

# Traveling by train through West Africa

BY KAREN KRAMER

This February, I attended a film festival which takes place every other year in Burkina Faso, West Africa. Instead of flying directly to Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso's capital), I decided to see some of the African countryside by taking the train.

Air Afrique makes two trips a week from New York to Senegal and Ivory Coast, and after an overnight stay in either of these two capital cities, flies the next day to Ouagadougou. There are two trains a day that leave Abidjan, Ivory Coast for Ouagadougou. The "Gazelle" leaves at 8:30 a.m., costs about \$90 with a sleeping couchette (shared with another person) and takes approximately 24 hours. The "Rapide" leaves at 4 a.m., costs about \$80, and takes a few hours more. The advantage of the "Gazelle" is that it arrives in daylight; the disadvantage is that it reaches the border between Ivory Coast and Burkina Faso at midnight when it is necessary to get off the train and wait for several hours. I chose the "Gazelle."

Although there's no problem buying a ticket the day of the trip, I purchased mine at the station the day before. Since I didn't know how long the procedure would take, and my French is almost non-existent, I wanted to just go directly to the train in the morning. As it turned out, the ticket-buying procedure was fairly simple, although when they had to send someone to run and get change for me, it took so long that I might have missed the train had it been the next day.

The next morning the train left promptly at 8:30 a.m. My heart sank when I saw the inside of the train. It was hot, noisy, and dusty. Babies were crying. The windows in the tiny two-bed couchette that I shared with an African woman were dirty and difficult to see out of. The communal toilet down the hall was also dirty and paperless. Clearly, this was no Amtrak.

For an hour, the train meandered out of the city—past concrete and buildings and shantytowns. Then we crossed a river into the plateau region, and finally we were in ... Africa!

Once out of the city, the landscape became softer and greener. Even the mood on the train changed. Babies stopped crying and voices became quieter. Although a sporadic high embankment on either side of the train made it difficult to see long vistas for the first few hours, we passed by several small villages, cornfields and banana plantations. At every station stop, women crowded the platform, selling fruits and vegetables, bottled water, bread, and hard-boiled eggs.

Throughout the rest of the day, we passed through hot and dusty countryside. For long stretches the land was brown and barren. Occasionally there would be a cluster of small huts made from mud, with groups of children playing. I spent long hours staring out the window or trying to make sporadic conversation with my couchette-mate. She spoke no English, and I no French, but somehow by the end of the trip we became friends. Sometimes her uncle came in from the next couchette,

and they spoke in low tones in a soothing African dialect.

The train was HOT. Although the guidebooks and railroad personnel in Abidjan state that the trains are air-conditioned this is not the case, and has not been for many years. In general, amenities that apparently existed several years ago—soap and towels by the washstand, clean windows and swept floors—no longer exist. This can all be overlooked. After all, there is still the wonderful African countryside out the window, and it is a feast that would have been missed had I decided to fly.

At 3 p.m. I had a small meal in the dining car. I ate a "ragout"—a sort of stew made from meat and yams, with a very warm Coca Cola. Meals are served twice on the train, from approximately 1 p.m. to 3 p.m., and later again in the evening. Soft drinks and bottled water can be purchased at any time, but a mediocre refrigeration system keeps them slightly warm. Meals are not included in the ticket price, but are inexpensive.

I was the only non-African on the train. But at no time did I—female, Caucasian, non-French speaking, traveling alone—feel the least bit uncomfortable. Africans are very respectful of visitors and will go out of their way to be helpful and put foreigners at ease. Any time I wished to talk, people were (without exception) friendly and open. If I wished to be left alone—to read or write, or stare out the window—then I was left alone. Having traveled solo to many other parts of the planet, I know this is not always the case for the lone female traveler.

At night there was little to do, and not much to see in the dark countryside. Going to sleep early was impossible because of all the noisy activity on the train, and I tried to wait until later when things would quiet down a bit. Unfortunately, the train reached the border crossing at midnight and at that time the activity increases. All those with foreign or questionable passports are required to detrain and wait in a little shack until an official can approve the documents. Generally this is not a problem, but the wait can take hours. This adds to the adventure and camaraderie, but does not contribute to a peaceful night of rest. We remained at the border for three hours.

Finally the "Gazelle" was again in transit. Everything was quiet. I could see a full moon. That reverie was continually interrupted, however, by the train personnel. At least once an hour until daybreak, the occupants of the couchettes were awakened and forced to show their tickets; this is to prevent unpaid guests from sneaking into the couchettes.

By dawn, we were traveling through the interior of Burkina Faso (the day before, all traveling had been exclusively in Ivory Coast) and the scenery was fascinating. Dry and dusty, the terrain had a sepia quality to it. Small villages appeared on the flat plain, patterned in earth-toned colors. Men walked by in robes.

When the train finally arrived in Ouagadougou, it was 29 hours later. I was hot, exhausted, and covered with dust. I immediately encountered other Americans attending the film festival. They had arrived by the comparative luxury of a two hour plane trip, and looked well-rested. But they had not seen the marvelous African countryside the way I had, had not experienced a magnificent trip, which will stay in my memory, long after the physical hardship disappears.

*New Yorker Karen Kramer is an independent filmmaker.*