of West and Equatorial Africa, has kept its value because it is linked to the French franc, at a rate of 50 to 1. To maintain this parity, African central banks must concede much of their decision-making powers to French monetary authorities. Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana's first president, resented this continued dependence on the former colonial powers and broke away from the British pound sterling, which supported the currencies of the former British West African colonies. Nkrumah's

decision left the Ghana government solely responsible for the management of its currency, and it was not equal to the task. As I walked around Accra with a two-inch wad of 10-cedi notes, worth about $40 in realer money, I saw pictures in my mind of people in pre-war Germany pushing wheelbarrows full of bank-notes. The cedi has been devalued twice in the last decade. Its current black market price is about half of what it was two years ago. The cedi gets its name from a local word for the cowrie shell, which was used as money in the region hundreds of years ago. If things continue the way they are going, the Ghanaians might do better to revert to the original.

The argument at the border ended about 8 and we got back on the road. We took one more collection of 500 francs apiece to get through two more police barriers, and settled down for a long, bumpy night of little rest. The deplorable condition of Ghana's roads, not the greed of its constabulary, kept us from reaching Accra before dawn.

On the third day, I walked into the visa section of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, heart in my mouth, a 5,000-franc note in my wallet. I requested a 14-day extension of my visitor's permit. The woman behind the desk duly informed me of the law, then scribbled a note on the back of an envelope saying she could help me. "How?" I asked. My honesty is directly proportional to my timidity. CFA? she wrote. I handed over my bill. I had to wait a couple hours for the money to work its magic and got a chance to observe how the visa section operated.

A priest entered. He was leaving Ghana in two weeks and couldn't get down to the capital again until the day of his departure. He had submitted his passport for a re-entry visa and a new residence permit some time ago. Wasn't it ready yet? Heads shook sadly, lips murmured sympathetically. "Brother Charles can pick it up for you when it's ready, Father," they said. The priest left clucking disconsolately, but either someone whispered in his ear or he got up the courage to risk a little temporal sin. A few minutes later he was back, and soon he walked out with his passport.

An American lady came in to get four passports. She gave a can of powdered milk to the woman behind the desk, for which the official paid her, and left, mission accomplished. Shortly afterwards, the visa woman and I were left alone in the office. Mistaking my uneasiness for disapproval, she defended her actions. Pointing to the drawer that contained my 5,000 francs, she said, "I'll use that to go shopping in Lomé (Togo) to buy things I need. Do you know how much things cost here?" She pointed to the can of milk powder. "I have two children. In Accra, that would cost 200 cedis, if you could find it. Who can afford that?"

She needn't have justified herself to me. In my mind, we were both victims.

Regards,

Bowden

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